"A powerful exploration of the Buddhist practice of the six perfections, this extraordinary book points toward the great possibilities of goodness resting at the center of the human heart."

—**JOAN HALIFAX,** author of *Being with Dying*

The World Could Be Otherwise

IMAGINATION AND THE BODHISATTVA PATH

NORMAN FISCHER

Praise for *The World Could Be Otherwise*

"We need to be reminded again and again to stay in touch with our own interior world, where a deeper meaning of life can be found. This book with its fresh approach to the six paramitas is here to do that very job. It gently yet powerfully reminds us to not get lost in the trap of self-centeredness and materialism, but to nourish our spiritual impulse which wants to expand our heart. I'm deeply thankful to Norman for writing this with such deep insight and love."

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"Buddhists are often skeptical of the word *imagination,* interpreting it to mean a flight into fantasy. But Norman Fischer, in his new book, *The World Could Be Otherwise,* makes it clear that imagination is the raw potential, the very source of inspiration, creativity, and astonishment that lies at the heart of a fully integrated spiritual life. He leads us with precision and skill through the six perfections (paramitas), using imagination as the uplifting force that binds the heart's calling for perfection to our human frailties. And he couples these inspiring teachings with grounded daily-life practices. This book is a source of renewal for anyone willing to move beyond their complacency and routine to ponder the wondrous possibilities that abound."

—Rodney Smith, author of *Touching the Infinite: A New Perspective on the Buddha's Four Foundations of Mindfulness*

“As an accomplished Zen teacher who is also a poet, Norman Fischer understands the power of the imagination. If reality is not fixed, it must be reimagined over and over, and there is no place to see that more clearly than in the history of great Zen masters.

The book shows us the difference between unimaginative religion and the open vision of possibility that authentic religion enables. It teaches us how to develop the imagination—a discipline of imagination—that shows us how to see the world otherwise.

Fischer’s discussion of practice is incredibly skillful, honed through decades of personal engagement. We get a glimpse of the difference between imaginative religious practice and practice that ironically is stultifying. Working through the Buddhist six perfections, he asks not just what each paramita is, but how it can be imagined today and how we might begin to practice it creatively. Every section in the book concludes with practices providing examples of what we might do with these Buddhist teachings in our own time and place.

A unique contribution to a vital dimension of Buddhism, written by someone who has long practiced what he is teaching. Highly recommended.”

—Dale S. Wright, author of *The Six Perfections: Buddhism and the Cultivation of Character* and *What Is Buddhist Enlightenment?*

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The Strugglers

Conflict

Questions/Places/Voices/Seasons

I Was Blown Back

Slowly but Dearly

Success

TRANSLATION

Opening to You: Zen-Inspired Translations of the Psalms

The World Could Be Otherwise

IMAGINATION AND THE BODHISATTVA PATH

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Shambhala
Boulder 2019

Shambhala Publications, Inc.
4720 Walnut Street
Boulder, Colorado 80301
www.shambhala.com

Shambhala Publications is distributed worldwide by Penguin Random House, Inc., and its subsidiaries.

Ebook design adapted from printed book design by Daniel Urban-Brown

Cover art by Shutterstock/Elena Zolotukhina, iStock/Alvarez // Cover design by Daniel Urban-Brown

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Fischer, Norman, 1946– author.
Title: The world could be otherwise: imagination and the Bodhisattva path / Norman Fischer.
Description: First Edition. | Boulder: Shambhala, 2019.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018023151 | ISBN 9781611805048 (pbk.: alk. paper)
eISBN 9780834842144
Subjects: LCSH: Paramitas (Buddhism) | Buddhist ethics. | Mahayana Buddhism—Doctrines.
Classification: LCC BQ4336 .F57 2019 | DDC 294.3/444—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018023151

v5.4
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Every man lives in two realms, the internal and the external. The internal is that realm of spiritual ends expressed in art, literature, morals, and religion. The external is that complex of devices, techniques, mechanisms, and instrumentalities by means of which we live. Our problem today is that we have allowed the internal to become lost in the external. We have allowed the means by which we live to outdistance the ends for which we live. So much of modern life can be summarized in that arresting dictum of the poet Thoreau: "Improved means to an unimproved end." This is the serious predicament, the deep and haunting problem confronting modern man. If we are to survive today, our moral and spiritual "lag" must be eliminated. Enlarged material powers spell enlarged peril if there is not proportionate growth of the soul. When the "without" of man's nature subjugates the "within," dark storm clouds begin to form in the world.

—MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., from Nobel Lecture, December 11, 1964

Call forth as much as you can
Of love, of respect, and of faith
Listen to the teaching of the gentle Buddhas
Taught for the weal of the world, for heroic spirits intended

—Opening verse of *Prajnaparamita Sutra in Eight Thousand Lines and Its Verse Summary,* trans. Edward Conze

I am certain of nothing but the heart's affection and the truth of Imagination.

—JOHN KEATS

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Imagination

HERE'S A STORY ABOUT HOW imagination changes the world, even in the worst possible circumstances. It involves the French surrealist poet Robert Desnos.

Desnos was Jewish. During World War II he went underground to fight for the Resistance. He was captured and sent to the concentration camps.

One day, along with many other men, Desnos is crowded onto the bed of one of the trucks that transports prisoners from the barracks. The men fully understand where they are going. The trucks always leave the barracks full and return empty. Their destination is the gas chambers and the ovens.

No one in the truck bed speaks. The mood is resigned, stricken. Eyes lowered. Faces grim.

When the truck arrives, the prisoners slowly and silently descend, as if in a dream. The guards, normally full of jokes and banter, fall silent, unable to avoid catching the prisoners' mood. But this almost religious silence is abruptly interrupted. One of the men in the line of prisoners suddenly, with great animation, jumps up, pivots, grabs the hand of the man behind him. Astonishingly, his nose almost touching the man's hand, his body coiled tight with energy, he begins to read the man's palm.

"I am so excited for you!" he exclaims happily. "You are going to live a very long life! You are going to have three children! A beautiful wife! Wealth! So fantastic! So wonderful!"

His excitement is contagious. First one man, then another, in shock and bewilderment, thrusts out his hand. Each one receives the same sort of prediction: long life, children, wealth, exciting career, beautiful surroundings, peace, happiness, success, joy unending.

As Desnos reads palm after palm, the atmosphere of the moment—drop by drop at first, and then, as if in a sudden tidal wave, breaking all at once—completely transforms. The prisoners are smiling, laughing, clapping one another on the back, their burden lifted, their reality transformed.

Even more astonishingly, the guards also are affected. Like the prisoners, they had been living a dark spell in which the marching of men to slaughter was a normal and acceptable everyday occurrence. But now, with this absurd and unprecedented event, this sudden and gratuitous evocation of an alternative reality, the spell is broken. The guards are disoriented, confused. The reality they had been living a moment ago has been somehow suddenly cast into doubt, all but shattered. They are no longer sure what is real and what is not. Perhaps their better natures—long suppressed in an effort to conform to the Nazi madness that defined their world, long numb to the grief, the guilt, the horror—were stirred by Desnos's powerful commitment to his absurd, but perhaps not absurd, vision. Who knows? They are in any case so undone by the jolly scene in front of them that they no longer know what to do. They can't go through with the executions. So they march the prisoners back onto the truck bed and send them back to the barracks.

Through this spontaneous exercise of imagination—precisely the sort of move Desnos constantly makes in his poetry—he and these men were saved from execution.

Desnos survived the camps but sadly did not survive the war. He died of typhus a few days after the liberation.

I have this story from poet Alan Bernheimer, a translator of Desnos, who got it from the writer Susan Griffin, who heard it from her friend Odette, herself a writer and a survivor of the Holocaust. When I first heard it, I was tremendously moved. But then I thought, is it true? Did it really happen? It sounds a bit too good to be true. I

don’t know Susan Griffin, but I contacted her to ask. She said she believed it. Odette, Susan wrote me, didn’t witness the event but had heard of it from people who said they had.

For weeks I carried the story in my heart, like a Zen koan, wondering about it, turning it over and over in my mind. One day I had a realization: Of course this story is true! Definitely, absolutely, true. One way or another, it happened.

The imagination is powerful. It creates its own self-validating truth strong enough to effect inner and outer transformation. When I say I am absolutely certain this story of Robert Desnos is true, I don’t mean I am certain of it as an objectively verifiable occurrence. I mean that the story, as a story, is certainly true. I feel its truth and it changes me, because it expresses something essential about who we are as human beings.

The imagination is powerful. It is essential for our humanness. The Bible and other religious texts, folktales, myths, rhymes, poems, plays, novels, anecdotes, music, ritual, pictures, dreams—all imaginative productions rise up from the unconscious to expand the soul, to help us feel who we really are and what the world really is. They help us move beyond the habitual one-dimensional perspective of our outer perceptions and fearful emotions. Imagination isn’t an escape from reality. Imagination deepens and enriches reality, adding texture, depth, dimension, feeling, and possibility. The truth is, all that is creative and ennobling in us ultimately sources in the imagination. Without imagination reality is too flat, too matter-of-fact, lacking in color and fervor. To go beyond the possible to the impossible, we need to imagine it.

The twenty-first century is busy and rough. For privileged people with demanding careers, social lives, families, and myriad interests, life is better than it has ever been. But it is also, perhaps because of this, more difficult, more stressful and demanding. The possibilities for growth and accomplishment are dizzying: one must be more, know more, experience more, have more fun—and all of this at an ever-accelerating rate. It is hard to catch a breath.

For the majority of people, who do not enjoy such great expectations, a decent life seems further away than ever. The top 10 percent of the world's population owns 90 percent of the wealth, leaving the other 90 percent scrambling to get by. For the vast majority of people, the daily struggle to survive in ever more trying social and economic circumstances is relentless. More and more simply cannot manage.

Privileged or not, we are all aware of the world beyond our households through the now-ubiquitous news media, which has become our collective nervous system, twitching our attention with constant jolts of true and false information about political, environmental, economic, and social problems. This becomes the stuff of our psyches and conversations. What will the future bring? What's the world going to be like for our children and grandchildren? Will there be a world? Dread fills the air. Sometimes we feel it; mostly we don't let ourselves feel it. It's too much. What can we really do about it?

I am convinced that the world could be, and actually is, otherwise —that its possibilities need not be, and actually aren't, limited to the tangible, the knowable, the negotiable, to the data we are constantly collecting about practically everything measurable. Data gives us the illusion that we know the world. But the world is more than we know.

The imagination doesn't measure, devise, or instrumentalize. It doesn't define or manipulate. Instead, its nature is to open, to mystify, to delight, shock, inspire. It extends without limit. It leaps from the known to the unknown, soaring beyond facts to visions and intensities. It lightens up the heavy circumscribed world we think we live in. It plays in the deep end, where heart and love hold sway.

Spiritual practice is one of the key sites of imagination. I don't see a big distinction between spirituality and religion, as many do these days. To me, spiritual practice is simply authentic religion, connected to observance and experience, beyond ideology and belief. I realize my view is unusual. Many people in our time, having been brought up without any religion, naturally feel religion is weird, unnecessary,

and old-fashioned. Many others shy away from religion because they were raised within a religious atmosphere that seemed dedicated to scaring them out of anything risky, joyful, or open, keeping them safely on the straight and narrow. I have studied religious teachings and practices in several traditions and I am convinced that, at its depth, this is not what religion is supposed to be doing. Religion is supposed to help us live more completely within our human imagination. In doing this it provides a counterforce to the gravity of a human world that has always been full of trouble and strife. Karl Marx famously called religion the opiate of the people. But he also called it "The heart of a heartless world."[1]

There's a reason why Marx opposed religion. Religion has had a turbulent history. When a religion becomes too successful, it inevitably becomes an orthodoxy, a brand, and its formerly provocative teachings and practices become stultified. Instead of challenging society and the individual to be better, a successful religion aligns with powerful social institutions to reinforce society's values. This in itself isn't a bad thing. Better for a society to be tamed by humane religious values than to be nakedly corrupt and power mad. But soon, inevitably, religious institutions, with too much to protect, themselves become oppressive, narrow-minded, and retrograde. When a religion thinks it makes sense to deny accepted scientific truths and to align with illiberal social groups whose ideologies suppress others, we can see that something has gone very wrong. So it is no wonder that religion seemed so negative to Marx and to so many people in the present. Many have been wounded by its worst excesses.

Yet, even at its worst, religion has a glowing coal of wildness hidden in its contemplative, mystical side—in texts, teachings, practices, and experiences that come from the uncharted expanses of the human imagination, religion's heart and soul. The word *spiritual* evokes this essential and powerful side of religious life, the source of creativity, the spring from which the dreamers and visionaries of the world drink. I choose to retain the word and the idea of religion because despite their many sins, the great religions of the world

contain a wealth of lore, languages, practices, and rituals that we can't afford to jettison now, when we need them more than ever.

WHAT IS IMAGINATION?

What exactly is imagination? How can human beings conceive of the impossible (absolute goodness, perfect beauty, truth) and yearn for it? How can we have passionate feelings about imaginary intangibles such as freedom and justice? How do we see without eyes, desire without objects, hear music where no music exists and then make that music exist? How do we conceive stories that never happened, images that spring to life from flat surfaces? What is this strange human capacity?

Imagination expands our hearts and minds. It brings forth all forms of innovation—artistic, scientific, social. It spawns myth, culture, religion, material progress. All idealism and moral vision depend on imagination. So does love. To go beyond one's own material and practical needs to loving care for another is the greatest of all imaginative acts. Love isn't rational or practical. It isn't data- or performance-driven. Though it may include animal or psychological need, its roots run deeper.

But imagination has another side. It is also deceptive and destructive. Imagination can distort reality, filling us with distraction and confusion. Too strong a dose of imagination can lead to madness. Paranoia is imagination run amok. Thanks to imagination we can crave what we can never have and so be constantly dissatisfied, even crazed. Imagination drives us to destructive acts, blowing our fear or grandiosity way out of proportion. Without imagination there would be no weapons, wars, or genocides. To build the atom bomb, to perpetrate holocausts, we had to imagine them and then imagine the technical means that made them possible.

No wonder then that for Plato and other early Greek thinkers, imagination was suspect. Imagination, the enemy of reason, was dangerous. Plato held that logical and reflective thought was all that

was necessary to lead the heart to truth and goodness. For him, imagination was subversive, its lure and color too likely to seduce us into error. He famously barred poets from his ideal Republic. (Apparently it never occurred to him that *The Republic* was itself an imaginative projection.)

Later generations of philosophers turned Plato's suspicion of imagination almost completely on its head. By the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant saw imagination as "a necessary ingredient of perception" and "a fundamental faculty of the human soul."[2] He saw imagination as central to human consciousness, literally creating the world we perceive and live in. Kant came to this view because by his time it had become clear that we don't perceive the world in a straightforward one-to-one correspondence. In fact, perception itself, our feeling for and experience of being in the world, involves raw, creative subjectivity. Consciousness is more than a machine registering data. As contemporary cognitive science confirms, consciousness is creative. Our brains, our minds, our past experiences and memories, our hearts, our souls—all go into making what we see, hear, taste, touch, smell, and feel. We do in fact imagine the world.

The English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge was the first English-speaking person to travel to the continent to absorb the new thinking that Kant was so persuasively expressing. As a poet, I have always appreciated Coleridge's classic definition of imagination, an important benchmark in Western thinking about the imagination:

> The IMAGINATION [Coleridge's caps] then, I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.[3]

According to Coleridge, the "primary" imagination creates the world we live in, the site of our human journey. Human beings, made in the divine image, imitate God in creating their world with every act of

perception and thought. Coleridge's "secondary" imagination is what we usually think of as creativity. It hones our souls, refining and deepening our primary imaginations. For Coleridge, who was trained as a clergyman as well as a poet, religion and the arts are the spheres in which the secondary imagination functions and develops.

Coleridge further distinguishes primary and secondary imagination from what he calls "fancy" (which we might today call fantasy). If imagination is the essential reality-seeking function, fancy is the desire for wish fulfillment, a projection of our ego-driven animal nature. Like imagination, fancy frees us from the crushing weight of a limited world. But it does so not in a positive, creative way but in response to our appetites and frustrations. It distracts us, increases our dissatisfaction, leads us to crazy and destructive acts. In making this distinction Coleridge seems to have solved the problem of imagination's double nature. "Fancy" is imagination that is suspect. It can be harmless, but if too distorted by baser human impulses it can go awry. "Imagination," on the other hand, when cultivated and refined, will always ennoble us. This, at any rate, is how I understand what Coleridge is saying.

The notion of imagination is also central to the work of Percy Bysshe Shelley, a second-generation English romantic poet. Following Coleridge, Shelley understands the purpose of imaginative activity to be the spiritual and moral cultivation of the soul—not the mere production of attractive, beautiful, amusing, or even edifying objects. In his famous essay "The Defence of Poetry," he conflates imagination and poetry, enlarging the idea of "poet" to include not only writers but anyone whose work depends on the imaginative faculty, including scientists, legislators, and all inspired social and moral innovators. For Shelley, imagination defines our basic humanness: it is, he writes, "connate with the origin of man," the source of all human goodness, all idealism, and of love. Reason is to imagination as "the instrument is to the agent, the body to the soul," an aid, a tool. The imagination "lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world…and apprehends [its] uncanny wonder."[4]

For Shelley, imagination works in essentially mysterious and uncharted ways, beyond will or intention, “its footsteps like that of the wind over the sea.” Moved by forces within them that are more than they can know or control, those who are committed to the imagination have the capacity to sense what has not yet occurred—not by clairvoyance but by a vaguer and more potent conjuring of images, ideas, and feelings that will bring humanity forward to a more noble future. The often-quoted ending of his essay calls poets “mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present…the unacknowledged legislators of the age.”[5]

BUDDHISM AND IMAGINATION

I was raised practicing Judaism, a tradition I love and with which I remain engaged. I was drawn to Zen Buddhism in my twenties and have practiced it ever since. Since I know more about Buddhism than any other religious tradition (though I am interested in all religions), I use Buddhist metaphors and practices as the basis for what I want to say about the imaginative life. I assume I could have found in any other religious tradition practices and metaphors that would have done just as well. Someone else might have—perhaps already has—written a book like this using the arts as the central metaphor and practice. Using spirituality as an organizing principle has the advantage of availability to more people (you don’t have to be able to draw, write, or carry a tune to engage it) and of including the whole of a person’s inner life and conduct, beyond specific activities or practices.

In this book I advocate the development of the imagination as a necessity for human survival and thriving in times ahead. The practice of imagination has to be more than a good idea or an aspiration. It needs a path of development, a process, a discipline, to support it. My intention is to use what I have learned over a lifetime of Buddhist practice—with contributions as well from my longstanding work as a poet—to propose an imaginative path of spiritual practice that can be used by anyone.

—

The basic teaching of early Buddhism begins with a disarmingly simple insight: life is essentially unsatisfactory and inevitably full of suffering. Yet despite this, cultivating a thoroughgoing path of spiritual practice can end dissatisfaction and suffering. Theistic traditions begin with soaring imaginative conceptions of the cosmos—omnipotent God creating this fallen world out of nothing. As a nontheistic religion, Buddhism begins at the opposite pole—human pain and the human need to understand and overcome it.

Buddhism's most basic formulation is the four noble truths: suffering, origination, stopping, path.

> *Suffering*: all conditioned existence is characterized by dissatisfaction and suffering.
>
> *Origination*: dissatisfaction and suffering originate in the failure of our imaginations to see things as they truly are.
>
> *Stopping*: we can stop suffering by opening our imaginations to the truth of how things are and enter the peace of nirvana.
>
> *Path*: the way to effect this opening is through practice of the Buddhist path of right conduct, right understanding, and right cultivation of mind and heart.

The early scriptures depict the Buddha as an exemplary human being who claims no special ontological status. His teaching can be tested and verified by anyone through personal experience, and anyone who diligently follows the path he taught can expect to end her or his suffering, just as the Buddha did.

This, at any rate, is a very short summary of the quite straightforward, sober, and practical early Buddhist teachings.

But from earliest times there was also a wilder, more visionary, and far less down-to-earth tendency within the teachings. This tendency developed into what we have come to call Mahayana Buddhism. (The word *Mahayana* means "great vehicle," in contrast

to *Hinayana,* "lesser vehicle," the polemical name the so-called Mahayanists gave to the earlier teachings.) In the Mahayana scriptures that poured forth in great numbers, at great length, and with extravagantly gleeful literary panache, the Buddha was no longer an exemplary human being. He was an eternal cosmic principle. In these scriptures the Buddha did not painstakingly end suffering and eventually pass away into nirvana—he feigned passing away to appease and encourage people whose crushing suffering put them in temporary need of the simple, definite, and final goal of endless nirvanic peace. In fact, the Buddha never entered the final passing into nirvana. How could he? For the Mahayana scriptures reveal the Buddha to be an endless illuminated imaginative projection whose limitless purpose was the same as that of each and every human being. That purpose was compassion: the endless caring and salvific activity that would relieve the suffering of infinite beings throughout time and space. The Buddha portrayed by Mahayana Buddhist scriptures is the imaginary embodiment of love. Each person, at the core, is a buddha in potential.

Based on this fervent vision, the Mahayana teachings radically recast the meaning of the four noble truths. Instead of dissatisfaction and suffering as pain to be eliminated by painstaking training in the path, it takes a new and noble place as the very heart of the path. The problem with dissatisfaction and suffering isn't that they're painful but that we misunderstand their nature and purpose. What makes suffering painful is that we identify it as "mine." In fact, the suffering I experience isn't mine; it's the common human suffering. Understanding that loss and pain connect me to others, and to life, I transform suffering. Embracing it fully, I see it as an expression of the radical identity of all things. Experiencing suffering like this, suffering ends. It transforms into love. Loving without limit, I dedicate myself to others and the world.

Though Zen Buddhism is a Mahayana school and follows Mahayana teaching, the Zen style is earthy, terse, and humorous. Zen stories turn on sudden imaginative leaps of consciousness and Desnos-like flights of surrealist fancy. A random search through the

Book of Serenity, a Song dynasty collection of one hundred Zen stories, will illustrate the style.

In one story, monk Magu, ringed staff in hand, comes to visit Zen Master Zhangjing. Magu circles Zhangjing's seat three times, shakes his staff once, and stands there at attention. Zhangjing says, "Right, right." Magu then goes to Nanquan and performs the same insolent dance. Nanquan says, "Wrong, wrong." Magu says, "Zhangjing said 'right'—why do you say 'wrong'?" Nanquan says, "Zhangjing is right—it's you who are wrong. Anyway, a good stiff wind blows right and wrong to pieces."[6]

In another story (this one from the *Blue Cliff Record* collection) Jianyuan and his master Daowu pay a condolence call. Jianyuan raps on the coffin and says, "Alive or dead?" Daowu says, "I can't say." Jianyuan says, "Why can't you say?" Daowu repeats, with some vehemence, "I can't say! I can't say!" On the way home after the visit, Jianyuan says, "Your Reverence, please answer my question. If you don't, I'll hit you." Daowu says nothing. Jianyuan hits him and is expelled from the monastery. Years pass. Daowu dies, and Jianyuan goes to Shishuang, the new abbot, and repeats the story and the question, "alive or dead?" Shishuang says, "I can't say! I can't say!" Jianyuan says, "Why can't you say?" Shishuang repeats, "I can't say! I can't say!" With these words, Jianyuan is suddenly enlightened. Some days later Jianyuan comes into the Dharma Hall with a hoe and walks back and forth as if tilling the soil. Shishuang says, "What are you doing?" Jianyuan says, "I'm looking for the bones of my late master."[7]

IMAGINATION IS FEELING FOR ANOTHER

Some years ago I went with a group of Zen practitioners, good friends, on a pilgrimage to Japan. We visited Eihei-ji monastery, one of the two headquarter monasteries of our tradition of Soto Zen. There we were lucky enough to have a special audience with Rev. Hoitsu Suzuki, son of the famous founder of San Francisco Zen

Center, Shunryu Suzuki, author of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. At that time Hojo-san (as we know him) was serving as teacher at Eihei-ji. I recorded some of what he said to us that evening in my book-length poem *Escape This Crazy Life of Tears: Japan, July 2010*. In this short passage, Hojo-san expresses the mysterious relationship between imagination, compassion, and death that lies at the heart of Mahayana Buddhist teaching:

> Hojo-san: "East, West
> a person of zazen is the
> same. grandmother mind
> the kind heart, is imagination,
> feeling for another
> see them as yourself
> takes imagination, imagination
> expands the heart. one day
> woke heard sound
> in both ears—sudden
> hearing loss. my eyes don't
> work right either. age is
> slowly melting my body. with
> each loss there's gain:
> my ears, my eyes, more mine
> now than ever, before not.
> so when I lose my life to death
> will my life be owned by me
> more then than it ever was?"[8]

This is a profound teaching. Imagination expands the heart, causing us to understand others as ourselves and ourselves as not belonging to us. This echoes strong words in Shelley's essay: "The great secret

of morals is love, a going out of ourself and an identification [with others]…the great instrument of moral good is the imagination."[9]

There is an almost impossible-to-grasp truth in this. What we feel inside—the currents of meaning and meaninglessness, of love and loneliness, of possibility and impossibility—is almost measureless. How can we ever understand who we really are and what makes us do what we do, feel what we feel? Only the imagination is deep and wide enough to open us to the profound healing in which we feel in ourselves the feeling of others.

Earlier I mentioned Kant's (and Coleridge's) idea of imagination as integral to our consciousness of the world. Mahayana Buddhism proposes a similar thought. The *Lankavatara Sutra* is a text of particular importance in Zen.[10] It speaks of *alayavijnana,* "storehouse consciousness"—the vast primordial substrate of consciousness that contains the world and all that takes place in it. Too vast to be an object of experience, it contains the "seeds" of cumulative past events that remain in potential until present events "water" them, causing them to sprout.

Because our individual lives arise out of storehouse consciousness, they are subject to forces—causes and conditions, good and bad, human and nonhuman—that preceded our births yet are embedded at the bottom of our psyches, ready to spring forth when conditions that activate them are present. In Mahayana Buddhism, the goal of practice shifts from ending personal suffering to "revolutionizing" storehouse consciousness—turning it around so that all causes for pain and suffering are ended for everyone. When this occurs, the practitioner will no longer identify with limited self; instead, identity will be all-inclusive, encompassing consciousness itself, so that natural compassion for all living beings becomes a warmly personal matter. This teaching amounts to what Hojo-san taught at Eihei-ji: turning the mind around, away from self-attachment toward identity with others, an act of supreme imagination. It is imagination's greatest achievement, and, as Shelley would hold, its ultimate purpose.

THE BODHISATTVA PATH

Mahayana Buddhism tweaked the mythology of early Buddhism to reflect the importance of this revolutionary achievement of consciousness. As mentioned earlier, the Mahayanists envisioned the Buddha as a cosmic principle, not a wise human being. As such, the Buddha was beyond human beings and their problems. He became a benevolent background figure whose job was to enable and inspire. In the foreground, Mahayana Buddhism installed a new figure of religious inspiration and salvation: the bodhisattva.

Like everything else in Mahayana Buddhism, the bodhisattva already existed in the early scriptures. In those texts, the bodhisattva was a person destined to become a buddha in a future lifetime, a buddha in training. There was only one bodhisattva, the historical Buddha in his prior lives, during which his main practice was devotion, service, and compassion. These past-life stories were folkloric, describing extravagant acts of caring and self-sacrifice. Thanks to these many lifetimes of selfless practice, the bodhisattva was born as prince Siddhartha, who left home to practice meditation and who ultimately awakened to become the Buddha for this human era.

The Mahayanists took this trope of the bodhisattva to new heights. As they did with so much else in the early teachings, they expanded it exponentially. Now there wasn't just one bodhisattva, there were countless bodhisattvas. There wasn't just the one Buddha, there were countless buddhas teaching in countless worlds. Taking the idea of compassion and concern for others as the essence of the bodhisattva life, they placed the bodhisattva figure at the very heart of their conception of the teachings. Though she or he was still an eager student in training, not a fully realized sage, the bodhisattva moved from the margins to the center of the dharma stage. Bodhisattvas took vows to be devoted to infinite buddhas and to serve infinite beings—each of whom were destined one day to become a buddha in their own right.

Mahayana bodhisattvas are the Energizer Bunnies of Buddhism. Innocent and enthusiastic, they make endless effort to do endless practice and to perform endless beneficial acts on behalf of others. Bodhisattvas are happy to defer their own awakening until every other sentient being is saved. In the many sutras and treatises that touch on the bodhisattva ideal, Indo-Tibetan Buddhism has created a marvelous, extravagant, idealistic, and imaginative portrait of a perfect human being, whose love and enthusiasm is literally boundless.

All ideals are imaginative projections. Though we can conceive of them, they can't exist in this imperfect world. Yet they are valuable nevertheless. We need ideals to propel us forward into better futures, to inspire us to be better people in a better world. Religions are always idealistic, asking us to be more than we are, more than we could ever be. We cherish ideals as essential ingredients of our humanness. Without them we slowly lose energy. We become boring, small-minded, and eventually depressed, as life's natural entropy overcomes us. Ideals lift us up.

Of course, we can overdo idealism. We need to balance it with realism, honestly and humbly accepting who we are in the everyday world and grounding our idealism in that. Ideals are like the horizon, a place we can walk toward, a direction we can go in, but not a place where we arrive. In the journey toward the horizon, the only place we take steps is here, the ground on which we stand.

Ideals become problematic when we take them literally, holding ourselves to impossible standards. Ideals are ideal. They aren't real. To the extent that we expect to realize them, we become frustrated.

Ideals are even more toxic when we deceive ourselves into thinking we *have* realized them. Then we become blind to our own actual behavior and motivation, and blind to others, whom we judge as less than ourselves.

Among all pernicious forms of idealism, religious idealism may be the worst; its excesses can be literally deadly. The saving grace of the bodhisattva ideal is that it is so outrageously extravagant, so absurdly imaginative, that we are clear from the start we can never realize it. It

is literally impossible! We can never get there. All we can do is keep on walking toward the bodhisattva horizon, inspired by the bright vision ahead, content to never arrive.

In Zen we recite the four bodhisattva vows: beings are numberless, I vow to save them; delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to end them; dharma gates are endless, I vow to enter them; the buddha way is unsurpassable, I vow to become it. These vows are perfectly impossible, so we know we can't take them as ordinary goals. They are imaginative goals, taken in an imaginative world by imaginative beings. We are those imaginative beings. Such vows point out a direction and inspire our feeling and action, but they don't pressure us. We practice them with joy and good humor. And we *do* realize them—in the imagination.

THE BODHISATTVA UNDERSTANDING OF SELF AND OTHER: COMPASSION

The practice of compassion, the essential and defining practice of a bodhisattva, is based on a notion of compassion quite different from the usual one, which goes something like this: I am over here and I am fine. You are over there in need of help. I am going to help you, and in doing so, I will be doing something praiseworthy that will aid you and will probably make me feel a lot better about myself.

This kind of compassion certainly is praiseworthy, and the world would be a much better place if more of us would practice it. Bodhisattvas also practice it. But it isn't bodhisattva compassion. Bodhisattva compassion is expanded and completely revised by force of imagination. Recall the lines of Hoitsu Suzuki I quoted above:

> so when I lose my life to death
> will my life be owned by me
> more then than it ever was?

These lines evidence a radically different sense of self than the one we usually live, in which I am here and you are there. To that self, death is the worst possible event. But for bodhisattvas the ultimate giving up (death) may be the ultimate receiving, the ultimate self-realization. Bodhisattvas know that the conventional self, the ego self, isn't the whole story or necessarily the true story. There are other stories. Yes, I am me with my personal history and social role. I can't deny it. But that's just my story. We all need a story. Yes, I am an ordinary person, like everyone. But I am also a bodhisattva living many lifetimes practicing my vow to be of benefit to others. And so are you.

Compassion isn't only me benefiting you. It's us together, swirling in and out of each other in the expansive ever-connectedly ineffable space of imaginative reality. I am not just me. You are not just you. My I and your you depend on each other. One can't exist without the other. I say "I" in relation to myself and "you" in relation to you, but you say "I" in relation to yourself and "you" in relation to me. There is no fixed I or you. I and you shift. (In linguistics they are called *shifters*.) We are we, so our serving each other isn't service in the usual sense. It's life taking care of life—the most natural thing possible.

The Buddhist pundit Santideva gives us this analogy in his classic text on the bodhisattva path, *Bodhicaryavatara* (*Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*—a text I will be referring to throughout this book): when a painful thorn lodges in the foot, the fingers pull it out without hesitation or fanfare. The fingers don't feel good about themselves for doing this, nor is the foot grateful. It is just a perfectly normal thing for the fingers to do. Why? Because the fingers don't think of themselves as independent of the foot. Fingers and foot are one body. They don't have to think about this; it's simply the case. So naturally, easily, smoothly, without trouble or fanfare, there is caring and beneficial action. One-body reality.

It's exactly the same for bodhisattvas. Taking care of one another is the truest and most ordinary way of being. As we say in Zen, compassion is like reaching back for your pillow in the night. Your

hand knows how to do it even if you are half-asleep. You don't need your eyes; your hands have eyes.

When I view others and myself like this, I have maximum happiness and ease. I don't need to be wary of others. I don't need to worry about whether they validate me, like me, or are taking advantage of me. I understand that every person will have some kind of conditioning that will cause them to see and live in a particular way that may or may not seem good to me, given my own conditioning. So naturally I—and everyone else—will have preferences and patterns. But all of this is myself, and I am all of it. I don't need to judge, congratulate, or condemn. I only need to love as a natural extension of my being alive, and I only need to do whatever seems naturally beneficial out of that love.

Given this, bodhisattvas don't mind much what happens to them. Their lives are larger than the plans they may have had for them. In the conventional understanding of our lives, we go forth with our inner and outer wants and needs. We try to bring these wants and needs to fruition. We are happy when we succeed, disappointed when we don't. But bodhisattvas don't think that way. They think about their impossible vows to save infinite beings, enter infinite dharma gates, purify infinite defilements, and become completely ethical, wise, and loving people.

We're only human. But we're also more. We're by nature aspirational beings. Our imaginations are unlimited. We can't be satisfied simply with the world as it appears. Presented with that, and only that, we will do what we have always done—distract and destroy. We will be deeply, narcissistically, self-protective and dissatisfied, and out of that uncomfortable smallness we will do stupid and terrible things. This is unworthy of us. We need a wider, deeper, more altruistic vision of who we are, for we are bigger than we look—as big as our imaginations project us to be. We each have to take ourselves less seriously as the person we think we are and more seriously as the bodhisattva we also surely are. All the world's great religions teach this in one way or another. This is why they exist.

We live in a materialistic world. The earth has always been our home, but never before have we been as concerned with the stuff that surrounds us: wealth, money, entertainment, and the incessant activity and anxiety that an almost completely materialistic world fosters. In the past we understood that there's spaciousness in the middle of everything. We understood that the material is also the sacred—that spirit pervades the tangible world. But we have forgotten. It may be that we need the imagination now more than ever.

PRACTICE

Throughout this book I use the word *practice,* and this is the time to say more about what I mean by it. Musicians, athletes, and orators practice to get ready for their performances. But doctors, lawyers, psychotherapists, architects, artists, craftspeople, and other professionals practice in a different sense. They are not preparing for something more significant that is going to happen later. Practice for them is ongoing daily effort to develop their field. They respect and honor their field, and they know they can't ever completely master it. As long as they practice they will extend themselves, improve their skills, work toward mastery.

For spiritual practitioners, life is the field of practice. Spiritual practitioners try to master the art of living. They pay attention to how they live, which means how they think, speak, and act. They pay attention to states of mind and body, relationships to self and others, perceptions, feelings.

Above all, practice is a transformative activity. Over time, practicing shapes character and point of view. This is true in all professions. When you study, apprentice in, and practice a profession or craft, you are eventually formed by it. You gradually come to see the world as does a lawyer, doctor, or architect. Of course, every lawyer, doctor, or architect is different, just as every spiritual practitioner is different. Yet lawyers, doctors, architects,

and spiritual practitioners share something that no one who has not done the practice over time can know.

So much in our world has changed over the last few hundred years. Certainly the external world looks and operates completely differently. But we have changed inwardly as well. We have expanded, broken down barriers inside and between us. Views and behaviors that separated one group from another—races, genders, cultures—have fallen away, and we are aware of, sympathetic to, and more understanding of one another than we have ever been. I realize, of course, that this *we* is far from universal. There is plenty of bigotry and misunderstanding still, and the many barriers that remain seem more painful now that we recognize them as barriers. So though human beings may be better at recognizing and including one another than we ever have been, we are very far from the full respect and justice we aspire to. The urgent need to close this gap between reality and aspiration is strong.

Religions used to see themselves as protectors of exclusive metaphysical truths. Every religion proposed a way of looking at the world that was understood to be the only possible right way. Some religionists still see it like this, but, increasingly, religious people see their traditions in the light of imaginative spiritual practice. That is, religious people see their religion less as an exclusive truth that must be defended and upheld, and more as a practice, a transformational process that gives them a way of living in and seeing the world. There are many views, many practices. But just as there are many branches of law and many different conceptions of the law in different countries, lawyers are lawyers and recognize one another as such. So, spiritual practitioners may differ radically in their views and practices and yet increasingly see themselves as being on the same path—an inner path, a spiritual path.

In our time, people are afforded a lot of autonomy in their spiritual practice. They are free to mix and match various churches or traditions—or to let go of any formal religion and practice secular forms of spirituality: meditation courses, experiential workshops, yoga classes, and many others forms of nonreligious spiritual

practice are widely available. Many if not most of the professional and corporate training programs I am aware of base their work on insights gleaned from spiritual disciplines. The notion of spiritual practice has become an important part of contemporary life in many ways. Some people complain that this is tacky and watered down. No doubt it often is. But little by little it deepens and becomes more serious.

