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THE PATH OF THE BODHISATTVA [Hekigan Roku: Case 89]
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Sesshin Teisho

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This text addresses some of the most fundamental and delicate religious issues.

Therefore, it should be read, quoted and analysed in a mindful way.

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THE PATH OF THE BODHISATTVA
Subhana Barzaghi

Ungan asked Dojo, "How does the Bodhisattva Kanzeon use all those many hands and eyes?"

Dogo answered, "It is like a man in the middle of the night reaching behind his head for his pillow."

Ungan said, "I understand."

Dogo said, "How do you understand it?"

Ungan said, "The whole body is hand and eye."

Dogo said, "That is very well expressed, but it is only eight-tenths of the answer."

Ungan said, "How would you say it, Elder Brother?"

Dogo said, "Throughout the body, the hand and eye."

Hekigan Roku: Case 89

The Bodhisattva ideal is particular to the Mahayana Path. Bodhi means awakened one, sattva means being. Together they mean a person who is awake and who is committed to the liberation and well-being of every human being and creature.

One of the grand archetypal images of the Bodhisattva of Compassion is portrayed with 1,000 arms and eyes. In this imagery, the eyes of the Bodhisattva symbolise wisdom, while the hands symbolise compassion. The compassion and wisdom of the 1,000 arms and eyes are symbols of active help to those who are suffering and the readiness to take on the suffering of all other beings.

The question is, "How does the Bodhisattva of great compassion use those many hands and eyes?" Or, in other words, what is the Bodhisattva way of being in the world? What are some of the ways we can bring wisdom and compassion into the world?

Dogo said, "It's like a person in the middle of the night reaching behind their head for their pillow."

This is a very interesting answer. There is a lovely image of naturalness in this response. It suggests a person who is half conscious and half asleep, like in a dream, instinctively groping around in the dark and reaching back for the pillow. This is a metaphor for true compassion which comes from a truly natural response. Our deepest natural response arises from the act of forgetting the self.

A commonly held but erroneous view is that the Bodhisattva seeks Buddhahood through the systematic practice of perfect virtues but renounces complete entry into nirvana until all beings cross over to the other shore, and are liberated.

In our Bodhisattva vows we chant, "The many beings are numberless, I vow to save them." But how do we save the many beings? The correct Mahayana perspective is that realisation is the act of "forgetting the self". In the moment of "forgetting the self", we are united with all beings in the universe and in doing so we liberate them, because in truth we are not separate from all beings. This is what is meant by saving all beings.

To follow the trail of a true human being is to hear the call of suffering and use every circumstance to express compassion and understanding. As our practice widens we gather a greater capacity to bear witness and embrace the suffering in the world. One of the pitfalls is that we can hold some inflated or idealistic image of ourselves as the saviour, the rescuer, the do-gooder, none of which reflects who we actually are. The Bodhisattva way is the way of true simplicity, it is the art of being very attentive, listening with an open spacious heart and returning the freedom and wonder to every encounter, to every situation.

The Bodhisattva within each of you knows that love is irresistible and perhaps irreversible. There is no going back. Once we encounter awareness and love we see through our narrow old ways of contraction, stubbornness, fear, defensiveness, anger and greed. Although we may revisit our old patterns, we tend to no longer be buried by them. We come to abide and trust that love and wisdom are irresistible and transform whatever they touch.

Within each of you is this spirit, this light, this generosity and peace of our Buddha nature which are in many ways the greatest gifts we can bring to the earth. It's just that sometimes this light gets a little buried as we scratch out a meagre existence in our own little backyards, preoccupied with trying to keep the grass down.

I remember one of my earliest practices in the Tibetan tradition which was to sit and contemplate the thought that every being I ever have or will encounter has been at some time my mother, father, brother, uncle, aunt, sister, son or daughter. It seems bizarre to contemplate that this ant was once my father in some previous life. Yet, strange as it is, it brings with it a respect, reverence and tenderness for all life and greater responsiveness to all creatures. Whether it is literally true or not is irrelevant, we can open our hearts to this reverence and experience this ant and bird as our brothers, that we are interconnected and interdependent in the seamless fabric of

totality.

