HOW TO BE A BODHISATTVA

How do we respond to life appropriately, with compassion and skillfulness? This is our challenge as human beings. The bodhisattva practices, says Zen teacher **REB ANDERSON**, give us a roadmap.

A MONK ONCE ASKED the ancient Chinese Zen master Yunmen, "What is the teaching of the whole lifetime of Buddha?" Yunmen replied, "An appropriate response."

These words are simple, but it is often difficult moment by moment to realize an appropriate response to the complex and turbulent world in which we live. Fortunately, there are teachings and practices to show us the way in this great endeavor.

I believe the six heroic practices of bodhisattvas, known as the *paramitas*, or transcendent perfections, represent the appropriate response of the buddhas.

These practices invite us to enter the mind of buddha. They are based on the bodhisattva vow to become buddha in order to benefit and liberate all living beings.

The six great paramita practices of bodhisattva heroes and heroines of enlightenment are called generosity, ethical discipline, patience, heroic effort, concentration, and wisdom. These practices are methods of training bodhisattvas to leap beyond duality, suffering, and delusion, while also leaping beyond enlightenment. These great, transcendent practices arise in communion with buddha. They are a path of training in being fully ourselves and allowing things to be fully themselves. From that fullness, an appropriate response comes forth. These teachings help us to understand the dynamism and vitality within the stillness and the silence of the buddhas.

Bodhisattvas are beings like us who aspire to the unsurpassed, complete, perfect awakening that is buddhahood. *Bodhisattva* is a Sanskrit word frequently translated into English as "enlightening being," or "the mind of awakening." One Tibetan translation of bodhisattva, however, is "enlightenment hero."

In Sanskrit, the six bodhisattva practices are called the six paramitas, which is commonly translated as the "six perfections." The word *paramita* literally means "going beyond." This going beyond can be taken in various ways. It may be understood as going beyond suffering. Another sense of it is that the paramitas go beyond themselves and beyond our ideas of what they are. Through them we transcend both the world and our ideas of practice.

The paramitas invite us to train in innumerable ways in order to become thoroughly and completely ourselves. This may seem ironic because we usually think we are already ourselves when we begin this path of the heroic bodhisattvas. But we don't understand what it means to be fully ourselves, and therefore, we do need training. When we are fully ourselves, we see that our lives are fragile and that we can be tender with our fragile lives. When we are tender, our lives do not become less fragile. Rather, through our deep acceptance that life is fragile, the door to an appropriate response opens. This is the door to the activity of wisdom.

When we meet things in this way, we are able to respond to things as they are. We are generous with our lives. We are also careful, gentle, tender, mindful, patient, relaxed, open, and undistracted. Even in

Left: A 14th-century Chinese statue of a bodhisattva. A bodhisattva is someone who has committed themselves totally to the well-being of others, delaying their own enlightenment until all suffering ends.

the beginning stages of spiritual practice, when we open to things as they appear to us, we are opening to myriad possibilities for a kind, skillful, and flexible response to emerge.

When we first engage with these transcendent practices, we do so according to our idea of them. As we practice with them we discover that they are not only what we think they are. They are also beyond our thoughts and understanding. We begin by practicing with our idea of generosity, our idea of being ethical and patient, and our idea of diligent effort. By training this way, we come to the perfection of wisdom, wherein we realize the actual practice of giving, which is free of our ideas about giving. The actual practice of moral discipline leaps beyond our ideas of morality and realizes the morality of the buddhas. And so on through each of the six paramitas.

Bodhisattvas train in these six heroic practices in the conventional world in which we find ourselves. These great practices help us to be kind and compassionate within the limits of our understanding of the world as it appears to us. They help us to offer our compassionate and kind action in the conventional world, and, at the same time, they train our minds so that we open to wisdom, which is the realization of the ultimate and inconceivable nature of reality. When these practices are perfected by wisdom leaping beyond, they free us from our limited understanding. They help us realize the place where we really are—the only place from which an appropriate response is fully realized.

The Six Heroic Practices

IN THE BODHISATTVA PRACTICE of the paramitas, compassion and kindness are developed and conveyed with increasing skill.

The first three practices bring benefit to living beings. When we engage in the first three practices with beings who are suffering, including ourselves, we offer our gentle, kind presence and attention. The second three—where we develop heroic effort, concentration, and wisdom—are practices that go beyond benefitting sentient beings to liberating them. The perfection of wisdom (*prajna paramita*) perfects the other five practices.

