

## Ordinary Bodhisattvas

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Reading: From *Buddha Is As Buddha Does*, by Lama Surya Das

*An American student asked the elder Tibetan master Khenpo Thrangu Rinpoche how to respond to today's troubling times and live a decent life in a culture like ours, which seems corrupt in so many ways. Thrangu Rinpoche replied, "You must counter the negative energy with as much positive thought and action as you can possibly muster. You must unceasingly sustain Bodhisattva action. It is the Buddha's teaching to make of ourselves an example, a light, a beacon."*

*Speaking more generally of how to meet the personal and communal challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Dalai Lama remarked, "Human beings will have to develop a greater sense of universal responsibility. Each of us must learn to work not just for his or her self, family, or nation, but for the benefit of all humankind."*

Today we are looking at a Buddhist framework for gaining higher perspective, the Ten Paramitas. The Paramitas are kind of like an operating system, a way to focus your mind-body-spirit with some driving instructions. These ten transcendental virtues work together to bring an understanding of life as larger than individual striving, an opportunity for altruism and service. They are seen as ten facets of the same diamond, Buddha nature.

Another name for the system is The Bodhisattva Code, conduct which invites each of us to be our best human self. The Bodhisattva vow is to work in this lifetime and beyond toward the ultimate liberation of all beings. Even if their own enlightenment is reached, Bodhisattvas stick around and encourage others to keep on going in transformation. They can be called spiritual heroes, beacons, guides, and benefactors. Sometimes they are famous figures like the Dalai Lama, or committed monks and teachers. However, in Buddhism this is not considered a special calling for the professional religious. To be a Bodhisattva is seen as the birthright of every human being.

There is a public elementary school in El Paso, Texas named after my grandfather, who was a community doctor, Presbyterian elder, and School Board President. His operating system came from the Biblical imperatives he learned from my great-grandfather, a minister in rural Arkansas and Texas. Poppa, as we called him, used five rules for living at the request of the school principal, a standard that oriented him to his best self. The rules were not religious per se, but were universal human values. The school painted the five rules up on a wall, and had small laminated cards available for students, teachers and parents. The interesting thing was that my grandfather never taught these things explicitly before the school asked him to create a statement. He simply tried to live a life steered by these values, creating a way of being that guided him forward. The two that I recall are: *Do your best. Be Kind.*

It's not easy figuring out who you want to be. The older I get, the more I am convinced that we need operating systems in life to figure out how to navigate. Small laminated cards as a visual reminder can actually help! Day-to-day phenomenon and choices roll through as tsunamis of stimuli, and we may feel swept along with little direction. In the powerful waves of living, we can seem completely at the mercy of the internal and external tides. Sometimes this experience is demoralizing, overwhelming and depressing. All the stimuli is more than most human psyches can bear, and just too vast to process in any meaningful way.

*Buddha Is As Buddha Does*, by Lama Surya Das, enthusiastically offers the Paramitas, or Bodhisattva Code, as a primary operating system. My purpose today is not to convince you that this is the one system to use. Rather, I am asking you to consider whether you *have* an operating system, and if so, to figure out what it is. Not having one creates a kind of confusion that can be rough to manage. At this moment in our country, one common experience is the disorientation so many people are experiencing as public culture changes. Some of the worst of human nature is on constant display, with divisions and small-minded thinking emerging from the chronic fear and anxiety. Certainly the overt racial hatred and Anti-Semitism we just saw in Charlottesville, Virginia was a prime example of the worst. We are also seeing some of the best humans can be in the generous responses to the tragedy of Hurricane Harvey in Texas. We have both capacities within us.

It's a good time to find some new resources! This is one reason we come to congregational life, to gather with others who are seeking refuge in the storm, and to seek meaning amidst the ongoing waves of life. In a UU congregation we draw on many sources to find our way, and consistently suggest that you can use more than one wisdom tradition to guide you. So let's take a look at this Buddhist system of the Paramitas, as Unitarians or as human seekers, and in a particular moment of history that feels especially disorienting.

