

WE CAME BACK TO SAY

An Anthology of Memoir



Edited by
Theo Pauline Nestor

BODHISATTVA IN TRAINING

By Faren Bachelis

I LOVE HUMANITY. IT'S PEOPLE WHO ANNOY ME.

The thought struck me as I watched a Tibetan Buddhist master teach on compassion. He described human beings as flowers in a colorful garden.

"Buddhas are the master gardeners," Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche told his rapt Seattle audience. "Bodhisattvas are gardeners in training. We need to tend all the flowers equally with love and compassion."

I'd studied Buddhism long enough to understand that a Buddha is an enlightened being, and a bodhisattva is someone who aspires to enlightenment in order to benefit others. The bodhisattva path is open to anyone—even me. I worry about this, because to paraphrase Groucho Marx, I'm not sure I want to be a member of a club that would have me as a member.

I don't think I'm bodhisattva material. As much as I aspire to be an awakened being radiating love and compassion, I'm more comfortable radiating judgment and impatience. While I enjoy flowers as much as the next guy, I love some more than others, I find some noxious, and I'd like to take a weed whacker to a few.

Sure, I'd like to think I have the potential to become enlightened, to have an awakened heart. Buddha said everyone carries the seed of awakening within him or her, what he called basic goodness. But if he heard me let loose a string of expletives after some jerk has just cut me off on the freeway, the Buddha would probably point at me and say, "Well, everyone but *her*."

· Faren Bachelis ·

Maybe I'm just too, well, *human*. I can be petty, judgmental, controlling—imperfect. I see these behaviors in myself, but I just can't seem to get rid of them. The other morning a lone woman ahead of me at the drive-through espresso stand ordered *four* drinks, a breakfast sandwich (it took extra time to heat it), and a dog biscuit (presumably for her dog). I waited nearly eight minutes and would've left (I had a doctor's appointment), but I was hemmed in by the car behind me. When she finally drove off I threw her a nasty look in her rearview and then made a snide comment to the poor barista. *Oh, God*, I thought later. *I'm a horrible person! Why can't I be more patient?*

At his talk, Dzigar Kongtrul had said that it's all about our attitude. He'd reminded us that we already have perfect enlightenment as our essence. So if we believe that we are good just as we are, then we can develop even more goodness. If we believe that we are patient, then we can improve our patience, and so on. Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki put it this way: "You're perfect just as you are. And you could use a little improvement."

It's the improvement part that trips me up. I often forget that when I ask for more patience, for example, I don't just magically become more patient. What usually happens is that I get a whole bunch of opportunities to *practice* patience. I'll encounter *more* slowpokes in the espresso line. Or in the grocery checkout line. Or in the fast lane on the freeway.

Buddhism appeals to me partly because it's a science of mind—it helps me understand how the mind works. You could say the Buddha was the first psychologist. And amazingly, although his teachings originated 2,500 years ago, they remain as fresh and relevant as they were when he attained his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. He taught that "we are what we think. With our thoughts we make the world." Another way of putting it is that everything we experience outside of us is simply a projection of what's going on inside. So if I see angry people or sad people or fearful people, they're all a reflection of the angry, sad, fearful parts of me.

I read somewhere that if we make a list of people we don't like, we'll learn a lot about those aspects of ourselves that we can't face. Furthermore, those who repel us unwittingly show the aspects of ourselves that we find unacceptable. Being around people we dislike is often a catalyst for making friends with ourselves.

When I saw that, I thought, "Are you kidding? You mean to say I have an inner Rush Limbaugh? A Charles Manson? A Sarah Palin?"

Ewwwww!

As unsettling as this realization is, I'm actually starting to get it. Decades of introspection, therapy, and spiritual practice have borne this out. As they say in twelve-step groups, it's an inside job. If I'm going to find any measure of self-acceptance, I'd better start from the inside out, not the other way around. One of the key points is the idea of embracing those parts of ourselves that we have rejected. "Hug your demons or they'll bite you in the ass," writes Pia Mellody.