THE FIRST PRACTICE: GIVING

Generosity (*dana paramita*) comes to life in the world of living beings by welcoming them and by being gracious to whatever arises and ceases. Other words for generosity include giving, graciousness, and welcoming.

In the training of generosity, we focus on giving and receiving our life and our practice wholeheartedly, and on offering our life and practice as a gift. As the practice develops, we come to understand that every arising and ceasing is a gift. When we are generous, we become fully grounded in the way things really are. Thus, when our giving fully flowers, it becomes perfect wisdom.

THE SECOND PRACTICE: ETHICAL DISCIPLINE

Ethical discipline (*shila paramita*) focuses on being attentive to all our actions of body, speech, and thought. Ethics is about responding with attention, care, and tenderness to animate beings, including ourselves, and even to inanimate beings. It is to be upright without leaning into concerns for personal gain and loss.

All of the great bodhisattva practices are encompassed in the precepts of ethical training. For some people, at some times, the practice of ethics may include a formal ceremony of commitment to the bodhisattva precepts.

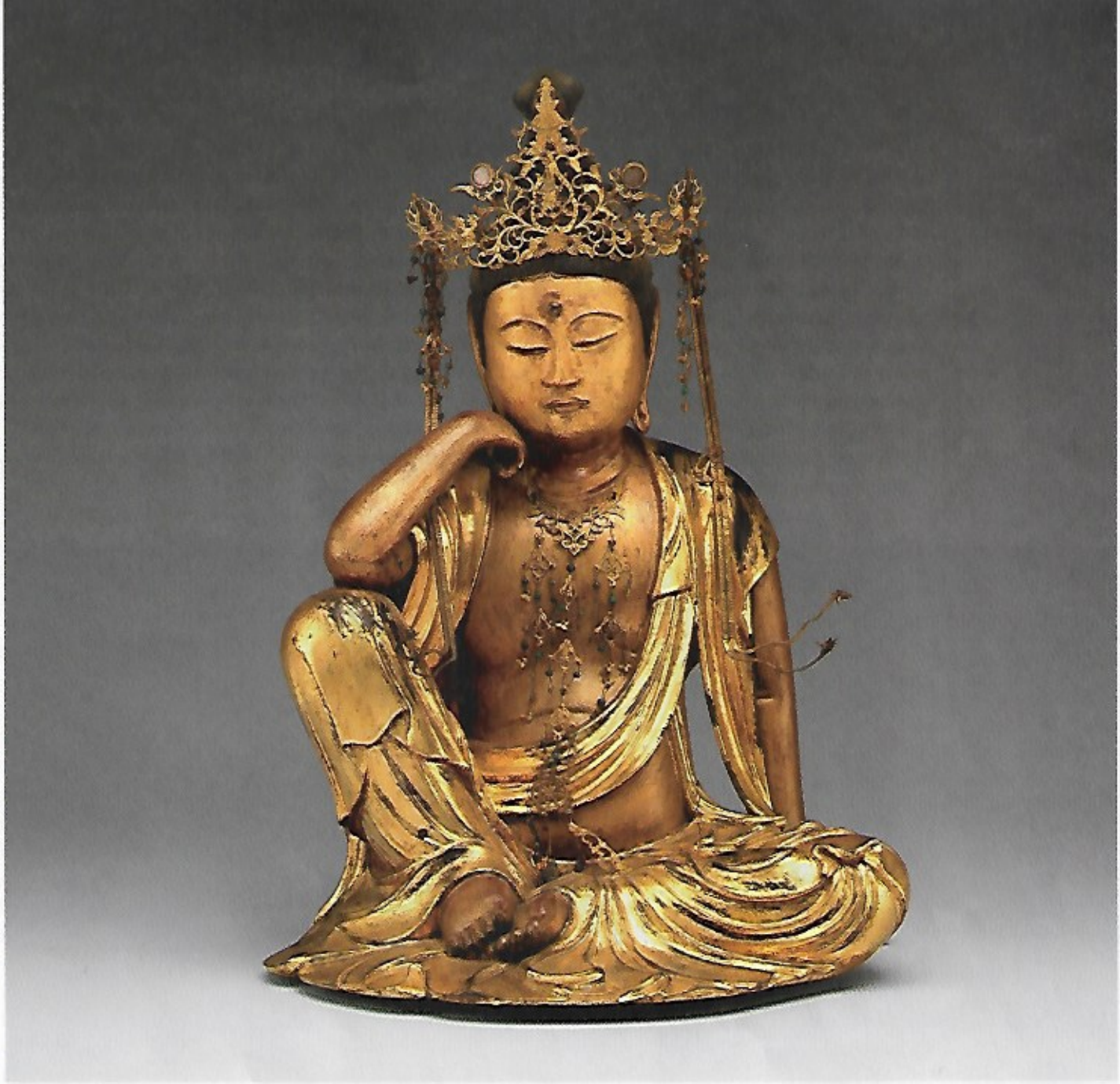
THE THIRD PRACTICE: PATIENCE

Patience (*kshanti paramita*) is the ability to sit calmly in the center of all suffering. Other words for patience include presence, endurance, forbearance, and tolerance.

Patience is not waiting for painful circumstances to go away. It is not attempting to control our experience. Patience is not trying to get away from physical and emotional discomfort, and it is not wallowing in them. The practice of patience is supported by generosity and ethics, and in turn, it protects them. Training in patience encourages us to be wholeheartedly present with whatever comes and goes. We will need great patience in order to enter the practices of heroic effort, concentration, and wisdom.