One of the great qualities of the Bodhisattva way of being in the world is to practice with a listening heart. Fran Peavey, a social and peace activist, shared this story about the Compassionate Listening Project. Fran and her friends travelled to various "hot spots" in the world, places of conflict, war or racial violence. They simply walked into these troubled places, sat down and listened. They practised listening with respect and attention to all sides of the conflict. When people felt heard, then the tension eased and a new space and possibility opened up for negotiation.

Right here in my own backyard in Lismore, in the very midst of the local political domain, there is a wonderful story. Councillor Lyn Carson was running as one of the Community Independents for the City Council elections. During their innovative campaign, she and her running mates went to the busy street corners of Lismore and sat down with a sign saying, "Community Independent, willing to listen." One by one people would come up and talk about their concerns.

A truly great story of compassionate listening came out of the Boodan Land Gift Movement in India. One of my earlier teachers, Vimala Thaker, was very involved in this movement and I was reminded of this inspiring story by our recent journey to India. After Gandhi's death, Vinoba Bhave, a senior elder in the Gandhian movement, took a six-month walk on foot half-way across India to a Conference., Vinoba would walk into rural villages along the way and invite everyone to gather around and tell their stories of hardship.

One of the main issues which continually emerged was the plight of the Untouchables, the people Gandhi renamed Harijans or "the children of God". They suffered severe poverty and had no land to grow their own food. Upon hearing their story, Vinoba offered to take their concerns to the Prime Minister, to try and have land reallocated to the landless poor. However, Vinoba knew in his heart that the Indian bureaucracy was so ponderous that it would take forever to bring about even minor changes. He also knew that by the time each petty bureaucrat in each government department took their slice of the land "pie" there would be virtually nothing left for the poor.

Vinoba did not want to create false hope, so the next day he once again gathered together the villagers, this time to apologise and confess his doubt that such action would gain them the land they so desperately needed.

A wealthy landowner in the gathering was deeply moved by Vinoba's integrity and honesty and immediately offered to give some of his land to the Untouchables. In the next village, Vinoba recounted this story of futility and generosity to another gathering and again a wealthy landowner offered some of his land.

By the time Vinoba had reached the conference, two thousand acres had been given back to the poorest villagers. Inspired by Vinoba's work, Vimala also walked across India from east to west and north to south and eventually ten million acres of land was given back to the landless poor without a single hand from the bureaucracy. All of this began with the simple act and spirit of listening.

Our quality of listening does expand. At first we are preoccupied by our own individual song. Meditation helps us to step outside this song

and tune into the great song that moves through all of us. The great song allows us to hear without judgement, without picking and choosing between the ten thousand different voices in the orchestral choir of life from the children's cries and laughter to the complaining, whining voice, the silent voice of oppression, the weeping voice, the critical voice, the joyful, playful voice, the piercing voice of the currawong and the deafening voice of the crickets at sunset. All are intertwined in the song, all are part of ourselves, and yet we are none of these.

In Tung-shan's Five Degrees of Honour and Virtue, the first degree of virtue is when we listen to the ancient song that rests in the heart before time began, the song that is beyond all stories, beyond all goals. This is the virtue of ascending to the world of emptiness where we don't even see the trace of a cloud. Yamada Roshi described it as "the world of no difference, no variations, no phenomena, no concepts." We still wish to save all beings, but there are no beings visible in the whole world.

The second degree of virtue is descending again into the world of differences, this time however seeing each thing as a unique expression of essential nature. Again, the Bodhisattva vow has arisen strongly from our bosom. We now come to honour, and find ourselves bowing to the dawn, bowing to our sangha, bowing to the difficult ex-spouse, bowing to the sick child, bowing to the garbage, bowing with gratitude for our daily bread and cheese, bowing to every kind of person. Whether rich or poor, high or low, we respond accordingly.

Yasutani Roshi added some comments here. "Before the degree of virtue we are not free because of delusion. Upon the degree of virtue we are not free, because of satori, because of attainment and proud realisations. When we attain to the degree of combined virtue for the first time, we are completely free."

