

## BODHISATTVA ACTION

by Stanley Lombardo  
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If you look up "bodhisattva" in a good dictionary you will find something like this: bodhisattva n. *Buddhism*. An enlightened being who, out of compassion, forgoes nirvana in order to save others. [Sanskrit, "one whose essence is enlightenment": *bodhi*, enlightenment + *sattva*, being]

The bodhisattva ideal is at the heart of Zen Buddhism. It has many different formulations. One that I like very much goes like this:

Practice all good  
Avoid all evil  
Keep your mind pure  
Save the many beings  
Thus all Buddhas have taught.

This was the answer Tao Lin, an old Chinese Zen Master, gave to someone who asked him, "What is Buddhism?" Hearing this answer the questioner said that even a child understood that. The Zen Master replied, "A child may understand it, but even an old

man cannot do it." He meant that it is very difficult to keep one's mind clear and practice compassion. On the other hand, this is everyone's original nature, and bodhisattvas are to be found everywhere. Two old Jewish women I know, for instance. Here's a poem about them working in a soup kitchen run by a Catholic church:

Blanche and Sarah, first generation holocaust Jews, volunteering in the soup kitchen at St. John's, asked by the cafeteria director to lead the staff in prayer: **Blanche**, after an awkward silence: "Just thank God we're here to do this." And Sarah: "Amen. And I hope we're around to do it a lot longer," as she shuffled off to the serving trays.

The phrase "Saving all the people," the work of the bodhisattva, might be misunderstood as missionary work, converting people to Buddhism. It doesn't mean that at all, but simply helping people in whatever way is appropriate to their situation. **Blanche** and Sarah were helping to feed hungry people. It is also possible to feed people's minds, to help them by the very clarity of your own actions. There's another Zen saying: "When your direction is clear, every swing of your arm as you walk down the street saves all people." There are some people who have practiced hard for a long time and whose minds are really clear who have a way about doing the

most ordinary things that touches and awakens other people's minds. I remember this scene when Munindra visited our Zen Center:

Stumbling into the dark Zen Center kitchen before morning bows, don't recognize at first at the sink there the old Theravadin monk who spoke last night. He turns slowly, luminous in our scullery's mirk, and says "Good morning!"

That smile and simple "Good morning," coming right from his center, made the situation complete and helped me wake up to its completeness. That's what we're faced with every moment of our lives: waking up to the completeness of any situation and acting accordingly. The ultimate situation, and the ultimate response, is expressed in this vow, which is said first thing in morning practice: "Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to save them all."

That's a Great Vow alright, and saying it first thing every morning helps give direction to our lives, but it's got to be activated to mean anything. This means being completely open to every situation, finding ways to step around the selfishness and self-consciousness that protect our petty interests and block our minds. In this work other people help us as much, or more than, we help them:

What can you do? A colleague approaches in the hall, you've just heard he has bone-marrow cancer. Embarrassed, you want to hurry by with a mumbled hello but his smile leads you to ask "How's it going, Gerhard?" and he knows you mean it and starts talking. This is called helping each other in the great work of life & death.

Gerhard knew that I was embarrassed, and self-conscious. His smile helped dissolve

that, then our minds connected. This connection between minds is very important. There's a wonderful stanza from the Morning Bell Chant (from the Avatamsaha Sutra) that my wife Judy and I wanted to use in our marriage vows (we used something else similar instead):

Vowing together with all world beings  
Together in Buddha's Ocean of Great Vows  
To save beings of numberless worlds  
You and I simultaneously attain the Way of Buddha.

It sounds like science fiction, "beings of numberless worlds," an intergalactic consortium dedicated to work for the enlightenment of all the races of the cosmos. Maybe that's just what Buddhism is, what bodhisattva action ultimately means. But however much the bodhisattva's work may aim at a cosmic ideal, it is also deeply personal and intimate: "You and I simultaneously attain the Way of Buddha." The old proto-Indo-European root *bheud*, from which *bodhi* (and Buddha) derive, means "to be aware" and "to make aware." I see this reciprocal process most clearly at work and in my marriage (marriage being possibly the keenest test of Zen practice): the constant effort to be aware and to make aware, seeing how one partner's awareness and action out of awareness awakens the other. Seeing the opposite also and realizing the consequences in suffering and confusion both for the marriage, for "you and I," and for the world of people we affect, a much larger world than we usually suspect. When I see this I am moved to renew the great vow and - try, try, try for 10,000 years, finish the great work of life and death, and save all people from suffering. □

Senior Dharma teacher Stanley Lombardo, a Professor of Classics at the University of Kansas, helped edit two of Zen Master Seung Sahn's books, *Bone of Space* (poetry) and *Only Don't Know* (teaching letters). He is currently compiling and editing a book entitled *Ten Gates: Kong-an Study with Zen Master Seung Sahn*. With his wife, Judith Roitman (whose poetry appears elsewhere in this issue), he established the Kansas Zen Center in Lawrence in 1978.

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