THE FOURTH PRACTICE: HEROIC EFFORT

Heroic effort (*virya paramita*) is energetic and joyful about the bodhisattva work of realizing unsur-



NYOIRIN KANNON, DATED 1693, JAPAN. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, ROGERS FUND, 1956. WWW.METMUSEUM.ORG

passed, complete, and perfect awakening for the welfare and liberation of the world. Other words for heroic effort are enthusiasm, diligence, vigor, energy, and joyful endeavor.

This practice includes developing and renewing our energy to work wholeheartedly with all of the other practices. We need energy to train in the first three perfections, and we will need even greater and more heroic energy to practice the last two.

Training in heroic effort is a pivotal point in the process of bodhisattva training. It is the point at which we pivot from the first three practices, which bring benefit to beings, and turn toward the practices of concentration and wisdom, in which we begin probing the nature of reality with the intention to liberate all beings.

THE FIFTH PRACTICE: CONCENTRATION

In the Zen tradition, concentration (*dhyana paramita*) means having a mind that is tranquil, focused, and able to deeply contemplate all phenomena. It is a state of awareness that is undistracted from the bodhisattva intention of living for the welfare of all. Our bodhisattva concentration develops in the

There are many bodhisattvas in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, each representing a different attribute of selfless, enlightened mind. This statue depicts the Bodhisattva of Compassion—Avalokiteshvara in Sanskrit, Kannon in Japanese, Guanyin in Chinese—who is the most popular deity in Mahayana Buddhist cultures.