To walk the trail of a true human being, one's action must be in harmony with the ancient law of conscious conduct. Our ethical conduct of living and refining the Five Precepts are gifts of non-harming we offer to the world. The positive power of virtue is fathomless. The Five Precepts become our natural abiding place of engaged expression in the world.

It is said there are two great forces in the world; one is the force of hatred, those who are unafraid to kill others; and the other great force arises from those who are unafraid to die and use only weapons of love, insight and compassion.

The following story of Maha Gosananda was told to me first by a peace activist in Thailand. Maha Gosananda is one of those people who uses only weapons of love, who is unafraid to take a stand for truth and practice metta, loving-kindness, even in the face of great adversity and fear of death. He is an inspiring and extraordinary Buddhist monk, one of the last remaining elders in Cambodia. He was invited to open a Buddhist temple on the Thai border, at a refugee camp. As many as 50,000 villagers had been forced to become communists either by threat or at gunpoint and had fled to the refugee camp. These villagers had endured enormous suffering.

Parents and children had been killed, families torn apart, their temples, schools and villages destroyed and burnt. Many had been threatened with death if they attended the opening of the temple, but

despite this, 20,000 villagers turned up for the opening ceremony.

What could Maha Gosananda say to those people whose lives had been totally ripped apart? Maha Gosananda started the ceremony with ancient and traditional Buddhist chants, then he chanted one of the central verses of the Buddha, first in Pali (the traditional language of the Buddha) and then in Cambodian.

Hatred never ceases by hatred
but by love alone is healed.
This is an ancient and eternal law.

He chanted these verses over and over and thousands of people chanted with him and wept. Despite their pain, grief, anger and suffering, the truth they chanted was even grater than their suffering. Truth has the virtue to hold and transform our sorrows.

To act in the world most effectively, our actions cannot come from the small sense of self, our limited identity, our personal hopes and fears. Rather we must listen to a greater possibility, a greater dream for humanity, and cultivate actions connected to our highest intentions. If we listen to the Tao, the deep current of truth and act in accordance with this truth, then no matter what happens, our actions will be OK. Reverence for the dark and the light enables us to move freely in the world, responding with compassion to the suffering and being free in the midst of it all, resting with the Dharma rather than the drama.

If we return to the Case, remember Ungan said, "The whole body is hand and eye." The wisdom of the Bodhisattva is to not be caught and bound by the concepts of time, sage, ordinary, self and other. The distinction between ordinary being and saint are wiped away. Avalokiteshvara's arms raised to save sentient beings become our own, which are now engaged in sipping and drinking a cup of tea, preparing a meal for the family, opening the window to let the light in, inviting a friend over for a chat. These present hands and eyes reveal the whole of it, the whole mystery is revealed right here in your hand, if you look deep enough. The light at work that shines within you, this non-discriminating light that does not waver, with no fixed abode, is unhindered like the moon traversing the sky.

Responding to suffering is only one face of life. Another eye of the Bodhisattva is to live imbued with the face of wonder. In the simple acts of mindfulness, our hearts are unfettered and we see the face of wonder, even in the complexities of our lives. Wonder may be ecstatic, joyous breathtaking, an exhilarating experience of connection with a loved one, a reunion of old dear friends, the joy of the full moon rising over the cliffs, or standing out under the Milky Way. Wonder is joining with this miraculous moment, whatever it may be. Wonder is a state which can only ever be found in the present moment, where we are stripped bare to the pure experience of tree, leaf, walking, touching and seeing.

As we walk further and further into our old growth forests, deeper into our practice, so too our sense of wonder increases, right in amongst the daily rituals of cleaning, breathing, sweeping, sorting and carrying, It's a mystery to stand here in the mist of eternity and not know our own true face. There is wonder in that. It's also a wonder to stand here and see into the vastness and know your roots. But knowing and not-knowing are momentary experiences, states of mind,

changes in consciousness, movements on the surface of the sea. Our original face of wonder is beyond knowing and not-knowing. It's just adjusting the pillow in the middle of the night.

So, Bodhisattvas, what will you do with your many hands and eyes?

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