

# What Can We Do?

Laura Otto-Salaj

*Adapted from a dharma talk given at Great Lake Zen Center, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.*

The other day, I came across an article in the New York Times by Amanda Gorman, written for the anniversary of President Biden's inauguration. The title was, "Why I Almost Didn't Read My Poem at the Inauguration."

In this article, Amanda talked about how she had been afraid. She didn't want to disappoint so many people with her poem. COVID-19 was raging, and young people couldn't be vaccinated yet, so she remained unvaccinated. And there was the issue of the January 6 assault on the US Capitol building, which is where the ceremony was going to take place—at the time, there were rumors of another insurrection being planned for the day of the inauguration. So, there was a lot of noise in Amanda's head about the ceremony. She had friends telling her to buy a bulletproof vest, and her mom had her crouch in the living room, so that she could practice shielding Amanda's body from bullets. She said someone she loves warned her to "be ready to die" if she went to the Capitol, telling her, "It's just not worth it." She had insomnia and nightmares, and barely ate or drank for days. She really focused on this decision she needed to make, and so many voices were telling her not to go.

The night before she needed to tell the inaugural committee her decision, she was up all night, listening to the quiet of her neighborhood in the early morning. It hit her: she said, "Maybe being brave enough doesn't mean lessening my fear but listening to it." She said she closed her eyes and voiced all her fears. In doing this, she found that what worried her the most was that, if she didn't go to the inauguration and read her poem, she would spend the rest of her life wondering what she could have done with the poem—what she could have accomplished. Her poem was not for her.

Amanda's conundrum resonates with me. My father has been diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment—a precursor to Alzheimer's Disease. His father had it, and his father's father before him. But, this is *my* father, which brings with it a new level of fear I've not felt before. Moving forward, there are many decisions to be made, and it is not always clear which ones are the best. Sometimes, it is easy to get stuck in not acting because of fear of what might happen. How can I not let my attachment to him and fear of what may come get in the way of helping him? Many of us have similar fears and complicated lives.

There is a lot of unrest in the world right now. Sometimes it feels to us like things have never been more unstable in this lifetime, and that there is a lot to fear—the

world seems very complex. But the truth is, there has always been bad news. The first noble truth tells us that life is suffering, and the second noble truth says that suffering is created by mind alone. Human beings are like this—the Buddha taught that we lose sight of the forest of just this moment for the trees of desire, anger, and ignorance. We make things even more complicated than they are.

But where there is bad news, there is also good news. The third noble truth tells us that we can do something about this suffering, and the fourth noble truth points us to the eightfold path, one step of which is right action. So, *action is really important*—it is covered in not one, but two of the four noble truths.

There is a Zen parable, which goes something like this:

One night there was a severe snowstorm in the province where a Zen monastery was located. In the morning, the disciples of the monastery woke to find the snow was waist deep. They trudged through the snow to the meditation hall for morning practice. At the door of the meditation hall, they were greeted by the Zen master. He asked, "Tell me, what should be done now?"

One disciple said, "We should all meditate on thawing so that the snow melts."

Another disciple said, "We should wait in our rooms and allow the snow to take its natural course."

The third disciple said, "The one who saw the truth does not care if there is snow or not."

The Zen master looked at the students and sighed. "Now listen to what I will say. Each of you take a shovel and off you go." Not so complicated—just this moment, action cuts through thinking. Just shovel snow.

Yesterday, the clear and respected teacher Thich Nhat Hanh died at the age of ninety-five. Many people talk about him as the "father of engaged Buddhism." About that, he said, "To say 'engaged Buddhism' is redundant. How can it be Buddhism if it is not engaged?" He also said, "My actions are my only true belongings." Zen Master Seung Sahn often taught, "Just do it"—we hear this all the time in our school. Sometimes we let our emotions or attachments get in the way of action, like being afraid of failure, embarrassment, or that the outcome won't be what we *want*. We say we're too busy, or we let the inertia of inaction take over by doing nothing, which is a choice in itself. Practice is so important, because it allows us to see clearly the roots of suffering and cut them off through action—in spite of fear, or lethargy, or other issues that can get in the way of doing our job of helping others.

*(Continued on p. 25)*

[21

(Continued from p. 19)

becomes a reality.