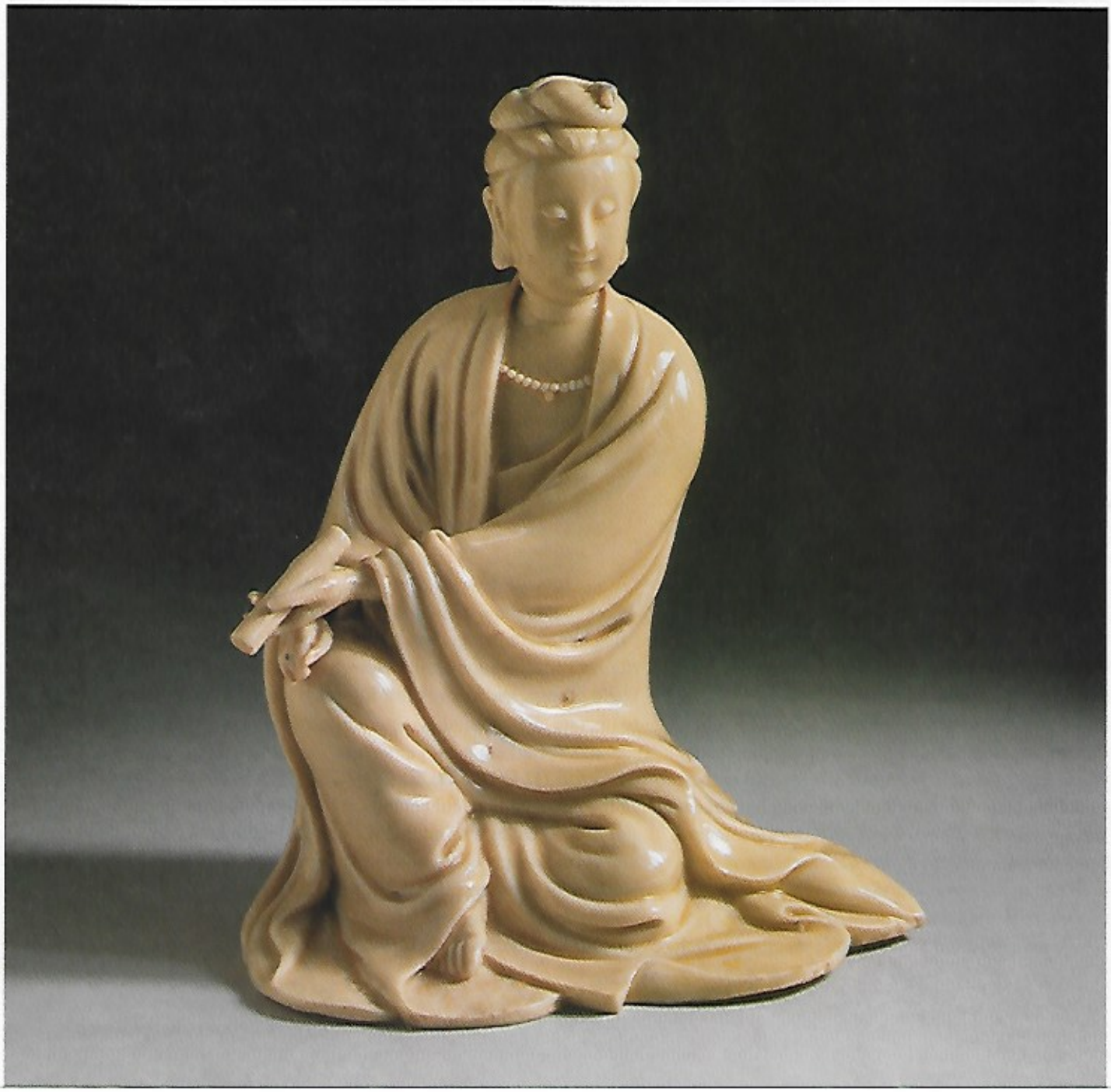
service of the vow to save all sentient beings. It is infused with generosity, ethical discipline, patience, and joyful effort.

The perfection of concentration arises simultaneously with the perfection of wisdom. Both of these terms include two aspects of practice. One is focusing our attention and becoming tranquil. The other is contemplating teachings and other phenomena in a state of tranquility.

In the background of the discussion of concentration and meditation, there are Sanskrit words which may be familiar to the reader from other contexts. These words include *dhyana*, *samadhi*, *shamatha*, *vipashyana*, and *prajna*.

THE SIXTH PRACTICE: PERFECT WISDOM

The perfection of wisdom (*prajna paramita*) is never-ending practice. It is wisdom that leaps beyond wisdom. The first three practices ground us in conventional truth. Perfect wisdom does not abandon conventional truth. It depends on becom-



AVALOKITESVARA (GUANYIN), THE BODHISATTVA OF COMPASSION, ABOUT 1644–1700, CHINA. LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART, GIFT OF CARL HOLMES. WWW.LACMA.ORG

ing intimate with this foundation through the practice of the first five paramitas.

Perfect wisdom is the profound understanding of our true nature and of our true relationships with all beings. Prajna paramita constantly evolves and is always fresh within ever-changing circumstances. It is an intimate face-to-face conversation with all beings—the spontaneous, appropriate response of all buddhas.

The Order of the Six Paramitas

IN THE REALITY of a buddha's awakening, these six practices all occur together simultaneously, and each practice includes all of the others. However, they are often taught and learned sequentially.

In the *Samdhinirmocana Mahayana Sutra*, Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Infinite Compassion, asks the Buddha, "How does one know the order of the teaching of these six perfections is like this?"

The Buddha replies, "Avalokiteshvara, it is because the six perfections serve as bases for progressively higher achievements. Bodhisattvas who do not focus on their bodies and physical resources—those who practice generosity—achieve ethical discipline. Those who guard their moral practice become patient. Those who have patience initiate heroic effort. Those who initiate effort achieve concentration. Those who achieve concentration attain wisdom that transcends the world."

Each of the paramitas is supported by the practices that precede it, and each supports what succeeds it. In turn, each one deepens and transforms the practices it is built upon.