IMAGINATION AND THE BODHISATTVA PATH: SIX PERFECTIONS

We all have the same human problem: how to take good practical care of our lives and, at the same time, expand them. In this book I propose the bodhisattva vision—your own version of it—as a way to do this. We all want to extend ourselves, to be of service, to have some bounce in our living. The bodhisattva path can offer inspiration.

The bodhisattva path is defined by six practices, called the six *paramitas*. The word *paramita* is generally translated as "perfection." This translation comes from the root words *param,* which means "the other side," and *ita,* which means "gone." So, *paramita* means "gone to the other side." By extension it means "perfection." Perfect goes all the way out to the end of possible—and beyond. It crosses over to the other side, beyond the possible.

"Nobody's perfect." Like most common sayings, this too is true. No human being can be perfect. But this doesn't stop us from trying. The six perfections are impossible. No one can practice them. But we practice them anyway. We make the impossible possible.

The only way to do what cannot be done is imaginatively. I can't practice the paramitas objectively, but I can practice them imaginatively through vow, intention, spirit, commitment, action. I can practice them through love, through expansion of my heart. That's the spirit of practicing the six perfections.

In an early sutra, the Buddhist path was compared to a raft. Starting from the shore of suffering, you float the raft to the shore of nirvana. You go beyond pain to peace. In using the word *paramita,* "going beyond," to describe the bodhisattva path, the Mahayanists wanted to echo the sense of that early metaphor. Each of the six perfections is a raft carrying us from this shore to the other shore. But also each perfection is already beyond. To practice it, wherever we are, is already to be beyond. We never leave this shore for another because we are already there, already beyond, immediately, simply in doing the practice. The very imperfection is the perfection! The path itself is the goal. This paradox lies at the heart of the practice of the six perfections.

The six perfections are expansive, endlessly imaginative practices, yet they are, at the same time, down-to-earth. They are pathways for the development of character, ways we can improve as human beings functioning in the world as it is. Taken as a whole, they define a spirit and a way of life.

The six perfections are generosity, ethical conduct, patience, joyful effort, meditation, and understanding.

The perfection of generosity: opening our hearts to ourselves, to others, and to the abundance of life.

The perfection of ethical conduct: paying attention to our thoughts, words, and deeds, turning them away from self-centeredness and toward love and the benefit of others.

The perfection of patience: fully facing difficulties and transforming them into the path.

The perfection of joyful effort: rousing ourselves to hopefulness and joy so we can keep our practice commitments with a bright spirit.

The perfection of meditation: focused, regular sitting and walking practice to refresh and slow down our heart and minds, so that our days and nights can be firm and calm.

The perfection of understanding: recognizing that nothing is as we think it is; that there is no separation, no tragedy; that nothing is fixed or solid; that there is only love and endless hopefulness beyond and within what happens and doesn't happen. The perfection of understanding pervades the other five perfections. It is the great gift of Mahayana Buddhist thought, the source and fruit of imagination.

These six practices define the path of the bodhisattva, the imaginative hero of the Mahayana Buddhist path. To contemplate and practice them is a lifetime's project—one we will never complete. The more we practice them in this crazy world, the more we will see how our ordinary human life, with all its pressures and difficulties, can also be a heroic and passionate spiritual journey. Understanding and love are possible.

In the chapters that follow we will study and practice the six perfections—the imaginative path of the bodhisattva. I will conclude this chapter as I began it, with Robert Desnos, a bodhisattva whose courage and irrepressible faith in the imagination make him a good model for us.

Here is his poem, "Ebony Life":

A frightening stillness will mark that day
And the shade from streetlamps and fire alarms will sap the light
All will go silent, the quietest and the noisiest.
The squalling infants finally dying down
The tugboats the locomotives the wind
Will silently glide
The great voice that comes from far away will be heard passing over the city
Long awaited
Then at the millionaire's hour

When the dust the stones and the absence of tears arrange the sun's dress on the great deserted squares

Finally the voice will be heard coming

It will growl endlessly at the doors

It will pass over the city ripping out flags and shattering windows

We will hear it

What silence before it but even greater the silence that it will not disturb but that it will charge with approaching death that it will wither and condemn

O day of sorrows and joys

The day the day to come when the voice will pass over the city

A ghostly gull told me that the voice loved me as much as I loved it

That this great terrible silence was my love

That the wind carrying the voice was the great revolt of the world

And that the voice would favor me.[11]

2

The Perfection of Generosity

THE PRACTICE OF THE SIX perfections defines the path of the bodhisattva. In this book I want to make use of the traditional teachings on the perfections because they are effective and helpful. But I also want to explore and expand them, because we need a more open and imaginative path that takes into account who we are in our time and place, which is our limitation and our opportunity.

Traditionally, the practice of the perfection of generosity (*dana paramita* in Sanskrit) is the gateway to the bodhisattva path. Why?

Bodhisattva practice is radical. It involves a fundamental shift in our approach to life. It begins with a serious examination of our attitudes, where they come from, and how they condition the way we see, think, feel, and act.

What *is* attitude anyway? Attitude is the climate of our lives. Everyone has some kind of attitude or set of attitudes. Probably we have never thought about them, never examined them, and don't much experience ourselves as having any particular attitudes. A fish doesn't know what water is because it sees and experiences everything through the medium of water. Like a fish in water, we swim in the medium of our attitudes.

Or maybe attitude is character: We are this or that sort of person. We are kind, generous, animated, quiet, fearful, grouchy, stingy, "nice," not very nice, relaxed, anxious. We think life is good, people are good. Or we think life is a struggle and people are not to be trusted. And so on. However much we haven't examined them, all of

us have fairly consistent attitudes that condition our lives. Our attitudes may be self-contradictory and confused, but we don't notice. Few of us have the time or capacity for deep self-reflection, and even if we did, the more we looked, the more confused we'd get. It's hard to see ourselves accurately. Our attitudes distort the picture.

Attitude literally means "stance." The way you hold your body, your posture; the way you stride forth into your life.

We come by our attitudes honestly. We get them from our parents, communities, and cultures; from our experiences, traumas, and triumphs. We assume our attitudes reflect reality. We assume they are fixed and unchangeable.

But attitudes aren't fixed. Neither is the world. Neither are we. In the bodhisattva path we don't assume anything is fixed and solid. And we don't assume that our picture of the world is the way the world has to look. This is where imagination enters in. Imagination is a warm breeze that loosens up what seems rigid and cold. Bodhisattvas have imagination. They assume that anything can be fluid and warm, subject to challenge and revision. They see that everything is provisional and open. Inspired by their imaginations, bodhisattvas believe that there are always possibilities.

The perfection of generosity confronts and softens our basic attitudes. To practice it is to appreciate the natural abundance of being, the inherent generosity of time and space, and the ongoing unfolding of life. These are exquisite gifts. Life itself is generous. Life is always making more life. Life is abundant and expansive, never stingy or small-minded. It keeps on going, bubbling up and expanding wherever it has a chance.

You don't need to create life, you just have to let it in. The grasses on the hillside are ready to burst out green as soon as a little rain falls and a little sunlight peeps through. Weeds and vines tangle all over the place. Life stopped in one place pops up somewhere else. Nature is prolific. Even the falling apart of things is generous: big trees topple willingly in heavy winds; they provide food for insects, bacteria, fungi, and other trees and plants. It's sad in our time to see so many species disappearing. More than sad. But species have

always disappeared, and new species have always arisen. When we say we are destroying or protecting the earth, we are expressing our dismay and our love, but we are also being a bit arrogant: the earth is fine, and life on earth will continue in some form no matter what we do, because life is generous and fecund and it cannot be stopped. As long as the sun shines, life in some form will continue.

It's true that human activity is messing up life as we have known it, and this is terrible. We absolutely must correct this. But we are not smart enough or destructive enough to kill life. Life is too generous and resilient for that to happen. And it's not as though we exist in a special category outside of life. We *are* life as much as anything else. Life goes on even if we do not.

The practice of the perfection of generosity eventually effects a basic attitude shift toward the recognition that we are living creatures who share in life's great abundance, freedom, and energy. So we always have possibilities. We always find a way, no matter how or what, to further our life. We just have to figure out how to stop getting in our own way. This is where the intentional practice of the perfection of generosity helps.

Someone once asked Tang dynasty Zen Master Baijang why giving is the gateway to the bodhisattva path. Baijang answered that it is because to practice giving is to practice letting go. The monk then asked, "What do you let go of?" Baijang said, "You let go of narrow views. You let go of the idea that things are small and tight, graspable and possessable."

Baijang is emphasizing the open and wide spirit of generosity. He is showing us that it is the crabbiness of our thinking, the stinginess of our minds, our desire to judge, evaluate, separate, define—holding on to scraps—that stop us from opening to the abundance that must be within us, living beings that we are. Why can't we be as generous as trees?

HOW TO OPEN UP

How do we go about challenging and opening up our stingy attitudes about reality? First, we pay close attention to our thoughts and viewpoints, which are expressions of our attitudes. If as living beings we are heir to a generous spirit, what blocks it? We have to investigate this. We have to become diligent students of our own minds, messy and unpleasant as they often are. We study our minds by noticing in detail whenever we feel pinched, small, fearful, or stingy; whenever we find ourselves seeing the glass half-empty rather than half-full or clenching up with defensive and protective feelings. We learn to identify these feelings in our bodies and minds—noticing the tightness in our chests and breathing, the clenching in our shoulders and faces, the old familiar paranoid and panicky trains of thought. With lots of patient repetition and training, eventually we learn how to notice these things before they run away with us. We learn to catch ourselves in midstream and just, literally, stop. If we are walking, we stop walking. If we are sitting, we stand up. We take a conscious breath or two and ask ourselves, "Is this really true? Am I really under attack? Is there really not enough to go around?" And we ask further, "What are the effects of this habit of mind?" This process and these questions are *practices*. We take them up repeatedly. We work at them.

Usually when we ask these questions, we answer no. We are not really under attack, and there really is enough to go around. What's bothering us is probably more a matter of pride and habitual defensiveness than reasonable necessity. When we reflect further, we notice that the consequences of this habitual response are not good: we end up with words, deeds, and feelings that cause us trouble and mess and that compromise our health, state of mind, and relationships. If we investigate and intervene like this again and again, we will eventually see our small-mindedness for what it is: an unsuccessful habit based on inaccurate information—a bad attitude.

Doing this consistently takes mental discipline. It is a kind of emotional yoga. But when you are motivated and determined, you can do it, especially if you have the support of your meditation practice and a community of friends to help you.

In fact, meditation practice is the best way I know to cultivate the expansive attitude of generosity. It is, of course, possible to sit down in meditation crabbed into yourself, obsessed with your thoughts, worries, and the constrictions of your situation. To practice the perfection of generosity in meditation is the opposite of this. When you practice the perfection of generosity in meditation, you open up, your fear and anxiety soften and dissolve, and you sit in the middle of the great gift of limitless, imaginative life.

How do you do it? Sit down in meditation posture and come into connection with your body and breath. Let yourself relax, and focus your attention not so much on your thoughts, feelings, or sensations as on the spaciousness that surrounds them. Mind or awareness itself is wide, without boundary. Within this wide openness—always there, though you may not have noticed it before—thoughts and feelings arise and pass away. Some of them you like; some of them you don't. Usually you are focused on the feelings and thoughts. Now shift your focus a bit. Let thoughts and feelings slip into the background and allow the background spaciousness to come forward. Settling down and paying attention to body and breath will absorb the free-floating anxiety that is usually there in your mind without your knowing it. This enables you to relax and let go into that generous spaciousness. Sit in the midst of it. You can say to yourself, "This is life: body, breath, consciousness. I share it with everyone and everything. It holds and protects me."

In this way, meditation will open up your attitude, little by little over time. It's a process. It won't help to try to measure progress. The effort to measure and accumulate progress is already small-minded and stingy! It already assumes you don't have enough and that you need more. Instead, be willing to keep sitting like this every day, and bit by bit you will be able to see some daylight in your basic attitude that wasn't there before—patches of blue sky peeking through the clouds.

ACTING GENEROUSLY

Attitude is all-important in bodhisattva practice because attitude comes from your understanding of and feeling for life. But attitude isn't enough. To practice generosity you have to actually do generous actions. You have to give gifts.

In the traditional Buddhist discussion of generosity, three kinds of gifts are mentioned. The first is material gifts: food, money, clothing, medicine, shelter. This first kind of gift is traditionally given by laypeople to monastics who have no other practical means of support. Laypeople also give material gifts to family members, friends, and especially to those in need. But it is always good practice to give materially to anyone, even to those who don't need the gift. The more giving, the better. Every gift extends the heart and opens the spirit. A wealthy person may give large gifts of charity or public welfare. In most societies, including ours, wealthy people feel, as they should, an obligation to give back in acknowledgment of their good fortune. But no matter how much you have, you can always give. A gift of any size and shape is good for the heart and appreciated by the recipient.

In traditional Buddhist cultures, members of the monastic community offer the second kind of gift: spiritual teaching and inspiration. The Buddha spent his life giving this gift, traveling throughout India for more than forty-five years preaching and staying in dialogue with laypeople as well as monastics. Throughout the generations, spiritual teachers have given the gift of teaching and inspiration in an effort to be of service to others.

The third traditional gift is that of fearlessness, which seems like an impossible gift to give. But it can be given. You give it by giving love, because when you feel loved, you feel confident. To give the gift of fearlessness is to give others the sense that they matter; that they are respected, cared for, secure within a loving reality, and therefore ultimately protected. You can't fake this. To be capable of giving fearlessness to others, you must have genuine confidence that there really is nothing to fear because love actually is built into the order of reality. It's not just a good idea: you feel it in your bones; it comes forth in you from your practice. Knowing that reality is inherently

generous and loving certainly doesn't mean bad things can't happen. But when you are fearless, bad things can be okay. You can accept them. Shame, loss, physical pain, and even death are part of life; they are folded into the bodhisattva's imaginative vision of the path ahead. Bodhisattva fearlessness doesn't deny catastrophe. It recognizes its inevitability. Everything that exists will one day not exist—this is how existence works; this is its beauty and the source of its bounty. So bodhisattva fearlessness is very solid, very tough, very large. When you feel it, it's easy to give the gift of fearlessness. You will give it all the time.

If you meet someone who has this kind of fearlessness, you notice. People say this about His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who, though he has been through much tragedy, is a cheerful, even light-hearted person. People report feeling somehow a sense of their own sacred humanity in his presence. Students of Suzuki Roshi, the beloved founder of our American Soto Zen lineage family, say that he was this way too, that when you were with him you felt good to be yourself. He didn't pat you on the back or try to boost your self-esteem. He said very little. But he naturally treated you as a sacred, mysterious person in whom he was ultimately interested.

In our time and place, most spiritual practitioners are laypeople. In the Zen world, even priests such as myself are essentially laypeople who are allowed to marry, have families, own property, and who commonly have careers or work other than their mission as priests. So the traditional distinctions between kinds of gifts doesn't really apply, and all of us need to give material goods, teaching and inspiration, and fearlessness as we can. We are all invited to make the commitment to extend our generosity a little more with each act. Probably we can't be famously loving like the Dalai Lama, Suzuki Roshi, or other saintly people we may have met or heard about. But we can be more loving tomorrow than we are today. I think any of us can eventually become noteworthy to others for the quality of our generous loving presence. It is definitely possible.

UPAYA—SKILLFUL MEANS

All this sounds too good, too easy. Life is complicated. The world is messy. Nothing, not even generosity, is simple.

So far I have been talking about generosity in an expansive and impressionistic way, and this is good, because bodhisattvas should be expansive and impressionistic. But the actual how-to of the six perfections can be perplexing when we look at it from a rational and practical step-by-step point of view. Bodhisattva practice isn't easily codified. This is why bodhisattvas practice *upaya,* skillful means.

Skillful means is the intuitive, practical, flexible understanding of how to concretely apply the perfection of generosity (or any other imaginative practice) in the many nuanced and specific situations presented in a messy world. In the case of giving material gifts, skillful means might encourage you to start slowly and carefully. Maybe you begin with giving a gift to yourself. One of my teachers taught me to practice generosity by taking an object in my left hand and giving it to my right hand. This seemed a bit silly to me, but when I tried it, I detected subtle feelings of gratitude or stinginess, various tiny clenchings of holding back or grasping, and, sometimes, the ease of delight and joy. The inner details of actual giving are more complicated than you think. Starting the practice of generosity by being generous to yourself is the best way. But it is not just introductory. In fact, as most people come to see, being generous with yourself is advanced practice. It requires—and promotes—an honest self-respect and unselfish self-regard that many of us find quite tricky. We tend to ping between the extremes of self-attachment and self-denigration. Practicing self-generosity requires that you care about yourself in the same way you care about others—not more, not less. This is not easy to do.

From generosity to yourself you go on to generosity toward others. You give birthday presents, send greeting cards or flowers, offer kind wishes. You do that anyway, but now you do it with more intentionality and awareness. You pay close attention to the experience. More than you did before, you notice the recipient's

happiness, not just your own sense of satisfaction or lack of it in having succeeded or not succeeded in doing something good. We all give, but do we really give? To practice generosity is to try one's best to give with a genuine feeling of love and well-wishing for the other person. It turns out this takes practice.

What about more complicated gifts? For instance, giving money. How much, and to whom? A loan to a relative in need? A dollar to the begging guy on the street? Generous tips to waiters and hotel cleaners? A big check to the Salvation Army? Funds to support children in Africa? Now it gets complicated. To whom should you give? You can't give to everyone. How do you decide? Should you give time as well as money, volunteering someplace? How much is enough? Is it ever enough? If you give until it hurts, as fund-raisers often ask you to do, do you end up feeling resentful? Can you, as the Buddha once said, give even a grain of sand and feel happy to give it, feel like it's enough? What if no matter how much you give, it never feels like enough?

I know people who are genuinely dubious about giving to charity. Charity is good, and it feels good to give, but maybe, they think, giving to charity causes you to lose sight of the underlying social injustices that give rise to the need in the first place. So maybe giving to charity is an excuse to avoid taking more responsibility for others. It's easy to write a check when you have a full bank account. But what if doing that only makes you feel less guilty and in the end perpetuates the unjust social order? Maybe the money would be better spent working for political candidates, parties, or organizations that tackle the root causes of poverty and injustice.

What if being generous to those in need—say, your child who is a meth addict, or your brother-in-law whose alcoholism rages destructively through the family—enables them to continue along a bad path? Possibly in cases such as these, the skillful means would be to not give. What about when you are making out your will? How much do you give to your children and other heirs, and how much to charity? Could giving a lot of money to your children be an unskillful gift, not really generous? Who needs to be remembered in your will

for the contributions they have made to your life, to pay them back for what you have that—you now come to realize—isn't and never really was yours in the first place? How much should you give these people or institutions?

In Jewish teaching, the Hebrew word for charity, *tzedakah,* literally means "justice." Giving to those in need is not magnanimous. As fellow human beings who share the same mind, heart, and position on the earth, we owe it to one another to ensure that basic human needs are met. It's only just and fair. No one achieves wealth and power exclusively through his or her own efforts. You can pull yourself up by your bootstraps, but someone gave you the boots. We have all been helped along our way by countless others. So it's justice to share what we have. The world is unsustainable if some do very, very well and too many others do very, very poorly. Practicing the perfection of generosity is simply being aware of our responsibility to who and what we are. The perfection of generosity implies a social vision.

But this doesn't tell us exactly how to practice generosity in any specific situation. There will always be questions, decisions, discernments. Practicing generosity takes understanding and reflection. And we won't ever stop cultivating the underlying attitude of abundance, kindness, and openness that enables us to give to the best of our ability with a maximum of joy and a minimum of agony.

GIVING TEACHINGS

Such complexities seem not to apply in giving spiritual inspiration. But maybe this gift too is more complicated than it looks. Practicing Zen with so many people over the years has shown me that sometimes saying something you think will help is a mistake. Sometimes saying nothing helps more. Perfectly sound and wholesome teachings will be heard in various ways. Meaning well and saying or doing something you think will be helpful can sometimes cause pain and trouble. Sometimes it's not what you say

but how you say it, your look or gesture, that communicates. It's difficult, if not impossible, to control or manipulate that level of communication. The way you really feel, even when you don't know how you really feel, unfailingly gets communicated. And what if you're fooling yourself, not realizing that you give your great teachings and sound spiritual advice mostly for the enjoyment of hearing yourself talk in such wonderful ways, more than concern for others?

When it comes to giving traditional teachings, which have been repeated for centuries, there is always the question of how much to adapt these teachings for your audience. If you are a Western Buddhist teacher, trying to sound like an ancient Asian sage will likely not work out. This book is a case in point: To what extent should I say the things teachers have always said about the perfection of generosity? If I add or subtract something in line with my ideas of what will most benefit my audience, maybe I'm actually misunderstanding or watering down the teachings and robbing my apparently willing readers of the chance to learn something tried and true. It turns out that giving spiritual teachings also requires skillful means.

What are spiritual teachings anyway? A Zen poem says, "The meaning is not in the words." Saying words that have been said before doesn't necessarily constitute sound spiritual teaching. Even if you repeat word for word something you believe the Buddha said, those same words uttered by you, in your tone of voice, with your life experience, in your time and place, might not be true. What is the meaning that isn't in the words? What are the teachings that really heal in any given situation?

FEARLESSNESS

Maybe the gift of fearlessness is the one gift that isn't complicated. This gift is an inner gift. Giving it doesn't require a transfer of goods

or words. There is no “thing” to give. You offer your heart, your feeling.

There are many gifts like this. You can give the gift of your happiness to others by being happy in a generous and inclusive way. This seems odd—how can my being happy be a gift to someone else? But it can be. If I experience my happiness in a light and outgoing way—if I don’t think of it as *my* happiness, *my* good fortune—then others can feel happy with me. If I am happy and others are miserable, maybe I feel guilty. Maybe I think I ought to be miserable too. But my misery won’t reduce theirs; it will only compound it. However, if I share my happiness without feeling I need to protect myself from others’ misery, I can cheer them up.

Probably we have all experienced being cheered up by someone who truly reaches out to us, offering his or her good spirit without judgment or coercion. Years ago, when I was elected abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center, a very complicated and burdensome position, people would ask me what priorities I had for my new role. I said that my first priority was my own happiness. This shocked people. But it made sense to me. An abbot practices at the center of a community. A crabby abbot will dampen everyone’s mood, while a happy abbot increases the community’s joy. We are all abbots, each of us practicing at the center of our various communities, so we should all cultivate our own happiness, not for ourselves (true happiness can never be selfish anyway) but for others.

Similarly, we can give others our joy and stability, our love and understanding. These last two might be the simplest and purest of all gifts—we simply aim to love, respect, and honestly try to understand another person, without a need to improve or fix, or think we have to figure out the person.

In all this, it’s clear that the practice of generosity can’t be dutiful and pious, as if we were magnanimously giving out of the goodness of our earnest heart. In fact, when we practice generosity, we ourselves receive the biggest benefit: to grow into a larger, fuller, more beautiful person. In traditional Buddhist scriptures it’s said that you achieve rebirth in human form thanks to acts of generosity

performed in past lives. The teachings say that the more you practice generosity, the better looking you will be in your next life—so if you are physically attractive now it's because you were generous in the past. This is probably true. Generous people *are* better looking! So the giver should be more grateful than the recipient. He or she should thank the recipient for being kind enough to accept the proffered gift.

In training volunteers to care for patients at our Zen Hospice Project in San Francisco, we tell them that they receive more from their service than they give. Initially volunteers might feel that their role is to give comfort and spiritual support as an act of charity. But in the end, volunteers experience that they are the ones to whom charity has been done. The patients, acting however unintentionally as good spiritual teachers, have somehow guided the volunteers to open up, to become whole. Besides, whatever you think you are giving—time, money, possessions, love—was never yours in the first place. It was a gift, given for no particular reason, and you are merely passing it on.

THE WORLD AS GIFT

Early Buddhist teachings can seem austere. The Buddha talks about "guarding the sense doors," as if acts of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching are somehow dangerous, as if someone who is serious about spiritual cultivation had better not have too much pleasure or too much fun. These teachings seem to echo Christian teachings about the corruptions of the flesh.

But if you look more closely at these early Buddhist teachings, they actually say something quite different. Meditation slows you down enough to experience, at close range, the workings of sensual perception. You notice that in pleasurable perceptions there is usually something more going on than the simple act of enjoyment. Underneath enjoyment you detect a subtle clinging, a greediness for more and better. If you go to a restaurant and listen to the table talk

around you, you find that people are always talking about other meals they have had on other occasions, comparing what they are eating now with what they were eating then. And there is often a sad poignancy about enjoying a spectacular view or smelling something deliciously fragrant: in the middle of the pleasant sensual experience is the sense that it is fleeting, that you can't get hold of it and you can't get enough of it. The closer you look, the more you see the lack, even sadness, at the center of pleasant sensual experience.

Then there are the unpleasant sensations: the aches and pains, the tastes, smells, or sights you don't like, the too cold and the too hot, the many unwanted sensations from which you want to escape.

The Buddha once used a drastic metaphor to make the case: he compared ordinary everyday sensual experience, both pleasant and unpleasant, to the experience of a leper roasting his limbs on a fire to relieve the discomfort of the disease. This sounds crazy, but I understand. Though I have never had leprosy, I used to get terrible poison oak; my arms and torso were so itchy and uncomfortable I could hardly bear it. My only relief was to douse my skin in scalding hot water.

The Buddha's point is that to avoid the unconscious but constant existential anxiety of knowing we are victims of time and death, we desperately drink in sensual experiences. We like the pleasant ones and avoid the unpleasant ones, but in the end they are both distractions and, in that sense, ultimately negative. The Buddhist teacher Ajahn Chah said that an unpleasant sensual experience is like being bitten by a snake; it hurts right away. A pleasant sensual experience, he went on, is like grabbing a snake by the tail; while it doesn't hurt at first, it will eventually. From the Buddha's point of view, no sensual experience is ever truly pleasant.

But avoiding sensual experience is impossible. As long as we are alive, the senses operate. When we face our human condition, we can go beyond sensual distraction; we can end the grasping, clinging, comparing, and averting that characterize our normal perceptual acts. When we do so, we feel each act of perception as a gift received in peaceful gratitude. We don't need to grasp in our greed or push it

away in our annoyance. This is another way to understand the perfection of generosity—as perception itself, in which we receive the world as gift.

How would you practice this? It is easiest after meditation practice, especially in retreat. When your mind is quiet, practice looking with soft eyes, listening with soft ears. Practice feeling the air on your cheek, the taste of food, the fragrance of flowers. Be fully present with sensual experience and you will feel what it is like to receive the gifts of the senses—without looking for more.

GENEROSITY IS EMPTY OF GENEROSITY

The Zen meal liturgy has this line: "May we with all beings realize the emptiness of the three wheels, giver, receiver, and gift." This is a teaching about the practice of the perfection of generosity that comes from the *Diamond Sutra,* one of the sutras on the subject of emptiness.

Any generous act requires three elements: a giver, a receiver, and a gift. This is obvious. We give or receive a gift. But remember that the six perfections of the bodhisattva path aren't obvious ordinary practices; as perfections, they go beyond usual practices. They are imaginative practices that leap beyond the seemingly solid material world. So the *perfection* of generosity is generosity that leaps beyond generosity and becomes something else.

The perfection of generosity and the other paramitas are perfections because they are permeated by the practice of the perfection of understanding, the sixth perfection, that sees the empty nature of things. *Empty* means "whole, connected, fluid, free, boundless." Emptiness seen through perfect understanding is inherently imaginative. You might say that the perfection of understanding *is* imagination itself.

Technically, according to the sutras, *emptiness* means "lacking independent being." This is what things are empty of: independent solid existence. Nothing is fixed or separate. There are no "things,"

“entities,” “selves,” or “beings.” There is only the flow of reality, the riot of life, the sun of being radiating everywhere.

In the light of such understanding, there can be no giver, recipient, or gift. Like everything else, these three “wheels” are empty—they don’t exist as we think they do. Things are not separate from one another. Everything is flow, everything is complete. Since no one owns anything, there is no giver or receiver. Life circulates as a gift. “Things go round and again go round,” as Wallace Stevens writes in his great poem, “The Pleasures of Merely Circulating.” Our very bodies come and go, their molecules mixing with air, food, and water, and eventually dissolving into soil and air as they circulate into other beings. So the perfection of generosity is a joyful practice. Giving is simple. Its manifestations are myriad. One of my teachers once instructed me to practice giving in airport restrooms (I am in airports a lot) by wiping down sink counters when I am done washing my hands—to do this for future sink users and for the sink itself. Even inanimate objects deserve our generosity and are likely to be generous in return.

The counter-wiping practice can be done everywhere. Why not wipe counters in your own bathroom or kitchen as the practice of generosity? Do it beautifully and joyfully. For yourself, for others in your household, for the counters. You could wipe your counters as an offering to people far away who have no counters. When the perfection of generosity is appreciated as the limitless imaginative practice that it is, almost anything can be a vehicle for it.

THERE’S NO ME OR YOU

This brings us to another essential point. There is no gift, no giver, no recipient, so there is no generosity. These are empty concepts, as we have said. “Me” and “you” are also empty concepts. Such concepts are important—we couldn’t negotiate the world without them. But when we forget that they are concepts, when we freeze and fix them

into solid realities that we cling to and defend, they become pernicious.

When I sit in meditation and settle deeply into myself, getting past the salient yet incidental facts of my life, I see a deeper self. I see my hopes, dreams, fears, and impulses. I want to live; I don't want to die. I want to thrive and be happy; I don't want to suffer. I want my family and those I care about to be well. These deeply ingrained impulses sit at the bottom of who I am. Feeling them, I recognize that every other human being feels them too. In this profound sense, "me" and "you" are incidentals, temporary positions we occupy for a short lifetime. When we are gone, these same basic human impulses (and the words *me* and *you*) are going to recirculate in other lives, other circumstances. The more I see and feel this as a fundamental reality of my life, the more I see that generosity isn't a noble act on my part. It's me taking care of me, you taking care of you.

This is more or less the argument the great eighth-century Buddhist sage Santideva makes in his *Bodhicaryavarata,* the text I mentioned earlier. He calls it the practice of exchanging self for other. The importance of it is to help us see that generosity is not a question of me diminishing myself to benefit you. Since there isn't any me or you other than conceptually, generosity increases my sense of well-being as well as yours.

This is an important teaching, even if it sounds like sophistry. One of the difficulties of the extravagant practice of perfect generosity is that people who sincerely try to practice it can get exhausted and burned out. This happens to professional helpers, medical people, social workers, therapists, teachers, and others. But it could happen to any of us in our roles of mother, father, or friend. Keeping your heart open for all the suffering you encounter in your therapy or medical office, in your family, or even in the daily news can seem overwhelming. When "I" feel responsible to "help" "them" or even care about them, I feel depressed, discouraged, stressed out because I can't take away their suffering. This is why it is essential that I develop the expansive view of the perfection of generosity that I have been discussing. Really understanding that there is no one to help,

no one who needs help, and no helping takes the pressure off. Everything is always the way it is, flowing and perfect, even when it seems painful.

This is easy enough to say or read but hard to feel. We work on it, and little by little we begin to feel it. We feel the sorrow and pain—we don't want *not* to feel this—but at the same time we feel the flow and the perfection. This helps us hold the pain with some lightness, some grace.

In the meantime, we reflect that if these teachings are true, they must mean that taking care of one's self *is* taking care of others. To sacrifice one's self in an effort to help others isn't the perfection of generosity; it's well-meaning neurosis based on the false premise that I am me and you are you. It misses the other side of that reality: that we exchange one another; that "I" am "us." If we can clean our kitchen counter on behalf of others, why can't we take care of ourselves for others?

Eating well, getting exercise and sleep, knowing when enough is enough or too much—these are necessary practices of the perfection of generosity. Maybe you feel guilty taking care of yourself when the world and all your friends are in such pain. But think about it: if you don't take care of your health, state of mind, and general well-being, what good will you be to others? When people give you gifts in an exhausted and semiresentful manner, it doesn't make you feel joy. You wish they'd take care of themselves, not you. The same is true for you. Practice the perfection of generosity with a spirit of abundance and happiness, not resentment and exhaustion. Taking excellent and loving care of yourself is skillful means in the practice of the perfection of generosity.

GIVING MERIT

In traditional Buddhist understanding, the practice of generosity, like any other spiritual practice, generates virtue, a stock of goodness traditionally called *merit*. When the laity gives alms to the pure

monastic community, they are generating merit for themselves and their families. Although practicing generosity in order to store up spiritual merit isn't exactly the perfection of generosity, the merit is accumulated anyway. Oddly, the more selfless and perfect our generosity, the more merit we get for it!

Given this traditional belief, Mahayana Buddhism conceived of the practice of the *transfer of merit*. It is typical in almost all ceremonies and practice sessions in Zen and other Mahayana Buddhist schools to "dedicate (transfer) the merit of this assembly," that is, to pledge all the good spiritual practice we have just done to the benefit of others so that none of it will be accumulated for ourselves. This may seem like an abstract notion of generosity, but it is a powerful act of imagination. I do this practice almost every day, dedicating the merit of my sitting, chanting, or study to friends in need who may be close or far away—and to others, to everyone. I don't know if this does them any good, but it certainly does me good to feel that I am participating with them, holding them in my mind and heart. It is more or less the same practice as praying for others, which is done in churches, mosques, and synagogues all around the world. Praying for others is a powerful act of generosity.

If life is a gift we have received freely and lovingly, from forces or nonforces beyond our ken, then certainly we are indebted to life and to all others who share life with us. We must continue to circulate the gift through the practice of perfect generosity.

DOGEN ON THE PERFECTION OF GENEROSITY

Zen Master Dogen (1200–1253), the founder of the Soto school of Zen in Japan, is noted for his imaginative approach to Buddhist practice. Zen masters are pretty imaginative, but Dogen, at least judging by his extensive writings, goes beyond the norm. His case is especially odd because his teachings have been taken by Buddhist readers through the centuries to promote and justify both very conservative monasticism and a wide-open, almost antinomian

approach to practice. This is because so much of what he wrote is wild, paradoxical, and notoriously difficult to pin down.

One of my favorite Dogen texts is his short essay "The Bodhisattva's Four Methods of Guidance," a chapter in his masterwork, *Shobogenzo* (*Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*). The four methods—generosity, kind speech, beneficial action, and identity action—are bodhisattva practices specifically designed to influence others. As we've noted, bodhisattvas' whole purpose is to help. They can't do this by badgering or proselytizing; they know this won't work and that it misses the point. When I practice, others practice; when others practice, I practice. So there's no me practicing and someone else not. In the big bodhisattva picture, we're all always advancing on the path together. So bodhisattvas don't need to cajole or convince. They influence others nonintentionally simply through their actions. Bodhisattvas do these four methods of practice to inspire others to become bodhisattvas.

Generosity is the first of the four. Dogen tells us that you practice generosity simply by not grabbing or wanting, simply by being happy to receive whatever is given. To be content is to be generous. When you are content, you will spontaneously give. You will give, he writes, flowers on a distant hillside, treasures you possessed in a former life, even things that don't belong to you. You will give what you see and hear and imagine. You will give a line of scripture, a penny, a blade of grass, a particle of dust. When your generosity defies all rational bounds, people will be deeply impressed, their lives transformed. Later in the essay, Dogen writes, "to launch a boat or build a bridge is an act of giving. If you study giving closely, you see that to accept a body [to be born] and to give up the body [to die] are both giving."[1]

There's no way *not* to practice generosity once we pay attention to our lives as they really are and enter the bodhisattva path.

VERSES ON THE PERFECTION OF GENEROSITY

There are many other traditional texts that cover the six perfections. Here is a verse from a Tibetan Buddhist text, *Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva,* written in the thirteenth century by the great lama Tokme Zongpo and translated and commented on beautifully in the book *Reflections on Silver River* by my friend Ken McLeod, a contemporary teacher and translator of Tibetan Buddhism. In his short pithy text, Tokme Zongpo offers thirty-seven verses to describe the bodhisattva path. Six of the verses (verses 25 through 30) cover the six perfections. Here is the verse on the perfection of generosity:

> If those who want to be awake have to give even their bodies,
> What need is there to talk about things you simply own?
> Be generous without looking
> For any return or result—this is the practice of a bodhisattva.[2]

The giving up of bodies referred to here has to do with traditional Indian Buddhist stories of bodhisattvas whose passion to benefit beings causes them to literally sacrifice their bodies. There's a folk story about the Buddha in a past life offering his body as food for a starving tigress who needed to eat so she could nurse her cubs. In another story, the prior Buddha is born as a rabbit and leaps into a hunter's campfire to roast himself to feed the hungry hunter. There are many other stories like this. Such stories are meant to express the thoroughness of the bodhisattva's love and concern for others. Though they are religious fables meant to express an attitude rather than objective action, one can imagine circumstances in which one would literally sacrifice one's life for another. People do it. Such stories are also meant to show us how identified we are with our bodies, how much fear we carry about our bodies and within them. To perfect the practice of generosity, bodhisattvas become free of this fear. They practice deeply within and throughout the body, truly appreciating and understanding its radical vulnerability, its empty nature. Appreciating the body, bodhisattvas can be completely generous, holding nothing back.

Tokme Zongpo's words in this verse are simple and to the point. If mythical bodhisattvas give up their bodies for others, how can we be stingy with our property or other things we think we own? Ownership is a misunderstanding. Everything we think we possess we only take care of on a temporary basis; we don't actually own it. Ownership is a social and legal convention, not an actuality. A friend of mine once told me he felt guilty that he owns a big house overlooking the ocean. Don't worry, I told him, it's only temporary. Once you take as real the convention of ownership, the perfection of generosity becomes impossible. Though you appear to own things, you have to remind yourself that this is not actually the case. Then you can be generous without looking for any return.