Yeah, but if I'm going to dive in and start hugging my inner Rush, Charlie, and Sarah, I'll need a big dose of kindness and compassion for myself. And maybe a dose or two of Cuervo. As my Sufi friend Jamal says, this inner work is simple, but not easy. It's messy, scary, and frustrating. Enlightenment is definitely not for sissies.

Buddhists emphasize the importance of compassion, both for ourselves and for others. We need it for lots of reasons, not the least of which is to help us shine a light in the darkest recesses of our hearts. And when it comes to compassion, for Tibetan Buddhists the big kahuna is Chenrezig, the bodhisatva of compassion (called Avalokiteshvara in Sanskrit, Kwan-yin in Chinese). His Holiness the Dalai Lama is viewed as a living manifestation of Chenrezig, so this is a big deal.

Not that I'm an expert on Chenrezig. I'd never heard of him until a Buddhist friend recently suggested I attend an empowerment, which is a ritual that establishes a special connection between the participant and a Buddhist deity. A revered lama (a Tibetan spiritual teacher) had traveled to the States from India, and this was a rare opportunity to receive this initiation. I'd read that meditation on Chenrezig is especially effective for those who want to be compassionate and kind to all beings—including ourselves.

I didn't know what I was in for on that July afternoon, but I hoped to find my inner Buddha. I was ready for transformation. Ready to release decades of self-aversion, confusion, fear, and judgment of both myself and others. I really wanted to replace all that with understanding, compassion, and acceptance. I just wanted to be happy.

I'd found the temple easily enough. The buttercup-yellow, two-story clapboard building was festooned with fluttering Tibetan prayer flags.

It looked as if it'd been uprooted from Dharamsala and plopped right in the middle of Seattle's Greenwood neighborhood.

I sat at the back of the large shrine room, which felt cluttered—nearly every square foot was covered with colorful tapestries, bright banners hanging from the ceiling, vivid iconic art depicting tantric deities. Aside from the monks—who were actual Tibetans—most of the aspirants were white, middle-class, and middle-aged Seattleites who dressed like they'd been practicing meditation and eating gluten-free for years: hemp yoga pants, pashmina shawls draped carefully around toned shoulders, natural fiber shirts and drawstring pants and flowing skirts. Everyone looked so relaxed, so organic, so—Buddhist.

At the front, the carmine-robed lama rested serenely upon crossed legs, eyes closed, a trimmed peacock feather in one hand. Joined by three other monks, he chanted a blessing for those seated before him.

"May you attain Buddhahood to benefit all sentient beings," said the Venerable Geshe Kunchok Tenzin.

Since this was my first experience with a Tibetan Buddhist initiation, I had mixed expectations and limited understanding of what it involved. But I knew that something profound and powerful was happening. I felt it in the room, in the monks' sonorous chanting, in the bright afternoon light bouncing off dust motes jitterbugging throughout the room like millions of tiny Shivas ...

An hour into the ceremony and I was miserable. I knew I should've sat in a chair instead of on this flimsy cushion at the Buddhist temple. My arthritic knees were aching, but I'd wanted to fit in. I tried to pay attention as clouds of cloyingly sweet incense burned my eyes and nose. I'd skipped lunch and was obsessing about the Snickers bar in my purse that I'd planned to have after my imminent spiritual awakening. The people around me all looked so peaceful. I was certain none of them were fantasizing about chocolate and dinner. A young mother pulled out an ivory breast and started nursing. I tried not to stare. I stared anyhow.

By now I was pretty sure I wasn't cut out for enlightenment.

The American translator told us that the lama would impart special blessings to us. A young monk handed the holy man with burnished skin and a beatific smile a small candle holder with several lit candles. *Okay, focus*, I admonished myself, and took a mindful breath. A deep peace settled through the room and, slowly, over me ...

Thump. Thump. Thump.

A loud pounding pulled me out of my tranquil state. I looked around to see where the noise was coming from.

Thump-thump-thump-thump-thump.