These six paramitas may also be seen as practices to deal with forms of ignorance, beginning with the grosser and continuing on to work with the more and more subtle. For example, the perfections of generosity and ethics antidote ignorance in the form of greed. They help us to let go of our wish to possess things. The perfections of patience and enthusiastic effort antidote ignorance in the form of aversion and laziness. These practices enable us to allow things to be themselves, and they help us to remember and protect our aspiration to save beings. The perfections of concentration and wisdom antidote ignorance in the form of delusion; they help us to realize ultimate truth. The six paramitas are an open-ended and endless process of training.

Generosity is the foundation upon which all of these bodhisattva practices rest. Generosity is joyful, and we need joy in order to devote ourselves continuously to these challenging practices. When we practice giving first, our ethical practice is informed by generosity, and thus our ethics are protected from becoming judgmental or dogmatic. By practicing ethics, we have more confidence in relaxing and calming down, which is necessary for meditation. When we practice generosity and ethics together and then practice patience, we are able to open to our experience without trying to control it. Patience supports us to be fully present in our lives so we can make the heroic effort to liberate suffering beings.

We usually begin with some enthusiasm for practice. This is beginner's luck. As our aspiration to liberate beings is clarified through the first three paramitas, we are able to bring forth even greater effort that will support us in the practices of concentration and wisdom. Joy comes when we cultivate all of these practices in this way. When they work together, these practices support a concentration that opens us to wisdom.

Zen Is Great Compassion

WHEN WE LOOK at the literature of Zen, the word *compassion* does not often appear as a headline, but it should.

In Zen practice, it is assumed that we are bodhisattvas and that we aspire to practice compassion together with all beings. Because this assumption is so basic in the context of Japanese Zen, sometimes it is not even mentioned. Great compassion is the ground of perfect wisdom, and the teachings of the buddhas are about how to purify and deepen compassion. So in Zen, we have the basic practices of compassion, and we have many teachings and stories to hone our compassion and purify it from all dualistic forms of thinking.

When we open to wisdom, our practice does not end; it continues with a deep and dynamic understanding of our connection with all beings. We expe-

Left: The Bodhisattva of Compassion. We can all be bodhisattvas, to the best of our ability. It starts with our intention to practice the transcendent perfections—what Reb Anderson calls the six heroic practices—to relieve the suffering of others and bring them joy and happiness.

rience ongoing, moment-by-moment practice of all six paramitas wherein the appropriate response of the buddhas blooms. Many of the most famous Zen stories don't mention compassion, but they are actually stories about how to free compassion from the impurities of dualistic thinking. Most of the ongoing open-ended work of the Zen bodhisattva is kindness and compassion in the form of the first five paramitas. Wisdom is the final touch on the masterpiece of great compassion.

Do You Sense a Wish for Buddhahood?

BODHISATTVAS VOW to live for both the welfare and the liberation of all beings. To accomplish this, they wish to attain unsurpassed, complete, perfect enlightenment; that is, they wish to realize buddhahood. Bodhisattvas are beings just like us who wish to become buddhas. The heroic bodhisattva practices of the paramitas protect and nurture our intention to find a kind response to the world of suffering, and, simultaneously, they open us to the realization of perfect wisdom that liberates all beings.

Many people wish to help others, but they have not yet discovered the aspiration to realize buddhahood for that purpose. If we look into our hearts and minds, and discover the aspiration to help beings, and we take care of that wish, it may eventually grow into the aspiration to realize buddhahood. Is there a wish for the welfare of beings in your heart? Do you sense a wish for buddhahood?

As we continue on our path, we will awaken to the reality that our entire life and practice is not something that we do alone. We understand that our practice is a gift to us from all beings and a gift that we give to all beings. This is the ultimate truth of our life. Perfect wisdom is the thorough understanding of this generosity—a state wherein we meet the Buddha teaching the dharma face-to-face. ♦

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WHERE JOY COMES FROM

REB ANDERSON on the secret to enjoying your practice—and your life

Tenshin Reb Anderson is a quiet pillar of American Zen. An important teacher in the lineage of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, he generally sticks close to home at Green Gulch Farm Zen Center, where he supervises a rigorous program to train Zen priests. He has written only four books, the most recent excerpted in this issue, and all are milestones in American Buddhism. I visited Reb at Green Gulch recently for a far-ranging conversation that will be part of a forthcoming podcast series of in-depth interviews with important Buddhist teachers. Among many things, we talked about the sometimes underappreciated role of warmth and joy in Buddhist practice.