Chanting also helps us with our sitting meditation. If you've ever just sat down on your cushion without some chanting prior to it, you can tell the difference. I could sense that in my own practice, and so always included one or two chants before my sitting practice at home. At a retreat a few years ago, one of my teachers said that he believed chanting helped us settle into our sitting meditation. The word *settle* caught my attention. Settling in this context connotes "coming to rest" or "sinking into." It was interesting to learn that chanting increases serotonin levels, which stabilizes our mood—lessening anxiety and bringing calmness to our heart and mind. Sarah Keating writes in "The World's Most Accessible Stress Reliever" (BBC, May 2020) that cortisol levels also decrease with chanting, letting our muscles relax and slowing our heart rate. The deep, diaphragmatic breathing often required of chanting increases vagal nerve tone, which slows the beating of our heart and lowers our blood pressure. Because of these physiological changes, chanting helps us come to rest in our sitting meditation practice with more focus and concentration. Newberg and Waldman also point out that even doing a quiet mantra has been shown to activate areas of the brain that decrease anxiety and increase our connection to others.

None of this will help, though, without some effort. Many of us have had the experience of chanting on

autopilot while our brains have taken us in all different directions and then suddenly we're at the end of the chant. Or sometimes we end up repeating verses or skipping verses—and suddenly everyone in the sangha is confused! Zen Master So Sahn in the *Mirror of Zen* cautions us against chanting in a pro forma manner: "Merely chanting with the lips is nothing more than recitation of the Buddha's name. Chanting with a one-pointed mind is true chanting. Just mouthing the words without mindfulness, absorbed in habitual thinking, will do no real good for your practice." As with all meditation practice, we must bring our attention back over and over again to the chant, the sound of our voice and the sounds of the voices around us. Zen Master Dae Bong said, "If there is any kind of thinking, any kind of feeling, or any kind of thing going on, take that energy and put it into the sound. Then there is no thinking at all, only the sound."

Chanting is a wonderful practice both in together action and when practicing alone. The energy of strong together action in chanting upholds us, bonds us, and soothes the heat of our passions and thinking mind. The solitary chants or mantras at dawn bring centeredness to the day. The sound of chanting carries into the room and out into the world, touching lives with the compassion of Kwan Seum Bosal or the blessings of the Great Dharani. ♦

[25

(Continued from p. 21)

Amanda Gorman said in her article: "Fear can be love trying its best in the dark." The darkness of desire, anger, and ignorance, of attachment to emotion, can be cut through with practice. With practice, we can reveal our Buddha nature and use it to act—to help.

Ultimately, Amanda realized that there was nothing else to do but to go to the inauguration. She said, "I can't say I was completely confident in my choice, but I was completely committed to it." She made a choice to just do it, 100 percent. Many of us have had times in our lives when there was nothing else to do but have great faith in our actions, even if we were uncertain of the outcome. In our school, we're fortunate to have a lot of resources to help us attain clear direction—online sangha and practice, local Zen centers, the teachings of the Buddha and our teachers, and so on. All of these provide direction so we can see the moment clearly, "try try try" and not be attached to the result. I'm afraid of what the future will bring for my dad. However, practice helps me transcend the fear of what may come, and see in each moment how to help him and our family as we move with his experience. Each time, we see what happens next, and just do it again.

And that is complete.

Right now, we are practicing Heart Kyol Che, our winter period of intense practice. During this time, we can focus on the opportunity to enhance our practice in many ways. One of the ways in which we can practice is being mindful that our job is to help others: How can we use our practice to attain just this moment, so that we can "be engaged," to help? Please keep this in mind as we practice today, and through Heart Kyol Che. And, thank you all for practicing so diligently. ♦

---

*Senior dharma teacher Laura Otto-Salaj began practice with the Original Root Zen Center in Racine, WI, in 1992, and assisted with the start and development of the Milwaukee Zen Group (now the Great Lake Zen Center) in 1993. Trained as a social psychologist, she spent many years at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee conducting research on the intersection of sexual risk behavior, addiction, and trauma, and also training doctoral and masters level students in social work and research methods before retiring in 2020. She currently practices with the Great Lake Zen Center in Milwaukee.*