The line says, "Be generous without looking for any return or result." Perhaps it isn't so hard to give up looking for a return, but it is difficult to give up looking for a result. Maybe I don't need to get credit for my generosity but at least it should help! There should be some good effect. But to practice the perfection of generosity, we forget about results and give just because this is our practice, it is who and what we are, and it is good in and of itself. If any further good comes of it, we are surprised.

Finally, here are some verses on the perfection of generosity from a favorite sutra of mine, the *Prajnaparamita Sutra in Eight Thousand Lines*. As the title suggests, this text specializes in the sixth perfection, the perfection of understanding (prajnaparamita) that, as we've said, pervades all the others and is so fundamental it requires its own set of sutras. Here are a few lines from this sutra that touch on the perfection of generosity:

> But one who…becomes unconcerned about anything that may be dear or undear—
>
> If, when he renounces head, hands, and feet his thoughts remain undejected,
>
> He becomes one who gives up all he has, always uncowed.[3]

Fear is a crucial theme in this sutra. A constant refrain in the sutra goes like this: if a person hears of the emptiness of everything and doesn't get frightened, depressed, or freaked out by this but is instead made glad and contented, then we know that person is a true bodhisattva. In the case of giving, if the bodhisattva realizes she or he could give up anything and everything because there is nothing to give up, and this realization makes her or him happy, not afraid, not dejected, not cowed, then she or he is a true bodhisattva. This teaching wisely and surprisingly acknowledges fear as an essential ingredient of our personalities. We identify with the vulnerable self: we think we are and possess what we are not and do not possess. Hence fear of loss of self and possessions is essential in us. When basic identity is challenged, fear arises, often masked by anger. To practice the perfection of giving, we have to overcome this fear, realizing there really is nothing to fear. Everything is empty in the first place.

This does not mean that we wait until we are fearless to practice generosity. Of course not. We practice right now, as we are, and the path of practice brings us bit by bit to fearlessness. Teachings like this are not meant to scare us off; they encourage by indicating the depth and range of what we aspire to.

PRACTICES

I intend this book as inspiration for you to reimagine your life so you can live it differently. I have no doubt this was the Buddha's intention too, to help ensure there is less suffering and more happiness in the world.

But this will require more than reading a book. It takes ongoing spiritual cultivation. Buddhist teaching is full of transformative practices. So at the end of this and every chapter of this book, I add lists of practices.

Many of the items on the list come from practices I've already embedded in the pages of the chapter. But it's useful to recast those

practices in short form, for ease of reference.

These lists are not systematic or exhaustive, and they are not from traditional sources. They are suggestions, starting points. I fully expect imaginative readers to create their own practices to suit their circumstances and temperaments, just as the Buddha created never-before-seen-nor-heard practices to suit himself and his students in his time. I hope the spirit of this book makes it obvious that I am not expecting readers to go down the list of suggested practices and dutifully try them all. Try any practices that seem useful or interesting to you. Try or ignore as many as you like. Don't force yourself to do anything you don't feel comfortable with or interested in.

I divide the lists of practice into two sections: meditation practices and everyday life practices.

Meditation practices are suggestions for ways to focus your mind on the meditation cushion.

Everyday life practices are practices you can use either by setting aside some special time for them (other than meditation time) or, more often, in the ordinary course of your everyday life.

Practices

MEDITATION PRACTICES

- Sit down and pay attention to your body. Now pay attention to your breath, in and out, as your stomach rises and falls. Rest in each exhale. Feel yourself relaxing with each successive breath. Open to generous, spacious mind with every exhale.
- Sit down and pay attention to body and breath. Become aware of thoughts, images, memories, whatever arises in your mind. Now become aware of the awareness itself that is the container or background for the content of your mind. Little by little (using your exhale to ease your way into it) shift your attention from the foreground (thoughts, etc.) to the background (awareness itself). Feel the awareness itself as boundless. Feel its infinite generosity.
- Exchange of Self for Other: Settle with body and breath. Now imagine another person sitting across from you. Reflect that she or he, like you, wants to live, not die; wants to be happy, not miserable. Feel yourself and the other person at this basic human level, beyond particulars. Now with each exhale, imagine yourself as the other person and the other person as you. See that body—across the room—as this body (yourself), and see this body as that body. Don't expect this to work out perfectly or exactly, but keep trying to exchange self for other. After a while, simply return to following the breath.
- Just after meditation, pay close attention to perception, seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling. Try to feel the feeling of the perception without underlying aversion or attachment; notice that the world is a gift. Feel the gift as a gift.
- Your own practices never before seen or heard or picked up from other sources.

Let me note again—and this goes for all the practices to follow—that if you feel doubtful about trying any of the practices above or any practices recommended in this book, don't do them! Spiritual practice can be and often is rigorous. We are enjoined to stretch ourselves, go beyond our comfort zones. But doing this requires the support of teachers and community. When you are practicing on your own it is better to be careful. So do only what you feel comfortable doing, and if in the doing you begin to feel uncomfortable, stop.

DAILY LIFE PRACTICES

- Wipe counters in public restrooms and recall that you do this for the next person coming in and for the counter itself.
- Give yourself a daily gift for a week or more: a sky-gazing break sometime during the day; a special food; a literal pat on the back or a neck message; a small purchase—whatever you can think of. Study how it feels to give the gift and to receive it.
- Purchase—or better yet, make—greeting cards to send to friends on any occasion. Try, as you write each card, to genuinely feel good wishes for the person who will receive it. Send the cards.
- Intentionally smile at people, anyone and everyone. Try to feel the inner warmth the smile outwardly projects.
- Practice saying to someone "How are you?" and actually meaning it. And think of follow-up questions: "How are your children?" "How is your _____?" (Whatever you know about the person, an illness he or she is recovering from, a hobby or interest he or she has, etc.)
- Do something every day for your health and well-being—meditation, exercise, healthy diet.

- Transfer merit. At the end of the day offer whatever goodness you might have generated during the day to someone you know who is sick or having a personal challenge and might need the help. Offer the stock of goodness to everyone in the world who is suffering; offer it to yourself. Alternatively, do something intentionally that would generate goodness (a few moments of reading a spiritual text; chanting; offering incense at an altar, if you have a home altar) and offer the goodness as above.
- Compose a grace before meals that reminds you that the food you are about to eat is a miraculous gift. Memorize and recite before each meal. If you can't think of one here's one I wrote some years ago:

One Heart Grace

As we make ready to eat this food
we remember with gratitude
the many people, tools, animals and plants,
air and water, sky and earth,
turned in the wheel of living and dying,
whose joyful exertion
provide our sustenance this day.

May we with the blessing of this food
join our hearts
to the one heart of the world
in awareness and love,
and may we together with everyone
realize the path of awakening,
and never stop making effort

for the benefit of others.

- Make it your business to call or visit a friend in need.
- Give material gifts: presents for family and friends on appropriate occasions (or, better, on any occasion); money to panhandlers on the street (keep dollar bills loose in your pocket for this purpose); money to charities or other organizations that do good.
- Give spiritual teachings: share books or sayings or websites you feel are worthwhile.
- Give the gift of fearlessness. This one is difficult but it is worthwhile to try it, again and again. Look at people with eyes of love, respect, and genuine concern. Try to find those feelings within yourself.
- Give "flowers on a distant hillside, things that don't belong to you, a speck of dust."
- Notice how you feel when you give a gift. Pay close attention. Do you feel some satisfaction, some self-congratulation? Do you feel like a "generous person"? Notice whether you have such a feeling—or whatever feeling you have. The practice here is not to feel the way you think you are supposed to feel. The practice is to see (and accept as a gift!) the way you do feel.
- Share your happiness.
- Memorize the verses from Tokme Zongpo and the *Prajnaparamita Sutra in Eight Thousand Lines*. Repeat them as many times as you can during the day to remind you of the practice of generosity.
- Your own practices never before seen or heard or picked up from other sources.

3
The Perfection of Ethical Conduct

THE PERFECTION OF ethical conduct (*sila* in Sanskrit) is traditionally listed as the second of the six perfections, but it's not second in importance or in chronological order.

Remember, the bodhisattva path is imaginative. Bodhisattvas aren't just regular people doing regular things—they are spiritual heroes accomplishing impossible tasks. Their realm goes beyond the everyday and the practical. Their path isn't linear; it's not a step-by-step effort leading to a goal. Bodhisattvas may have provisional goals from time to time (this is their upaya, skillful means), but they realize that the real goal is always beyond reach. There are no steps, no hierarchies of importance. Bodhisattva practice happens all at once.

We are regular people doing regular things—who could deny it? But also we are heroic bodhisattvas. This doesn't make us different from anyone else. Everyone is a bodhisattva. Everyone has imagination and an infinite wish for the happiness and welfare of all beings, however much they may be out of touch with this aspiration. Being a bodhisattva is just being human. But as intentional bodhisattvas, we are trying to remember this side of our humanity more often and live it as best we can.

The six perfections are empty, which is what makes them perfections. Just as we are ordinary people and at the same time beyond that, so the six perfections are beyond themselves. So the bodhisattva's perfection of ethical conduct isn't the usual sort of ethical conduct—it's ethical conduct beyond ethical conduct. It's both

the entry gate to the path and the path's ultimate fruition. At first it involves some intentional restraint, but as bodhisattvas continue on the path, they easily and spontaneously practice it without particularly noticing. At this point, the perfection of ethical conduct isn't uptight or restrictive; it's a joyful path of doing what comes naturally out of the fullness of the heart.

We don't generally think of ethical conduct that way. We think of it quite soberly as a matter of restraint, purification, and righteousness. You follow ethical guidelines to clean up your act, straighten out your behavior, be a decent and good person. Bodhisattvas practice like this too. They don't want to upset people and create disturbances. They want to do the right thing. They aren't morally obtuse. They know above all that there is no "them" without everyone else, so conducting themselves with respect for others is common sense. And when they mess up, as they sometimes do, they pay attention and make corrections.

Yet the perfection of ethical conduct, like an eagle in flight, soars far beyond conventional ethics into the empty blue skies of love and delight.

ETHICAL CONDUCT AND MEDITATION

In meditation you eventually see a direct connection between your fidgeting, your uncomfortable body, your obsessive mind, and your conduct. You see that when your conduct becomes kinder, more straightforward, and clearer, your meditation becomes easier and more focused—and vice versa. In long meditation retreats, this experience can be quite stark. A searing ache in the middle back spontaneously resolves into a heartbreaking sense of remorse for a past action, suddenly and vividly recalled. In a rush, you feel the implications of your conduct in your body and in your thinking.

Ongoing meditation practice makes this connection even more obvious. You see that you never get away with anything, that shoddy conduct casts shadows on your mind and heart that you feel, sooner

or later, as mental or physical discomfort when you sit down to meditate. So naturally you become more sensitive to the little nicks and bruises to which the heart is subject. Hurtful things you used to say and do without particularly noticing, or things said and done to you that you brushed off, you now understand as consequential. It pains you to say, even to think, hurtful things.

Meditation practice sensitizes you to others. The more you are familiar with your own mind, its various twists and turns, the more you realize that others are just like you. The human mind is a swirl of activity mostly centered around self. It's full of self-protection and all sorts of scheming to get its own way, and to excuse, punish, or deceive itself. When this chaos clears enough so you can see this activity of your mind, you initially feel dismay. You knew things were bad, but now you see they are worse than you had reckoned! Then you realize it's not just you: it's normal. Although we have all become adept at presenting ourselves to the world as if we were upstanding citizens in good shape, in fact none of us is what we have become adept at seeming to be. Everyone is more tentative, more vulnerable, and rougher than they appear. Accepting this, you are kinder to yourself and everyone else. This kindness, based on a grounded understanding of human nature, is the root of ethical conduct.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF ETHICAL CONDUCT

In Zen, the practice of the perfection of ethical conduct is described by the sixteen bodhisattva precepts. They are:

THREE REFUGES

I take refuge in Buddha.
I take refuge in dharma.
I take refuge in sangha.

THREE PURE PRECEPTS

I vow to refrain from harmful conduct.
I vow to cultivate beneficial conduct.
I vow to benefit all beings.

TEN CLEAR MIND PRECEPTS

I vow to protect life, not to kill.
I vow to receive gifts, not to steal.
I vow to respect others, not to misuse sexuality.
I vow to be truthful, not to lie.
I vow to remain clear, not to intoxicate self or others.
I vow to speak kindly, not to speak ill of others.
I vow to practice modesty, not to praise self at the expense of others.
I vow to practice generosity, not to be possessive of anything.
I vow to practice loving-kindness, not to harbor ill will.
I vow to cherish and polish the three treasures.

The first three precepts, the three refuges, aren't precepts, strictly speaking. They don't describe commitments to do or not do something. Instead they point to the confidence in human goodness bodhisattvas feel and that underlies their practice of ethical conduct. This confidence is expressed by the oldest formula in Buddhism: refuge in the three treasures of Buddha, dharma, and sangha.

To take refuge in the three treasures is to confirm as one's primary motivation the bodhisattva commitment to working toward goodness and depth in living. For bodhisattvas, it isn't enough to get what you need and desire, to protect yourself and your family, to accumulate wealth, security, and reputation. It's not that bodhisattvas are against any of that; they too recognize these goals and desires as natural. It's just that bodhisattvas are committed to a much more ambitious goal, a greater obligation, a higher and wider calling. They want much more joy, much more love, much more justice and well-being, for themselves and for everyone. Personal well-being is only a means to this end.

This basic commitment to universal goodness and benefit for all isn't particular to Zen or Buddhism; every religion teaches it. Human beings have conceptual consciousness, shaped by language, thinking, and imagining. This is why we are the animals concerned with beauty, meaning, and purpose. Having this kind of consciousness is both an advantage and a disadvantage. On one hand, it means we can't be satisfied with mere physical well-being. We have to strive for more, which could make us perpetually dissatisfied and restless, even destructive and crazy. We can do, and have done, a lot of harm.

On the other hand, this need to strive for more can produce tremendous joy when it finds a suitable outlet. It's the source of creativity, goodness, and idealism. It drives us to surpassing accomplishment and also to a sense of responsibility for one another, to caring, to love. All religions teach love. That is the fundamental reason for their existence, despite all the evidence to the contrary.

This is why taking refuge in Buddha, dharma, and sangha are the first three precepts. Taken narrowly, they commit the bodhisattva practitioner to the Buddha as teacher, the dharma (teaching) as path, and the sangha (Buddhist community) as community of support. Usually in Zen, taking refuge in the three treasures is understood also in a wider sense. The Buddha is understood as the awakened nature inherent in all human beings (the bodhisattva impulse toward love and idealism); the dharma as the peaceful, solid, and open way of life that is natural to beings who want to awaken; and the sangha as the community of all beings with whom we share the earth and cosmos.

The word *refuge* comes from a Latin root meaning "to fly back, to return to the nest." To return home to one's truest and best nature, a place of ultimate security. The world is full of strife and paranoia. Governments don't help you, community is fractured, close friends betray you, family members get mad and stop speaking to you or, worse, get sick and die, leaving you bereft. In such a world, having a feeling of refuge in something ultimately reliable is profoundly comforting. Grounding one's life in basic human goodness and lofty aspiration is a source of confidence and peace.

Judeo-Christian ethical practice also begins with a large-scale idealistic commitment that undergirds the more mundane guidelines for ethical conduct. Here is the first of the Ten Commandments: "I am the Lord thy God [...] and you shall have no other Gods besides me."[1] As with taking refuge in the three treasures, this isn't an ethical precept. It's a declaration of faith (though it may sound like a demand for it). In Judeo-Christian ethical practice, unlike Buddhist ethical practice, ethical conduct is mandated by God, the ultimate source of life and meaning. So goodness is not an option but rather an absolute imperative. God commands your ethical conduct, and God cannot be denied. This is why Christians and Jews often espouse unshakable ethical principles (for example, abortion and adultery are always sins). God's commands are not subject to negotiation or the contingency of particular situations.

In Buddhism, by contrast, the practice of ethical conduct is an integral element in a path designed to bring understanding and compassion to human beings. Good conduct isn't commanded; it is urged as essential to the path toward happiness and liberation. So Buddhist ethics tend to be flexible. And since, as with the other bodhisattva perfections, the perfection of ethical conduct is also pervaded by the perfection of understanding (which recognizes the emptiness of everything), ethical conduct is empty of ethical conduct. So in the bodhisattva path, ethical conduct is a wider and more open question—one with more dimensionality than unchanging norms and rules could do justice to.

EVOLUTION

I understand why some religious people don't like Darwin's work on evolution. Early evolutionary theory seemed to suggest that the existence of God and, consequently, the God-mandated practice of ethical conduct are not fundamental to humankind. Evolution teaches that being human is being an animal, different from and yet fundamentally the same as other animals—not a uniquely privileged

creature made by God in God's own image. The will to survive is basic to all animals. The fittest survive.

Survival was conceived as a nitty-gritty affair—power, force, and mainly luck ensure it. Not goodness, and not God's special protection. So evolutionary theory seemed to weaken the Judeo-Christian basis of ethical conduct and even of religion as a whole. These were seen, in the light of evolutionary theory, as inessential ornaments to humanity, cultural developments that may sometimes hold humanity back from progress.

But evolutionary theory has evolved. Further studies in social biology suggest that cooperation, altruism, kindness, helpfulness, and love have powerful evolutionary functions. The human capacity for cooperation and communication may be our strongest skill set for survival. In our time, when we face the strong potential of planetary damage on a wide and devastating scale, we may need to develop these skills more than ever. Technical solutions to climate change are more or less known and doable. It's lack of cooperation and motivation, lack of human connection, that prevents us from saving ourselves. Impossibly idealistic though it is, it may be that the bodhisattva path, and other such religious paths toward universal love, is our most practical tool for the future. The perfection of ethical conduct—which purifies the heart of its greed, grabbiness, self-focus, and aggression—is a necessity for the survival of human life on earth.

PRECEPTS

The practice of the perfection of ethical conduct has three aspects. First, restraint—noticing and checking conscious and unconscious selfishness, which is counterproductive to real self-love and love of others. Second, the development of virtue—cultivating positive inner qualities, matched by outer conduct, that go beyond mere restraint to encouraging and increasing an inner passion for goodness and caring. Third, the full bodhisattva joy in benefiting others—loving

and helping without a sense of restraint or a need to develop virtue. Bodhisattvas are beyond virtue. They live expansively and lovingly for and with others as their own most excellent life path.

After refuge in the three treasures, the next three Zen precepts, called the pure precepts, represent this three-step process of the practice of ethical conduct:

I vow to refrain from harmful conduct.
I vow to cultivate beneficial conduct.
I vow to benefit all beings.

The first of this set of three is to restrain from causing harm. To be a bodhisattva is to be a bodhisattva in training, with a very long way to go. Right now we have selfish and self-protective impulses; we are greedy, grabby, fearful, territorial. This is normal. We can't pretend we are better than we are. Pretending is pernicious. All forms of self-dishonesty hinder the practice of ethical conduct. When we sit down in meditation, we face the full truth of who we are. So the practice of ethical conduct begins with the recognition that sometimes we need to restrain our impulses. Ongoing practice gives us the eye to see what's beneficial to ourselves and others, and what isn't. We want to accentuate the positive and eliminate or at least gently reduce the negative. The first pure precept urges us to practice in this way.

The second pure precept is the other side of the coin—to develop virtue and do good. Usually we think of doing good as performing good deeds, giving charity, supporting good causes, acting with kindness, and so on. This precept certainly means that. But it also means taking genuine delight in doing good, not just doing it dutifully; finding it fulfilling, satisfying, enjoyable.

Doing good also specifically includes developing virtues that come directly from overtly religious and ritual acts. If you were brought up with any religion at all, likely you were taught to view attending church or praying as a solemn and serious activity. But spiritual practices are, in fact, as challenging and engaging as anything else—probably more so. To practice this precept is to notice, extend, and

strengthen our love for and delight in goodness in all its forms, including religious observances. You can even take delight in restraint, once you get into it! Restraining yourself from nonedifying or harmful activities isn't a sacrifice but rather a pleasure. And all the more is it a pleasure to do something beneficial.

The third pure precept is the bodhisattva precept: to live to benefit others. This means that all you do in following the first two pure precepts, you do with the feeling for and the motivation of benefiting others. For bodhisattvas, ethical conduct is simply caring for others (which includes one's self) and acting out of that feeling.

The final ten Zen precepts sketch out the kind of conduct we want to restrain and the kind we want to promote. They are, in effect, more detailed versions of the first two pure precepts. Traditionally the ten precepts are given as don'ts—don't kill, steal, lie, and so on. But some years ago I saw a version of them, attributed to Roshi Kobun Chino, a Japanese Zen priest in our Soto Zen family, called the Ten Clear Mind Precepts, which reflect Zen Master Dogen's commentary to the precepts. In this version, Chino Roshi states the precepts in the positive as well as the negative. My version is based on his:

I vow to cherish life, not to kill.

I vow to receive gifts, not to steal.

I vow to respect others, not to misuse sexuality.

I vow to practice truthfulness, not to lie.

I vow to practice clarity, not to intoxicate mind or body of self or others.

I vow to speak with kindness, not to slander.

I vow to practice modesty, not to praise self at the expense of others.

I vow to practice generosity, not to be possessive of anything.

I vow to practice love, not to harbor ill will.

I vow to cherish and polish the three treasures.

I vow to cherish life, not to kill. If I care for life, naturally I want to respect and protect it. Why kill even a bug if I don't have to? Instead of mindlessly stepping on a spider, I notice it as another precious being, very similar to myself, that deserves to live. And why eat a lot of animals if I don't need to? Why not respect them, as if their lives mattered? By extension, this precept means that we want to promote life in our interactions with others—to love and respect them, and help them live and flourish, rather than encourage their negativity.

I vow to receive gifts, not to steal. When material goods come into my life, even when I pay for them, why not see them as gifts, supplied by many hands and hearts? Why not appreciate them as such, rather than feeling as if I need to get what I pay for, and more?

I vow to respect others, not to misuse sexuality. In sexual matters, it is essential to be honest and forthright; not to use others for my own pleasure but to take care of them as much as and more than myself. As a married person of many years, I have always felt that sexual fidelity is essential. I do not see how I can be fully honest and intimate with my spouse if I am deceiving her and sharing our marital intimacy with others. These days there is a wider range of sexual permissiveness than there was a generation ago. The precept doesn't codify which kinds of sexual activity are okay or not. Instead, it calls for respect, care, and deep reflection to ensure that whatever our sexual activities, they take others deeply into account. Sex is powerful. It stirs up intense and sometimes surprising passions. Since it is such an important part of being human, it makes sense to take especially good care of it.

I vow to practice truthfulness, not to lie.

I vow to speak with kindness, not to slander.

I vow to practice modesty, not to praise self at the expense of others.

Speech, like sex, is a basic human practice. The speech precepts ask us to not lie, not to praise self at the expense of others, and not to slander. Sometimes these precepts are tricky. I like to elaborate a

story to make it sound more interesting, so I have to watch out that I am not lying (though a little color is good). At this point in my life, not to speak well of others is painful for me. I just can't do it. I see no point in denigrating anyone. If it's necessary to be critical, I can do that without being unkind. But the truth is, there is far less need to be critical than we think. As with the other precepts, the speech precepts don't tell us what to say or how to say it. They recognize the complexity of speech acts. Context, tone of voice, who is speaking, and who is listening—it all matters. There is a right and a wrong time to say something, and a good and a bad way to say it. Most important is to check the spirit behind our words, and to be as loving and as harmless as possible. If we see that we don't have a gentle spirit, that we're feeling pretty aggressive and hurt, then maybe we have to wait a while before we speak.

The most important thing these precepts show us is that our words matter. They are far more powerful than we think they are. When unkind or even cruel speech is practiced, especially in public, harm is being done. In these days of Internet speech, where many online formats encourage quick and clever communication, practicing these precepts in all the venues for communication that now exist is more important than ever.

I vow to practice clarity, not to intoxicate mind or body of self or others. In Zen, at least in our lineage, the precept against intoxication means literally not to be intoxicated. It doesn't mean one can't be convivial in sharing spirits with friends. I do that. But getting tipsy to feel less inhibited or to avoid coping with emotional difficulty is a pretty bad practice. Unlike alcohol, psychotropic drugs, as far as I am aware, always produce intoxication, so taking them would violate this precept. In some Buddhist lineages, the precept against intoxication is ignored, while in others, complete abstinence from all intoxicating substances is called for. The precept's meaning is commonly extended to not only substances but anything that can be intoxicating. Work, entertainment, even spiritual practice can be intoxicating. Spiritual teachers try to follow this precept by not

speaking or coming across in a way designed to entice listeners, intoxicating them with an inspiring message.

I vow to practice generosity, not to be possessive of anything. This precept references everything we said in the previous chapter about generosity in all its dimensions. In this case, as precept practice, we are being enjoined to study our stinginess. This is a hard practice for me. Having grown up with great frugality, I easily get stuck on an attitude of lack, often feeling an impulse to hold on to money and material goods. Noticing this as the opposite of what I am trying to do, seeing that it brings a sense of constriction and some pain, is my practice.

I vow to practice love, not to harbor ill will. Not harboring ill will doesn't mean not ever getting angry. It means that when you get angry, you know it, you know it doesn't help, and you let the anger go as soon as you can rather than holding on to it with justification. I almost never get angry at other people, and not that often at myself. I get angry at packaging that won't open, objects that fly out of my hands onto the floor, doors that stick, computers that refuse to do what they were purchased to do. But I am working on it and getting better. (I will say much more about anger in the next chapter.)

I vow to cherish and polish the three treasures. This last one brings us back to the beginning: our commitment to the three refuges of Buddha, dharma, and sangha. Here we're committing ourselves to thinking of and speaking about the three treasures in a respectful way. Naturally we are going to feel cynical about the teachings and the practice from time to time. When we do, we understand it as a sign that we're out of sorts, that there's probably something happening in our lives we have to address. This precept also reminds us that if we don't cherish and polish the three treasures, they'll tarnish. They require tending if they are going to continue to be a resource for humankind.

These comments offer a brief sketch of what it might feel like to practice the Ten Clear Mind Precepts. But I'm afraid my comments may be misleading. I may have made it sound as if practicing precepts is simple and straightforward. It's not. Exactly how any of

these precepts may appear in specific complex human situations isn't always so clear. Practicing love might look different in different times and in different situations. Sometimes it could take the form of a shout or a refusal. Sometimes getting angry is necessary to bring another's bad or abusive behavior to an abrupt stop. What is appropriate in one situation may be inappropriate in another. Everything depends on circumstances—the timing, the setting, the person. So you have to exercise understanding and skillful means, and check, as much as possible, your intentions. Good intentions don't ensure right conduct, but they help. Even so, self-deception is always possible. Probably most people who do terrible things believe their intentions are good and that they are good people justifiably trashing bad people who deserve to be trashed. Bodhisattvas don't see the world like that. For them, good intentions always involve generosity toward others.

Precept practice can be even murkier when we extend it beyond the personal and the interpersonal to social and global responsibilities, spheres in which ethical conduct certainly must be practiced. What is stealing and not stealing in a world full of institutional thievery? What is not harboring ill will in a world where strong oppositional energy is sometimes needed to overturn social injustice? Does "doing good" sometimes dictate that one political leader or party should be actively supported and another strenuously opposed? Is there a particular social policy or theory of government implied in the precepts? Does "not killing" always mean nonviolence, or can the use of violence, in particularly dire situations, sometimes be justified as less harmful than nonviolence? There are no absolute answers to any of these questions. In a complex world, many ethical dilemmas offer no good options, only less bad ones. No one who lives in a violent and unjust world can claim ethical purity or even semipurity.

Despite these many questions and more, the clear practice of ethical conduct is essential. If specific issues can sometimes be befuddling, the basic thrust of ethical conduct is not. Fundamentally, avoiding harm, doing good, and benefiting others always serve as a

moral compass, even in sticky situations. Committed to these principles, we will have to decide, in any given situation, what can best be done. As long as we are always working to develop clarity, kindness, and love, and trying to reduce self-obsession, we can be confident that we will be able to decide what's best, from our present viewpoint. If our best decision turns out to be wrong, we apologize, practice regret and repentance, and go on to the next choice, wiser than we were before.

REGRET AND REPENTANCE

Regret and repentance are key elements in the bodhisattva's practice of ethical conduct. Bodhisattvas know that they have made and will make mistakes. Walking the path of perfection, they know they have a long way to go. The point is to understand the path and to be honest about what they actually are doing at any stage of the journey.

So, when we see our mistakes, we don't justify or deny. Instead, we feel regret and remorse. We cultivate these feelings. We *want* to feel terrible when we've hurt someone. Feeling terrible feels good, because it's good to feel bad when we've caused harm. It would be far less good to hurt someone and go on with our business, as if it didn't matter. Regret and remorse keep me honest and lead me to repentance, which includes apology, making amends if I can, and committing myself to not doing the same thing again.

Probably in some matters we will go through this process repeatedly, because we will make the same mistake many times, even though we intend not to. As long as we are willing to feel regret and repent, we know it's all right. Practice simply goes on, as is, and we are committed to continuing to take steps in the right direction. Nothing helps the journey more than mistakes. Even though we work hard not to make them, and even though when we do make them, we suffer a lot! Bodhisattvas are not trying to avoid suffering (we will hear much more about this in the next chapter). They know that

suffering and difficulty drive the heart deeper and strengthen compassion. In this sense, feeling terrible is good for bodhisattvas.

But there is a big difference between regret for having done a harmful action and jumping to the conclusion that we are inherently bad people doomed to do bad things. It is a deeply held Buddhist perspective that there is no such thing as a fixed person, let alone an inherently bad or inadequate person. There is only what happens, arising and passing moment by moment according to conditions. There are tendencies, habits; there is responsibility for action. But none of that is a basis for feeling guilty for being who we are, as if some substantial seed of evil or inadequacy were lodged inside us. If we feel that way about ourselves, we know that's just a feeling—personal, psychological, and arising from cultural habit. It's true only in that sense, not based on any self-evident fact. When we find ourselves indulging in profound self-denigration when we've made a mistake, we remember what's true: We did something that hurt someone. We regret it. We take responsibility, because it is good for us and others to do so. But there's no blame. And the sense of shame or self-loathing is extra. There is no real reason for it, and it isn't helping. Probably, if we have conditioning like this, we will have to repeat this lesson many times before we are finished with it.

FORGIVENESS PRACTICE

True as this may be, it's too easy to leave it at that. Let's be honest: self-recrimination, self-blame, and shame are compelling feelings. They condition much of how we feel and think about our lives. We have to address them. The only thing that heals them is love.

The bodhisattva path is a path of love. Bodhisattvas need love, give love, can't live without love. Love is always available. The flow of love, life's inherent abundance, is constant.

Yet that flow sometimes seems blocked. Sometimes the world doesn't seem like a loving place. What happened?

We've been hurt, and we've hurt others. Even if we haven't been hurt too much or hurt others too badly, so much hurting has already happened in the human past that it's engraved in our DNA. No one escapes the scars. They occlude the flow of love. These hurts that echo through the human past keep coming back on a daily basis. We feel them every day in our present engagements. The world consists of wounded people who have become hardened, alienated, estranged.

So forgiveness practice is basic. We don't need to have had something done to us or to have done harm to others. The hurt is always there. We have to forgive the world for being as it is, others for being as they are, ourselves for being as we are. And we need to be forgiven by ourselves, others, and by life. Those who feel close to God seek forgiveness from God. Forgiveness is a basic practice for bodhisattvas. It comes from the depth of their sorrow and from their loving understanding of the painful world we live in.

Forgiveness clears the heart of resentment and blame. Resentment literally means "to re-feel," to replay the hurt over and over again. This is unpleasant, so it is natural for us to want to find someone to blame. Because of him, because of her, because of them, this happened to me. It may be true. But blame clatters and chatters in the heart, making it nearly impossible to hear the clearer, gentler tones that inspire us to practice kindness. To practice forgiveness is to quiet things down so we can hear ourselves better.

We can't practice forgiveness aggressively. We can't grab hold of it. We practice it by simply being willing to notice the pain and then the blame and resentment we've added to it; to admit to ourselves that we actually don't want to forgive or be forgiven, that we're addicted to the pain that we're covering over with our hard-heartedness.

So you notice the pain. You let yourself feel it. You stop blaming and bemoaning your fate. You take a breath and say to yourself, "Yes, yes, this is how it is."

When you do this repeatedly, the noise quiets down and you feel the grief and shame behind the pain. You come to accept it. You don't have to blame anyone. It happened, it was just like that. You don't have to go over it again and again. It's done.

This feeling of “it’s done” is forgiveness. You can’t get to it any other way than by slogging through the difficult feelings. Forgiveness isn’t so much something as a lack of something: your resentment and bitterness. When you forgive, your heart is relieved, you can grow, and you are free. Whether or not you actually go to the person who has hurt you (if this is the case) and “forgive” him or her depends on the situation. But whether or not it makes sense for you do this, you have practiced forgiveness, and it has deepened your empathy and understanding.

KARMA

Behind the bodhisattva practice of ethical conduct is the idea of karma. Karma is action. Action matters, it’s effective. Action includes intention and volition. The quality of your thinking and feeling is important.

Actions produce results that rhyme with them. Good actions produce good results; bad actions, bad results. You know this is true: when you think, speak, and act with kindness, you feel good and the chances of others reciprocating your kindness are good. When you think, speak, and act with a mean spirit, you feel unhappy and will be less likely to receive beneficial reactions from others. The conclusion is quite sensible and practical—to be happy and to have good relationships, it is worthwhile to speak, act, and think in a kind way and to avoid mean-spirited speech, action, and thought. That’s basic karma and observable common sense.

In ancient India, before the Buddha, karma was not particularly understood in this way. It was taken to be a fatalistic, cosmic force. Human beings were living brief lives in the context of many lives turning in the cosmic cycle. One’s station in this life was the result of karma accrued in past lives. In this life, the most important thing was to live faithfully according to the station in which the karma of your birth had placed you. Each caste had its own inescapable karma to which each individual was subject. There was more karmic efficacy

in cosmic ritual and carrying out your social duty than in personal moral conduct.

The Buddha's radical innovation was to emphasize the power and crucial importance of personal ethical choice. In choosing to do good and avoid bad actions, one could change destiny. The Buddha felt that any individual, regardless of his or her station at birth, could achieve dignity and goodness, and that conduct—not ritual and not merely fulfilling a social role—was the shaper of our destiny. The Buddha was the first great moralist and a social radical as well: anyone was eligible to join his community and achieve dignity and status, irrespective of caste or gender.

Buddhist teachings about karma are practical and empowering, which is one reason Buddhism has been so well received in our time and place. The teachings on karma provide a road map for more happiness and less misery that does not require excessive restriction or a special belief system. One simply observes actions and results, and adjusts conduct.

Several times, I've mentioned the basic Buddhist idea that there are no fixed persons. So the teachings on karma emphasize that though there is action and consequence, there is no "owner" of actions. The teachings acknowledge the persuasive power of the illusion of a continuing self. They acknowledge that this illusion is built into the nature of perception and consciousness. But they say that what we think of as self is in reality a process, not an entity. Although there isn't any "me" to receive the results of my actions, my actions are effective down the line, in the continuous flow of events I think of as "my" life.

What this means for the practice of ethical conduct is that in the present moment I am confronted with a situation that is not my fault. It is the result of many factors, among which are my own past actions. But the "me" who did those actions is gone. The process of my life has moved beyond that "me" to a new me, arising now, as the illusion of this particular process-moment. So even if my own stupid actions have mostly caused the pickle I am in, it's still not my fault. I practice regret and remorse, because they are beneficial, but I don't

denigrate myself or become wracked with guilt because it really isn't my fault! Yet it's my responsibility. Here is this moment, this situation. What am I going to do?

Karma is volitional action that I am always empowered and responsible to exercise. My choices will have great power in determining future moments of my life. But those future moments are determined by many other factors too.

Causality, often called "conditioned coproduction" or "interdependence," is a larger concept than karma, though sometimes the words are used interchangeably. Clearly I am not making my life all by myself. My actions are important but the next moment of my life arises dependent on an almost infinite array of causal factors beyond my actions—sun, sky, wind, earth, government, culture and language, prior existence of my parents and the entire human past—even the fact that there is existence at all.

This is why we can't control or predict what will happen. We can be entirely kind and good but have a terrible life anyway. We can manipulate, cheat, and steal, yet everything turns out fine. The Buddhist theory of karma explains such observable karmic injustices with the idea of past and future lives. Bad actions *will* lead to bad results—if not in this life then certainly in lives to come. Good actions *will* be rewarded—if not in this life then in lives to come. This is not so different from the Christian idea of heavenly reward and punishment in Hades.

But what could past and future lives mean when there is no "person"?

We have already discussed radical impermanence. Things appear and disappear simultaneously every moment. There isn't even a tiny speck of anything left over. So what could be reborn from one life into another? Nothing. Yet there's a continuity of being. Being goes on. Karma and causality produce moments in continuity with one another even though, strictly speaking, there is nothing there but the flow of such moments.

So Buddhism has it both ways. On one hand, no person is reborn. When the person I call myself dies, nothing of him will be left. A

being born after my demise won't be me in any sense. Yet, to motivate me to do good and not to do bad, Buddhism wants me to care passionately about what happens to this future person, to feel that this future person is me reborn, and that if he or she suffers, it is I who suffer. Maybe the Buddha took the preexisting local belief in rebirth and decided that rather than refuting it, he would make use of it to bolster his point—that responsible action matters crucially, for the present as well as the future.

Certainly there are many people who are sure past lives exist because they can remember them, or they have various sorts of uncanny experiences that seem to indicate that they and others have had other lives. This is commonplace in Tibetan culture, where various tests are performed to see who is the reincarnation of whom. And there are various clairvoyant people who feel they can see who you have been in a past life or who you will be in a future life. No doubt some of this is intentionally faked and some is sincere but misguided. But who knows? The sequel to life, beyond death, is completely unknown territory and surely can't be studied in ordinary scientific ways, so who's to say what's true or not—or whether the categories true and false even apply.