In a key difference from Christian doctrine, Unitarians posit that we are born with original blessing. Not original sin, which needs to be remediated, but blessing, which is waiting to blossom within us. The central belief is that we have a basic human goodness which can be cultivated. Like original blessing, the concept of Buddha nature is also innate human potential for loving and kind awareness. The Buddha taught that we must put wise attention towards cultivating this, or our essential diamond nature gets buried in a mud of confusion. We don't lose it, we just lose track of it in the mud. Wisdom helps us discern what to ignore, what to abandon, and what to undertake. It guides us towards an operating system which can work for us, a rhythm and structure which builds a boat in the relentless waves. We steer that boat towards something powerful and inspirational, reminding ourselves of the best that we can be.

The Paramitas are such an operating system, a map for the innate higher self, the Buddha nature of the kind heart. Attention is focused on the cultivation of original blessing, orienting us to the highest human potential. This depends on moving away from focus on individual drama and trauma, and orienting towards compassion to others. This reorientation helps you remember interdependence and interconnection, in order to find a wider identity than your own personal history. It frees you from the narrow view of personality and ego, and moves you to connect outwards to the largest possible perspective.

The qualities and actions of the Paramitas help cultivate that Bodhisattva vow, which is service to others. Here are the ten aspects, or facets of the diamond, as explained by Lama Surya Das, an American teacher trained in Tibetan Buddhism. As you listen, ponder whether each one is something you find inspiring, a way to operate in the world when at your best human self:

- *Generosity, which arises from unselfishness and nonattachment.*
- *Ethics, which involves virtue, integrity, and self-discipline.*
- *Patience, which requires resilience, acceptance and fortitude.*
- *Heroic effort, which means courage in joyous perseverance.*
- *Meditation, which implies mindfulness, concentration, reflection, and introspection.*
- *Wisdom, which includes discernment and self-knowledge.*
- *Skillful means, which arise from resourcefulness and imagination.*
- *Spiritual aspirations, which include noble intention and resolve.*
- *Higher accomplishments, which require leadership, powers, and positive influence.*
- *Awakened awareness, which mean pristine realization.*

It's challenging to live a life that brings purpose, focus and meaning over time. What is your operating system? What are your transcendent values? When you lose your way in the tsunami of life, how do you build a boat once again? These are not esoteric questions, but practical considerations in how we make it through, day by day. We all get disoriented in the waves, and yet, it is possible to find new direction and focus. The good news of Buddhism is that we can return again and again to an essential nature that is good, kind, compassionate and true. We can remember who we really are, reconnect with Buddha nature which is the diamond of Bodhicitta, selfless love and compassion, buried beneath underneath all the mud.

Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron, also an American in the Tibetan lineage of teachers, writes that when we re-orient to this diamond, we come home. In a small book called *Awakening Loving Kindness*, she reminds us:

*We could all take heart...the point is that our true nature is not some ideal we have to live up to. It's who we are right now, and that's what we can make friends with and celebrate...The message is that each of us has all that it takes to become fully enlightened. We have basic energy coursing through us. Sometimes it manifests as brilliance and sometimes it manifests as confusion. Because we are decent, basically good people, we ourselves can sort out what to accept and what to reject. We can discern what will make us complete, sane, grown-up people, and what—if we are too involved in it—will keep us children forever. This is the process of making friends with ourselves and our*

*world. It involves not just the parts we like, but the whole picture, because it all has a lot to teach us.*

As we search for an operating system to guide us, the ideal of what we might become helps reorient us. The Paramitas call us to the highest perspective, the vantage of point of being human in our greatest capacity. We can be friendly to ourselves in the process, and gently choose the way which inspires us the most. There is no need to beat up on ourselves for getting confused. Rather, we find our diamond nature once again, and begin again to sail. Not once for all time, but many times a day.

Choose the system which inspires you to your fullest self, because the world needs you right now. Perhaps you can even use a small laminated card to keep you on track, a visual reminder that you have a boat, and a North Star. In these challenging times, it is crucial to have a way forward that connects us with the benefit of others, the heart of compassion that wants the liberation of all. This is not only the path of saints and special holy ones, but the way of ordinary Bodhisattvas, human ones living in to original blessing and Buddha nature.