—*MELVIN MCLEOD*

Sometimes meditation is thought of as the neutral observation of what's happening inside us. But I don't think it works just to be cool, detached observers of ourselves. Meditation has to start with warmth, with a caring and understanding attitude toward ourselves, or it can turn meditation into just another form of stoicism.

Tenshin Reb Anderson: Unless we bring in warmth and compassion, that stoic thing doesn't work. In the four *brahmaviharas*, the divine abodes, the final one is equanimity, which is kind of neutral and impartial. If we try to practice equanimity without first practicing loving-kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy, then equanimity can become dissociation and repression.

If we have some problem, the way to deal with it is not to destroy or fight it. It's to embrace it with compassion, become intimate with it, become relaxed and playful and creative with it. Then there will be liberation.

The stoic or the neutral has its place, but only once you're intimate with others and yourself, which you do through being kind to yourself and others. Once you're intimately involved, then you can look dispassionately. Just to look, just to be present, only works when you are not running away from the suffering of all beings. Buddhists sit with equanimity in the middle of the suffering of beings and then turn the wheel of the dharma for all the suffering they're seeing.

So dispassion in this case is based on compassion.

Yes. So it's compassion, dispassion; compassion, dispassion.

And that cycle of compassion and equanimity continues endlessly. Your teacher, Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, described the path of the bodhisattva as "a single rail that runs straight forever," meaning that the bodhisattva's work continues until samsara is emptied.

Another translation of that quote is that the bodhisattva path is a 10,000-mile iron road. The Japanese word for railroad is "iron road." The practice is open-ended. To think that it comes to an end is antithetical to the practice.

The essence of the bodhisattva path is a total commitment to the well-being of others. How is that different from other spiritual and moral systems that preach the same kind of selflessness?

The bodhisattva ethics follow from the practice of generosity, and generosity is not holding onto things. Bodhisattva ethics are based on not being possessive, not being self-righteous, and allowing yourself to be called into question. Some people do what they think is ethical, but they're not open to being questioned about it.

Unlike other religions, Buddhism looks at ethics through the lens of emptiness. If you apply what's called the three-fold purity, there is no practitioner of ethics, no ethics, and no object of ethics. All are fundamentally pure, empty of a solid self. This is much more open and fluid than how other systems would approach it.

As Buddhists, we want to be mindful of our ethical behavior, but we don't want to be possessive of the precepts. We don't want to be possessive of our understanding. We don't want to be too certain. The way we protect ourselves from being overly certain and self-righteous is by conversation—by being open to being questioned about our moral understanding and behavior. That's key.

As Buddhists we might think that enjoyment is a function of ego and has nothing to do with enlightenment. But if we don't enjoy the practice, then it becomes like some sort of medicine—it tastes bad, but it's good for us. We either force ourselves to do it, or we stop practicing. How do we find joy in the practice—and in our lives?

Tenshin Reb Anderson

It's not just that if you don't have joy, you're not going to do the practice. I would say that if you don't have joy, you're not actually *doing* the practice. It's true that you won't do it. But it's also true that without joy, it's *not* the practice. The practice has joy running through it.

Many people come to me and say, I'm still practicing, but I feel like I'm going through the motions. I'm not really joyful anymore. They don't understand that you have to rekindle your joy on a regular basis. Enjoyment, the practice of joy, is at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the path.

Joy comes from the practice of generosity. Generosity, when it's mature, is extremely joyful. It's the first step on the bodhisattva path, and we keep practicing it every step of the way. The joyfulness of generosity runs through all Buddhist practice.

If you're practicing without generosity, the practice goes flat. But that's not the end of the story, because when you go back and practice generosity again, the joy will return. We have to keep coming back again and again to the practice of generosity, back to the joy. Generosity is a constant refreshing of our joyful enthusiasm. That's a daily thing, an hourly thing. Over and over. If we don't practice generosity, we lose the joy. And if we don't have joy, we lose the practice.

Now, just our own joy is not the goal. The goal is to liberate beings so we all may joyfully live together in peace. This is the bodhisattva's goal. However, this goal is not separate from our life right now, and our joyful practice realizes this.

And could anything be more joyful than being completely dedicated to giving others joy? Is that the single rail of the bodhisattva we talked about earlier.

Yes, it is. That's the single rail, and it runs eternally. ♦