I don't know about past and future lives. But I know that in order to effectively walk the imaginative path of the bodhisattva, I need to view my life in a scope wider than the mundane. If my life involves only what happens in the brief linear time span between my birth and my death, during which I remain an individual unconnected to anyone but my close associates, and not even very much to them, then either meaninglessness and despair or self-interest and hedonism may seem my most sensible options. I can imagine living a spiritual life just for myself in this one life, but this seems too small a vision. Time isn't only linear. My Buddhist studies have convinced me of this, and I understand that physicists corroborate this view with their experiments. If time isn't a stream in which we are swimming, if things do appear and disappear at the same time and there isn't a separate entity outside them called "time"; if time is being, and the gap between one moment and another and the gap

between the death of someone and the birth of someone are the same gap, then most of what we take for granted about what life is and who we are must be subject to serious revision. There would be a lot of not-knowing, plenty of mystery.

In this sense I think the bodhisattva path requires faith in rebirth. A psychologically oriented view that spiritual practice makes sense for this life is good, but there is more. The bodhisattva path is psychological, but it is also religious—it deals with experiences, thoughts, and attitudes that we can't entirely explain or even conceive. It's a path that requires imagination.

THE EMPTINESS OF ETHICAL CONDUCT

As I said at the beginning of this chapter, the perfection of ethical conduct goes beyond the conventional practice of ethical conduct. In the bodhisattva path of maximum imagination, when we innocently pick up one thread and follow it far enough and imaginatively enough, we end up somewhere far away in the cosmos.

Each of the six perfections is suffused with the perfection of understanding, which sees the truth of the empty nature of all things. Naturally our discussion of simple ethical conduct would end with mystery and emptiness. Just as there is in reality no giver, no gift, and no recipient, so also there is no hurting, no one to hurt, no one to be hurt. There is no ethical conduct.

Saying this may sound scary, as if anything goes and, once we appreciate emptiness, we can go ahead and commit as many sins as we want. But this isn't the case. Seeing that there are no actual persons, that being is the flow of love, makes us much more passionate about doing good and not doing harm. We're not trying to be righteous, we're not acting out of fear; we simply act in accord with the way things are. There's no other way.

Insight into emptiness makes us flexible, open, soft, and forgiving when we practice the perfection of ethical conduct. We know we can never condemn anyone, ourselves or anyone else. Everyone is doing

what they can, as are we. Yes, sometimes restraint is necessary, self-restraint or restraining another. But such restraint is an act of kindness, not of punishment based on moral superiority. In the practice of the perfection of ethical conduct, there is no hint of intolerance or arrogance, no sense of ethical purity or impurity. There is only love, forgiveness, and appreciation.

DOGEN ON THE PERFECTION OF ETHICAL CONDUCT

In his text quoted in the previous chapter, "The Bodhisattva's Four Methods of Guidance," Dogen's second method, kind speech, is one of the key practices of the perfection of ethical conduct. Kind speech, he says, arises from a heart of compassion. More than just a way of speaking, it's the full expression of a tender heart. "You should speak to sentient beings as you would to a baby," he says—aware, I suppose, that all of us are as tender as babies and require the kind of love an infant needs.

Offer kind speech, he says, especially to those without virtue. We think that people without virtue don't deserve our kind words. We should condemn or criticize them, or at least relate to them neutrally. Why speak kindly to a nasty and unappealing person? Who does that? But Dogen says the opposite: if you offer kind speech to such a person, you will be amazed at its power; virtue will grow where you thought there was none. Do not ever give up on kind speech; trust it, he says, world after world, lifetime after lifetime. "Kind speech," he concludes, "has the power to turn the destiny of the nation."[2]

As I said in the previous chapter, Dogen has a great capacity for imagination. He is always saying the unexpected. Who would make such claims for the simple act of kind speech? But he seems to mean it. To have this much faith in the simple act of speaking kindly is typical bodhisattva extravagance. Bodhisattvas see possibilities far beyond the ordinary.

VERSES ON THE PERFECTION OF ETHICAL CONDUCT

Here is Tokme Zongpo's verse about the second perfection from his text *Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva*:

> If you cannot look after yourself because you have no ethical discipline,
> Then your intention to take care of others is simply a joke.
> Observe ethical behavior without concern
> For a conventional life—this is the practice of a bodhisattva.[3]

Again, Tokme Zongpo's simple words cut through to the heart of the matter. The practice of the perfection of ethical conduct is simply looking after one's self: it's self-care. I am always amazed when I see people acting blindly, foolishly, and with unconcern for their own behavior. Do they think they will get away with it? Do they imagine that not paying attention to their own bodies, minds, and actions won't catch up to them, one way or the other? If you can't take decent care of yourself, how are you going to be a bodhisattva who takes care of others? The commitment to benefit others starts with yourself. This simple idea, which seems perfectly clear to Tokme Zongpo, is probably big news for most of us. As a person of Tibet, Tokme Zongpo knows this very well. No wonder Tibetan Buddhist culture is so well regarded in the West.

His second point is also important. Mostly people practice ethical conduct because it is conventional to do so. We want people to think well of us, to not think we are scurrilous creatures who do questionable things. But bodhisattvas are really not concerned about how they look to others. Often they appear foolish and naive. But that's fine. They follow through with their concern to take care of self and others regardless of how it looks. They don't even notice.

Here are some lines on the perfection of ethical conduct from the *Prajnaparamita Sutra in Eight Thousand Lines*:

By morality those who hanker after calm are lifted up…
However many actions of restraint they comply with,
They dedicate them to enlightenment for the benefit of all beings.[4]

This verse adds two more thoughts to what we have said. First, it associates ethical conduct with calmness. It's true—shoddy behavior makes you nervous, anxious, jumpy. It's bad for your health. It creates a cascading effect of more nervous-making, life-destabilizing conduct. Second, this verse mentions dedication of merit, as we have discussed in the chapter on generosity. Here the verse tells us that although practicing ethical conduct calms us down and is the best way for us to take care of ourselves, we ought to do it explicitly with a wish to benefit others, not just for ourselves and not just because it is a good thing to do. Everything in bodhisattva practice is dedicated to the benefit of others.

Practices

MEDITATION PRACTICES

- Sit down and pay attention to your body. Now pay attention to your breath, in and out, as your stomach rises and falls. When you feel settled and calm, bring your mind to your day's activity. Invite any memory or feeling that touches on words or deeds spoken or accomplished during the day that may have had a negative or positive impact on others. The point is not to review the details but rather to notice what feelings arise when you recall the day's incidents. Practice like this for a short while, then let it go and return your attention to your breath.
- Settle in meditation as above. Focus your attention on the goodness in your own heart. Feel its warmth in your chest. Say to yourself, "This is human goodness. Everyone has it just as I have it."
- Settle into meditation. Feel the sense of completion in each breath. See how you breathe out and in, naturally—exactly enough air coming in, exactly enough going out. This is contentment. Nothing more is needed. Feel the inherent contentment in every breath. Reflect that every moment is like this. Every moment contains its own contentment.
- Forgiveness Meditation. Settle into meditation. Recall someone whom you know you need to forgive. Just let the person's image or the sense of who they are arise in your mind. Feel the feelings. Observe whatever happens without entanglement. Let the feelings come and go. Don't try to forgive, just be present.
- Loving-kindness Meditation. Settle into meditation. Imagine someone you love sitting across from you. On your exhale, send that person loving and healing energy from your heart. Now imagine a neutral person, an acquaintance. On your exhale, send that person loving and healing energy from your

heart. Practice the same way with all beings everywhere. Then with someone you don't like. Then return to resting in your breath.

- Your own practices never before seen or heard or picked up from other sources.

DAILY LIFE PRACTICES

Practice with the Ten Clear Mind Precepts in succession for a week each. Write the precept down, put it somewhere in your home where you can see it, look at it every day, keep it in mind. Observe your conduct through the lens of the precept.

SPEECH PRACTICES

- For a week, try never to criticize anyone.
- For a week, practice kind speech, saying to everyone you meet, at some point, that you appreciate them and why.
- For a week, try not to believe you understand anyone's motives or actions. Assume they have reasons you don't know.
- For a week, whenever anything happens you don't like, small or large, repeat the phrase "Yes, this is how it is." Try to reflect on how it applies to the particular situation you are in.
- Practice with self-denigration. For a week, pay attention to any time you feel down on yourself. Train yourself to look for these moments and to be energized when they arise: "Good! I have a chance to practice." Simply observe anything you can about the feeling, what causes it to arise, how it feels, what kinds of thinking comes as a result of the feeling. If you like, you can journal about this.
- At the end of each day, dedicate the benefit of your good activity accomplished that day to the benefit of everyone. Maybe you can write a short verse that says this and read it, like a prayer, before bed.

- Memorize the verses from Tokme Zongpo and the *Prajnaparamita Sutra in Eight Thousand Lines*. Repeat them as many times as you can during the day to remind you of the practice of ethical conduct.
- Your own practices never before seen or heard or picked up from other sources.

4
The Perfection of Patience

THE PERFECTION OF PATIENCE is *kshanti paramita* in Sanskrit. *Kshanti* can be translated as "patience," "forbearance," or "tolerance," but these words don't capture the fullness of what kshanti connotes because they all imply a kind of quietism or passivity. To be patient can be understood to mean to suffer silently, like a patient in a hospital who can't affect her own cure and so must wait for the ministrations of others. Forbearance has an even greater sense of quietly enduring. Tolerance implies a kind of benign neglect—not correcting, fixing, or complaining but being tolerant. On the other hand, tolerance also implies broad-mindedness: a tolerant person is open to the views and actions of others, neither condemning nor dismissing.

Though all these words reflect in part what is meant by kshanti, kshanti paramita exceeds them. To practice kshanti paramita *is* to patiently, tolerantly forbear hardships and difficulties—but not passively. The perfection of patience is transformative. It transforms difficult circumstances from misfortunes or disasters into spiritual benefit. For this reason it is a particularly powerful practice, a prized and essential one. A person who develops it has strength of character, vision, courage, dignity, and depth. She or he understands something profound about human beings and how to love them. I'm using *perfection of patience* to denote kshanti paramita because we are so profoundly impatient about everything these days. We can use a dose of old-fashioned patience. But understand that I'm using the word *patience* in this special, fuller sense.

Patience is the most important of all the bodhisattva practices because without it all the others will eventually fail. It is easy enough to practice meditation, generosity, ethical conduct, and other wonderful practices when things are going smoothly. But when things fall apart—as they inevitably do from time to time—we revert to old patterns. Over the years many people have told me they regret that they haven't been tending to their spiritual practice lately, but they can't right now; they're having some personal setbacks and will get back to their practice as soon as things clear up. What they haven't understood is that difficult times are the most fruitful time for spiritual practice because they are exactly when the practice of patience comes most into play. When things get tough you should intensify rather than set aside your practice.

It's natural to turn away in the face of difficulty. We come by this powerful habit honestly. No one wants to go toward pain. We want to go elsewhere, take a break, think of something else, get rid of it if we can. We distract, deny, blame, or rush around in generally futile attempts to fix it somehow. With the practice of patience we train ourselves to do the opposite: to turn toward the difficulty and embrace it as an ally.

BEING WITH DIFFICULTY

We all understand that life will at times be difficult. We are aware of the various drastic forms of suffering like illness, death, loss, disgrace, financial ruin, broken relationships, addiction, or despair. In all too many communities there are, in addition to all these, socially determined forms of suffering like war, violence, sexism, racism, homophobia, severe political repression, and crushing poverty. Our lives are subject to these sad, long lists of pain.

So, yes, our lives are rife with suffering. I hope none of the readers of this book are victims of the crushing forms of social and economic suffering that so many human beings endure. But even the most fortunate among us is touched by suffering. No one avoids death,

illness, and loss. Nearly everyone is close to someone who suffers from addiction, serious health problems, disgrace, financial ruin, divorce, mental illness, or other serious troubles. Basic suffering has no respect for social class.

In order to be able to practice patience with these serious forms of suffering, we have to start small. The perfection of patience proceeds by familiarity—we start with something manageable, get used to that, then go on to something more daunting, understanding that we won't need to produce some stronger suffering for our practice; it will eventually come.

Of course, life is also full of happy experiences, and neutral ones too. Depending on your current circumstances, you could have mostly happy or neutral experiences and not that many mildly difficult or terrible ones—or the reverse. But no matter your circumstances, you are going to have some degree of suffering every day because suffering is a built-in feature of body and mind: the body will experience discomfort and pain; the mind will know stress and strain. Every day we all experience lesser forms of suffering. Aches, pains, annoyance, anger, frustration, situational depression, feeling disrespected or out of sorts—these experiences pervade our days.

The usual approach to a bad experience is to bemoan it. We say, "I can't believe this is happening!" and act as if it weren't, even as it is. We refuse to accept it. Having gotten in an argument with reality, we look for someone to blame so as to have an explanation. Usually it's not so hard to find a blameworthy person, persons, category of persons, or maybe an institution. Or we can blame ourselves—or reality.

Sometimes assigning blame helps fix the situation, reverse the bad experience, or at least prevent it from happening again. If someone steals my identity and drains my bank account, I can take steps to stop it. If I'm miserable because a coworker is disrespecting me, I can speak up with strength and let her or him know this treatment is not all right. Maybe my coworker will stop. If I'm the victim of racial or gender discrimination, understanding the social dynamic will

empower me and point a way forward. So, yes, when assigning blame for the purpose of taking action is possible, we do it.

But much of the time—maybe most of the time—blaming doesn't help. The offending person isn't going to change, the court's verdict won't be overturned, the medical diagnosis is what it is, the divorce is final. When in times like that you insist on blame, dismay, and obsession with the injustice of what happened, you are adding injury to injury, making a bad situation worse, shooting a second arrow into the arrow-punctured wound, as the Buddha once put it. Going on like this—even if you have good reason—will erode your point of view and put you in danger of becoming a bitter person. So when what's happened can't be changed, there's no choice but to turn toward the difficult experience, whatever it is, and take it on. As Santideva succinctly puts it, "If you can find a solution, what's the point of being upset? And if you can't find a solution, what's the point of being upset?"

Too true! If you can fix the problem, why groan, moan, and jump up and down wearing yourself and your friends out? Fix it. If you can't fix it, what good will it do to groan, moan, and jump up and down? Instead, why not recognize that the state of life you previously enjoyed has ended and you are in a new state? Why not make something out of that state? This is the practice of patience.

Disasters are disasters. When bad things happen, we suffer. Through turning toward the suffering with patience, bodhisattvas transform it into something meaningful. One of the chief ways they do this is by expanding the nature of the suffering through acts of the imagination.

Let's say I am suffering because someone has treated me disrespectfully, even scornfully. In the biggest picture of things, why would I care about this? When I was a child, my parents, to protect me against schoolyard taunts, taught me the old saw, "Sticks and stones will break your bones, but names can never hurt you." Makes sense, and, of course, it's literally true. Santideva says exactly the same thing: A word has no substance. It's just a vibration in the air that disappears as soon as it's uttered. How can it hurt you? Besides,

the “you” that it could hurt is a chimera. There’s no “you,” just a floating ongoing rush of impressions, gestures, actions, memories, and so on. How could a word hurt that?

Still, it does. Even if it doesn’t make sense, you feel upset when someone diminishes and disrespects you. Despite Santideva’s wise perspective, you can’t talk yourself out of it. So bodhisattvas recognize the feeling of suffering, and they expand it. They know that the pain of disrespect is not just theirs; it’s a basic human pain. They reflect like this: “The pain I’m feeling now is the same pain others feel when they are disrespected. No doubt in this very moment, as I am feeling this pain, thousands or even millions of others are feeling it. So this pain isn’t mine. It belongs to all of us. Being a person entails this pain. So as I feel and suffer it, I feel and suffer in solidarity and sympathy with others.”

When I practice such reflections, I transform my personal suffering into connection and love. I expand the word *suffering* from its narrowest meaning, “to feel anguish and pain,” to its related, wider meaning, “to allow”—to allow more and more love and connection.

Such imaginative deepening and ripening of suffering goes to the heart of what’s most valuable about the practice of patience. When we’re patient with our suffering rather than bemoaning it, we see that suffering is expansive, connecting us warmly to the world and to others. When suffering is “ours” instead of “mine,” it’s not suffering. My sorrow, grief, or fear is painful, yet it’s also sweet, because I share it with everyone. This is how bodhisattvas understand the third noble truth of the Buddha: “the end of suffering.” To them, the end of suffering doesn’t mean the end of physical pain, failure, loss, alienation, fear, and other forms of suffering but rather the transformation of suffering into solidarity and love.

In traditional discussions of the practice of patience, three arenas for the practice are distinguished: first, patience with personal pain and hardship; second, patience with suffering caused by our interactions with others; and third, patience with the painful truths about our human life.

PATIENCE WITH PERSONAL HARDSHIP

The first arena for practicing patience is personal hardships such as physical pain, failed arrangements, not getting what you want or feel you need, and so on.

As usual, meditation practice helps. People take up meditation as stress reduction, but meditation isn't always so peaceful. Sometimes it's full of agitation, mental and emotional jumble, even physical pain. New meditators think that if these things occur they must be doing something wrong. But no, they're normal, and they're opportunities to practice patience.

In the simple format of meditation, just sitting there by yourself with no one to negotiate with and no task to perform, you have the perfect conditions for practicing patience. Take the issue of physical pain, an experience we naturally view as problematic. Working with pain in meditation can be a way to develop patience. Here's a way to go about it: When physical pain arises in meditation, stay with the breath and the sensations of physical pain. Don't move, don't adjust, even though you want to. Doing this will quickly show you how the mind runs away when it doesn't like what's going on. Gradually train your mind to stay close to the unpleasant sensations and the thoughts that inevitably go with them. When you do this, you will be surprised to discover within yourself a larger person, someone more forbearing, more dignified, and more courageous than you thought you were. It may seem masochistic to practice like this, but developing patience with unpleasant physical sensations is perhaps the most valuable thing you can learn from meditation practice. To be able to endure physical discomfort and pain with grace and composure is a valuable skill you will come to appreciate as time goes on.

This practice with physical discomfort extends to emotional pain. Once you get the point—in your body, and all the way to your heart and soul—that avoiding pain, adjusting, blaming, and perseverating about it makes the pain worse, you see that facing pain with tolerance and dignity is much better.

PATIENCE WITH SUFFERING IN RELATION TO OTHERS: ANGER

The second arena for the practice of patience is in relation to others. Despite the fact that relationships are potentially the source of our greatest joy, and love the fullest and most positive human experience, relationships are, as they say, complicated. Meditation shines a light on our own complications. It shows us how stubborn, deceptive, and hard to deal with we are. So it comes as no surprise to find that others are the same. Inevitably, human interaction gives rise to sticky, painful, and sometimes tragic problems. Practicing patience with the painful feelings that arise in relationship to others is a key practice for bodhisattvas, whose primary commitment is to love and be of service to others.

Imagine what life would be like if we loved everyone, treated everyone with unwavering positive regard, and were never in conflict with anyone. We would be happy people. Most of the unhappy-making factors in our lives would be removed. Even if we got sick and had to undergo hardship, the loving support of others would make that difficult experience better. Even if we were poor and in a bad social situation, the love, support, and respect of others would make it endurable. Our friends would help us out and make sure we always had the necessities of life.

Of course, this isn't how it is. We have plenty of trouble with people in our lives. People will behave badly, and we will get upset. The practice of patience calls for tolerance, understanding, forgiveness, compassion, and loving-kindness toward others. It also takes into account that anger and resentment will arise and we will have to learn to live skillfully with such emotions.

A great deal of the traditional discussion of the practice of patience focuses on anger. This makes sense. Anger poisons relationships. According to the traditional teachings, anger is never justified. Santideva begins his chapter on patience by saying that a moment of anger can destroy lifetimes of positive spiritual effort. If that were literally the case, we would all be in plenty of trouble! But perhaps

Santideva is only trying to scare us into recognizing that we had better turn toward our anger and learn to understand it. Facing our anger is an important acupressure point in our practice.

Santideva argues that it makes no sense to get angry at another person. His argument is, as usual, imaginative and unexpected. Even when a person does terrible things, it isn't that person who is at fault. It's the passion inside them that has them in its clutches. They themselves are innocent victims of this passion. They really can't help it. So it's irrational to be angry with them. We should be angry at the passion. But what's the use of getting angry at a passion? Santideva uses the analogy of a man beating a dog with a stick. Stung by the stick, the dog immediately gets angry and vigorously attacks the stick, not understanding that it is the man wielding the stick, not the stick itself, that is the agent. In the analogy, the stick stands for the aggressive person who attacks you, and the person wielding the stick stands for the passion that grips the aggressive person. When you attack the aggressive person for what he is doing to you, you are like the dog foolishly going after the stick. What a waste of energy!

He goes on with his argument: The actions of others, no matter how heinous, are not what make us angry. The real cause of our anger is our own unwise reaction to the action. If you hit me and I don't mind, there's no anger. If you wave a stick through the air and I am not there to receive the blow, there's no anger. "You made me angry!" is never accurate. No other person is responsible for my anger, no matter how terrible their behavior may have been. Anger is mine and mine alone. When I seize my anger, train it on you, and act, I am going to cause a lot of harm. Acting in anger is like trying to throw a handful of shit at your enemy. You may or may not hit her or him, but you will certainly soil yourself.

In our culture, anger is often viewed positively. When someone says or does something wrong, especially to you, someone you care about, or an institution or a symbol you identify with, you *should* get angry. You shouldn't just sit back and acquiesce. Justice, as well as your dignity and self-respect, is served by your anger. By extension, a society is best served when it is made up of individuals who take this

attitude, whose anger won't let them sit idly by as bad guys do bad things, and who will collectively pursue such bad guys anywhere in the world with state power and might.

But our culture also has the opposite idea. Jesus's radical teaching is to love our enemy and practice mercy, regardless of the circumstances. So it is not only Buddhists who preach universal love, compassion, and care for the other. If anything, Christianity and the Judaism out of which Christianity arose have even more radical teachings on love than Buddhism does. It would be hard to find a more thoroughgoing expression of universal love and care for others than that which is everywhere in the Sufi poetry of Rumi. "If you don't want to be dead, never be without love. / Die in love if you want to be truly alive,"[1] he writes.

It seems to me that however much justifying anger makes sense in theory, it doesn't actually work in practice, because retaliation—seeking what we call "justice"—breeds further retaliation. In my anger I decide that your conduct is evil. I do not consult with you about this; I decide for myself. Then I engage in a battle with you that goes on and on, possibly for generations. We have seen this happen in personal as well as world affairs—in families, religious groups, nations. Insult leads to insult, incident to incident, war to war. Even if the warring parties are happy to go on with their aggression, innocent people always end up being hurt. In the end someone will have to help the warring parties heal. Or bury them.

If peace and concern for others is the bodhisattva path, it's clear that anger must be dissolved.

Trying to practice love and compassion, and letting go of anger, doesn't mean acquiescing when harm is done, especially when others are being hurt. A bodhisattva could never stand by and let that happen. A bodhisattva practices radical acts of protection, which might sometimes be forceful. But force is avoided if at all possible in favor of any gentler method that stands even a slight chance of working. Even where forceful methods seem necessary, they are applied without anger or hatred but rather with sadness, strength, and an eye to eventual healing as soon as the conflict abates.

This is the ideal. Meanwhile, in our day-to-day lives we get angry and frustrated all the time. What do we do?

WHAT IS ANGER?

Although spiritual teachings tell us that anger is bad, demonizing anger and trying never to be angry won't work. It won't help to be angry with our anger or with our angry selves. We have no choice but to be angry when we're angry because we can't make anger go away any more than we intentionally produced it in the first place. So when we're angry we just have to be angry. To turn toward anger, to experience it without affirming it and waving it around, is to practice patience. When we do this, we will eventually learn how to transform it into the path.

The more we study anger, the more interesting it gets. Anger is more than just another human emotion. It brings us to the heart of the human condition.

What is anger? In a sense, there's no need to ask. We all know what anger is. It's a set of intense and mostly unpleasant physical sensations—pounding heart, surging blood, rapid breath, tense body, heat, pressure. Anger is flooding thoughts—fiery streaks across the mind. Anger is a powerful emotion. Its rush can be addictive. Like cocaine, it can make you feel powerful and effective. If you like to get your own way, your anger will intimidate people into yielding to you. However, like all addictive substances, anger becomes toxic. In the end it will ruin your health and relationships.

Anger is more complicated than it seems. I may feel angry, but if I look more closely I see that the anger is a cover for an emotion behind it, such as fear or grief, that I can't yet feel. In such cases we might say that anger isn't anger; it's really fear or grief. Or maybe I am furious with you because of something you said to me. But a moment later I realize I wasn't angry with you at all; I was angry with myself or with someone or something else in my life—not you. Maybe my moment of anger directed at you was produced by the anger I feel

for someone I haven't seen in decades that suddenly flashed forth when you spoke. Or maybe it has to do with some dread, some fear, I am not even aware of having.

Or maybe I don't feel angry at all. I look angry to you—in fact, you can see by my words and body language that I'm quite angry, in a controlled slow-burn way. But I insist I'm not angry. I don't feel angry. Am I angry, only I don't know that I am? That's odd—the possibility that I could be in the grip of an emotion I'm not even feeling. Could it be that I'm so afraid of my anger that I don't feel it or let myself notice it, and it remains buried in my consciousness? Maybe I have been covering it over for decades with an ideology of Buddhist peacefulness, so that I don't even know it's there until one day, like a sudden flaring brushfire, it bursts forth.

Anger bears more investigation than we might think. We may not know its nature or its true causes. The causes of anger may be so basic and pervasive that all difficult emotions are forms of it. Things change, and we can't stop them from changing. Loss, aging, and death are inevitable, and there is absolutely nothing we can do about them. The immense injustice of these basic facts of life strikes me as a perfectly compelling reason to be angry. Maybe all instances of anger are just stand-ins for our basic anger about the total loss we are all subject to and can't prevent.

There are a few things we know about anger:

Anger isn't rational or calming. This means that decisions, judgments, and actions taken in anger are likely to be inaccurate and to make matters worse.

Anger is associated with a sense of fear and threat. When I'm threatened I feel vulnerable and weak, which is uncomfortable, so anger flares up to make me feel strong and powerful.

Anger isn't intentional. I don't decide to be angry. It just happens, usually all of a sudden. This is why crimes of passion carry less weighty penalties than premeditated ones: we understand the perpetrator was in the grip of their anger, did not necessarily intend to do what they did, and was perhaps

unable to decide not to do the action. This is Santideva's stick-and-dog argument.

Anger surely has its legitimate place. Anger arises for a reason. Since every moment arises from the totality of past conditions, a moment of my anger is produced by everything that has ever happened to me, though it bursts forth now, triggered by an event in the present. So this moment of anger must be here. There's no use regretting it or trying to avoid it. Here it is. This is what it feels like. I don't have to believe all my thoughts about it or act on them. Certainly I will be better off if I don't. But if I can be with the precious and inevitable moment of anger that has arisen, face and understand it, I will benefit. Possibly I will learn something valuable about myself and about being human. Possibly I will extend my capacity to understand and love others who also have in them the conditions for anger. Intimately being with anger when we are angry is the practice of patience.

PRACTICING WITH ANGER

What if we could use anger's power for the good? What if we could transform it through the practice of patience, purify it so that we, no longer pushed around by its irrational destructiveness, could use its energy to help us work for the good?

Anger is information. It tells us something about who we are, what is on our minds and in our hearts. It's like physical pain, the body's way of protecting itself by indicating that something is wrong and where it is wrong. Pain hurts, but if we know how to learn from it, we can find a necessary cure. Anger is just the same. It's an indicator: something needs attention. If we are angry, it's because we are thwarted, frustrated, or afraid, and we would not have realized this without that moment of strong anger. By drawing our attention, anger makes it possible for us to understand, shift, and grow. We practice patience not to make anger go away but rather to move into

it, with appreciation and respect, so we can transform it into energetic positive emotion and action.

It's no simple thing to be able to notice anger as anger, to be able to embrace it gently and courageously rather than get scared by it or grab hold of it and wave it around. Relating to anger is a subtle matter you can't learn from a book. There is no other way but to see it in action for yourself, in the unique patterns of your own body and mind.

This practice of subtle observation—spaciously being with what happens, without judging or fixing, simply noticing and embracing—is mindfulness. As so many studies, books, conferences, programs, courses, and trainings attest, mindfulness is a powerful practice. Yet it's counterintuitive. How could just being gently aware of something, without doing anything, make a difference? But it does, because mindfulness isn't an isolated practice. People who practice mindfulness also have determination, the intention to learn and change, the discipline to stay with the practice over time, and enough intelligence and openness to see what is going on.

And they have imagination. Practicing patience to transform anger into energy for the good takes imaginative effort over time. It takes imaginative vision not to see anger in the limited scope in which we usually live but instead to open up the picture and see larger possibilities.

Let's see if we can reduce practicing with anger to a few more or less clear, if provisional, steps:

1. *Think about anger*. Intelligent reflection matters. Read books about anger, listen to talks, journal, talk with friends. Become as clear as you can about what anger is, how it appears in you, how it hurts you, and how it helps you. Bring all this reflection to bear as you practice the second step, in the moment of actually being angry.
2. *Just notice*. That is, before you rush into blame and foolhardy words and deeds, notice the actual phenomenon of anger. How

does it feel? Train yourself through repetition to immediately bring attention to your body in the moment of anger. Be with your breathing. Be with your heartbeat. If you don't remember to do this until after the moment of anger, do it then. Little by little you will learn to do it in the moment.

3. *Say to yourself, "This is anger. This is what it feels like. It's just like this.*" When you do this, you are slowing things down, gently embracing your condition, neither pushing it away nor getting hooked into it. If you get angry in a moment of intense interaction with another person, train yourself to ask for a pause. You might say something such as, "Hold on for a minute. Let me get a grip on myself." Resist the impulse to immediately shoot back with aggression.
4. *After the anger moment has passed, take time to investigate it.* Bring it up in meditation, journaling, or other forms of reflection. What happened there? What were the proximate causes of it? What were the deeper causes? Think about the people involved, how you regard them and how you would like to regard them. Remember your bodhisattva commitment to identify affectionately with everyone you meet. You may not be feeling that in the moment of anger or even in later reflection, but reinforce that that's your commitment and that you are going to get there eventually. Reinforce that you are committed to viewing whatever you are feeling now as a step in that direction, however much it seems not to be. When you develop a habit of investigating anger like this, bit by bit you are changing your relationship to it. Now you are interested in anger as a process and a problem. You are waiting for it to come up so you can investigate further. You are no longer taking it at face value.
5. *Practice the ninth bodhisattva precept: I vow to practice love, not to harbor ill will.* We discussed the sixteen bodhisattva precepts in the previous chapter. These are commitments bodhisattvas make to help them stay on track with their intention to live a loving life. Practicing the ninth precept doesn't mean that you never harbor ill will. Like the arising of anger

itself, harboring anger isn't necessarily intentional. When someone has wounded you very badly, it's hard not to go on feeling angry at them. You can't help it. To practice this precept begins with simply noticing your angry thoughts and feelings. Next, instead of justifying them (because you are ashamed of them and need to excuse yourself for feeling them), remind yourself that although they are there right now, they won't always be there. Recall that your commitment is to one day be entirely free of them, however distant that day may be. You can also do loving-kindness practices for the person or persons against whom you are harboring anger. These practices involve the intentional repetition, in meditation or other quiet moments, of phrases such as, "May you be well, may you be happy," in relation to each person with whom you are angry. (I suggest a simple loving-kindness meditation on this page). Even if, as you repeat these phrases, you don't really feel them, the repetition will eventually help soften your anger.

CONFLICT: THE ADVANCED PRACTICE OF PATIENCE

The practice of patience extends to an area of our lives we usually have a great deal of trouble with: conflict. Most of us are conflict avoidant. Rather than confronting one another over hurtful and unfair actions, we ignore or deny them. Most of the time we can get away with this. But resentment builds up and sometimes develops into open warfare.

Where does conflict come from? We usually think of conflict as a mistake, a failure, a breakdown in communication. But conflict is normal and unavoidable. Like so much else that troubles us, it's not our fault; it's built into our humanness. As limited beings with essential needs, living together in a limited world, inevitably we are going to clash. As soon as there are two people in the world, conflict

is guaranteed. Maybe it only takes one: I can be conflicted all by myself!

Conflict is natural and inevitable in this dualistic world of autonomous choice. We all want power—if not power over others, at least the power to determine our own lives. Too often spiritual practitioners feel as if being "spiritual" means they're not supposed to see power, want power, or engage in conflict. But I think this notion is unrealistic and even destructive. To deny or override our human feelings doesn't work out. Wise bodhisattvas don't pretend they have no needs. They don't pretend conflict doesn't exist. They consider conflict a fertile area for the advanced practice of patience.

Let me note the obvious: The imaginative practice of the six perfections isn't as neatly divided as the chapters in this book—first generosity, then ethical conduct, then patience, and so on. Life isn't a book. It's richer and more beautiful than any book could be. I mention this now because the reality of conflict in our lives is so various and nuanced that no discussion a few pages in length is going to do it justice. To practice as bodhisattvas within the realm of conflict, we will have to use everything we have: generosity, ethical conduct, patience, joyful effort, meditation, and especially understanding—and, of course, much more. And we will have to throw away all our good spiritual skills from time to time and just be fully, sometimes fiercely, present in the midst of powerful feelings. Conflict will churn up our most painful and scary impulses. Because of this, conflict is especially precious.

When I'm in conflict, I usually begin by remembering my bodhisattva commitment, which is grounded in my sense of how things really are. I know that thinking of myself in a small way—thinking of my own needs, my pride, my desire to be important or worthwhile—doesn't serve me. It only makes me miserable. Besides, it isn't true, or it isn't the whole truth or the happiest truth. I may be an ordinary person with ordinary psychological needs and troubles, but, at the same time, I know I'm more than this. My imagination tells me I'm not just "myself." I exist because everything exists, and I couldn't exist otherwise. Others and myself are one being, one

continuous flow, so my interests and the interests of others are identical.

I know all this is true, even if I forget it a lot. Conflict can't flare up in my life unless I have forgotten it. So when I feel the feelings conflict produces in me, I know I have forgotten something basic that I need now to intentionally remember. So I remind myself. Of course, this doesn't make the conflict disappear. But it puts it in its proper perspective.

Next, I recall the teachings about anger on which we have been reflecting. I know that when I have strong feelings, I need to turn toward those feelings and investigate them. If I leap over them and rush into blaming and strategizing, I will be missing something. Not only will I fail to appreciate my connection to others, but also I may be missing the solution to the conflict that is probably lurking right there in the very emotion I'm trying not to feel by rushing into defensive or aggressive action. I know very well how to step into this emotion: I return awareness to my body and breath. I take time to reflect, think it over, be with the emotion patiently.

The truth is, we can yield much more than we think we can. Much of what we insist on in our relationships, much of what we think we need and want from others, we can easily do without. It may take us some time to see this, but eventually we do. With practice over time, we can let lots of slights, hurts, and supposed needs go. As we get stronger in our practice, we become more resilient and generous. We appreciate that people don't really mean to hurt us. They are always doing the best they can. We become more tolerant and find that we can yield without feeling as if we are losing ourselves. In fact, quite the opposite seems to be the case: the more we leave the victory to others, the stronger, calmer, and more expansive we become.

But sometimes it isn't right to yield, and sometimes we can't. Sometimes we have no choice but to jump into conflict. To indulge others endlessly in their folly isn't good for them or for us, and bodhisattvas know that one's self is among the many beings in the world deserving honor and respect. If in yielding to others we're subtly eroding our sense of self-worth, we're doing violence both to

ourselves and the other. We can't abrogate our responsibility to ourselves. When we notice we're doing this, we have to take up opposition as an exercise in compassion.

Indo-Tibetan Buddhism has many famous texts for generating compassion. A famous teaching found in one of them is "give the victory to others." In other words, always yield to others, even when you think they are in the wrong.

A student of this teaching sent in a question about it to *Lion's Roar,* a Buddhist magazine formerly known as *Shambhala Sun,* who forwarded his question to me. The student began by saying he appreciated the teaching and had practiced it with great profit. "But," he said, "I have a colleague at work who's constantly taking credit for my ideas and accomplishments. How do I balance practicing this teaching with doing what's right for my morale at work and my career?"

Here's how I answered him:

> Your question brings out the complexity of the teachings in actual life. Sometimes you can't take the teachings literally. In tricky situations, you have to figure out the spirit of the teachings and try to follow the spirit, if not the letter. The point of "give the victory to others" is to reduce self-focus. Why would you want to do that? Because being too focused on your own well-being is bad for you. It limits your range of activity and it constricts your heart.
>
> In the case you mention, begin by examining your motivation. Why not continue to let your colleague take credit for your ideas and accomplishments? Does this bother you? Why? Think about it.
>
> The most important thing is to be honest and realistic. If letting your colleague take credit for your work is, in fact, eroding your morale (as you say), limiting your career, and making you unhappy, then following the letter of this slogan is not helping you practice its spirit. So you have to stop conceding to your colleague. When you are a buddha you can

give the victory to others all the time. But not yet. Your trying to do that now is backfiring. It's having the opposite of its intended effect.

So you have to do something more difficult: Have a conversation with your colleague in which you tell her or him to stop the behavior because it's bothering you and it doesn't seem right or fair. Try to do this with a generous understanding that the colleague's behavior must come from some lack or moral blind spot she or he comes by honestly. Not really her or his fault.

Doing all this without losing touch with your bodhisattva commitment is the way to practice this slogan.

