

You Too Can Be a Bodhisattva

by Diana Winston

These days, more than ever, we need to put on our bodhisattva shoes. But what does it mean to embody the bodhisattva ideal in these times? What is the history of this ideal? What are the tools a bodhisattva needs along the path? What are the obstacles a bodhisattva meets along the way? And what is the fruition of stepping onto the bodhisattva path?

History

In early Buddhism the term *bodhisattva* was applied to the Buddha's previous lives. The Jataka Tales tell of the Buddha's lives as a tiger or a parrot, for example, when he was a bodhisattva, or Buddha-to-be. It took him thousands of lifetimes of making merit to become the one we call the Buddha, the Awakened One.

Theravadin Buddhism emphasizes the *arhat* path, the ideal of attaining complete liberation in this lifetime. Some people say this is selfish. What about all the suffering beings? But I think it's a misunderstanding to view arhats as selfish; in fact they have extraordinary wisdom and compassion. It's just that a different aspect of the path is being emphasized.

The term *bodhisattva*, on the other hand, came to mean, over time, a being who is becoming liberated for the sake of all beings. The bodhisattva practices to end suffering for everyone. The bodhisattva never turns away. Until modern times, the suffering was assumed to be personal suffering; social and political suffering wasn't necessarily what the Buddha was talking about.

In some Mahayana traditions, the bodhisattva is one who actually postpones his or her enlightenment and continues to be reborn in the realm of samsara, in order to help all other beings reach enlightenment.

Shantideva, the seventh-century author of *The Bodhisattva's Guide to Life*, mentions this vow of the bodhisattva: "For as long as space exists, and sentient beings endure, may I stay to dispel the misery of the world." Or in a more poetic translation: "May I be the living ground of love for all beings." I love that!

We can each make a decision to step onto the bodhisattva path. It doesn't matter whether we identify as Theravadin or Mahayanin. Anyone can do it.

In some traditions of Buddhism, like Zen, people automatically take the bodhisattva vow. In some zen-dos the vow is chanted daily:

*Beings are numberless, I vow to save them.
Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to end them.
Dharma gates are boundless, I vow to enter them.
Buddha's way is unsurpassable, I vow to become it.*

In the Tibetan tradition, practitioners consciously decide to take the bodhisattva vows. They say, "Now I'm ready. I'm going to do it," and they commit to enlightenment for the sake of all beings. And this speeds up their practice, because once they do this, it means that they're serious. It lights a fire under their practice, and then they can get enlightened super fast!

The bodhisattva is a wonderful and useful archetype for our work as socially engaged Buddhists, although in traditional Buddhist circles the bodhisattva is often viewed as an exalted being, like Kuan Yin, or Avalokitesvara, or Samantabhadra—godlike deities of the Buddhist pantheon. So, ordinary people say "I can't be a bodhisattva. That's grandiose. That's ridiculous." But the bodhisattva is an archetype that makes sense for these times. It's not about grandiosity or trying to be great. It's just that there's so much suffering these days and we want to do what we can to liberate beings and to liberate the world.

What would be the socially engaged version of the bodhisattva path? It means taking our power. It means choosing to act with as much wisdom and compassion as we possibly can. And it means settling for nothing less than full liberation of the personal, relational, social, and political realms of existence. That's not the classical Buddhist understanding, but I think it's the understanding that our times require.

The Tool Kit

We have several tools to work with, as budding bodhisattvas.

Intention

The first thing in our tool kit is our intention. This is connected with the concept of *bodhicitta*, familiar to Tibetan practitioners. "Bodhi" means awakened, and "citta" means heart, or mind. So, *bodhicitta* is the aspiration for an awakened heart and mind.

Having true *bodhicitta* is enormously difficult. His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that he thinks that maybe once or twice he has experienced *bodhicitta*! His Holiness is quite modest, but what he says indicates that *bodhicitta* is really a big deal. He says that if you've had it even for one second, it's an amazingly profound experience. But we *can* have it, the intention to develop *bodhicitta*, even if it's only a glimmer.

We can set our motivation. We can say prayers like the one in the Tibetan tradition: "May the precious *bodhicitta* arise where it has not arisen. And where it has arisen, may it not decrease, but increase, further and further." I try to say that prayer every morning. I

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forget a lot, but I try to say it as much as possible. “May the aspiration for the awakened heart and mind grow and grow and grow.”

Spiritual Practice

The next thing the bodhisattva has in her tool kit is her spiritual practice. For many of us, this is a meditation practice. For others it might be chanting, visualization, or other devotional practices. Whatever helps us to know ourselves more clearly is a useful tool. For myself I can say that because of my meditation practice I can see things more clearly and I can see myself more clearly. It’s really simple. Because of my meditation practice, wisdom grows, compassion grows.

We also learn from our practice that it’s not really “me” trying to help the world. When we sit in meditation, we see phenomena rise and pass away. We watch ourselves with this thought or that feeling—“Oh yeah! I’m angry! I’m fearful!”—and then we see that these are just movements of the mind. And as we do this, day after day, the mind relaxes some, and lets go.

Then what happens is we begin to be less identified with our sense of self when we are *off* the meditation cushion. Sometimes this happens when we’re in a service or social-change situation like cooking at a soup kitchen or planning a protest, and we think: “It’s not *me* doing this!” It’s as though something is coming through us.

Putting our spiritual practice into our tool kit also means, at times, taking time out to practice or go on a retreat. Bodhisattvas can be greatly nourished by going on a retreat and not doing anything for a little while. We must learn to respect our cycles of being in and out of the world of activity.