Spiritual teachings, including the teachings in this book, are inherently idealistic. They should be. Ideals are by definition imaginary—they don't actually exist; we imagine them in order to expand the possibilities for our lives. "Give the victory to others" is an idealistic teaching. Sometimes, as I've said, we're capable of actually doing this. Sometimes we aren't, but we try anyway and see what happens. Maybe we can stretch. Still other times, as in this case, the effort to stretch doesn't work. It only makes us resentful. We struggle with our resentment, but we lose. Then we get discouraged. We think spiritual practice is too hard for us. Or maybe we think spiritual practice is just foolish.

Bodhisattvas recognize such thoughts and feelings as signs that the best course, for now, is to leap into the conflict—there's no other choice. Doing this doesn't mean abandoning our spiritual practice. It means instead that right now, as things are, practicing conflict *is* our practice. Sometimes the practice of conflict leads to surprising developments. Sometimes that difficult conversation turns into an occasion for deepening friendship.

CONFLICT IS LOVE

Having spent a lot of time studying and contemplating conflict, I have come to believe that there is a drop of love at the center of every conflict.

What makes conflict conflictual? Opposing interests. But what is opposed to what?

We all need and want love. We all know that love lies at the center of who we are as human beings. We all understand the imperative to love the other as ourselves, however much we have forgotten or deny this. So when the other seems to be threatening us, there is a disturbing disconnect with something that lies deep within us—our intense need for one another. This is why severe conflict seems to rock us to our very foundation, much more than the issue at hand would seem to warrant. Is the money or the honor really all that important? Is it really worth all this expense, time, and struggle? What is it that has us so upset?

At the bottom of every important conflict is a sense of love having been betrayed. We are as shaken as if jilted by a lover. Certainly we notice that when we are in a deep conflict with someone, we are as closely connected to that person as we are to a lover. We think about them many times a day, dream about them at night. What is it that makes conflict so compelling? Why is conflict at the heart of every play, novel, soap opera, TV show, pop song, and dramatic episode of our lives? It's because conflict is about the failure of love, and love is what matters most.

This is particularly noticeable in family conflicts, which are so common and so painful. We are hurt most by the betrayal of those we had counted on to love us. The indifference or hostility of someone who is supposed to love us is much more painful than that of a mere acquaintance. It hurts us to the quick.

This goes for tribes of people as well. I have noticed that the most virulent and longstanding of the world's great conflicts are often between groups close to one another in proximity and ethnicity—the Israelis and the Palestinians; the Irish Protestant and Catholics; Sunni and Shite Muslims. Civil wars are always the most bitter wars. In a sense, all conflicts are civil wars—bitter combat between siblings

who love and depend on one another and, exactly because of this, feel the pain of opposition all the more intensely.

The magic of conflict is to recognize that there is a point of connection and even love at the heart of what is most painful. Because we care so deeply for one another—however much we are not in touch with this caring—we are capable of hurting one another. Once we know this, we can search within for the hurt and vulnerability. It is there somewhere—underneath the anger, defensiveness, or aggression. If we can let ourselves feel the hurt, grief, fear, and disappointment, eventually we will find the love—that place within us that contains the basic human feelings we all feel for one another.

Bodhisattvas fully appreciate this counterintuitive point: all instances of conflict are poignant moments in which the depth of our human love meets the depth of our human longing and alienation.

PATIENCE WITH THE TRUTH ABOUT OUR HUMAN LIFE

We have now covered the first two arenas in which it is traditionally suggested to apply the perfection of patience: to our personal suffering and to our interpersonal suffering. The third area in which we practice the perfection of patience is in relation to the difficult truth about our human life. Life is impermanent. Time is passing. We are changing all the time. Sometimes we like the changes, sometimes we don't, but we can't do anything about them. We all get sick. We all grow old. We all die. We all suffer losses. We will all lose everyone we love and everything we have spent our lives building. Though we know this, we generally shrug our shoulders and think, "Well, those things will happen later, a long time from now, so why dwell on them? Let's forget about them and enjoy life while we can. Anyway, maybe it won't be so bad, maybe somehow we will be lucky and be spared the worst sorts of troubles."

But when we look more deeply, we recognize that all this trouble and loss is not something that happens later, long from now, when we are much older and at the very end of our lives—it is happening gradually, with every passing moment. Every moment we are losing this moment. Each moment is gone as soon as it appears. To experience time is to experience sorrow and loss. Rebbe Nachman, the great Jewish sage, once said, "The world is a narrow bridge. Don't be afraid!"

But that's just the trouble: we *are* afraid. Fear of loss, failure, disgrace, aloneness, impermanence, and death lurks behind much of what we feel and experience, whether or not we know it.

All religions teach that there is a way to overcome this existential fear. Each religion has its own way of expressing this possibility, but all religious teachings at their depth imaginatively suggest a hopeful and transcendent sense that within and beyond our lives are larger lives—more whole and more real than our human capacities can ever hope to grasp. In Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, the path is one of faith in a loving, compassionate, just, and merciful God. In ancient earth-based religions, there is patient trust in a great spirit connected to the earth, sky, water, plants, and animals. Classical Buddhism appreciates the empty boundless nature of existence itself, nondifferent from nonexistence, whose essential nature is love and compassion.

Whatever the expression, this is not an easy truth to embrace. It is radically humbling. It requires a completely different point of view. It takes deep and patient forbearance to accept our human vulnerability—that we die, that we are at the mercy of time and the world, that our narrow self-view can't really be right, that we have to expand far beyond our comfort zone.

PATIENCE IS EMPTY OF PATIENCE

Like all the perfections, the perfection of patience doesn't really exist. In fact, there's no such quality as patience. Patience is just a word

that evokes a feeling in us about how we could live. Like all the perfections and everything else in this world—including ourselves—patience is empty of any graspable inherent reality. Appreciating emptiness is the fruit of our practice of the sixth paramita, prajnaparamita, the perfection of understanding.

Why is it important to remember that patience is empty of patience? Because it reminds us not to get too worked up about our practice of patience. If patience is empty of patience, then practicing it ought to be relaxing. Why get upset because we think we are not patient enough, when in the end there is no such thing as patience anyway? We practice patience the best we can, because to do so is delightful and its benefits are great. It would be silly to be impatient with our impatience when patience—and therefore impatience—is an empty concept. Isn't this the trouble with religious life as we usually think of it: we take it so seriously, we get so intense about it, and we end up in a mess. Appreciating the emptiness teachings helps immensely with this problem.

DOGEN ON THE PERFECTION OF BENEFICIAL ACTION

The third of Dogen's four methods of guidance for bodhisattvas is beneficial action. It calls on us always to do beneficial actions for others, using whatever skillful means we have at hand. Such acts, he writes, are performed not for any reward but for their own sake. They are acts of oneness: they always benefit self as well as others, because there is no difference between self and others. So, he concludes, you should benefit self and others alike, benefit friend and foe alike, even benefit grasses, trees, wind, and water.

I want to apply this simple teaching—the commitment to be of use to others, including all living beings and even apparently inanimate things—to the practice of the perfection of patience.

Basically, all I have said about the practice of patience amounts to something quite simple: just keep going. Don't let anything that

happens, including setbacks of any sort, deter you. In fact, there will always be setbacks. Setbacks are a necessary part of the process. So whatever is going on, whatever disadvantageous or even catastrophic thing occurs, just remember: Be of benefit to others. Be a blessing for others. Just try to help, even if it looks like there's nothing you can do. In fact, you can always do something: say a prayer, have a kind thought, offer a kind word. It will help. Frustrated by bad traffic or a very long checkout line? Be of benefit to others. Financial setback? Be of benefit to others. Job loss, divorce, illness, aches, pains, fears of old age? Be of benefit to others.

The full perfection of the practice of patience can be effected with just this one practice: be of benefit to others.

VERSES ON THE PERFECTION OF PATIENCE

Tokme Zongpo's verse on the perfection of patience, from his *Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva*:

> For bodhisattvas who want to be rich in virtue
> A person who hurts you is a precious treasure.
> Cultivate patience for everyone,
> Without irritation or resentment—this is the practice of a bodhisattva.[2]

It is a common teaching in Tibet, where bodhisattva practice and the practice of the six perfections are culturally embedded, to think of irritating, grating, and hurtful people as precious treasures.

Hurtful people are precious because they're rare. It's true: more or less, nice people are commonplace. Most people are decent and fairly polite. They don't challenge you that much. They are nice, you are nice, everyone is nice, life goes on. But a really rude and disturbing person is unusual. If you are lucky enough to have such a person in your life, you should regard them as a treasure because they will consistently do for you what most people won't: they will stir up your

anger, resentment, and other difficult emotions, which will force you to practice patience. And since patience is the best way to increase your storehouse of precious virtue, these rotten, nasty individuals are especially to be appreciated.

Tokme Zongpo instructs us to "cultivate patience," not "be patient." *Cultivation* is an agricultural word. You cultivate a field with the careful daily work of careful observation, weeding, plowing, adding soil amendments. You are aided by rain, air, and sunshine, factors beyond your control. Cultivation is a good metaphor for the practice of the perfection of patience, a gentle effort we keep up quietly and steadily day after day and year after year. Being perfectly patient with everyone might take a long time—maybe more than a single lifetime. But bodhisattvas imagine many lifetimes of joyful cultivation.

Here is a verse on the perfection of patience from the *Prajnaparamita Sutra in Eight Thousand Lines*:

> When he hears someone speaking to him harshly and offensively
> The wise bodhisattva remains quite at ease and contented.
> [He thinks] "Who speaks? Who hears? How, to whom, by whom?"
> The discerning is [then] devoted to the foremost perfection of patience.[3]

This wonderful verse is like a Zen koan. It describes a practice: When you find yourself suddenly agitated by a harsh word, note the flaring emotion. But instead of letting it get to you, spinning you into a flood of thoughts, feelings, and angry words, try to remain at ease and present, and ask yourself, "Who speaks, who hears, how, by whom, to whom?" Eventually you can identify these questions with a feeling in your belly (the same place in your belly where you feel your breathing in daily meditation), and you can just bring attention to that place in your belly without using any words.

Such questions pierce the surface of the emotional moment, plunging you to its depth. In this moment of emotion, who are you? Who is the so-called other? What is really going on?

You are not looking for answers. You are simply practicing the questions. This opens and deconstructs the moment. What is really going on in a moment of anger? Breath and body. Speaker, hearer, unpleasant emotion. Earth and sky. Existence and nonexistence. Appreciation and sorrow. In other words, the surface story—"She had no call to say that, I'm angry, I'm yelling"—on intense investigation is experienced as free of its conventional terms. There is really no me, no you, no emotion, no words. There is simply experience that flares up and out. Knowing that—that all our conceptions of any moment, however convincing they may seem, are merely conceptions without real substance—makes us perfectly patient.

Practices

MEDITATION PRACTICES

- Sit down and pay attention to your body. Now pay attention to your breath, in and out, as your belly rises and falls. Rest in each exhale in the belly. Notice any physical sensations that are uncomfortable or unpleasant. Don't try to adjust your body or make the sensations go away or occur in any other way. Just be aware of them, explore them, and continue to breathe. See if they change over time.
- Sit down and pay attention to your body, feeling your breath, in and out, in your belly. Rest in each exhale. Feel yourself relaxing with each successive breath. Once you have established some peace, recall a recent (or maybe not so recent) event in your life in which someone hurt you with a word or a look. Imagine this moment. Be with it deliberately as you breathe. Feel any emotions that arise as you think of it but try not to indulge thoughts and speculations; keep your focus on posture and breathing, creating space that allows emotions to rise and pass away with calmness. The goal here is not to produce insight about the event but rather to sit calmly with feelings as they come and go, without being reactive.
- Sending and Receiving Meditation (Tonglen): Sit down and pay attention to your body and breath. Become aware of thoughts, images, memories, whatever arises in your mind. Now become aware of the awareness itself that is the container or background for the content of your mind. Little by little (using your exhale to ease your way into it) shift your attention from the foreground (thoughts, images, and the like) to the background (awareness itself). Rest in this spacious awareness. Sit like this for a short while.

  Now breathe in whatever pain and suffering you may have, either the pain and suffering you are feeling right now or pain and suffering from the past. Imagine yourself sitting across

from you. Draw in the suffering from the you across the room, feeling it as a thick smoky substance you can actually take in as you inhale. Have confidence that the spacious awareness you have already established is whole enough and strong enough to be able to do this. Now exhale and imagine that the pain has been transformed into healing energy, light and pleasant. Exhale this pleasant healing energy toward yourself.

Now breathe in the pain and suffering of someone you love. Imagine that person sitting across from you. Imagine her or his suffering as a thick smoky substance you can actually take in as you inhale. Have confidence that this spacious awareness you have already established is whole enough and strong enough to be able to do this, to take in and transform the pain of another. Now exhale and imagine that the pain has been transformed into healing energy, light and pleasant. Exhale this pleasant healing energy and send it to your loved one.

Repeat this for a neutral person, for a group of friends, and for all the suffering all over the world. Breathe it in, and breathe out healing, sending this healing energy all over the world—above, below, and in all directions.

Rest again in spacious awareness.

- Sit down and pay attention to your body. Now pay attention to your breath, in and out, as your belly rises and falls. Rest in each exhale. Feel yourself relaxing with each successive breath. Now imagine suffering as a tiny red spot in front of you. Breathe in the dot. Expand it slowly until it grows as large as it can, even to the point of covering the entire universe. Repeat to yourself: “Suffering is not mine, it belongs to everyone and everything.” And “Suffering is empty of suffering.” Feel the red color as beautiful.

Note that if you feel squeamish about trying these practices, you shouldn’t do them! It may be okay to challenge yourself when you have the support of a spiritual community and experienced spiritual

guides, but not on your own. Never do any practices recommended in this book unless you feel perfectly comfortable with them.

DAILY LIFE PRACTICES

- Notice any uncomfortable or unpleasant physical sensations that arise during the day. As soon as you feel them, pay close attention. Notice thoughts that arise in association with them. Notice the sensations themselves as closely as you can.
- Pay close attention to all moments of frustration that arise during the day. These are precious for your practice of patience: all jars, packages, doors, or windows that won't open easily; all irritations with traffic or checkout lines; all hardware and software that malfunctions when you need them to work; all people who seem too slow or too picky; all people who seem not to listen when you speak. Notice the frustration, label it as frustration, check the thoughts and actions associated with it. The goal is not to make the frustration go away—though likely it will—but to study it, appreciate it.
- Practice the steps in the practice of anger on this page.

  First, take time to intentionally think about anger, what it means to you, how it has affected you. Write about it, discuss it with friends.

  Second, in the moment of being angry, notice exactly what happens, the sensations and feelings.

  Third, say to yourself, "This is anger. This is what it feels like. It's just like this."

  Fourth, after the moment of anger has passed, take the time to review it, to understand what happened.

  Fifth, practice the ninth bodhisattva precept (discussed on this page): "I vow to practice love, not to harbor ill will."
- As recommended by Dogen, reduce your practice of patience to two simple practices: first, just keep going, no matter what

happens; and second, be of benefit to others.

- Memorize the verses from Tokme Zongpo and the *Prajnaparamita Sutra in Eight Thousand Lines*. Repeat them as many times as you can during the day to remind yourself of the practice of patience.
- Whenever a moment of frustration or conflict with another person arises, train yourself to ask the questions: “Who speaks? Who hears? How? To whom, by whom?”

5
The Perfection of Joyful Effort

THE BODHISATTVA COMMITMENT is endless, the bodhisattva job goes on and on, and the bodhisattva's love and desire to be of service to others is limitless. In order to keep on with the work, bodhisattvas practice the perfection of joyful effort. It's impossible to be a bodhisattva without lots of energy, and you can't have lots of energy without limitless love for what you do.

Virya paramita is the Sanskrit phrase I translate as "the perfection of joyful effort." The word *virya* comes from the same root as the English word *virile*: strong, manly, heroic. *Virya* is most often translated as "energy," or even "zest." It implies irrepressibility. Bodhisattvas are like the Buddhist pop-up dolls you see in Japan. The dolls are in the shape of Bodhidharma, the legendary Central Asian monk who brought Buddhism to China and is therefore credited as the founder of Zen. You can whack these big, round inflatable dolls, knocking them over, but they pop right back up. The energy of the knockdown provides the energy of the pop-up: no energy is lost. For bodhisattvas, getting knocked down is already getting up—knock-downgetup, one motion. Bodhisattvas, like the Energizer Bunny, just keep on going. But their effort isn't wooden or mechanical; it's effervescent. They love to do spiritual practice, in all its endless varieties and forms, for the benefit of self and others, and they go on doing it no matter what. They simply couldn't do otherwise. Bodhisattvas' impossible-to-defeat energy comes from their practice of joyful effort.

Traditional texts depict many portraits of bodhisattvas who spare no effort to go on and on with their practice for many lifetimes, undergoing extravagant sacrifices and feats of endurance. But unlike mythical heroes who conquer monsters or evil kingdoms and overcome terrible obstacles by force, bodhisattvas conquer internal foes—their own selfishness and smallness. They overcome obstacles not by oppositional force but by patience, as we discussed in the previous chapter. Once they overcome, they go forth again with joyful effort. It's love, not power, that propels them.

BINOCULAR VISION

The bodhisattva path requires binocular vision, seeing with two eyes. As we are living now, we see with only one. We see that we are ordinary people without much deep understanding or vision, and very little energy for anything other than the maintenance and edification of our own lives. With just the one eye, we see serious problems—intractable social, economic, political, and environmental dilemmas. We see attitudes and emotions that confine us, making our lives difficult. We feel beleaguered in a troubled world.

When we see with only one eye, we lack depth perception. Seeing with depth requires a second eye, the bodhisattva eye. This second eye sees our extraordinary human potential. It sees that we have it in us to be bodhisattvas practicing generosity, ethical conduct, patience, joyful effort, meditation, and understanding. It sees that we have the buoyant strength to go on making effort in this endless path of universal awakening, and that we do this together. Once we develop this second eye, and add it to the first eye, we see with depth. This depth perception doesn't obliterate our problems—they certainly remain in the foreground—but it reframes them by shifting the background, replacing the background of fear, restriction, lack, perhaps even terror, with a background of endlessness. Now we see possibility. We see connection and love. We see a path.

Binocular vision implies the dual nature of the practices I have been suggesting. On one hand, we are realistic. We see our troubles and faults; we do not try to override or deny them. We are not pretending. We know who we are, what has happened to us, and how it has affected us. By practicing with our troubles, flaws, and personal limitations, we heal. Through our limitations we connect to one another. Using our vulnerability as leverage, we reduce our human pain. A wonderful Japanese Zen saying describes this process: when you fall down on the ground, you use the ground to get up.

On the other hand, and at the same time, we are constantly working on our bodhisattva commitment. With study, reflection, meditation, and imaginative practices, we cultivate a commitment to grow beyond our received smallness, to expand our vision, to move past our conditioned selves toward the selves we know we can be. The bodhisattva vision buoys us up and keeps us going.

Joyful effort is both the cause and result of this binocular vision. Practicing it refreshes and strengthens our vision, and our vision in turn gives us the energy to keep going with our practice. Though at first it may seem difficult to sustain the perfection of joyful effort, as we go on it gets easier. We realize that there is no other way, there never has been any other way, and we are enjoying ourselves!

The bodhisattva practice of joyful effort involves energetic activity in the pursuit of goodness. This means, specifically, effort directed toward what is loving and beneficial, toward what expands the heart —effort in the context of the other bodhisattva practices: generosity, ethical conduct, and so on.

LAZINESS

Traditionally, joyful effort is defined by what it is not: laziness.

Laziness isn't just lethargy and sleepiness. Laziness can also be rushing around doing a bunch of stuff that is actually motivated by deep-seated avoidance of what we most need to address in our lives.

I think that a great deal of the effort we make is just this sort of laziness—we are working hard to run away from ourselves, to avoid facing what we know we need to face.

These days, overwork is a common form of addiction. Most jobs are enormously demanding. As productivity and creativity ramp up, our rapid and fertile minds think of more and more tasks that need to be done, even as organizations, to stay lean, employ fewer people to do them. Add to that our contemporary need for entertainment and distraction, as well as the voluntary demands of our social networks, and we have very full lives. No wonder we find ourselves doing personal and work emails in the evening, making a night of restful sleep more difficult to come by. No wonder we are so wound up and tangled in our lives. While there are probably some couch potatoes out there, not many of us are lazy in the usual sense of the word. But from the point of view of joyful effort, most of us are slackers.

Discouragement, self-doubt, and situational depression are also forms of laziness. To label them "laziness" isn't meant to increase guilt and self-denigration but rather to empower us to overcome these difficult emotional states. No one can prevent discouragement, self-doubt, or depression from arising when the causes that produce them are present. But when we too easily give in to these emotional states, assuming that there's no way out, we unwittingly make matters worse.

Joyful effort can be an antidote to these commonplace problems. It arises based on the storehouse of faith we have cultivated through our practice, faith that as human beings we are all inherently precious and worthwhile. We recognize that the thought that we are not precious, that our lives are not important, is a darkly conditioned thought. Though it may not be preventable, it need not be validated. It must be confronted with patience. The practice of joyful effort begins with recognition that our darker impulses do not need to rule our hearts.

According to the laws of all nations, murdering a human being is a crime. It is perfectly legal to murder many other sorts of creatures,

from insects to large domesticated animals, but not human beings. This legal reality acknowledges that we consider human life to be precious and sacred, and that no human being, even a very smart, wealthy, and talented one, has the right to take human life. If all human life is sacred, your life must be sacred. If so, how can you give in to self-doubt and discouragement? So, when these feelings arise, you practice taking yourself in hand and reminding yourself that it simply cannot be the case that what you are feeling is an accurate assessment of who and what you are. In truth, you are an awesome creature, worthy of respect and love, no matter what your circumstances are right now, and no matter what you are feeling. Your discouragement is temporary. It arises due to present conditions; it will soon pass. In the meantime, you can read a good book of spiritual teachings, get some strong exercise, or go for a walk among trees and big skies.

If you find you are unable to deal with your negativity in this way, the practice of joyful effort will spur you on to seek support and encouragement from others—friends, therapists, meditation or devotional practice groups—wherever you can find it. To indulge negativity is laziness. (It goes without saying that clinical depression and serious mental problems require treatment. The practice of joyful effort is always helpful, but in those cases, it is insufficient.)

The ultimate source of laziness is our semiblind view of our lives. In his chapter on joyful effort, Santideva rouses us out of our slumber with strong language reminding us that we are like fish in a puddle—what pleasure can we really find when our lives are so short and death is already breathing down our necks? How can we fool around with discouragement and negativity when we are in such a terrible fix? The end of your life, he writes, is going to come much sooner than you think, at which time you will say, “What!? How did this happen? I have barely begun! It all went by so quickly!” You will look at your relatives gazing down at your sad diminished body, nodding their heads sadly, and you won’t know what to say. You’ll be tormented as you remember all the time you wasted, not thinking of

others, not taking the time to appreciate your life and to love the people you wanted to love.

Being human is a rare gift. Most of the creatures on our planet have not received this gift. Having received it, what a shame that you are frittering it away with stuff you think makes sense, but that, in your last hours, you will regret. Thinking of this, maybe you can rouse yourself right now out of your laziness and begin to expand your vision of who you are and what your life is about. Maybe now is the time to begin the bodhisattva path of maximum loving and caring for everyone in your life—and beyond.

Such, at any rate, are the sorts of reflections Santideva recommends to give us incentive to rouse the practice of joyful effort.

But even without such drastic imaginings, we can see the point of making joyful effort. We can see, for instance, that much of what seems to give us pleasure isn't as worthwhile as we might have thought. We tire of it easily. Good food and drink and all forms of sensual pleasure decrease in their pleasurable effect on us the more we indulge them. The first glass of wine might be good, but the fifth and sixth are less good, and they ruin our tomorrow. The first promotion at work is exciting, but after a while professional advancement just seems like more of the same, another rung in an endless ladder that isn't really going anywhere. And money doesn't help. A certain amount of money is necessary to maintain a decent life. But what's a decent life? How much is enough? Probably much less than one thinks. And what is money anyway? Mostly, money is an idea of self-worth, and a hollow one at that. To think too much about it distorts the picture of our lives.

The more you check your experience, the clearer it will be to you that, in the end, the only worthwhile things are love and the inner satisfaction that comes from living your life at some depth. These are to be pursued with joyful effort.

PRACTICING JOYFUL EFFORT

Even though the ultimate point of joyful effort is to love and take care of others, it starts with taking care of ourselves, our bodies and emotions. If you want to make a contribution to the well-being of your friends and the world at large, you have to be in reasonable physical, emotional, and spiritual shape.

Getting in shape starts with the simplest things, the body and breath. Slow, steady rhythmic breathing, as in meditation, is good for the body. Take the time every day to breathe well, and to sit in silence so you can gently accept and soothe the slings, arrows, and bruises of daily living.

What you eat is important. Eating terrible food is the opposite of practicing joyful effort. Eat food that is good for your body and the planet. These days good food is more available than ever. Don't get prepackaged stuff. It doesn't take very long to wash and prepare produce. Do it mindfully and with zest. When you see that activity as part of your practice of joyful effort, it doesn't take any time at all. It's not time, it's life.

Exercise as often as you can. Exercise is the best medicine. It preserves your body and protects your good mood, so you can offer it to others. It gives you the energy you need to pay attention to people in your life. Doing regular exercise makes it far less likely that your body will fall apart before its time, causing others to worry about you and have to take care of you, and costing health-care dollars that could be spent on others in need.

Doing these sorts of things may seem, at first, like chores. You can even go so far as to be full of worry and paranoia about your eating and the condition of your body, or full of guilt that you are not doing all the good things for yourself you know you should be doing. The more worried and guilty you feel, the more worried and guilty you feel—you feel guilty about feeling guilty, worried about being worried: you know how bad worry and guilt are for you! Yes, it can actually get this ridiculous.

Worry and guilt are the opposite of joyful effort. Once you get used to taking care of yourself—making a strong, slow, steady effort to do so, expecting setbacks as normal and not taking them personally—it

becomes natural and easy. After a while, not eating terrible food feels more pleasurable than eating it. You no longer crave the fat, oil, and sugar that were once so addictive. Formerly dutiful trips to the gym or hiking trail become a pleasure you look forward to and miss when you don't go. Vigorous physical activity gives you a chance to rest your mind and appreciate being alive. Getting well acquainted with your body is interesting. You are embodied: heart, lungs, hands, legs, fingers, and toes. What's that like?

Similarly, you practice joyful effort in taking care of your emotions. In preceding chapters, we talked about techniques for doing this. Practicing joyful effort means that we employ those techniques with pleasure, interest, and a spirit of constant investigation and refinement. With joyful effort you develop the attitude that it isn't a flaw or tragedy to get angry, find yourself in conflict, or suffer some sort of loss. Instead of your mind sinking into discouragement and lethargy when such things happen, your energy rises. Since what happened to you did actually happen, and can't unhappen, you are glad to take it on and see what can be done. If you get discouraged or depressed, you understand that these feelings happen sometimes to bodhisattvas, who must learn to forgive themselves for their difficult mental states, bear them with patience, face them fully, substitute more wholesome states for them if possible, or, if not, wait them out and move on. When you practice joyful effort, you are far less plagued with guilt, pernicious remorse, and self-doubt. Such states might come, but when they do they are less virulent than they used to be. They become objects of study and practice. With joyful effort you develop a sense of humor about your persistent ridiculous mental habits. Like a stand-up comedian, you will have your own routines: "Ah, Mr. No-One-Can-Be-Worse-Than-You, how are you doing today? Complain much? Trying to fix the world to suit yourself? How's that going?"

The "joy" in joyful effort is crucial. It implies, as I've indicated, a rising mind, a happy and easeful mind, a sense of humor, even when things aren't going well. The word *effort* sounds like a task, a chore. But joyful effort is almost no effort at all. It's effortless effort—effort

without strain or pressure, just doing something for the doing of it, not for the accomplishment, money, or prestige. It's the pressure to achieve a goal that makes effort effortful. In his chapter on joyful effort, Santideva says that most people perform tasks for the satisfaction they may or may not get from them. But for bodhisattvas, joyful effort is itself already satisfaction—they can't be satisfied unless they keep on making such effort. The effort *is* the goal, so it's easy.

Bodhisattvas, you will recall, have impossible goals. They want full happiness, awakening, fairness, and respect for all creatures everywhere, without a single exception. This is their goal. They realize this is impossible. Therefore it will take a while to realize: an infinitely long period of time, an amount of time that could only exist in the imagination. Bodhisattvas' goal is so huge that it might as well be no goal at all. With a goal this big, bodhisattvas will certainly be making joyful effort forever, without expectation. If they get good results, wonderful, another drop in the bucket—and onward. If they get bad results, wonderful, you never know how things pan out in the long run—maybe this setback will somehow have good effects down the line—and onward. In this spirit, bodhisattvas go on with their joyful effortless effort.

Sometimes bodhisattvas get tired and take rests. Sometimes they see their activity isn't working, so they stop. Taking rests or changing course is part of the practice of joyful effort, not a break from it. Bodhisattvas don't take breaks. Even their breaks aren't breaks! They take zestful loving relaxing breaks, for their own sake and to revitalize body and mind so they can go on making joyful effort on behalf of others.

JOYFUL EFFORT IN ALL CONDITIONS

All this may make it seem as if joyful effort is a practice only for the young and able-bodied. But that's not the case. No matter your condition, you can find the appropriate way to practice joyful effort.

I lead a lot of long meditation retreats, during which I give a daily talk and spend hours seeing practitioners (bodhisattvas, that is) in private interviews. I've been sick in a retreat more than once. It would seem that this would be a terrible predicament, that there would be no way I could get through the retreat being sick. But there's a way to practice joyful effort even when you're sick. You do it by modulating your activity, scaling it down to match the condition of your body and mind. When I'm sick in a retreat, I don't try to perform as if I weren't sick—I practice in the retreat as a sick person would. I modulate my energy to suit my condition. I try to practice smoothly and steadily, not too vigorously. I try not to waste time wishing for another condition. I just live within the condition I have. I focus more on just doing one thing. It helps me remember that I am not in the retreat for my own enjoyment. I am there for other people, because that's my job, my joy, and my life. Knowing this, how could I complain or wish for something else, even if I am sick? When I think like this, I get more energy, or just enough energy to do what I need to do, resting in all the breaks, and taking a few more breaks if I need them.

This is the great secret of joyful effort and perhaps its most important aspect: Joyful effort isn't something you do. Joyful effort is life, it's sharing life. It comes to you from elsewhere, flows through you when you are ready to allow it. Once you stop getting in its way, stop straining, stop thinking your life is yours and up to you, energy somehow appears—just enough energy, given the condition of your body and circumstances. If you have to do something, you will do it. If you have to rest, you will rest, and someone else will do what you would have done.

Fortunately, I have so far been able to practice when I have been sick during retreats. Probably one day I won't be able to do that. In that case I'll do what I usually do when I am sick: go to bed. Going to bed can also be practicing joyful effort. It's being sick completely. It's not so bad. Being sick is what the body naturally does when conditions warrant. Of course, the time will come when I'll be so old or sick I won't be able to do retreats at all. When that happens I will

practice joyful effort in whatever way I am able. And others will benefit by my absence. They will lead the retreats, continuing the practice of joyful effort, which isn't mine, or theirs, or anyone's.

One of my favorite Zen stories is about the famous Master Mazu, who was said to be a huge man, seven feet tall, mighty and scary, with more than a hundred fully trained disciples. It takes a lot of joyful effort to train even one disciple. Having more than a hundred disciples is quite a feat—never equaled, as far as I know, before or since. (Of course, Zen stories are imaginary, so who knows if Mazu really had a hundred disciples or how tall he really was.) In the story, Mazu is sick. Perhaps very sick—perhaps at the end of his life. He is lying in bed in a very reduced state, helpless, like a little baby. His attendant asks him, "How is your health today?" Mazu replies, "Sun face buddha, moon face buddha."[1]

Sun-faced buddhas are vigorous buddhas who live for many eons in full strength. Moon-faced buddhas are cool, quiet buddhas who live for a day and a night. So Mazu is saying, in effect, "Yes, I am a wreck, but I am a buddha wreck. Whatever condition I am in is the perfect condition. In any condition, I have what I need to practice joyful effort, to be a bodhisattva in the appropriate form and style to fit the occasion."

Our great contemporary Zen teacher Maurine Stuart is the protagonist in a very similar story. Years ago she was diagnosed with incurable liver cancer. She was still a relatively young woman, with lots of energy and many students to take care of (among them, my wife and myself). She gave a dharma talk in which she said, with great vigor, "I am not sick!" Everyone was upset: the great Zen master in denial! Finally, someone brought it up with her. Maurine said, "I know I have cancer. I know I am going to die soon. But I am not sick!" She continued to practice joyful effort right up until the end of her life. For all I know she is practicing it still.

At the end of his chapter on joyful effort, Santideva has a striking image. Just as a piece of sheer cotton cloth is swayed by a wafting wind, he writes, so should a bodhisattva be moved by her or his practice of joyful effort.

This seems a far cry from the strenuous heroic effort that you see in sports drink ads featuring sweating, straining, determined-looking athletes maximally taxing body and mind. Quite the contrary, joyful effort is easy and smooth, flowing and wandering, like Indian cotton in a gentle breeze.

To explore joyful energy further, let's think about some key factors that are intimately connected to it: desire, vow, integrity, courage, and hope.

DESIRE

Classical Buddhism takes a dim view of sensual pleasure and the desire that is connected to it. In the earliest formulation of the second noble truth, the cause of suffering is desire. (In later interpretations, the root cause became ignorance, because ignorance was taken to be the basis of desire.) We suffer because we desire pleasant things we cannot have and cling to pleasant things we cannot keep. We want to stay young, but we have to get old. We want to live, but we have to die. We want to be rich, good-looking, accomplished, and talented, but we're not—or not enough to satisfy our outsized desire. So desire is the primary cause of suffering.

In the traditional list of hindrances to practice, sensual desire is the first item. Though Buddhism is famous for being the middle path between asceticism and indulgence, the early scriptures, by contemporary standards, are quite suspicious of the world and its pleasures. The early Buddhist attitude seems to be: engage the world, since there really is no choice, but do so as gingerly as possible—and beware!

The extravagant Mahayana sutras take almost the opposite view. They depict offerings being made to buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other great teachers—piles of food, fragrant flowers, banners, flags, parasols. Buddhist adherents erect luxuriant pavilions, castles, and thrones. They scatter the ground with flower petals and pave it with

gold, lapis lazuli, and other precious stones. The imagination runs riot in these sutras, full of impossible sensuality.

If, in classical Buddhism, desire is to be tamed and modulated so it can take its rightful place among other aspects of our living, in Mahayana Buddhism desire is to be transmuted and cultivated. What is the enthusiastic practice of joyful effort if not desire itself surging onward, channeled in the sloughs of love and compassion? Bodhisattva practice is certainly a practice of desire—desire for the weal of others, for their benefit, undertaken out of love for life and everything that lives.

What is desire? It's not just one phenomenon. Selfish desire is natural and biological. It's a life force that cannot be denied. I saw a recent video in which someone asked the Dalai Lama what he would say if he had spent his life as a mute and was suddenly given half a minute to speak. First he burst out laughing, saying, "What a silly question!" Then, pressed to respond, he said, "It depends on the situation. If I were hungry at the time I'd say, 'Give me some food!'" So yes, selfish desire is undeniably necessary. One has to take care of one's self and provide that self with what it needs to survive with a modicum of pleasantness. But, as we said, when you add pleasure to pleasure, satisfy desire on top of desire, things don't work out well. The fifth glass of wine won't help you.

In our time, the collective satisfaction of selfish desire has led to a dire situation. Our planet cannot continue to yield to us the material satisfactions we have been demanding of it. We now have a world economic system that depends on an exaggerated emphasis on selfish desire to continue to function. The system's logic has rewarded some people and countries with unprecedented wealth while leaving others with virtually nothing. An unfortunate point about selfish desire has been amply made!

Bodhisattva desire, however, is inherently unselfish desire; it is the fuel for joyful effort on behalf of others. As I've said, bodhisattvas understand that one's self is one among the many to be cared for, so self-care and self-compassion are folded into the bodhisattva path. To deny one's self completely is impossible. Only a saint could be

perfectly, literally, unselfish. If even the Dalai Lama, with only half a minute to speak, would ask for food when he is hungry, how much more so any of us!

But, having taken care of our own needs enough to go on living, we continue our practice unselfishly. It's a wonderful paradox that unselfishness is the ultimate selfishness. Think about it: Once we look further than the end of our own noses, we notice that love, friendship, and connection are the best things for us. They're what we all yearn for, what make us ultimately happy. And not only are they satisfying, delightful, necessary, and fulfilling in their own right, but they are also practical. We can't survive without the love and support of others. Without our parents, friends, coworkers, and governments, we would be too vulnerable, too sad. The more love and friendship we have, the more support we have in good times and bad. The only way we can have all this support is to be supportive, to genuinely think of others more than we think of ourselves. There is no doubt that our ability to act unselfishly, for the general welfare, is the only way humans will survive on this beautiful earth.

So bodhisattvas have strong desire to practice joyful effort. Santideva makes this point with the imaginative exaggeration typical of a bodhisattva: One should be addicted, he says, to joyful effort. One should be absolutely insatiable, like a lover obsessed with the beloved. Joyful effort is sweeter than any sensual pleasure, so bodhisattvas should be constant in their exercise of it. They should plunge into it, immediately and repeatedly, the way that an elephant plunges into a cool stream on a blazing hot day. So says Santideva.

VOW

Bodhisattvas are defined by their vows. Mahayana sutras list page after page of bodhisattva vows, each one more extravagant than the last. The unimaginative mind is very careful about vows. One should only vow what one feels one can realistically accomplish in a doable time frame. Otherwise one will have welched on one's promise.

While this makes sense in the small-scale version of our lives, it is far too limiting for the outrageously expansive life of a bodhisattva.

For bodhisattvas, a vow is not the same as a promise to accomplish something so that you can then go on to accomplish something else. Rather, a vow is expressive of deep intention and vision—a horizon toward which you will journey forever. We have already talked about the classical Zen four great vows: to save all beings, end all delusions, master all teachings, and completely become a buddha. These vows are not promises we keep—certainly we can't keep them in this short lifetime. Maybe one day, somehow. But who knows when?

Yet such vows make sense because they express and inspire a firm commitment to a path, a way of life. We can't "make" or "take" vows like this. We can only practice them. To practice a vow means to embrace it in a heartfelt and serious way, though we know that, as we are now, our commitment can't possibly run very deep. Of course, it's going to be a bit wobbly. But if we continue to practice the vow—repeating it alone or in groups, reflecting on it, taking it to heart, acting on it as best we can, observing what happens when we don't—our commitment will grow. Maybe the whole path of spiritual practice comes down to nothing more than vowing—once I come to feel and mean it when I say "sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them," my life is changed. I am no longer subject to my own confusion and selfish attachment.

This is certainly true in my own case. I first took bodhisattva vows fairly casually, not really appreciating what they were about. But as the years went by, I got more and more serious about them, seeing that, yes, I was really trying my best to live this way, concerned for others, going beyond my narrow needs.

The vows I mentioned in chapter 3—vowing to practice the sixteen bodhisattva precepts—are important forms of Zen vowing. Almost everyone I know who has vowed to practice these precepts has been deeply affected by it. Taking a vow is soul surgery. You remove commitment to self-concern and insert vow in its place. As a result of this surgery you become a different kind of person. You're no longer a normal person who considers care and protection of self and close

others as all-important. Instead, you become an extraordinary person concerned to reduce self-centeredness and establish love and concern for all others, without exception.

Of course, once you become this kind of person, you can't help but notice that you are no different from anyone else. As anyone who has taken bodhisattva vows will attest, though taking vows changes your life, at the same time you remain the same. Your self-centeredness doesn't simply and suddenly vanish, despite the soul surgery. It remains just as before. The difference is that now you know it for what it is, and you are clear (or at least mostly clear) that your commitment is to see through it. Rather than affirming, defending, and bolstering yourself, you now see that the best thing you can do for others—and for yourself!—is to admit that, like everyone else, you are a slave to self and that the effort of your life is to free yourself from this bondage. The vow changes your priorities, setting you forth on the long path to expansiveness.

INTEGRITY

Integrity literally means "wholeness." Wholeness means everything in your life is put together as a whole—body, speech, mind, and activity; relationship to yourself, to others, and to the physical world. Having integrity means you aren't divided against yourself, blocking your energy with inner contradictions, disappointments, or defeats. When you have integrity, you may have contradictions, disappointments, and defeats, but instead of being set aside or ignored, they are folded in—integrated—into who you are. You are dealing with them, living with them, as friends and allies. Integrity also implies moral wholeness, rectitude, acting straightforwardly, taking everyone into account, not acting deviously to favor yourself or promote an agenda.

We all have some integrity, but probably not enough. Without bodhisattva cultivation, without reflection and effort to work on ourselves over time, we will be a bit at odds with ourselves—our

impulses out of line with our best intentions, our actions out of line with the deeper inclinations of our hearts.

Our hearts themselves, if we really look, are occluded with division. We feel or want so much that we can't acknowledge or even understand. This inner confusion can take the form of unwise or erratic action. But more often it takes the form of rote dullness, lack of vision or courage. Our lives aren't dynamic. We aren't growing. We aren't able to make joyful effort.

When you have integrity, you remain open to everything you feel, good and bad. With your bodhisattva commitments, you know how to stay in balance with it all, to not be pulled over to one direction or another. You're not afraid of what's inside you. You don't need to deny or be ashamed of anything. You stand in the middle of your life, occupying your own place.

Joyful effort is integrity—being in tune with your whole self and your connection to others, and receiving from the whole, by way of your unique place in it, the energy it takes to further the whole.

The ordinary way we've been trained to live is the opposite of integrity. We're not trained to embrace the whole—we're trained to feel apart from it. We're trained (and it is more than training, it's our biology too) to feel separate, to be self-protective, to see ourselves fundamentally at odds with the world and others, so that we need to push against everything to further our aims. This isn't evil or a mistake—it's normal and natural. But in the long run it won't afford us a happy, expansive, and creative life. Seeing ourselves as a whole, as arising from and returning to the whole, is a much better and more accurate way to live.

This truth is being recognized everywhere. In business and education, there is more and more emphasis on working in teams rather than on individual achievement. Research shows us that the most important learning and accomplishments come not from genius individuals but from the synergy of people working together. Being an effective team member requires listening to others, building on what others say and do, jumping in and helping, without any reference to who gets credit. This is how bodhisattvas naturally live.

They are not obsessed with how they are doing, how they are viewed, how many awards they win. When these impulses arise, they understand them for what they are and don't run with them. They understand their self-centered impulses as normal yet out of line with integrity. Bodhisattvas identify themselves with the total situation in which they find themselves. They are willing to take their place, make whatever contributions they can. But their concern is for the best outcome for everyone, regardless of whether they have a lot or a little to do with that outcome. Their way of living is to consider others, consider the task at hand, and see the task's place in the grand scheme of things.

COURAGE

The perfection of joyful effort (from, you will remember, the Sanskrit word *virya,* meaning "heroic") can also be understood as courage.

Courage implies altruism. The person who endures much, going through all sorts of ordeals for his or her own safety or glory or financial gain, isn't generally considered courageous. Maybe tough and determined, maybe admirable, but not courageous. We understand a courageous person as one who undertakes great difficulty not for themselves but on behalf of others—their family, their nation, or a great ideal. Bodhisattvas are courageous in this sense. They are always trying to stretch beyond their normal self-concern. This is always an act of courage.

As all courageous people know, courage isn't fearlessness. It's the opposite: it's facing fear, going into and through it. Fear doesn't stop bodhisattvas. They study their fear, become familiar with it, and step into it little by little. They understand that fear is inevitable and that it will defeat us and shrink us if we don't face it, and that it will cause us to grow if we do.

The deeper we go into the question of fear, the more we notice how often it comes up, in subtle ways. We're afraid not only in the face of physical danger or dramatic loss but also almost every day, in almost

all our encounters. We constantly fear humiliation, exposure, embarrassment, or failure. However slight or subtle these feelings are, they influence most of our ordinary responses and viewpoints. They shrink us down into self-protective people unwilling to move forward into significant relationship—which we could do with each and every encounter of our lives, if only we had the courage. It turns out that it takes courage simply to be a normal person at ease in the world among others.

Mostly we are not at ease. Our comfort zones are fairly small, and we consistently protect them. With the practice of joyful effort, we have the courage to notice this everyday fear, and to engage it, overcome it, and stretch ourselves toward others.

Love is the most frightening thing of all. It takes courage to love because you have to throw yourself away for the beloved; you have to be willing to suffer. With joyful effort, bodhisattvas face this great risk, they develop this great courage.

HOPE

It is commonplace in traditional Buddhist teaching to denigrate hope. Hope, conventional Buddhist wisdom says, is future-oriented. Hope is hoping for something later that isn't present now. To face and live the present moment, many Buddhist teachers say, you have to give up hope.

This is true. A bodhisattva would probably not hope *for something*. (I say "probably" because there are no hard-and-fast bodhisattva rules; skillful means has no limit.) But bodhisattvas *are* hopeful. Of course they are. In times of great stress or challenge, it is important that bodhisattvas, for their own sake and the sake of those around them, remain hopeful.

Being hopeful doesn't mean being foolish. When it is pretty clear that bad things are going to happen, bodhisattvas don't pretend that this is not the case. Bodhisattva hopefulness doesn't depend on pleasant things happening or insist on cheery outcomes. True hope

exists even when terrible things happen. Bodhisattva hope arises as a consequence of the practice of joyful effort. It has nothing to do with what happens or fails to happen. It has to do with the profound nature of being itself.

Think about it: If there is a present living moment, it must include within it a potential future moment. This is true as long as we are alive. Even if I am moments away from death, in *this* moment of my life, a future moment is embedded. As soon as there is no future moment in my present moment, I am no longer a living being. Life is time is hope.

Every moment of life contains a future moment. Future moments are unknown and unknowable because they haven't yet occurred. No one can predict the future. Something good can always happen, no matter how unlikely this may seem. Of course, something bad can also happen. But the point is, no one can know what the next moment will bring, how it will feel, what its consequences will be. This is life. Bodhisattvas, deeply feeling this truth, are always hopeful for the next moment of life. Even if it brings catastrophe, meeting that catastrophe with joyful effort is always possible. When you meet a moment in that way, even if it is the last moment of your life, it will be noble, decisive, and lovely.

JOYFUL EFFORT IS EMPTY OF JOYFUL EFFORT

As we say about each of the six perfections, there actually is no perfection of joyful effort. Despite the fact that we have spent several pages discussing its many virtues and angles, in the end we can't reify such a thing, such a quality, such an activity, such a state of mind. It is only imaginary. Knowing this helps us practice it most effectively.

Remember that the word *perfection,* which is attached to every one of the practices we are speaking about, means that each of these practices is infused with the sixth perfection—the perfection of understanding, the perfection of all perfections.

Technically, the perfection of understanding means seeing things as they are, seeing beyond our ordinary human deception. It means seeing everything as empty, boundless, groundless, lacking the kind of hard-and-fast existence we attribute to things. We see things as separate and real. They are not. Things, practices, ideas, teachings, techniques, and beings—they are not fundamentally real, though we project them to be.

Projection is a common psychological term that means to see things in a distorted way by speciously attributing the qualities of past experiences or relationships onto present ones. But in Mahayana Buddhist teachings, which are infused with the perfection of understanding, everything is understood as projection. There are only projections. Things don't exist as we think they do. They are fluid, free. The problems we think we have are projected problems; they are unreal. The smallness of our lives, our lack of courage, our laziness and lethargy are projections that exist because of the pain we experience in our mistaken, projected world.

The six perfections don't exist either. They are skillful means, ways of looking at and approaching what is essentially ineffable, ungraspable, and impossible: being truly alive.

As I said at the end of the previous chapter, the reason this seemingly abstruse and odd philosophical point matters is that it shows us that it makes no sense to get too worked up about our spiritual practice. Feeling pressed, judging ourselves, stressing out with excessive effort or self-flagellation when we think we aren't making enough effort—none of this makes sense. There is no standard of joyful effort against which we measure ourselves.

The six perfections are essentially functions of the imagination—practicing them, we see that our lives are not what we think they are, and that our troubles are based on false premises.

What is really real? We can't say. Buddhism doesn't say. It says practice, live, make your best effort, don't try to figure anything out. Release yourself to a larger, more loving space and see what happens.

DOGEN ON THE PERFECTION OF JOYFUL EFFORT

The fourth practice of Dogen's four methods of guidance is called *identity action*. This teaching has been interpreted in two ways. The first and most traditional interpretation is the alignment of one's words with one's deeds.

Identity action is an important practice for any of us, but especially for spiritual teachers. There's nothing more discouraging to spiritual seekers than noticing that religious leaders are not walking their talk. But it happens. Many people tell me they left their family religion when they tired of observing the frayed behavior of ministers, rabbis, priests, and other pillars of the community who talked a better game than they actually played. It's called hypocrisy, which literally means "to pretend, to play a part."

I take this to heart. I try not to say anything in my various talks and presentations (or books) that I don't believe and that I don't try to practice. I may not be able to practice these things very well, but I try. If what I really think is true seems to contradict the teachings, I say so. My goal is to present teachings that are useful for people—and to practice those teachings myself. In this way, I use my own words as encouragement: if I am going to advocate that others practice like a bodhisattva, I better do the same.

Behaving consistently with your own words and intentions is crucial for the practice of joyful effort. Nothing saps your energy more than deception—deceiving others or, even worse, deceiving yourself. And nothing erodes your strength more than not living up to your own intentions. When thoughts, words, and actions don't line up, a subtle soul erosion slowly depletes your strength and motivation. When thoughts, words, and actions cohere, when you feel confident in your own integrity, you feel buoyed up and encouraged. Even when your body is weary, you can keep on going.

Dogen extends this traditional interpretation. First, he reconceives of identity action as action performed with an inner sense of identity

with others. To act this way, he says, is to enlarge your spirit. “The ocean does not exclude water,” he writes, “that is why it is large. The mountain does not exclude soil; that is why it is high.”[2]When we have no sense of self-accomplishment, self-serving, or self-justification in our activity, when we feel as if what we are doing, in the very doing of it, includes others, we will have more energy and expansiveness in our living. Living partially is exhausting!

Dogen applies this practice to rulers and to all those who take responsibility for the lives of others. If you don’t look for reward or reputation, or even think there is any such thing as self or other, if instead you do everything with a sense of inclusion, then you will never tire of your work and never tire of people.

People who are subjects of rulers (as most people were in feudal Japan) should also practice identity action, recognizing that each person is responsible for the whole on each moment of action and that to rely on rulers to take care of you will reduce your strength. This is very good advice for us in the contemporary world, in which all citizens must pay attention to their impact on the world at large.

Dogen then conceives of this practice still more intimately, as a physical exercise. Identity action is the Zen practice of total presence with everything you do—standing, walking, meditating, cooking, cleaning, and so on. When with each activity you are fully present, fully attentive, then you are practicing identity action, all-inclusive activity. When you sweep the floor with full attention, you are sweeping up the whole world. When you peacefully drink a cup of tea with full attention, you are bringing peace to everyone. When you practice like this, you will have lots of energy and others will be inspired to practice this way themselves.

VERSES ON THE PERFECTION OF JOYFUL EFFORT

This is Tokme Zongpo’s twenty-eighth verse from his *Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva*:

Listeners and solitary buddhas, working only for their own effort,
Practice as if their heads were on fire.
To help all beings, pour your energy into practice:
It is the source of all abilities—this is the practice of a bodhisattva.[3]

Bodhisattvas, as we have been saying, practice joyful effort on behalf of others. For them there is only one kind of spiritual practice—practice for and with others, always with others in mind.

In the traditional Buddhist discourse on bodhisattva practice, various sorts of nonbodhisattva practitioners are identified, such as those mentioned in this verse: "listeners" are those who dutifully hear the teachings in a linear way and try to put them into practice step by step, without much imagination; "solitary buddhas" are those who fully overcome ordinary suffering by awakening to the truth but do so without the imagination to recognize that individual awakening is too limited to be finally worthwhile.

If even people with these limited agendas practice with such intensity (as if their heads were in flames), Tokme Zongpo says, how much more should bodhisattvas, whose practice is for everyone, practice joyful effort?

The practice of joyful effort is the source of all abilities, he says. Everything flows from it. If you perfect joyful effort, everything else automatically follows: you will certainly practice generosity, ethical conduct, patience, meditation, and understanding—all of these with joyous fervor, never stinting. You will happily go on and on taking delight in all you do for others. You will never get enough of helping others and refining your effort and understanding.

Finally, here are some verse lines from the *Prajnaparamita Sutra in Eight Thousand Lines*:

The Bodhisattva who intends to wander about in birth and death for [a] long [time],

A Yogin devoted to the purification of the Buddha field for the welfare of beings,
And who does not produce the least thought of fatigue,
Is endowed with the perfection of vigor (joyful effort), and undaunted.[4]

The prajnaparamita teachings emphasize above all else our deeply ingrained faulty views. Here fatigue is considered a faulty view.

We think of fatigue not as a view but as a physical fact. But it is a view. There is no such actual condition called fatigue. The body will, of course, have many sensations and experiences, depending on its condition within and without. But fatigue is a notion we add to the physical facts. And then that notion has its effect on us.

You can study this phenomenon in long retreats. Maybe you feel exhausted on the first or second day of the retreat. You think, "Oh no, I am tired today. How much worse am I going to feel on the third, fourth, or fifth day!" But then the third or fourth day comes, and the fatigue is completely gone, even though the meditation—and the early morning wake-up—has continued unabated. What happened? Or maybe you experience a moment of severe fatigue, followed, for no reason at all, by a burst of energy. Experience these phenomena enough and you realize that you can have all sorts of notions about fatigue, about what your body can and cannot do, but these notions are not necessarily correct.

Of course, the body sometimes can't do something. If you don't sleep for a long time, your body will be tired. If you don't eat, if you are pretty old, if you are ill or injured, if you exert yourself for long hours, the body will behave accordingly. This is the body's pleasure, the body's wisdom, to express itself this way. We pay attention, and we adjust the body. We take a nap. We spend the day or the week in bed. We give up mountain climbing or downhill skiing. But these things are part of the practice of joyful effort. Caring for the body as it is, exerting it appropriately as one can, is the practice of joyful effort.

The first line of this verse—"The Bodhisattva who intends to wander about in birth and death for [a] long [time]"—refers to the commitment bodhisattvas make not to leave this sorry world of birth and death until every creature in it has found peace and happiness. Buddhas seem to enter nirvana, to leave this world finally, and for good. But bodhisattvas vow not to do this until everyone is saved. This is why they need to practice joyful effort!

Practices

MEDITATION PRACTICES

- Sit for ten minutes, once or twice a day, and practice slow deep breathing. Try to heal and calm yourself with each breath.
- Establish a daily meditation practice in the morning—first thing, even before coffee. Try to sit for a half hour. When you are sitting, note the quality of the effort you are making, especially with your body. Emphasize sitting up straight, lifting from the sternum and the top of the head. See how lifting up increases your energy.

DAILY LIFE PRACTICES

- Pay attention to your diet: eat vegetables at least twice a day.
- Note how not eating food can be a pleasure. At a restaurant buffet line, or even when looking into your refrigerator, notice a food you like and decide not to take any because it isn't good for you or you have already eaten enough. Study how it feels to have said no to that food. See if you can find some pleasure in it, some well-being in not doing something that might harm you, however slightly.
- Eat mindfully, paying attention to each bite.
- Exercise for at least an hour every day, five days a week. Do this for a week and see how you feel. If it feels good, do it for another week.
- Be on the lookout for all negative states of mind—simple dullness, depression, discouragement, lack of motivation. When such states of mind arise, note them and practice stopping, breathing, and saying to yourself, "I am a precious human being, like everyone else. I have been given this life for a reason."

- Rest when you feel tired. Take a short nap if possible. If not, sit quietly for a moment or take a slow, peaceful breath.
- Pay attention as you fall asleep—try to be aware as you drift off to sleep, to catch the moment.

6

The Perfection of Meditation

WITH THE PERFECTION of meditation, we enter a new realm. The previous four perfections are built on relatively commonplace virtues—nothing esoteric or special about them. The practices of generosity, ethical conduct, patience, and joyful effort exist, more or less, in any culture, in any conscious tradition of character cultivation, whether religious or not, and do not require extraordinary skill or knowledge. But the fifth and sixth perfections, meditation and understanding, are different. They involve a more mystical or spiritual frame of reference and require an effort beyond what we would commonly make in the normal course of our daily lives. Meditation is a specific technical skill. It requires instruction, discipline, and development. Maybe this is why, of all the Buddhist practices, meditation is the one that has received the most attention in the West. While meditation is the basic background practice that makes all other practices possible and effective, it seems at the same time exotic and unusual. We tend to see meditation, more than any other teaching, as a special gift from the East.

This isn't entirely so. The word *meditation* is an English word, from Old French and Latin, meaning "to think over, to think deeply, to reflect." As such, meditation is not new to us. We have a long tradition of meditation as a form of thinking. Of course, we are thinking all the time, but mostly in scattered and unconscious ways. To meditate is to think calmly, deeply, with focus and a serious intention. Philosophical thought is meditative. It requires that we step back from ordinary thinking—emotion-driven planning and

strategizing—to a profound consideration of what we most deeply value and understand. *Meditation* is also a religious word. It includes various practices Christian monastics and other Western religious practitioners have developed over the centuries. We might more commonly call these practices contemplative—quiet, directed thinking, inspired by faith and a sense of wonder or surrender. Scripture reading, prayer, and sacred singing are in this sense forms of meditation.

Such meditation practices are also included within the range of Buddhist meditation. But Indian meditation practice (Buddhist and pre-Buddhist) includes in addition a particular technique that our culture seems to lack, the specific practice we usually think of these days when we use the word *meditation*.

I am talking about the psychophysical practice of concentration in which the meditator sits upright in a yogic posture on a meditation cushion or a chair, focused on breathing, silent and aware. This powerful and simple practice is Indian culture's great gift to the world. So radically simple! Yet, as far we as we know, no Western person ever thought of doing such a thing.

TRIPOD

There are several words for meditation in classical Buddhism. *Bhavana,* often translated as "meditation," literally means "cultivation," an agricultural word we encountered in chapter 4. Cultivation implies discipline, careful steady effort over time. *Samadhi* means "concentration, focus, single-pointedness, nondistraction." The word describes a state of mind rather than a technique or a practice, the result of disciplined meditation rather than its exercise. *Dhyana* is the word used for the fifth perfection. It refers to the practice of settling and focusing the mind.

Classical descriptions liken the Buddhist path to a tripod whose three legs stand for the three great practices: ethical conduct, meditation, and understanding. As with a tripod, whose legs must be

in perfect balance, these three practices evenly support one another and enable the path of practice.

We could say that ethical conduct is the most important of the three, because the point of spiritual practice is to live truly and beautifully. To support ethical conduct, we have to practice meditation to stabilize our ordinarily shifting mind and heart. When the mind is stable and the conduct pure, deep understanding will arise—understanding that is more than thinking and wishing, that suffuses identity and feeling. With that suffusion, our behavior will be naturally forthright.

Or we could look at it like this: Understanding is the point of spiritual practice. In order to gain it, we have to start with ethical conduct so we can reduce our problems and dramas. Meditation is a necessity for the kind of deep understanding we are aiming for—understanding that pierces through the veil of ordinary reality.

Or we could put meditation at the center of the path. The point of spiritual practice is to live a focused and meditative life, beyond the confusion of the everyday. When meditation is our daily practice and approach to life, pure conduct and understanding will naturally arise.

However we look at it—whichever we think comes first or last, or is most or least important—it's clear that the tripod needs all three legs. They always go together. It's as if they are one and the same.

According to traditional descriptions, the specific function of meditation is to deepen and stabilize the mind and heart. This stabilization and depth are necessary if conduct and understanding are to be firm and serious, if they are to touch us to the point that we experience transformation. Without meditation, our best intentions wobble. We find ourselves frequently knocked off our game by events and our reactions to them. We undergo all sorts of waffling, which erodes our good conduct and calm understanding. Since meditation involves somatic as well as psychological cultivation, it affects us on a level deeper than ordinary thinking and feeling. It touches us all the way down to the breath and the body—the seat of all feeling, thinking, and emotion.

SAMATHA—CALMING OR CONCENTRATING MEDITATION

Classically, Buddhist meditation is divided into two practices: *samatha,* or calming meditation, and *vipassana,* or insight meditation. In some presentations of meditation, samatha is developed first, as a basis for vipassana. In others, the two are developed simultaneously, or in tandem. Sometimes the two are collapsed into one practice with two aspects.

In Buddhaghosa's classic text, the fifth-century *Visuddhimagga* (*The Path of Purification*), samatha is understood as concentration. Buddhaghosa begins by asking the question, "What is concentration?" He answers that concentration is of so many types and aspects that it would be impossible to discuss them all. He further argues that such a discussion would lead to distraction, the opposite of concentration. He concludes by provisionally defining concentration as "profitable unification of mind"—"unification" in the sense of without distraction or division, a mind anchored to one post; "profitable" in the sense of spiritually profitable, tending toward understanding, liberation, and compassion. So concentration is unification of the mind in the service of spiritual growth.[1]

Buddhaghosa's thorough discussion of concentration includes many hundreds of pages of practices, most of which have not been used for centuries, as far as I know. But his list also includes practices that are used today, such as concentration on the body, concentration on breathing, and concentration on the four unlimited emotions of loving-kindness, sympathetic joy, compassion, and equanimity.

The basic technique for concentration involves bringing the mind to the object of concentration and patiently training it, through repetition, to stay with the object. This is not so easy to do. The mind naturally gets distracted, tired, and/or bored. It is not used to staying put unless it has some distinct drive toward pleasure or satisfaction. When you try to concentrate in meditation, you are impressed with how little control you have over your mind. It is humbling to realize

that you can tell your mind, in all seriousness, “Stay still,” but it won’t stay still. You can’t control it. It makes you wonder who is in charge of whom. Still, if you keep on with it, you eventually develop some ability to focus, and maybe once in a while you come into a moment of strong single-pointed concentration, which is peaceful and calming. Developing concentration takes much more time than you might have thought. It also takes faith, diligence, determination, and support.

Traditional texts define five hindrances to meditation that anyone who tries to meditate will soon see: *attachment* (the mind’s obsession with thoughts, memories, sensations, or images other than the meditation object); *aversion* (obsessive complaining and the desire to flee); *flurry and worry* (the mind and/or body jumping all over the place and dredging up things to be concerned about—doing anything not to stay with the object of concentration); *laziness* (being sleepy and unmotivated, and thus unable to return to the object for lack of interest); and *doubt* (wondering what is the point of doing all this frustrated and boring work, or doubting one’s own capacity to do it).

When one or more of these five hindrances and their various related mental and emotional states are present, concentration can’t be. So the practice of concentration involves identifying them and patiently working through them until they reduce and eventually disappear (though they will reappear). Of course, these five hindrances can occur anytime, not only in meditation, so the ability to stay focused and not let them get the best of you has implications for your life beyond the development of concentration in meditation. When you are able to get beyond the hindrances, at least temporarily in meditation, concentration states spontaneously appear, bringing emotional and physical delight, joy, and equanimity—all of which feel quite wonderful. While calmness meditation may be a struggle, its rewards are unexpectedly great. Most experienced meditators who have some capacity to concentrate enjoy their practice and would rather meditate than spend their time in pursuit of more ordinary pleasures.

Breathing is probably the most common and effective concentration object. There are many ways of doing breathing practice. My favorite is to pay attention to breathing in the lower belly, watching the breath as it rises and falls there, and feeling the sensation of breathing infusing the whole body. Breathing consciously is a pleasure. It is calming, healthy, and has good effects on your mood, outlook, and capacity to think straight even in trying situations. If you can keep focus on the breath in meditation, you will eventually feel a deep sense of life's rhythm, in and out, in and out, coming and going again and again peacefully. It can feel as if you are breathing with everything and everyone on the planet, that breathing is breathing you into existence and constantly taking care of everything, leaving nothing to worry about.

This same kind of focused practice can be done using a feeling, a word, or a phrase as its object rather than the breath. Many practitioners now and in the past have meditated on loving-kindness or other social emotions to produce the same sort of focused meditation states. Here the technique is to bring the mind back again and again to a phrase such as "May all beings be happy" and the feeling that goes with it. Perhaps try situating the phrase in the belly and repeating it with the breath. With this practice, the feeling of concentration becomes infused with heartfelt goodwill for others.

Practices such as this make it clear that concentration meditation is more than a technical exercise for producing mental focus. A skillful bank robber or assassin can develop strong mental focus with concentration techniques. Meditative concentration is, as Buddhaghosa says, humane, connecting us to others and liberating us from the self-focus and distraction that make our lives small and unimaginative. The paradox of calming meditation practice is that while it narrows the mind to a single point, that point is expansive—a window, so to speak, onto a vast vista beyond.

OTHER TECHNIQUES

Over many generations, creative practitioners have developed a multitude of techniques for calmness meditation. Some approaches focus on the hindrances to concentration and the application of tailored antidotes to them. Some suggest focusing on specific objects other than the breath or a phrase, such as bodily sensations. Breath practices are quite various: counting the breath in the belly; watching it in the belly, the chest, or at the tip of the nose; following it throughout the body. Some meditators practice with a variety of repeated phrases or lists. Some practice repeating a single word or part of a word on the inhale or exhale, or both—for instance *Budd* when breathing in, *ha* when breathing out. Some practice paying attention to posture, globally or in specific detail. Some practice focusing on the position of the hands in particular. There is the practice of listening to sound or to silence. And there is the technique of no technique: just sitting and being present to whatever occurs, with what some call *choiceless awareness*. There are myriad visualization practices and many other kinds of practices.

Generally, if you are attending a retreat, listening to a talk online, or reading a book on meditation, it makes sense to use whatever technique is being offered, to see how it works. Eventually, if you keep on with meditation practice, you will discover which techniques work best for you and naturally return to them. On the one hand, it is good to vary techniques, because doing so refreshes your practice and each different way to practice will give you a slightly different feeling. On the other hand, jumping around from technique to technique will reinforce the mind's habit of being jumpy and dissatisfied, so it's best to have a basic practice that you do most of the time.

VIPASSANA—INSIGHT MEDITATION

The possibilities that derive from calming meditation are tremendous. I mentioned above the wonderfully pleasant states you can experience when the mind's calm is deep. Traditional descriptions of concentration states mention eight distinct stages.

The last four of the eight are austere and mystical. They are called, in order, *infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness,* and *neither perception or nonperception*. It's hard to imagine what these states would feel like, but their names give us clues. Some people will be attracted to them. (In addition to these states, by the way, traditional meditation manuals also list paranormal powers such as clairvoyance and recollection of past lives among the possibilities for adepts.) But while such profound states may be intriguing, they are not what most practitioners are aiming for.

What they are aiming for is vipassana, "insight," for which a certain amount of concentration is required. In classical Buddhist meditation, insight specifically means liberative insight into the nature of suffering. The idea is that in order to end suffering, we have to see its causes and its nature so we can thoroughly undo them. In some systems of meditation, the concentrated mind is trained on the teachings systematically, so that the insights given there can be deeply and fully internalized. In other systems, the insight comes with a less discursive, more experiential approach. In either case, concentration always goes together with insight and serves as insight's support.

Meditation practice is somatic. Its site is body, breath, belly, nerves, and sinews. This aspect of meditation becomes crucial when it comes to insight practice. To explain why, I'll make a detour into traditional Buddhist thought.

When the Buddha was asked to explain in detail the origin of human and cosmic suffering, he formulated a pedagogical tool, a list usually referred to as the twelve *nidanas,* the twelve-linked chain of causation. To simplify, I will reduce the twelve to four groups of three.

The first group I call *the tragedy of consciousness*. Of course, consciousness is the ultimate cause of human suffering. If we weren't conscious of suffering, there would be no suffering. Consciousness is inherently tragic because its operation involves basic separation: to be conscious of something, I have to be separate from it. To hear a bird, I have to be a distance away from it. To see the sky, I have to be

other than the sky. So consciousness is alienation, and alienation brings with it exile, longing, and fear. Consciousness is inherently in need of healing. One way or another, all religions acknowledge this. Whatever the mythology or the teaching, all religions agree that there is a fundamental human problem that requires redemption.

The second group of factors I call *entering a partial world*. With this alienated consciousness, we enter the world. The world is not ourselves; we are not it.

I call the third group of factors *reacting to a partial world*. In this partial world, we are agents with choices to make, actions to take. Every choice we make entails other choices we decide not to make; every action taken leads to mixed consequences. Because of this, there will inevitably be trouble, disappointment, and conflict, even if things go as well as they possibly can.

The fourth group of factors I call *living and dying*. If consciousness were never produced, and if we and the world were not partial, and if we were not therefore forced into choices, actions, and reactions, there would be no living and dying. If reality were one fullness, one wholeness, it would simply flow on, ever transforming, ever peaceful. But it doesn't. Thanks to consciousness, we are born. And because we are born, we die.

For human beings trying to heal our pain, the pivot point in this cosmic drama is *vedana,* "feeling-sensation." It is the first thing that happens when we react to the partial world. Consciousness is given; I can't change it. The partial world appears; I can't stop it. But it is within my capacity to understand and alter my gut reaction to that world, my first feeling-sensation, lodged deep within my body, at the base of consciousness. Here is where I can snap the chain that binds me to suffering. Here is where I can be free. And here is where I need insight.

This insight is not easy to come by. Feeling-sensation is barely conscious, barely available as an experience. To access it, I need to do more than think and observe in the usual ways. We think of insight as a cognitive experience. But insight that's fully integrated with concentration practice, in all its somatic depth, is more than a

thought or an understanding. It pervades body, mind, and heart; it transforms emotions, physical sensations, and thoughts. It's the foundation of a new identity. This is why meditation has always been an essential element in the Buddhist project of bringing an end to our ordinary human suffering.

INSIGHT ABOUT WHAT?

In classical Buddhism, the content of this insight is the three characteristics of existence: impermanence, nonself, and unsatisfactoriness (often translated as "suffering"; *dukkha* is the Pali word). The three are so closely related as to be almost the same thing; wherever you see one, you see the others.

Impermanence is a commonplace fact: things abide for a while, alter, and eventually disappear. The long discourse about impermanence in Buddhism includes but goes beyond this simple thought. If things change, as we know they do, how long do they abide in any particular state before change occurs? A year? A week? A day, an hour, a minute, a second? No. Logically, certainly, there can't be a specific interval of time during which something remains the same before it changes. Though you may not appear to have changed since yesterday, you have changed. However imperceptibly, you changed every moment of yesterday and are changing every moment today. Change is happening constantly, not in sudden jumps but rather in time, as time. So time is change. One moment gives way to the next, the disappearance of one moment and the appearance of its successor occurs smoothly, without gaps. The only possible way this could happen is if this moment and the next *arise and pass away at the same time*. Our common notions hold that this is impossible, but Buddhists have taught for millennia that our common notions are incorrect. Because we live on the basis of deeply flawed notions, we suffer. This is the first point we need to have insight about.

If things arise and pass away at the same time, what is "self"? We can't possibly be the abiding creatures we think we are, coherent identities with attitudes and personal characteristics that continue through all the changes of our lives. In the light of radical impermanence, self as we know it must be impossible. Though the illusion of continuity certainly exists, there must be something more (or less) that we are not seeing. We need insight about this too.

Finally, suffering or unsatisfactoriness—things being fundamentally "off"—is the experience we always have (even when we think we're not having it) when we mistake the false world of our notions for the world as it really exists. Trying to keep things solid and graspable in an ever-shifting world is a frustrating proposition. There is nothing we can hold on to. Our bodies, our souls, know this already, but we persist in hoping against hope. We need insight about this as well.

But isn't all this sober insight a bit distressing? Impermanence, nonself, and unsatisfactoriness don't seem like the basis of a happy life. In the bodhisattva path, insight into the three characteristics is more cheerful: each appears as its opposite. While in the ordinary way of looking at things opposites are opposites, in the bodhisattva imagination opposites are identities.

It takes a bodhisattva to see that it makes perfect sense that if things arise and pass away at the same time, they don't actually exist. If they don't actually exist, they can't cease to exist. Hence impermanence is permanence. And bodhisattvas know that if we are not the abiding selves we think we are, we must be some other sort of selves that gloriously come and go in the great flow of impermanence —true selves. Bodhisattvas know that when we slough off our false lives, we get true lives. No longer clinging exclusively to our pathetic vulnerable nonselves, we become no one and everyone. And once bodhisattvas see, accept, and fully integrate the unsatisfactory nature of our lives in this broken world of partiality, they see that the pain and trouble inherent in alienated consciousness are exactly the pain and trouble we need to live this life of sorrow and healing together

with everyone, in a painful and gorgeous world. So, unsatisfactoriness becomes joy.

SANTIDEVA ON MEDITATION

Interestingly, Santideva's chapter on meditation doesn't mention any of what I have said so far. Instead, the long chapter consists of two lengthy and laborious arguments. First, he tries to talk us into the realization that the world and all the things in it that distract and occupy us are not worthwhile. The only truly worthwhile thing to do is meditate. And meditation requires solitude and removal from the world. In making this argument, he mercilessly tears down all we think of as dear—from food to friendship to sex to social life. Like Solomon in Ecclesiastes, Santideva holds that all of this is vanity.

Having presumably convinced us to abandon our normal lives and take to the forest to engage in solitary meditation, Santideva opens his second argument, which is a meditation practice in itself—the most important of all meditation practices. I discussed this practice briefly in the chapter on the perfection of generosity and gave a shorthand form of it as one of the meditations at the end of that chapter: the practice of exchanging self for other.

Santideva's outrageous argument proposes to demolish the perfectly natural idea that it makes sense to favor ourselves over others. He begins by saying that this seemingly reasonable notion is actually ridiculous. Like everyone, I suffer. So, from my point of view, there are two piles of suffering: my own and the aggregate everyone else's. One pile is clearly quite small, the other quite large. Yet I seem to pay as much as and probably much more attention to my own little pile of suffering than I do to the gigantic pile of suffering of the billions of other humans (not to mention nonhuman creatures) on earth. Why would I do that, especially when I notice that focusing on my own suffering makes me miserable, while focusing on the suffering of others makes me feel empathy, compassion, and love? Also, like me, others feel joy from time to

time. It makes no sense at all for me to limit myself to my own joy, which is so small, when I could just as easily identify with others, who collectively experience much more joy in a single day than I could experience in an entire lifetime. Why do I persist in limiting my joy in this way?

It is illogical, stupid, and highly disadvantageous for me to identify solely with myself. Exactly like me, everyone wants to be happy and doesn't want to suffer. Why not identify with that shared human impulse rather than set myself foolishly aside as if I were somehow different and more important than others? To isolate myself in this way definitely brings pain, whereas to identify with others brings joy. Just as the body is a living unit, not a disparate collection of fingers, toes, hands, eyes, and internal organs, so is all of existence one body. I should identify myself with the whole body, not cut myself off from it, like a severed arm lying uselessly by the side of the road. I should definitely exchange my self-concern for concern for others.

These two arguments are more or less all Santideva has to say about meditation in the 186 verses of his chapter.