Non-attachment

The tool kit is stocked with lots of non-attachment. Because of my meditation practice, because I am doing the work every moment of letting go, or of *trying* to let go, I’m less attached to the results of my actions. A bodhisattva has got to be non-attached! But keep in mind that we’re talking about an ideal here. So of course we’re attached, as long as we’re human. Still, this is our vision, and we can take steps towards it.

I encourage bodhisattvas to think in terms of geological time. There’s so much work to do, and if we get impatient about results, we are only going to suffer. I often feel kind of hopeless. The misery of the world seems so profound these days, set into stark relief by recent events. But from the long-term perspective, patience is what’s called for. We don’t have to change things overnight. But this doesn’t mean that there’s so much time that we can be lazy. It means acting with simultaneous passion and non-attachment.

Action

The fourth tool in the bodhisattva’s tool kit is action itself. Even when she feels exhausted or like nothing is

worth doing, the bodhisattva still acts, but not in a blind way. She knows how to respect her limits. But her action is a flowering of her practice; she comes into her buddha nature through each act of making change.

One way to think about this is that when we act, we develop what are called the *Paramitas*, or the Perfections, of Virtue: generosity, ethics, patience, effort, meditation, and wisdom. Generosity is developed through service, through social-change work. So are the others. Day after day, we show up at the clinic or the march, or create new institutions, or protest even though we think people are laughing at us. Through these actions we develop perseverance and generosity of heart, which is a deepening of our spiritual practice. In traditional social-change circles, acting may not be considered particularly spiritual, but for the bodhisattva, working for change is a profoundly spiritual act.

History and Analysis

The fifth thing in the bodhisattva’s tool kit is analysis. The bodhisattva’s work is grounded in what people have done before us. It’s grounded in knowing Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., and the history of nonviolence teachings. The bodhisattva is very happy to study feminism, labor movements, liberation theology, and all of the work that’s been done on issues of racism, for instance. And of course the bodhisattva is well versed in dharma teachings. All of this study gives the bodhisattva a practical background for making decisions and creating strategy.

Community

The sixth tool in the bodhisattva’s tool kit is community. The bodhisattva doesn’t like to act alone. The bodhisattva gets very lonely! Therefore we create community around the work that we’re doing, so that we all can be bodhisattvas together. I have a dear friend who told me that when he took on the bodhisattva vows, he felt very heavy, as though he had taken on the weight of the whole world. But after a time he realized, “Hey, wait a minute! I took the bodhisattva vow—but so did a whole lot of other people! Wait a minute! A lot of us are carrying the weight of the world! It’s not that hard!”

If we can create community around us, then we’ll be in good shape. Then we’ll have mirrors to reflect back our mistakes when we screw up. And when we’re doing great we can celebrate together, and play!

Obstacles on the Path

There are countless obstacles we will encounter when we embark on the bodhisattva path. A major one is doubt. “Who, me? A bodhisattva? You gotta be kidding! That’s super grandiose. I’m just an ordinary person.” Well yes, we are ordinary people. And, we can have extraordinary motivation. What’s wrong with that?

A relevant and useful book about the history of the bodhisattva archetypes and about contemporary exemplars is Taigen Dan Leighton’s *Bodhisattva Archetypes: Classic Buddhist Guides to Awakening and Their Modern Expression* (Penguin, \$14.95)

Self-judgment may also arise: “Oh, I’m the worst bodhisattva in the history of the entire world!” It’s probably not true. If we’re really filled with self-judgment we can talk to ourselves and say, “Well, you know, I’m not doing too bad, for a bodhisattva in training.”

Another difficulty that we often have is that we don’t know where to act. The world is a mess. How can we find the place where we can best contribute? We can get paralyzed by this feeling. Best here is to follow our hearts. Go to the place we feel drawn to, whether it is helping kids read or overthrowing global capitalism. If our hearts are there, that’s where we will do the best work.

Another obstacle is the feeling “Oh no! This is too soon! I’m not ready!” I think the events of 9/11 gave us a really big message about being ready. What I felt inside myself was that it’s time to step into our power now, regardless of how ready we think we are. The world situation is so critical that if we’re going to embody peace and work for change, now is the time.

Fruition

Ultimately, the fruit of the bodhisattva path is a meaningful life. It’s a life where our highest spiritual and social ideals are completely merged. It’s a life where we can look into our hearts and say, “Yes, this is a life well-lived.” The bodhisattva path is a commitment, it’s a huge deal. At the same time, when we give ourselves this challenge, we find ourselves rising to the occasion, and we say, “Yeah, I can do this! Why not?!” Because deep inside us, we’re noticing that it feels right, and we’re willing to take it on. Actually, we have no choice. It’s a commitment to our own healing, and to the healing of the world. A Hopi Elder said:

You have been telling the people that this is the eleventh hour. Now you must go back and tell the people that *this* is the hour, and there are things to be considered. Where are you living? What are you doing? What are your relationships? Are you in right relationship? Where is your water? Know your garden. It’s time to speak your truth, to create your communities, to be good to each other, and not look outside yourself for a leader...

At this time in history, we are to take nothing personally, least of all ourselves. For the moment that we do that, our spiritual growth comes to a halt. The time of the lone wolf is over. Gather yourselves. Banish the word “struggle” from your attitude and vocabulary. All that we do now must be done in a sacred way, and in celebration. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. v

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