We learn several things from Santideva's perhaps odd take on meditation practice. First, we learn that meditation is essentially a solitary practice, removed from the world and attachment to the world, and this is why it takes great determination and strong motivation. "World" here means the world of separation and partiality. Meditation is the opposite of this, a return to wholeness, an escape from the pain of the partial world. Of course, when we sit in meditation we do not necessarily feel this. Since the partial world exists in our hearts and minds, it is always right there with us when we meditate. Besides, we might be meditating in a group, not all by ourselves in a forest in the Himalayas. Yet I think Santideva's point still stands. He is telling us that the essence of meditation is the validation of, the essential act of, being a self in search of its own truth.

The second takeaway I find in Santideva's chapter is, paradoxically, the opposite of this. What we are to gain from this removal of ourselves from the world into our solitariness is full

identity with and embrace of the very world we have left behind. The purpose of our meditation isn't escape or self-healing but the abandonment of self in identity with others. In other words, meditation is a process of returning to our true selves that know that we are nothing other than everything we are not: we are others. This insight heals the world.

Third, since Santideva's chapter on meditation never mentions yogic posture, breathing, or focusing the mind on a single point, we can conclude that either Santideva himself never meditated and didn't know how to do it, or, more likely, that he considered the technique of calming meditation far less important than the insight that is the goal and substance of calming meditation. Also, we can imagine that perhaps Santideva—like millions of other meditators in India, Tibet, China, Japan, Korea, and in the West—practiced meditation not by sitting upright and breathing but by thoughtful, careful, committed, and repetitive reading of sacred texts, until the thoughts and words of the texts were committed to memory, learned "by heart."

This brings our discussion of meditation close to the English word *meditation* that we began with. As I noted, all spiritual reading, recitation, discussion, text interpretation, prayer, and singing can be understood as forms of meditation. The practice of listening to in-person or recorded dharma talks is a form of meditation. In listening to the talk, we are not trying to grab hold of useful information but rather just to listen, letting the words go deeply into the heart, even into the pores of the body. These days, spiritual books are often sold in bookstores on the "self-help" shelves, presumably because they are expected to yield useful information for personal growth. We need information. But reading or listening to teachings as meditation practice is not information; it is part of a long process of rearranging body and mind, shifting the point of view, softening the heart.

MINDFULNESS

We've already referred to mindfulness practice in chapter 4. With mindfulness we expand still further the sense of what meditation is. Mindfulness is being aware, with some clarity and calmness, all the time, not just when we are doing formal meditation practice on the cushion, or reading, listening to, or reciting teachings. Just as concentration practice isn't concentration per se but concentration for the purpose of spiritual development, and just as insight practice isn't just insight per se but insight with a profoundly healing purpose, so mindfulness is more than just being aware. You can be aware without being mindful. For bodhisattvas, mindfulness is the effort to be aware of our deeper life—our connection to others and to all of being. Mindfulness isn't self-consciousness; it's the opposite of self-consciousness. It's the opening of our imagination on each moment.

The words translated as "mindfulness"—*sati* in Pali, *smrti* in Sanskrit—mean "to remember or recollect." To be mindful is to recollect one's object of attention when one has forgotten it—to bring the mind back over and over again, just as you do when developing concentration practice. The techniques are identical. The difference is that in concentration practice you stay with a single object for a longer period of time. This requires a simple situation—such as sitting on a meditation cushion with nothing else to do. In mindfulness practice the object shifts with circumstances, so, in effect, you are returning attention to whatever appears in the present and to presence itself. As we'll see in a moment, this is the main practice in Zen. Many Zen sayings are about this practice—eat when you eat, sleep when you sleep, chop wood, carry water, do whatever it is time to do with full attention and commitment. Contemporary conceptions of mindfulness imply that mindfulness is an interior affair—that one should be mindful of states of mind, perceptions, thoughts, reactions. In Zen the practice is to be present with whatever appears, inside and outside. To think of inside (thoughts, feelings, reactions) as myself and outside (other people, other beings, objects, activities) as not myself exactly reinforces the problem that Buddhism hopes to help us alleviate. As Santideva's teaching makes

clear, the point of meditation, including mindfulness, is to help me to see beyond myself.

ZEN MEDITATION

Dhyana, the Sanskrit word that means "meditation," is transliterated into Chinese as *Ch'an,* into Japanese as *Zen,* into Korean as *Son,* and Vietnamese as *Thien*. Because I have received my main teachings from the Japanese Soto Zen tradition, and because *Zen* is the most commonly known of these Far East Asian words, I will use that word here.

Zen is the meditation school, and, yes, in Zen practice we do plenty of formal sitting meditation. But this is not where Zen gets its name. Zen is called Zen because of its insistence that meditation is more than formal meditation practice. In Zen all practice is collapsed into meditation; there is nothing other than meditation.

The classical source of this Zen take on meditation is found in the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Ancestor*. As the story (which is clearly apocryphal) goes, the Ancestor, Hui-Neng, is an illiterate rice pounder working in the monastery pantry. When the abbot calls for a poetry contest to determine who has the best understanding of the teaching and will therefore inherit the leadership mantle, the monks, assuming that the head monk will surely win, don't even bother offering poems. The head monk's poem reads:

> The body is a bodhi tree
> the mind is like a standing mirror
> always try to keep it clean
> don't let it gather dust.[2]

This verse affirms the classical Mahayana teaching about meditation practice. We meditate to bring about concentration and insight, so we can return body and mind to their original buddha nature. Our pristine mirror consciousness has gotten dirty, we need to clean it.

Someone reads this verse to Hui-Neng. It sounds wrong to him. He has some insight already. He's been pounding rice, not meditating, and he doesn't see any difference between what he has been doing and the pious meditation practice the monks engage in day and night. He doesn't think he needs laborious meditation to return to a pristine prior state—that state is present all the time. So he composes his own verse and has one of the monks write it and post it on the wall:

> Bodhi doesn't have any trees
> the mirror doesn't have a stand
> buddha nature is forever pure
> where did you get this dust?[3]

Of course, the abbot immediately recognizes Hui-Neng as his true successor, and from then on Zen's approach to meditation is set—everything is meditation or nothing is meditation; meditation is beyond meditation. So there's no need to meditate. Insight is sudden, constant, all-pervasive—and therefore unnecessary.

How do we come to this profoundly liberative understanding? By practicing meditation so that we can understand how useless it is! And by continuing to practice meditation not because it is necessary or even helpful but because we are bodhisattvas who are dedicated to sharing practice with others. Besides, by now this useless meditation has become our way of life. It connects us to practitioners in the past and present. It transcends life and death, purity and impurity. Clearly this vast meditation that we practice in formal sitting can't be limited to formal sitting. It includes rice pounding and all other activities. Everything and everyone must be doing it all of the time. Zen meditation is paradoxical, almost absurd. It is imaginative bodhisattva practice par excellence.

The specific technique of Zen meditation is straightforward. There are two main styles. One technique is to meditate on a koan, a short Zen story or phrase. This practice is similar to the practice of focusing on a phrase, as we described above in our discussion of

concentration. The difference is that, in koan practice, concentration and insight are practiced together, so your focus on the phrase includes a strong spirit of inquiry—not only staying with it but simultaneously looking through and beyond it for insight. There is a subtle balance in this practice between effort and relaxation, between looking for something not yet present and settling on something in the present—a balance that can be frustrating to discover but invaluable in many ways, once you discover it. When you do this practice intensely enough, sooner or later there will be a dramatic or not-so-dramatic breakthrough. Insight will suddenly arise.

There are several systems for koan meditation. Some teaching lineages use a flexibly or inflexibly organized curriculum of koans the practitioner works through over many decades of practice. Others use koans unsystematically, taking them up either according to the student's own interest or as assigned by a teacher. In the curriculum systems, the practitioner is expected to "demonstrate" understanding privately to the teacher, who certifies that the student has "passed" the koan and can go on to the next. In our Soto Zen style there is no passing, and demonstrating understanding to the teacher isn't required. Koans in Soto Zen are generally used the way that short texts are used in any scriptural tradition—repeated, memorized, contemplated, made personal.

The second form of Zen meditation, usually associated with Soto Zen but practiced in all schools, is probably the one employed by most Zen students today and throughout history: simple silent sitting. Technically it is indistinguishable from calming and insight meditation as I have described these, but the intention and the approach are different. Rather than seeing the practice as a means (concentration) to an end (insight), meditation is understood in the light of Hui-Neng's Zen irony: simply sitting without goal or purpose, in the faith that whatever work needs to be done has already been done and one only needs to appreciate it.

What is most remarkable about all forms of Zen meditation is how little instruction is provided. You'd think a school named for the practice of meditation would offer detailed instruction. Zen literature

is voluminous, including numerous commentaries and sub-commentaries to stories and teachings, but it says almost nothing about how to meditate. Here's the instruction given in the famous commentary to the Mu koan, in the collection *The Gateless Barrier*: "Make your whole body a mass of doubt, and with your sixty bones and joints and your eighty-four thousand hair follicles concentrate on this one word 'Mu.' Day and night keep digging into it....It's like swallowing a red-hot iron ball. You try to vomit it out but you can't."[4] These words, which sound more like an exhortation than a careful description of meditation technique, are all you will hear about how to meditate on a koan.

For instruction on simple silent sitting, we will turn to its major proponent, Dogen.

DOGEN ON ZEN MEDITATION

Dogen's most widely read text about Zen meditation (or *zazen,* literally "sitting meditation") is *Fukanzazengi, Universally Recommended Instructions for Zazen*. Its opening lines echo Hui-Neng: there's no need to practice meditation, we are already fine. "And yet," the text continues (a highly significant "and yet"), "if there's a hairsbreadth deviation, it is like the gap between heaven and earth. If the least like or dislike arises, the mind is lost in confusion."

Here's the heart of the problem, and of the paradox. There is no way we can live for even a moment without "the least like or dislike." So there will always be a hairsbreadth deviation—or a deviation large enough to drive a truck through. We may be already awakened, but the fact that we don't know it is not insignificant.

In the next paragraph of the text, Dogen explains why meditation is worthwhile, even though we don't really need it: "Consider the Buddha," he goes on. "Although he was wise at birth, the traces of his six years of upright sitting can yet be seen. As for Bodhidharma, although he had received the mind-seal, his nine years of facing a

wall is celebrated still. If even the ancient sages were like this, how can we today dispense with wholehearted practice?"[5]

There is something important in this passage that isn't obvious. It's the secret of Dogen's approach to meditation. He is saying that, contrary to what we might have thought and what Buddhism seems to say, the Buddha didn't meditate to become awakened and end his suffering; he meditated *because he was already awakened*. Similarly, the Central Asian monk Bodhidharma, the legendary founder of Zen in China, meditated facing a wall for nine years not to awaken but *because he was already awakened*.

Maybe we can understand Dogen's point this way: The body is already awakened. The body knows precisely how to live the truth of impermanence/permanence. It knows how to change moment by moment, it understands perfectly how things arise and pass away simultaneously, and it is fully capable of dying and mixing with other elements to continue its cosmic journey forever. Just as the Buddha and Bodhidharma were already awakened before they practiced, so our bodies are already awakened, even if our minds and hearts are not. Our already awakened bodies lead us to our meditation cushions and guide us through the gentle passage to peace. For Dogen, the Buddha and Bodhidharma were inspiring devotional figures in whom he had warm faith. Since they practiced sitting meditation because they were already awakened, we too should practice it because we too are already awakened. We should practice it with them, for them, and for all sacred living creatures who share this same nature of already being awakened buddhas. For Dogen, formal meditation is not instrumental effort, it is devotional practice.

There's something more lurking in this passage: a profound teaching about time. Think about it: the notion that the Buddha (or you and I) is unawakened and will later be awakened implies a particular concept of time: time is linear. Time is a road we walk on. The past is behind us, and we are taking steps here in the present toward a future that is up ahead. We were suffering, we are suffering, but in the future we will no longer suffer.

It's clear from what he is saying here, as well as in other writings, that Dogen denies this conventional notion of time. He is perfectly aware that the Pali sutras say that the Buddha suffered, struggled, and was awakened in a linear time frame. In saying that the Buddha was awakened already at birth—before he ever practiced at all—Dogen does not intend to contradict the early scriptures but rather to reveal their true meaning. He believes they contain an implied deeper teaching about time that subsequent Mahayana sutras and commentaries bring out. The moment of suffering and the moment of awakening don't entail in a linear fashion. Sacred time doesn't operate by the same rules as ordinary time. In sacred time all moments occur at once. The moment when we sit in meditation with our suffering hearts is the same moment when the Buddha suffers, awakens, and teaches. It all happens at once. This teaching echoes uncanny insights of contemporary physics: time and space are not rational eternal containers in which events occur. Time and space are themselves the events, simultaneous and all-inclusive. We are literally meditating with the Buddha: his and our suffering and awakening, along with that of all beings, occurs with our every breath.

This isn't exactly the sort of meditation instruction we were looking for. In *Fukanzazengi,* Dogen goes on to give a few practical instructions. He tells us to sit in a quiet room, not to tie our robe sash too tightly or eat too much food before sitting. He tells us to sit up straight, breathe through our nose, gently sway our body from side to side until we find a balanced upright posture. Finally, he provides a few sentences of more sophisticated inner instruction: "Take the backward step and turn the light inward. Your body-mind of itself will drop off and your original face will appear. If you want to attain just this, immediately practice just this."[6]

This is a technical meditation instruction that comes from the Yogacara, or the Mind-Only school of Mahayana. These teachings specialize in a detailed analysis of consciousness that is designed to, among other things, pinpoint the moment at which consciousness splits off subject from object, creating, as we have discussed, a partial

world of separation and suffering. Dogen's brief instruction asks us to trace the mind back to this point, so that we can stop the mind's normal habit of reaching out for an object and instead step backward into the silent mind itself, into awareness itself, which cannot be an object. Dogen is giving us the ultimate meditation object—no object. Technically this is nondual meditation: beyond the duality of subject and object. Just presence, "just this." It can only be done "immediately," in no time, eternal time.

By definition, this practice is impossible. There is literally nothing to it. Yet we can do it. Or rather, it can somehow occur, though we can't do it. When the mind becomes quiet—ceases to search for concentration, insight, or anything other than being in time, and is willing to simply sit in the midst of the impossible ineffability of being alive—then this meditation is taking place. Body and mind drop away. No longer ours, we don't worry about them. Like the sun rising in the morning, our original face, our buddha face, dawns. We touch it intimately with our body, breath, and awareness.

ZEN MEDITATION AS THE PRACTICE OF IMAGINATION

For bodhisattvas, meditation practice is the most direct way to cultivate imagination, to open up a big space in the middle of their lives, a space always there but usually unnoticed, in which anything can happen.

If you approach meditation as a salutary practice for calming the mind and cultivating peace, or as a way to gain insight, you will be concerned with exactly how you are supposed to do it. You will want to do it right. Probably you will start with the idea that meditation requires slowing down your mind, reducing or eliminating thoughts. Maybe if you follow good Buddhist teachings you will think that there is a certified progression to meditation, depending on what system you are following. All this is fine. Certainly we can't ignore the careful teachings of tens of thousands of sages throughout the

centuries. Bodhisattvas will certainly pay attention to all these methods and instructions. Yet bodhisattvas who practice the perfection of meditation will have a free and easy sense in their practice. They will jump off the end of meditation into other realms. For bodhisattvas, the perfection of meditation is less about limiting and shaping the mind than it is about releasing the mind into imaginative spaciousness.

Take, for instance, the question of thinking. Most instructions for meditation tell you to let go of thinking. Most meditators think that if they are thinking in meditation there is some fault—that meditation is the opposite of thinking. But this isn't so. There's a big difference between thinking, as we usually do it, and the sort of thinking bodhisattvas do: creative, open-ended, all-inclusive thinking. Maybe the difference is analogous to the distinction Coleridge makes (as I discussed in the opening chapter) between imagination and fancy (fantasy). Imagination opens and frees us; fantasy reinforces our smallness, our desire.

We can apply this to our own thinking. If we observe thinking, we will see that it usually comes from self-concern. Self-concern is the energy behind most thinking: "Is this good for me or bad for me? How can I strategize to get what I want this way or that way? How can I solve this problem, satisfy that curiosity?" Regret, blame, resentment, scheming, shame, self-denigration, or just random self-generated interests are churning around in our minds, all based on our sense of self. After all, who, if not us, is doing this thinking?

But not all thinking goes like that. Creative thinking, thinking that soars, inspires, liberates, seems to come from somewhere beyond us. Thinking per se is not a problem. Some kinds of thinking can be a problem and other kinds can be beautiful.

In *Fukanzazengi,* Dogen gives a wonderful teaching about this. "Think not thinking," he writes. "How do you think not thinking? Beyond thinking. This is the art of zazen."[7]

This seems at first like a paradoxical koan-like saying, designed merely to baffle. It isn't. It's Dogen's expression for unrestricted bodhisattva meditation, imagination-expanding meditation. In

meditation, Dogen says, don't try to eliminate thinking or anything else. "Think not thinking." "Thinking" is the usual sort of thinking, driven by self-smallness. "Not thinking" is the opposite: not ceasing thinking but allowing thinking that isn't limited by our smallness, that is open and free.

So, in meditation we should practice thinking, but not the usual sort of thinking. How would we do this? By not pursuing thinking. That is, when a thought arises, whatever thought it is—even an angry, resentful, or violent thought—we let it come. No matter how afflictive it is, it comes originally not from our smallness but from the endless past of the storehouse consciousness. It comes from the vastness of the time-space simultaneity Dogen speaks about earlier in his text. Every thought, every perception, every emotion is precious and immense, no matter what it is.

But there's an "and yet." And yet when we take that wondrously arising emotion or thought, grab hold of it, and make it our own, the pain starts. To practice "think not thinking," we have to learn how to let any and every thought occur and celebrate it by simply leaving it alone. Not grabbing it, not identifying with it, not twirling it about. Letting it come, appreciating it, letting it go—as everything will go, if left alone. When we learn how to practice like this (which is easiest to do on the cushion), we give free rein to our imaginations. This *think not thinking, beyond thinking,* is exactly what we mean by imaginative thinking: things come and go, unexpectedly. We receive what we need.

In this spirit, bodhisattvas practice meditation as the supreme imaginative field. They practice any and all of the techniques we have been discussing, depending on the spontaneous need of the moment or on chance—chance being the great friend of the imagination, as John Cage, Jackson Mac Low, and many other artists have taught us. In addition, they create their own meditation practices on the spot. One of my role models for creating beautiful meditation practices is Zen teacher Kathie Fischer (who also happens to be my spouse). Among my favorites of hers: Visualize everything that comes up in meditation as a snowflake. Watch the snow fall down, and let it

gently fall, till you and everything around you is covered in soft whiteness. Or: Fall. As you sit, feel your body falling into the earth, melting and sinking into the earth. Let all your thoughts and feelings fall like that too, neatly and lovingly pulled down to the center of the earth by gravity.

Here are a few good practices that I have invented: On successive exhales, silently say these words: *slow…deep…soft…quiet*. Notice whatever else is happening but stay as best you can with these words and the feelings that go with them.

Or, a four-step practice:

1. Count your exhales, one to five for a while.
2. Follow exhales in your belly for a while, without counting.
3. Watch the whole of the breath all the way in, beginning, middle, end, and all the way out, beginning, middle, and end. Do this for a while.
4. Sit with the breath as a koan: What is this moment of breathing?

Or: Just sit with feeling breath, body, and awareness. This is, after all, the concrete bottom-line feeling of being alive: breath, body, awareness. Everything else depends on this. So just sit with that, be present with it, return to it whatever else happens.

And you can imagine many more practices.

THE PERFECTION OF MEDITATION

Echoing what I have said at the end of each chapter so far, this chapter isn't about meditation (as the others are not about generosity, ethical conduct, and so on). It's about the *perfection of meditation*. Perfection is a figment of our imagination. The fact that we even have the word, are capable of conceiving of the idea of perfection, shows how large and wondrous our imagination is. The perfection of meditation isn't practicing meditation perfectly but rather seeing that meditation is inherently imaginative; that to most

truly practice meditation, we have to crawl all the way out to the end of meditation and fall off into spacious free fall. Just as Dogen teaches that true thinking is nonthinking, so the perfection of meditation is nonmeditation: meditation empty of meditation as any distinct practice. One of my favorite Zen dialogues is about this: A monk asks Zhaozhou, "What is meditation?" Zhaozhou says, "Nonmeditation." "How can meditation be nonmeditation?" the monk asks. Zhaozhou's final words: "It's alive!"

VERSES ON THE PERFECTION OF MEDITATION

Tokme Zongpo on the perfection of meditation:

> Understanding that emotional reactions are dismantled
> By insight supported by stillness,
> Cultivate meditative stability that passes right by
> The four formless states—this is the practice of a bodhisattva.[8]

In this verse, Tokme Zongpo brings us back down to basics: Even after all this lofty talk about meditation, we still live here in the funky troublesome human world, in which our own reactions become our most local form of suffering. Things may get bad, very bad, but if we have mental and emotional stability, and if we can see through our emotional reactions, we can bear troubling circumstances much better, and we can even be a source of strength and support to others.

This is why we need to practice insight and calming meditation: to stabilize our minds; make us wiser, more resilient, and better able to roll with the emotional punches. "The four formless states" refer to the four ultimate stages of meditation (infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, and neither perception or nonperception) I mentioned above. Anyone who meditates thoroughly enough to experience such states (or any other pleasant peaceful states) is likely to get stuck on meditation, hooked on it,

almost addicted to it. The pleasures of meditation are subtle and very tasty. Once you have meditated for a while, you see that life in meditation retreats—in wonderful, quiet, natural surroundings, with wholesome, simple food—is much nicer than life on freeways, in office buildings, and in bars. You might find yourself craving retreats—more and more of them. This is especially the case if you become familiar with Buddhist teachings and think the retreats are not only pleasant in and of themselves but are also sure to lead to complete liberation and awakening. But no, Tokme Zongpo tells us in the verse. Pass all that by. Don't get hooked. Just practice meditation enough to be able to live with some understanding and compassion. That's the perfection of meditation that bodhisattvas should practice.

The Prajnaparamita Sutra in Eight Thousand Lines says something similar:

> Those of great might who dwell in the four Trances
> Do not make them into a place to settle down in, nor into a home.
> But these four Trances, with their limbs, will in turn become
> The basis for the attainment of the supreme and unsurpassed enlightenment.[9]

The name for Buddhist monastics (and in our world, the name for any of us who commit ourselves to bodhisattva practice) is *home-leaver*. Leaving home means that everywhere is home. Every thought, every state of mind, every emotion, every perception, and every person are fully appreciated, because each moment of being alive is all-inclusive. This is how bodhisattvas view life. So bodhisattvas don't grab on to anything because they know there's nothing that can be held—even, as we just read, meditation states. In order to be persons of "great might"—heroic bodhisattvas, imaginary saviors of the world—we will practice meditation devotedly, knowing how important it is, in faith that no matter how good or bad we are at it, it will inevitably lead to the supreme and unsurpassed enlightenment that will enable us to live lives of perfect love.

Bodhisattvas don't worry about how their meditation practice is going because they practice the perfection of meditation, which involves the perfect faith expressed in this verse (perfect faith that falls off the end of faith)—a faith that recognizes the nonlinearity of time, in which what is hoped for in the future is already here in the present.

Practices

MEDITATION PRACTICES

- Practice breathing every day for a week, first thing in the morning, for twenty to thirty minutes. Sit up straight on a chair or cushion. Breathe in and out, paying attention to the breath in the lower belly. When the mind wanders to other things, bring it gently back.
- Pay attention in your meditation practices to the five hindrances (this page). Simply notice them when they are present. Gently label them, continuing to breathe. Don't try to make them go away.
- Listen to guided meditations or dharma talks while you meditate. Don't try to remember or think as you listen, just let the words go through you.
- Practice loving-kindness meditation. You can read about this in many books. Maybe you have practiced it already. A simple way: imagine yourself sitting across from you. On successive exhales say, "May I be happy, may I be well, may my heart be open." (Or just one of these phrases will suffice—or use one or more of your own.) Now think of someone you love and practice the same way. Next an acquaintance, not a close friend. Next everyone, all people and other creatures. "May they be happy, may they be well." Next someone you don't like or who has hurt you. As you repeat the phrase or phrases, try taking them to heart. But if you can't, this is okay. Just keep on with the practice.
- Practice sending and receiving meditation as described on this page.
- Practice one or more of the several imaginative meditation practices mentioned on this page.

- Try a version of koan practice: Select a Zen story or phrase. You might pick one from this chapter, such as “think not thinking,” “it’s alive,” or “where is there dust?” Or pick one from somewhere else. Repeat the phrase on each exhale. Try to stay with it with every breath. As you repeat it, feel a questioning spirit. What does it mean? How does it rock your life? Alternatively, sit with a question such as “Who is it?” or “What is this?”
- Sit focusing on posture. Pay attention especially to shoulders, hands, spine, top of the head, position of the chin. Keep these points in mind as often as possible and return to them when your mind wanders to other things.
- Practice “think not thinking,” allowing whatever thoughts that want to emerge, to emerge. Marvel at them (amazing that you are capable of such a thing as thought!) and let them go, making way for the next ones.
- Practice walking meditation. Outside or inside, simply walk a course of thirty or forty paces, back and forth. Pay attention to your steps and your breathing. Notice the surroundings in front of you, but don’t gawk; gently gaze. Feel your body in movement. Notice anything else that is happening. No need to take exaggerated steps, but do go somewhat more slowly than you ordinarily would. Clasp your hands in front or behind your body. When you come to the end of the course, stop, take a deep breath, turn around clockwise, take another breath, and start back.

DAILY LIFE PRACTICES

- Institute a daily study practice of reading a spiritual book (not necessarily Buddhist) for fifteen minutes a day. Don’t read for information. Just let the words come in. Stop and reread if you come upon something that strikes you as particularly worthwhile.

- Memorize a few lines of teaching and repeat them several times during the day.
- Go back and read and reread, as study practice, the sections in this chapter on Zen meditation and Dogen's meditation (this page).

7
The Perfection of Understanding

WE HAVE ARRIVED at the last stop on our journey toward imaginary bodhisattva perfection—the sixth perfection, prajnaparamita, the perfection of understanding. We have been referring to the perfection of understanding throughout our discussion because it is the basic practice of Mahayana Buddhism and the keystone of the bodhisattva path. Without the perfection of understanding, nothing in the bodhisattva life holds up. We've already heard about the basic thrust of perfect understanding: it intuits the emptiness of all phenomena and thus recognizes the primacy of the imagination in making the world as we find it and as it could otherwise be. Now we are ready to explore it more deeply.

As I said in the previous chapter, the last two perfections are different from the others—more intense, more esoteric, and requiring a special sort of cultivation. You can be patient and generous anytime and all the time, but if you want to meditate, you must have the discipline to take the time to do it. Meditation and understanding go together. Understanding arises when meditation is developed—meditation, that is, in all the senses we've discussed: focused sitting, study, contemplation of teachings, and deep intuitive reflection. In the previous chapter I wrote about insight into the three characteristics. In classical Buddhism, this liberative insight is what's meant by understanding. The Mahayana Buddhist view of the perfection of understanding includes this liberative insight but leaps far beyond it. From the Mahayana perspective, seeing the empty

nature of phenomena is something at once more than and less than insight into impermanence, nonself, and unsatisfactoriness.

Here is where the problem begins. The perfection of understanding is slippery, hard to define, hard to pin down. In fact, its essential nature (if it had one!) is exactly that it can't be pinned down or defined. And it's certainly not the case that one can "develop" it through meditation—or in any other way. In fact, the idea that anyone would "have" understanding, acquired by whatever means, is already far from the mark. No one can *have* understanding. Understanding arises, but no one can have it or cause it to arise. It is extremely elusive. So this chapter is going to be a challenge. In it we'll truly explore imaginative bodhisattva activity as we try to approach the unapproachable, envision the invisible.

WORDS

The question of how language works to create the world we live in is central to the teachings on the perfection of understanding. As a poet and writer, I have always been interested in this topic. Language is frustrating. In a way, it's nothing. Painters have paint and canvas, sculptors have whatever stuff they decide to use, musicians have instruments and sound—all immediate and tangible. Writers and speakers have nothing but words, whose intangible power comes not from what they are but from what they are not. That is, the power of words lies not in the letters and sounds but in what these arbitrary and abstract signs refer to and point toward. Yes, the sound, rhythm, and physical presence of words in an ear or on a page or computer screen matter, but what's really important is their meaning, which reaches beyond them to something else. If I wrote here a series of words without referents, words that didn't point to something that was not the black letters on the white page, I would be writing nonsense. The graphs would be linked symbols without meaning. They wouldn't be what we call *words*. You wouldn't, you couldn't, read them.

For a word to be a word, it has to refer to something that is not a word. Yet words' referents are slippery and indeterminate. I can write *table,* and you will likely know what I mean. But the world includes many millions of tables and categories of tables, any one of which I might be referring to. And if I write *love, hope, truth,* or even *this* or *that,* matters will be even worse. We understand one another more or less, but the closer we look at what we are communicating and what we are understanding with our words, the fuzzier it gets.

I don't want to—and I am not capable of—getting too far into the weeds with this discussion about words (nor would you want me to), but many have done so: the twentieth-century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, notable among them. Language philosophy is one of the cornerstones of contemporary thought. The prajnaparamita scriptures' teaching is also largely about language—language per se and language in a wider sense. Just as words don't have definite referents because they are symbolic, not concrete, so also things in this world are not concrete, as they seem to be. Everything is symbolic, metaphorical, referential. Things seem to be independent, autonomous, and truly existing, but they are not. They are "mere designations," the sutras say. In his fascicle "Painting of a Rice Cake," Dogen considers the commonplace Asian saying "You can't eat a painting of a rice cake." The idea is that you can't eat a description of food, you can only eat real food. It means, by extension, you can't transform your life by reading scripture, you need to have real religious experience. But Dogen turns the teaching upside down: the only thing you *can* eat is a painting of a rice cake! Because there is nothing that *isn't* a painting of a rice cake, a mere designation.

This seems outrageous, I know. Yet this is what the perfection of understanding comes round to, which is why it is so hard to get at when you try to explain it in language.

The perfection of understanding is the most important of all the perfections. As I have been saying all along, the other five perfections depend on it. It pervades them all, and it's what transforms them from ordinary practices into "perfections." As I explained in the

chapter on generosity, ordinary generosity isn't the perfection of generosity unless it's pervaded by the perfection of understanding. The same is true of the other four perfections—they are all perfumed by, suffused with, the perfection of understanding.

The tradition puts this another way: there is only one perfection, the perfection of understanding. But since the perfection of understanding is so elusive (it is literally, as we will soon see, incorrect even to say that it exists), it doesn't have any characteristics of its own. So it comes out as the perfections of generosity, ethical conduct, patience, joyful effort, and meditation, none of which actually exist except as manifestations of the perfection of understanding, which doesn't exist otherwise.

Yes, this does get a little heady. But also, I hope, amusing (more on this later).

UNDERSTANDING, WISDOM, AND LOVE

Given the long Mahayana Buddhist history of focusing on the problem of language, and this problem's intrinsic connection to the perfection of understanding, I have given a lot of thought to how I want to present the sixth perfection, prajnaparamita, in English. Words may be slippery and inexact, but this is a book, and words are all it has to communicate, so I want to choose them as carefully as I can. The Sanskrit word *prajna* is usually translated as "wisdom," but I have decided to render it as understanding. Let me tell you why.

Wisdom is an old-fashioned word. We hardly use it these days. We think of people as quick, clever, intelligent, creative, innovative, knowledgeable, maybe as having good judgment, but seldom do we call them wise. It's almost as if the world in which wisdom occurs—a world of solid truths and eternal virtues—has disappeared. Today's world seems too fast and shifty for wisdom. The word *wisdom* suggests probity, character, the discernment that comes from long experience. A wise person is sober and careful, stodgy almost—and usually older. Synonyms for *wisdom* include *sanity, caution,*

prudence. None of these quite fit the portrait of the imaginative bodhisattva that I am painting.

Understanding, however, is an interesting double-sided word. It includes much of what the word *wisdom* does. If you understand, you see things clearly and from all sides, which will give you discernment. But the word *understanding* hides within it something more. Etymologically, to understand is "to stand with." The "under" part of the word doesn't mean under. It comes from a proto-Indo-European root that means "among, or between," not "beneath." So understanding means to be close to, to be with. And we take it like that. An understanding person, we feel, is compassionate, considerate, empathetic (words the dictionary lists as synonyms)—exactly the spirit of prajna in the bodhisattva path. The perfection of understanding includes both sides of what is meant by the English word *understanding*: to understand deeply how things are—to know, to see, how elusive and shimmering this life is and, at the same time, with and through this seeing, to be understanding of life, to care for it, to stand with it in empathy, love, and compassion.

Years ago, when I was in university studying Buddhist sutras on the perfection of understanding, my professor remarked that he could not comprehend how the teachings on the perfection of understanding, which seem so abstruse and philosophical, could possibly lead to compassion and love. He knew that, in Mahayana Buddhism, understanding and love always go together, but he couldn't really see how. But to me, all these many decades later, the merging of understanding and love, both contained in the English word *understanding,* makes perfect sense.

Of course love and understanding go together! To really understand something, not just as an object of scrutiny but in a deeper way, in an intimate way, you have to have a warm feeling about it. The reverse is also true: to love something in the truest sense, you need to understand it. You can be attracted to what you don't understand. You can have desire for a person, quality, or object you don't understand but want to possess. But what we mean by love requires understanding, a true and profound appreciation of the

object of affection, a knowing of it from its own side. To practice the perfection of understanding is to understand this life truly and deeply. Knowing life as it is, we love it. Understanding beings, naturally we love them with a love that isn't selfish, intrusive, or cloying.

The Buddhist literature on the perfection of understanding is extensive. In addition to the many primary sutras, there are myriad treatises and philosophical commentaries. Fortunately for us, one of the greatest Buddhist scholars of all time, Dr. Edward Conze, has translated into English and commented on the most important of the many perfection of understanding sutras, among them the *Prajnaparamita Sutra in One Hundred Thousand Lines,* the *Prajnaparamita Sutra in Eight Thousand Lines* (the one I have been quoting from at the end of each chapter of this book), the *Diamond Sutra,* and the *Heart Sutra.* Following his early lead, many others have provided many other versions, so that we have now, in English, a very good representation of this literature. The one-page *Heart Sutra,* chanted several times a day in Zen monasteries the world over, proposes to summarize the "heart" of the perfection of understanding teachings.

The speaker of the *Heart Sutra* is neither the Buddha nor Manjushri, the imaginative bodhisattva of perfect understanding. It's Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva who represents compassion and love. The sutra never mentions compassion and love: its subject is emptiness, the central teaching—the obsession, one might say—of the perfection of understanding sutras. Emptiness sounds like the opposite of compassion and love, and the *Heart Sutra* isn't warm and fuzzy in any way; it is almost coldly, insistently analytical. It's no wonder my professor felt the way he did. Yet the fact that the sutra is spoken by Avalokiteshvara signals that the emptiness teachings are about love, however much they don't seem to be. Our perplexity about this point only shows us how little we understand what love is —and what emptiness is.

Avalokiteshvara (her Chinese form is Kwan Yin, the female bodhisattva of love and compassion) hears the cries of the world and

sees the world's suffering. This is her practice: listening and seeing. In Chinese lore she lives on an island, surrounded by the sea, contemplating its endless flow and ebb, and hearing in it the flow and ebb of life and death, suffering and peace—taking it all in with a heart of kindness. She has infinite eyes to see it all and infinite hands to help.

Here's a Zen story about compassion (I referred to it in brief in the first chapter): Yunyan asks Daowu, "Why does the bodhisattva of compassion have so many hands and eyes?" Daowu answers. "It's like reaching back for your pillow in the dark." Yunyan says, "Oh, I understand!" Daowu asks, "What do you understand?" and Yunyan replies "The whole body is covered with hands and eyes." Daowu says, "That's 80 percent." Yunyan: "Well, what do you say, elder brother?" Daowu: "The whole body is nothing but hands and eyes."[1]

These two Zen brothers are talking about the all-pervasiveness of compassion and love, and its natural function everywhere. We don't need to produce a special feeling or activity called love and compassion that sometimes exists and sometimes doesn't. We need only to perfectly understand and appreciate the world as it is—empty of separation and friction and therefore without any actual pain. Then everything we see and hear will be lovely, and we will care for everything. Our compassionate action will be as simple and natural as reaching back for our pillow in the dark.

These days there seems to be a powerful lack of understanding in the world. Since September 11, 2001, the idea of "terrorism" and "terrorists" has been a pervasive feature of public discourse, and with this has come a sad increase in fear of "the other," the one who seems different or alien. There has always been violence in the world. There has always been misunderstanding between people and groups of people. Probably there always will be. But in these last decades the misunderstanding and fear have seemed stronger and more toxic. After 9/11 I tried my best to spread the message that drastically violent events require three responses: First, grief—taking the time to face and address the pain such losses always cause. Second, prevention—discovering who performed the horrendous acts, and

how, so they can be prevented in the future. And third—understanding. To deeply investigate and understand how people come to do such brutal things. For all human brutality is just that—it's human. Over the long run, understanding brutality is the only way to prevent it. And understanding requires a deep appreciation of humanity as well as the specific spiritual, economic, and social conditions that cause particular people and groups of people to perpetrate such actions.

I was gravely disappointed in 2001 when only the first two of these three key points were practiced. Because we have made almost no effort to understand, we have escalated the violence, with no end in sight. The perfection of understanding is a crucial practice if we are ever going to have a humane world.

EMPTINESS

The *Heart Sutra,* like the whole of the perfection of understanding literature, teaches the emptiness of all phenomena. Understanding in Mahayana Buddhism, in the bodhisattva path, means, specifically, understanding the empty nature of all phenomena. It's this specific understanding that opens up the path of love and compassion.

Words again. The word usually translated as "emptiness" is *sunyata* in Sanskrit. It comes from a root word suggesting swelling, something puffed up and hollow, with nothing inside, like a balloon. (Yes, I know there is air inside a balloon, but no "thing"—more on this in a moment.) Emptiness implies a kind of deception. Beings, all things, thoughts, ideas, feelings—these are all deceptive. They seem to be something big and full, like a balloon, but when you prick them, they pop, Wizard of Oz–like. Like the Wizard, they are empty, completely lacking the substantiality they appear to have. Everything is like this, including and especially one's self and others.

When the balloon of being pops, it's an unsettling experience. The emptiness of all phenomena is a disturbing fact of life. The *Heart Sutra* includes a litany of things that are popped, empty, nonexistent.

The list includes eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. It further includes the objects we normally associate with our senses and body: color, sound, smell, and even mental concepts. Being a radical condensation of very long sutras, the short version of the *Heart Sutra* simply says "no" to each of these supposed "things": no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind, no color, no sound—and so forth. Most people are baffled and a little put off when they first hear the sutra chanted. It's no wonder.

In the previous chapter I wrote of Mahayana Buddhism's discourse about impermanence—how it must be the case that things arise and pass away at the same moment, that there can't be any duration of time in which anything abides. This is where the teachings about emptiness come from; they are another important way to conceive of impermanence and time. (Dogen's radical ideas about time, as discussed in the previous chapter, source here.)

Over the centuries, Buddhists have put it like this: Things don't actually exist. To say they do is an exaggeration, an overstatement of the case. If something appears and in that same moment disappears, how can we say it exists? Existence is an illusion. But to say things don't exist isn't right either. How could it be, when throughout our whole life we see, hear, taste, smell, touch, and feel the world? Being is a paradox. The middle way, Mahayana Buddhists have said, isn't, as originally conceived, a path of moderation between asceticism and sensuality; it's the middle ground between the two extremes of existence and nonexistence. It's the way things really are, neither existing nor not existing: empty, ungraspable, ineffable. As concluded in another of the perfection of understanding sutras, the *Diamond Sutra,* being is like a dream, a phantom, a flash of lightning, a magic show, a bubble, a dewdrop.

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We must go into this further. A balloon is empty of things but full of air. An empty glass is empty of liquid but also full of air. If being is empty, what is it empty of? And what is it full of?

The technical answer to the first question is that beings are empty of *svabhava,* own-being, a concept with a long history in Buddhist thought. To be empty of own-being is to lack independent substantial being—such as a soul or an essential consciousness—that can be isolated and grasped. In the previous chapter I mentioned the basic experience of feeling-sensation, which I referred to as the pivot point of existential suffering. Our mistaken notion of svabhava, or own-being, is what ties feeling-sensation in a painful knot. Without knowing we are doing it, we viscerally impute to things a deeply, almost physically held sense that they are there in a way they actually aren't. If we truly appreciated that things are not there in the way we think they are, that they are there in some completely different way, we would not react to them in the way we normally do. Our pain would disentangle from its false support. We would not long for something we can't ever have. Things are empty of the own-being we crave in them.

What about the second question? Like the empty balloon and the empty glass, if beings are empty of own-being, what are they full of? They are full of connection; they are full of one another; they are so radically interdependent they cannot exist in their own right as separately existent entities. There are, in fact, no things: there is only the endless ebb and flow of being, Avalokiteshvara's compassionate ocean. Nagarjuna, the great Buddhist philosopher of the second century C.E., clarified this point in his systematic commentaries to the teachings on emptiness. Things are empty of own-being but full of their connection to everything else that isn't them, he wrote. The great contemporary Vietnamese Buddhist teacher and social activist Thich Nhat Hanh coins a marvelous word to express this: things *inter-are*. There is no being, he points out in his many books. There is only "interbeing."

Look closely enough for something and you won't find it. If you look for a person, for instance, you can't find a person. You find thoughts and feelings, actions, histories, a body, but no essential person separable from all that. Look for me right now and you won't see some kernel or essence, some own-being. You'll see clothes,

which are the temporary physical embodiment of the materials and activities that produced them. You'll see my house, which is an impermanent congealment of the efforts of those who built and maintain it, including carpenters, trees, lumber mills, factories that make tools and hardware, and innumerable other factors. You'll find my friends and relatives; my lifetime of experiences, perceptions, and thoughts; my parents and their parents; the world all of us live in…and on and on, all the way up to the earth, sun, and cosmos: all the conditions that cohere as me, all the life that has been flowing in and out of empty existence-nonexistence that has produced the momentary appearance you and I think of as me.

Myself as a physical object is the same. Look for my body and you can't find it—you find only arms and legs, a head, a torso, organs. Look for those parts and you can't find them either—only tissues, cells, molecules. And if you keep looking further eventually you find nothing at all—empty space, which can't even be called empty space with any certainty because its essence can't be pinned down. It's indeterminate. Search as you will, you will not find a single thing you can isolate and call my body or even a part of my body.

All in all, you will have to conclude that the person called me is an idea, a thought, a concept imputed onto all this. So "I" doesn't exist in the naive and unexamined way we thought it did. I exist in a radically different way. I am empty of myself but full of all that has made me appear to be myself in this fleeting ungraspable moment of nonlinear time. There is no me, only everything other than me that produces the illusion of me. "Me" is a designation, a pronoun we apply to an infinitude of connected causes. I am not a rice cake; I am a painting of a rice cake.

The connection of all this to what I said earlier about language and concept is clear. In his key text, *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way,* Nagarjuna analyzes many commonplace Buddhist and non-Buddhist concepts, such as causality and motion, upon which we base our ordinary understanding of life. He elegantly shows again and again that all concepts, all words, and all common notions contain a self-contradiction, the same self-contradiction displayed by

existence itself. Things exist and words make sense—but not in the way we think they do.

All this clever philosophizing matters. It means that selfishness is impossible: it is based on deeply flawed premises. The more I insist on my own-being, my fixed identity, the more I am going to suffer. Just as Santideva argues in his chapter on meditation, only compassion and love are actually possible—not only theoretically but also personally and emotionally, because they accord with what's actually the case about life. If we practice the perfection of understanding and appreciate the empty nature of phenomena, we will exchange self for other.

When the Chinese translated the Indian sutras on the perfection of understanding, they puzzled over how to translate the word *sunyata*. They used the character for *sky,* with the connotations of wide, blue, and endless. Things are empty: without boundary or border; as deep as the great blue sky.

ZEN AND EMPTINESS TEACHINGS

Hui-Neng, the Sixth Ancestor of Chinese Zen (the rice pounder mentioned in the last chapter), was suddenly awakened when he heard someone reading the *Diamond Sutra,* one of the emptiness sutras. The line that snapped him to attention was "give rise to an unsupported thought" (that is, a thought or word without anything substantial, anything with own-being, behind it). Since then the emptiness teachings (among other key Mahayana teachings) have been foundational to Zen, as they are to all schools of Mahayana Buddhism.

To illustrate how Zen expresses these teachings, I will tell two Zen stories.

The first story, which opens the *Book of Serenity* collection, is about the Buddha giving a dharma talk. One day the Buddha ascended the ceremonial dharma seat to speak. Manjushri, the bodhisattva of perfect understanding, struck the gavel to open the

talk and began making a formal statement of introduction. He said, “Clearly observe: the dharma of the dharma king is thus!” The Buddha then got down from the seat.[2]

As I have been saying, the perfection of understanding is elusive. Even more elusive are words to describe it. Yet it is not a mystery: everything everywhere is already empty, just as it is. All you have to do is clearly observe. The Buddha’s dharma talk is an exercise in ultimate eloquence. He sits on his seat but doesn’t say a word. The presence of Manjushri, the bodhisattva of perfect understanding, tells us this is a teaching about the perfection of understanding. In Buddhist art, Manjushri is depicted as a young man seated in meditation, wielding in one hand a sword held high over his head and in the other a book, the *Prajnaparamita Sutra*. The sword cuts through all entangling words and ideas, showing the empty space at their center.

The second story is about Bodhidharma, whom we mentioned earlier as the legendary founder of Zen. This story appears as the first story in the *Blue Cliff Record,* another important koan collection.

The Chinese emperor Wu asks Bodhidharma, “What is the highest meaning of the Holy Truths?” Bodhidharma replies, “Emptiness—there is nothing Holy.” The emperor says, “Who is this facing me?” “I don’t know,” Bodhidharma replies. The emperor didn’t understand. Bodhidharma crossed the Yangtze River, came to Shaolin, and sat facing the wall for nine years.[3]

“The Holy Truths” stands for the normative Buddhist teachings. Emperor Wu was a big supporter of Buddhism. He was really expecting something special from the great Bodhidharma. Shockingly, Bodhidharma gives him nothing. He says the teachings are empty.

But we should not be shocked. Emptiness is a thoroughgoing fact of life. Everything without exception is empty of own-being—even the Buddhist teachings, even the Buddha himself, even the imaginative bodhisattvas we aspire to be. This is their highest meaning: no meaning. Even emptiness is empty! To make emptiness the highest teaching, to conceive of emptiness as having own-being—

as being understandable, graspable, or existing in any real way—would be to violate emptiness, to make it an absurdity.

These two stories illustrate the centrality of the teachings and practice of the perfection of understanding in Zen—and they illustrate Zen's style of expression of these teachings: active, embedded in encounter; laconic, ironic—cutting through.

Tibetan Buddhism also has a powerful focus on the emptiness teachings, but its style is almost the opposite. There are many schools and differing approaches within Tibetan Buddhism but, in general, Tibetan Buddhists take a far more discursive and philosophical approach to the perfection of understanding. The Indo-Tibetan teachings on emptiness—starting with Nagarjuna's writings and the many Tibetan commentaries to his treatises—are sophisticated and prodigious. In some schools there is a full course of study and debate on the subject of emptiness that takes decades to complete, after which there are more decades of systematic meditation practice to bring the teachings fully to heart. From a Tibetan Buddhist perspective, it is ludicrous to think you could meditate on emptiness without years of preparatory study. Yet this is exactly what Zen practitioners over the generations have tried to do! Years ago, I invited the late Tara Tulku Rinpoche, an eminent Tibetan Buddhist master, to our temple to teach. When I explained our practice to him, telling him about Dogen's teachings on Zen meditation that were the basis of it, he was astonished. He could not imagine that we were seriously attempting to do this very advanced (from his point of view) practice, and that we taught it to even the casual and curious who came to the temple for initial instruction. It made no sense to him at all.

Perhaps he was right! Perhaps a thorough intellectual understanding of the emptiness teachings is a necessary preliminary to embodying them. Perhaps the traditional Zen idea of "sudden realization" is naive and misleading.

It seems to me that both approaches have strengths and weaknesses. If you are Tibetan, and Buddhism is embedded in your culture (or if you are a Western student devoted to Tibetan Buddhist

culture), it may make sense to spend decades in study of the detailed and scholastic teachings on emptiness, followed by a step-by-step process of meditation—all of which has been a cultural treasure of Tibet for generations. But if you are a Western person whose interest is in personal transformation, and who must find a way to practice seriously in the context of a life that, of necessity, includes career, family, and other important interests, maybe it doesn't make sense to embark on such a long journey.

On the other hand, to practice Zen meditation without any idea of what you are doing, what is behind it, and where it is taking you—that is, without training your reflective thinking in the perspective that the emptiness teachings imply—might also prove less than optimal.

In my own practice I have found a combination of the two approaches important. I have studied the prajnaparamita sutras in Dr. Conze's English translation, as well as Nagarjuna's works in their excellent English versions, and many commentaries on these texts, including several works by the Dalai Lama. While I don't think someone needs to do all this, I recommend it if you have the patience for it. For some reason, I have always had a particular passion for these teachings. Maybe it was because I took up Zen practice not looking for a new religion. I was after something else, I'm not sure what. If Buddhism is empty of Buddhism, as the teachings on perfect understanding certainly say it is, then, I saw, you could practice Buddhism without "being" a Buddhist. I still don't think I am a Buddhist. Nor do I think I am a Zen Buddhist priest, though I perfectly understand that the world conjures me as occupying the role, and that possibly there's some good in that, so I don't argue the point. The emptiness teachings truly are quite freeing, and studying them for a lifetime has been a great relief to me.

But study isn't enough. Like me, you will also need to practice meditation steadily over time (perhaps for even longer than Bodhidharma's nine years). If you do, you will find yourself practicing the other five paramitas as you tread the imaginative path of the bodhisattva with a sense of inspired commitment that will

grow on you, little by little, over time. Still, you will never master the perfection of understanding. How could you?

EMPTINESS, SELF-REFLECTION, AND HUMOR

I want to return for a moment to the story of Bodhidharma and the emperor. Note how swiftly it moves from emptiness, which sounds so philosophical, to nine years of solitary meditation. To really appreciate what emptiness means, you have to look deeply within. You have to investigate the self. Bodhidharma's response to the question "Who are you?"—"I don't know"—is important. The perfection of understanding is not about something out there we are analyzing or thinking through. It is about us, our lives, our intentions and feelings, our identities. Who are you? Who am I? This is where the perfection of understanding flashes forth.

Early Buddhist practice focused on analysis of self, following the Buddha's insight that there is no actual self, and that clinging to a self that does not exist as such is the central human problem. So practitioners were instructed to meditate deeply in order to analyze self's constituent elements: physical matter, feeling-sensations, perceptions, volitions, and consciousness. These are real, the teachings said. Self is not. Very likely this detailed and earnest path of self-analysis produced some very picky and self-obsessed meditators. Some present-day Western Buddhist meditators may also be a bit picky and self-obsessed. This makes sense: deeply concerned with remaining calm, with eliminating or purifying afflictive emotions, with moral improvement and psychological health, practitioners may well find themselves increasing rather than decreasing their self-focus.

I am sure Buddhist practitioners from earliest times saw this self-focused tendency in themselves. It must have concerned them. I believe the emptiness teachings grew out of this concern. The sudden insight into emptiness blows up this problem. Yes, self is empty, as the Buddha originally taught. But so are its constituent elements! So

the practice of analysis of self into its elements is ultimately useless; it doesn't uncover the real but rather merely opens up a new level of illusion. Not that this practice should necessarily be dropped. Mahayanists never denied anything in Buddhist teaching or practice. They merely reinvented, reinterpreted, and recontextualized Buddhism. They shifted the frame. Analyzing the self into constituent elements is a good practice as long as you don't take it too seriously.

Besides, if your practice is all about self-investigation, self-liberation, and peace, what about everyone else? Didn't the Buddha spend his former lifetimes serving others, loving others, as the Jataka stories relate? If we are going to imitate the Buddha, we too must be ultimately concerned for others. So, yes, self is empty, constituents of self are empty, nothing exists on its own—everything is connection. Others are not others, self is not self. Emptiness is love! At any rate, this is how I imagine the emptiness teachings developed out of early Buddhism.

Though the emptiness teachings in their Indian form seem fairly humorless, they are actually funny when you think about them. It's no wonder the Chinese took them that way. Paradox is funny, even nonsensical. Life is ironic—things seem to make sense, but they don't. There is a big joke built into the emptiness teachings—hilarious and tragic at once.

In the generosity chapter we discussed at length the importance of attitude. To a large extent, bodhisattva practice is a matter of attitude, and humor and irony are essential ingredients in the bodhisattva attitude. If we are going to take in the entire mass of human suffering with loving concern, we better see the humor in it, so we can hold it lightly. Like comedians who joke about serious things without denying their seriousness, bodhisattvas must have the capacity to hold suffering and humor in balance. And in order to practice with full commitment and full effort, without becoming insufferable or burning out, bodhisattvas better not take themselves or their practice and teachings too seriously. Taking things too seriously is a sure sign that you have lost the thread of the emptiness

teachings. We could call the perfection of understanding the perfection of irony.

Earlier I defined skillful means as the ability to improvise. Now we see more deeply into this thought. Based on the perfection of understanding, bodhisattvas don't see practices or teachings, they don't have goals or make effort—they are flexible, they have a sense of humor about themselves and their bodhisattva project. They understand that everything is ironic, provisional, and fluid, especially the way they see things, the way they think and speak. The perfection of understanding is the ultimate source of skillful means. The whole world is nothing but skillful means.

It's an easy shift from here to the overarching theme of our discussion—imagination. I hope it's clear that all the words I have been emphasizing in this book are just labels I am clumsily trying to pin on something that defies all labels. *Emptiness, understanding, perfection, imagination, irony, skillful means, love, compassion, awakening, bodhisattva*—can we really be clear about the precise definitions of these various words? Aren't they all just markers of our continually feeble attempt to explain something we desperately need to understand, but can't quite understand, about our collective life on earth? Yet we need to keep trying to understand, with a great hope that our effort will somehow help.

IS THERE SUCH A THING AS THE TRUTH?

There's something a bit disturbing about the idea of perfect understanding as ironic, paradoxical. If bodhisattvas see that everything and nothing is true or false, then everything and nothing is possible. Having no settled truth to depend on is unsettling. The groundlessness of the bodhisattva point of view disturbed Buddhists when it was first proposed two thousand years ago. It's still disturbing.

Until fairly recently (and still, in some quarters), human cultures were grounded in absolute and eternal truths and values embedded

in the religious traditions that provided their unifying ideologies. When, a few centuries ago, open scientific inquiry become compelling, those seemingly eternal truths began to fray. Revelation based on the mystical testimony of sacred scripture and the hierarchies who interpreted it was no longer a reliable and exclusive source of truth. A newly confident humanity, no longer subject to the perception of divine control, overthrew such religious truth and strode forward into a new era full of bright possibility.

But recently—during my generation's lifetime (the last half century or so)—that confidence has worn thin. Suddenly the future no longer seems so rosy. We now realize that truth was never really the result of the rational search for meaning we thought it was; it was always produced by people with the social and economic clout to control the message. Control had simply passed from one hierarchy to another. Knowing this, we now have warring culture centers, whose conflicting notions of what is and should be happening leave us reeling. The rational give-and-take of ideas that produced triumphant modernism has become a shouting match.

Even science isn't spared. We see that scientific truth isn't fixed, and that even the putatively objective results of scientific inquiry have human frameworks. Decision makers who control funding shape what gets studied and what doesn't. And studies don't produce certainty anymore. The more sophisticated scientific investigation gets, the murkier and more complex its results become. Nothing can be studied in isolation—causality is complex and entangled—so the more we know, the more we see how much we don't know. In physics and cosmology, we've passed out of the Newtonian universe, with its absolute and immutable laws, to Einstein's relative universe, and on to Heisenberg's uncertain universe, which seems to invalidate the possibility of the objective observer.

The social and political world is in even worse shape, battered by the onslaught of "fake news" and extreme ideological factionalism, each faction with its own facts and world-organizing assumptions. Truth is one of a number of possible "narratives."

Interestingly, the Buddhist teachings, with their emphasis on human suffering, nonessentialism, and radical impermanence, fare better in this confusing moment than those of other religious traditions. People who like Buddhism notice its wide influence in these times as contemporary psychology and other sciences develop approaches and understandings that seem quite Buddhist-friendly.

Yet the problem remains: Is anything true? What facts hold up? Do teachings on the perfection of understanding have anything to contribute to this dilemma?

Let's remember that the perfection of understanding isn't about understanding *something*. It promises no propositional truths and validates no facts. It isn't about what we know or even how we know. It's about who we are and how we navigate this human journey. Bodhisattvas who practice the perfection of understanding don't necessarily know what's going on. But they have a path through life, a way of being in the world that helps them navigate these choppy waters, and a broad set of character traits that they have developed through their practice.

First and foremost, bodhisattvas who practice the perfection of understanding, along with the other perfections, are kind. Generous in their outlook and actions, they have the capacity to forgive people because they understand the conditions that give rise to unwise conduct. They have unfailing compassion. Knowing how sad and impossible it is to be human, they see others as they see themselves—trying their best to do what they can to get by. Whenever suffering is present, they go toward it rather than turning away; they feel it deeply and do whatever possible to make it better. If nothing can be done, they grieve with everyone. They practice Avalokiteshvara's listening practice, hearing in the cries of the world the ebb and flow of life, hearing deeply the words of the person in front of them who is speaking, and hearing beyond the words to what's behind them. They have the courage to face whatever needs to be faced without retreating into distraction or confusion, and they trust enough in life to remain hopeful in all conditions, no matter how terrible. Above all, bodhisattvas are humble. Bodhisattva humility isn't personal

modesty; it comes from the perfection of understanding. All dharmas are empty of own-being. This means that the truth of what goes on, the truth of who one is, is unknown. It's not that it can be known and we just don't know it yet—it is beyond knowing. To respect this fact is to be humble.

I fully realize that the portrait of the bodhisattva I have just painted is hopelessly idealistic. Who could ever be such a person? Yet the fact that the imagination can conceive of such a person, and that most of us would affirm the goodness of such a portrait, however much we might be certain no such person could ever exist, shows us that the ideal is heartfelt and worth our best effort. Making the effort to practice the six perfections, and to live in the world in this way, would help.

But we are talking about truth. Does the perfection of understanding offer any guidance in this disturbing world of shifting truth?

Yes, the perfection of understanding appreciates that truth is always shifting, has always been shifting. All things without exception are empty—there isn't and has never been a solid truth. Yet, at any moment, something is true. There are some facts we can accept, knowing that in the future we might not accept these same facts. To act now, we need to take something as provisionally true. Truth's provisionally doesn't obviate truth. The fluidity of truth is disturbing only if we expected it to be solid.

How do we decide which facts to accept? We do so through investigation, reading, discussion with friends, and through trusting sources that have been reliable in the past, figuring out to the best of our ability a trustworthy consensus. Of course, we are aware that there's a lot we don't know and that what we decide to accept now we might reject later when new facts, and a new consensus, come to light. Of course the truth is always changing! Truth is empty of truth and full of the world's myriad, ever-shifting interconnections. Our action is part of that interconnected web that will produce the new truth that is coming. So we take responsibility to do what we can based on the best truth we can find today.

It's my practice to follow national and world developments as best I can. I am always trying to understand what is going on, and I see this as an important part of bodhisattva practice. Like many, I've been following the climate change issue for decades. There are many facts to be digested, facts that come from a variety of scientific disciplines and that are reported in many places. I am not aware of, and not competent to keep up with, most of this information. But even if I could, it would be difficult to know exactly what is happening because the situation is so complicated. I have a few friends who are climate scientists, and they are quite worried about the trends, but they always say they don't know how it is going now or will go in the future because too many factors are at play, each of which influences the others. So when people refute scientific claims about climate change, as was the case a few years ago, they may in some cases be correct. When they say we really don't know what is going on, they are surely correct. Yet the best truth we have now, or at least the truth that I have come to believe based on my best effort to understand, is that climate change is occurring, in large part due to human activity; it will have seriously dangerous effects on our planet and its species; and it is urgently imperative that we stop the emission of carbon into the atmosphere as soon as possible by switching to clean energy sources.

Science skeptics, many who are religiously inspired, also like to point out that evolution is only a theory. They are right. Einsteinian relativity is also a theory. As I understand, a theory is a plausible and serviceable explanation that fits, as of now, the information we have. It isn't an eternal truth but rather a human truth, and as such it is subject to expansion, revision, and perhaps even contradiction. But to conclude that because scientific theories are theories they should not be validated violates the best truths we have now and so leads to actions—or inactions—that have very bad consequences for the safety and well-being of people and other living creatures.

When it comes to social and political issues, which I also follow closely, I often find myself in the odd position of agreeing and disagreeing in part with many sides. Political news seems hopelessly

tendentious at the moment, though of course it has always been. But I apply the same principle here as well—I make the effort to find the best possible truth I can and act based on that truth.

Compassion arises as a natural consequence of the practice of the perfection of understanding. I try to ask myself which set of facts, view, or decision is most compassionate, will do the most good for the most people, and cause the least harm. I feel that, in complex mass societies, governments are necessary for coordinating activities—there's no getting past that fact—and they should work on behalf of people and the environment, protecting and enhancing people's capacity to be well and flourish—especially those most in need. But I can well understand the point of view of those who mistrust government. History is full of examples of oppressive and terrible governments. In fact, most governments have been like this, so it is not irrational or immoral to dislike and mistrust government.

I can see why people would not want to follow this rule of seeking, through investigation, the best possible truth. It takes time and patience, and it doesn't ever yield certainty. When the whole world is shifting underneath your feet, and when your personal circumstances are shaky, it makes sense that you would want to hold on to a firm set of beliefs, which provide not only a basis for selecting facts but also a sense of identity and belonging to the community of people who share those beliefs. Probably our current social and political factionalism will continue for some time, regardless of who is in or out of power, and we will have to continue to practice the perfection of understanding patiently for a long time. But this is not a hardship or frustration for bodhisattvas. It's what they do—it's their bread and butter!

I hope you will forgive this long and perhaps facile summary of cultural, scientific, and social history that I am completely unqualified to give! I do it not because I think what I've said is necessarily true or correct but to illustrate that the perfection of understanding is not only an imaginative idealism that exists in the spiritual skies but also an imaginative idealism that can and must be

applied to living in this world as it is, with all its complexities and challenges.

There are many examples of contemporary bodhisattvas bringing their practice down to earth and doing what they can to help. Several of our Everyday Zen sangha members work with environmental groups and Native American groups to try to stop the worst excesses of bad climate change policies. Our sangha, and many others, run programs in prisons to bring the goodness of dharma understanding and practice to prisoners deeply in need of them. I have several Zen colleagues, including my old teacher Roshi Bernie Glassman, founder of the Zen Peacemaker Order, who are dedicated to bearing witness and helping by traveling around the world to observe and bring loving-kindness to trouble spots. My colleague Roshi Joan Halifax has been an activist all her life. Among her many projects to help the world, she has for years trained a cadre of Buddhist chaplains whose mission is to help the sick and dying. Some years ago, the activist Paul Hawken made a video that simply listed the names of the various NGOs and other organizations around the world whose missions involve helping people, animals, plants, and environments. The list scrolled on and on, for many hours, and was, of course, by the time it was finished, already incomplete. The world is full of bodhisattvas who are helping in myriad ways to bring peace, harmony, and well-being to this world. As crazy and destructive as we human beings have been, are, and will be, we are equally as kind and loving and as effective in turning the very tragedies we have perpetrated into occasions for love and healing.

DOGEN ON THE PERFECTION OF UNDERSTANDING

The second essay in Dogen's masterwork, *Shobogenzo* (*The Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*), is called "The Great Perfection of Understanding" ("*Maka Hanyaharamitsu*"). The essay begins by quoting the opening of the *Heart Sutra*. Avalokiteshvara,

bodhisattva of great compassion, speaks, saying, “All five skandhas [constituent elements of the self, as discussed above] are empty.”[4]

Dogen calls this the fivefold perfection of understanding. Then he says there is the twelvefold perfection of understanding—the six senses and their objects. There is the eighteenfold perfection of understanding—the six senses, their objects, and the six consciousnesses that arise when each sense meets its object. There is the fourfold perfection of understanding—the four noble truths of suffering, origination, stopping, and path; the sixfold perfection of understanding—generosity, ethical conduct, patience, joyful effort, meditation, and understanding; and the single perfection of understanding: perfect awakening in this timeless moment of present time.

This perfection of understanding, he concludes, manifests in three ways—past, present, and future; in six ways—earth, water, fire, air, space, and consciousness (the elements that make up the physical world: scientific understanding in Dogen’s day); and in four ways—the standing, sitting, walking, and lying down we practice in our everyday activities.

Buddhism is a religion of lists, and Dogen is fond of providing as many lists as he can think of when the mood strikes him. Reading his essay, you get the feeling that Dogen is not so much trying to explain the perfection of understanding as to riff on it, as a musician might riff on common themes in her or his repertoire. For Dogen’s wide imagination, the perfection of understanding is musical and amounts to this: the whole world, as it appears in consciousness and time, is nothing other than perfection of understanding unfailingly and constantly expressed in the simple actions of our daily living.

VERSES ON THE PERFECTION OF UNDERSTANDING

As usual, we can count on Tokme Zongpo to state the matter with unadorned simplicity:

Without wisdom [understanding], the five perfections
Are not enough to attain full awakening.
Cultivate wisdom [understanding] and skill [in means]
Free from the three domains [wheels]—this is the practice of a bodhisattva.[5]

Tokme Zongpo repeats here what we have been saying all along: the perfection of understanding is the yeast that makes the other five perfections rise. There is certainly great virtue and benefit in practicing generosity, ethical conduct, and so on, no matter what. Practicing these, we will definitely improve our lives and the lives of those around us. But when we practice the perfection of understanding, the other five practices become perfections and bring untold benefit to the world.

The line "free from the three domains," or wheels, refers to the teaching I brought up when we discussed the perfection of generosity. Practicing the perfection of understanding, we see that there is no giver, no recipient, and no gift: these three "wheels" are empty. Giving is free of giving. The perfection of understanding frees each of the five perfections to be perfections so that we can practice them with a free and easy attitude, beyond self-righteousness and any other form of small-mindedness.

The essential marriage between perfect understanding and skillful means is also indicated here by Tokme Zongpo—perfect understanding and skillful means always go together. Skillful means is not something other than the perfection of understanding. The open, flexible, improvisational, ironic vision of this world, and the ability to move in it to benefit others, no matter how weird or difficult it gets, is the essential bodhisattva way of life.

And here, finally, are verses from the *Prajnaparamita Sutra in Eight Thousand Lines*:

Of all the teachings which have been revealed by the Leader,
This teaching is the best and unsurpassed.

One who, wise in all trainings, wishes to go Beyond
Should train in this perfection of wisdom [understanding], in the Buddha-training.

This is the best receptacle, the storehouse of the supreme Dharma,
The treasury of happiness and the ease of those people who belong to the clan of the Buddhas.
The past and future world saviors in the ten directions,
They have come forth from this, yet the Dharma-element does not get exhausted
As many roots of skillful devices [means] as there are, doors and methods of cognition,
They have all issued from wisdom [understanding], the foremost perfection.[6]

These verses praise and appreciate the perfection of understanding. Their language implies that the perfection of understanding is the womb (receptacle, storehouse) from which issues the happiness and ease of the members of the Buddha's family. The buddhas themselves come from this womb. Perfect understanding is the mother of all the buddhas. In Mahayana Buddhism, this thought led to the iconographic depiction of perfect understanding as a beautiful and voluptuous goddess, sitting in meditation posture, her hands often holding the wheel-turning mudra, indicating the origination of the teachings. In our Zen centers we have been chanting for years an excerpt from the "Hymn to the Perfection of Understanding" found in a passage from the *Prajnaparamita Sutra in Eight Thousand Lines*:

Homage to the Perfection of Wisdom, the lovely, the holy.
The Perfection of Wisdom gives light.
Unstained, the entire world cannot stain her.

She is a source of light and from everyone in the triple world she removes darkness.

Most excellent are her works.

She brings light so that all fear and distress may be forsaken, and disperses the gloom and darkness of delusion.

She herself is an organ of vision.

She has a clear knowledge of the own-being of all dharmas, for she does not stray away from it.

The Perfection of Wisdom of the buddhas sets in motion the wheel of dharma.[7]

Practices

There is no way to practice the perfection of understanding! No techniques, no instructions, no tricks.

On the other hand, as the passage from Dogen indicates, there is no way not to practice the perfection of understanding. If you are standing, sitting, walking, or lying down; if you are alive in the present moment, with body and consciousness, perfect understanding is there. Remember this!

Or you could go back to the previous five chapters and continue to work with the many practices listed under the other five perfections. To practice generosity, ethical conduct, patience, joyful energy, and meditation as perfections, rather than as conventional practices, is essentially to practice the perfection of understanding.

Or you could follow Dogen's instructions in chapter 5 and begin a daily meditation on emptiness practice (hopefully augmenting it with practice at a practice center where you can find guides and other practitioners to rub shoulders with). If you establish a daily sitting practice in the spirit of the perfection of understanding, the rest will automatically unfold in its own time, in its own way.

Good luck!

Acknowledgments

No author can claim sole authorship for her or his book. This is even more than usually true in this case. In a very real way, I have coauthored this book with my many teachers and dharma friends; not a single word you have read is my own. The ideas, feelings, and inspirations that compose this book have arisen thanks to my associations with the many people in my life whose insights and examples have most influenced and illuminated me.

I thought to make a list of those to whom I am especially grateful, but after several versions the list became impossibly long. So let me mention, among my teachers, only my Zen Transmission teacher Sojun Weitsman, my first and last teacher, and Zentatsu Baker, my ordination teacher. (And let their names stand for those of the many other spiritual teachers with whom I have been blessed to study in my lifetime, beginning with my grandmother, Fannie Lustig, and my parents, Sidney and Lenora Fischer, and Rabbis Gabriel Maza and Alan Lew.)

My gratitude also extends to my spiritual communities, where I have so many colleagues and friends: the Berkeley and San Francisco Zen Centers; the Everyday Zen dharma family, including especially the Red Cedar Zen Community, the Mountain Rain Zen Community, the Bay Area Everyday Zen Group, the Mexican Everyday Zen sanghas, and the Makor Or Jewish Meditation Community. I must also mention my many colleagues in other Buddhist traditions, as well as the rabbis, Catholic priests and monastics, Protestant ministers, First Nations people, and senior Sufi and Muslim practitioners in whose presence I have learned that religion can be something that connects us deeply rather than divides us.

I remain in debt to my children, Aron and Noah Fischer, and their families, whom I deeply love and respect, and who have taught me what love and respect is.

Most of all, my gratitude and love extend to my spouse and fellow Zen priest (we were ordained together in January 1980), Kathie Fischer, with whom I have engaged in dialogue about the religious life for more than forty years, and to whom I owe my happy life.

The teachings in this book come from many sources. I have been especially a student of Dogen, through many translations I have studied over the years by, especially, Kazuaki Tanahashi, a dear friend and colleague. The prajnaparamita teachings, as translated especially by Edward Conze, have long been foundational for me. I have extensively used Santideva's great text *Bodhicaryavatara,* especially the translation by Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton; *The Six Perfections,* the commentary on the six perfections by Geshe Sonam Rinchen, translated and edited by Ruth Sonam; and the wonderful text of Tokme Zongpo, *Reflections on Silver River,* translated and introduced to me by the astute Buddhist teacher and my good friend, Ken McLeod.

Finally, I want to single out the best book on the six paramitas I have ever read, Dale Wright's *The Six Perfections: Buddhism and the Cultivation of Character* (Oxford University Press, 2009). Professor Wright is that very rare combination of scholar, serious thinker, and religious practitioner seldom seen in this or any other era. I find all of his books inspiring, enlightening, and encouraging to my practice. He has the unusual ability to understand and digest teachings while questioning them thoughtfully until they yield their larger ramifications. Many if not most of the ideas in this book have their source in his. Often while writing I wondered whether it wouldn't simply be better to tell my readers, "Stop right here and read Dale Wright, who does a much better job!"

Finally, I want to express my appreciation to my long-time literary agent, the wonderful Lindsay Edgecombe, of the Levine Green-berg Rostan Literary Agency, whose support over the years of our working together has been unswerving. And to everyone at Shambhala

Publications: especially my editor Dave O'Neal, who was taken suddenly ill in the midst of this project and is now, gratefully, recovering; to his successor, Matt Zepelin, who stepped in with great expertise and kindness; and to associate editor Audra Figgins. It has been a pleasure to work with such skillful, kind collaborators, and with a press that does so much good for its authors and readers.

Notes

CHAPTER 1: IMAGINATION

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CHAPTER 2: THE PERFECTION OF GENEROSITY

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3. Throughout this book I refer to this text as *Prajnaparamita Sutra in Eight Thousand Lines*. The quoted translations are all drawn from Edward Conze, trans., *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines and Its Verse Summary* (Bolinas, CA: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973), 69.

CHAPTER 3: THE PERFECTION OF ETHICAL CONDUCT

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3. McLeod, *Reflections on Silver River,* 119.
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CHAPTER 4: THE PERFECTION OF PATIENCE

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2. McLeod, *Reflections on Silver River,* 123.
3. Conze, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines,* 67.

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2. Dogen, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye,* 476.
3. McLeod, *Reflections on Silver River,* 127.
4. Conze, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines,* 66.

CHAPTER 6: THE PERFECTION OF MEDITATION

1. Bhikku Ñānamoli, *The Path of Purification* (*Visuddhimagga*) (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1991), 85.
2. Red Pine, trans., *The Platform Sutra: The Zen Teaching of Hui-Neng* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2008), 6.
3. Red Pine, *The Platform Sutra,* 8.
4. Robert Aitken, trans., *The Gateless Barrier: The Wu-Men Kuan* (*Mumokan*) (New York: North Point, 1991), 7.
5. Dogen, *Dogen's Extensive Record: A Translation of the Eihei Koroku,* trans. Taigen Dan Leighton and Shohaku Okumura (Boston, MA: Wisdom, 2010),

532–33.
6. Dogen, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye,* 907.
7. Dogen, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye,* 908.
8. McLeod, *Reflections on Silver River,* 131.
9. Conze, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines,* 63.

CHAPTER 7: THE PERFECTION OF UNDERSTANDING

1. Cleary, *Book of Serenity,* 229.
2. Cleary, *Book of Serenity*.
3. Cleary and Cleary, *Blue Cliff Record,* 1.
4. Dogen, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye,* 25. I've slightly altered the wording from the original translation for simplicity.
5. McLeod, *Reflections on Silver River,* 135.
6. Conze, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines,* 61.
7. Conze, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines,* 135.

About the Author

Norman Fischer is a poet and Zen Buddhist priest. For many years he taught at the San Francisco Zen Center, where he served as co-abbot from 1995 to 2000. He is presently founder and spiritual director of the Everyday Zen Foundation (www.everydayzen.org). Author of more than twenty-five books, Fischer lives with his wife, Kathie, also a Zen priest, in Muir Beach, California.

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