A curly haired toddler hopped down the creaky wooden stairs at the back of the room, then loudly clomped up the aisle toward the monks. His thirtyish mom sat calmly, oblivious to Junior's marching back and forth. Maybe she'd already reached nirvana. Maybe she was on Zolof.

Clomp. Clomp. Clomp.

The little boy had hopped down the aisle back to the stairs. He was hanging off the handrail, legs dangling between the posts, stubby-toed bare feet slapping on a step. Right next to my head.

Okay, I thought. This is a good thing. Here's an opportunity to practice patience and nonjudgment. I can accept the whole shebang: monks, meditators, traffic, and this annoying kid.

The lama continued his prayers, slowly waving the peacock feather. He seemed unfazed by the activity. Well, yeah, he's spiritually evolved. Me, I've been so distracted by Junior's antics I didn't hear a word of what the translator just said. For all I know, he could've told us we've all just erased a thousand lifetimes of bad karma from our past lives. Or a year's worth of parking tickets. Or maybe he asked one of the monks to get the rice on the stove, because we'd be done soon.

That made me start thinking about dinner, until I sensed I was being stared at. A pair of bright button eyes had me fixed in their inquisitive gaze. From his perch on the banister, just inches from me, the kid studied me intently. I did the same, momentarily tempted to stick my tongue out at him. I didn't—it'd be spiritually incorrect.

Junior lost interest in this interaction and focused his attention on the front of the room again. Then: *thump thump thump*, he ran up the aisle, throwing his arms around a man seated on a cushion smack in front of the lama. The man—his father?—remained still. The boy danced around the man. I watched the man, the boy, and the lama. Nobody seemed to be at all distracted or annoyed by this.

Except me.

Jeez, what's wrong with these parents? I wondered. How clueless are they to not understand that children this young shouldn't be brought to

this kind of event if they can't sit for long periods. How thoughtless of them. How insensitive. How stupid and rude—

Then, abruptly, Oh for chrissake, what's wrong with me?

This led to my rapid descent into the dreaded and all-too-familiar black hole of self-criticism, self-doubt, and unworthiness, and the conviction that I was doomed to remain stuck in the cycle of suffering because I'd accrued too much bad karma. Translated as: You don't deserve happiness, it's hopeless, so you might as well accept it and give up the search for enlightenment. And go get a cheeseburger and large fries instead.

I scanned the room, imagining that everyone else was so much more spiritually advanced than me. They *looked* more spiritual, they sat so easily on their cushions. Some even had performed the formal full prostrations at the beginning of the empowerment. They surely must be closer to the bodhisatva ideal than I'd ever be.

I was considering leaving when the lama seemed to look right at me and said, "Receiving an initiation is like planting a seed. Properly cultivated with the right conditions, this seed will sprout and help you grow into the enlightened state of Buddhahood."

As I sat there thinking about seeds and gardens and Buddhahood, I remembered Dzigarg Kongtrul Rinpoche's metaphor of humanity as a colorful garden. "When you walk into a garden you see this flower, that flower, this plant, that plant," he'd said. "All come from a seed, and though all are different, they are all one in the garden. Just as you can enjoy the variety of the flowers, you can appreciate human beings as well."

Maybe it was the late afternoon light, the incense clouding my eyes. Maybe it was just low blood sugar. But when I momentarily closed my eyes I was no longer seated uncomfortably in a Tibetan Buddhist shrine room. I was standing in the middle of a beautiful garden filled with roses and lilacs, snapdragons, poppies, jonquils—and thousands of other flowers. The lama was a yellow lotus, the little boy a pink rosebud, his mother a hyacinth, the translator a daisy. And I saw myself, watering can in hand, tending lovingly to all of them. And in the center of the garden was a single red rose—and I realized that rose was me.

The image faded as quickly as it had appeared and I was back in the shrine room—in my body, with the monks and the seekers. Maybe I

was beginning to understand what they both had to teach me—the holy man and the curly haired boy. I pulled the Snickers bar from my purse and decided to stay a little longer.

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Why has the memoir gained such a boost in popularity over the last fifteen years? Perhaps because contemporary readers yearn for the intimate companionship between storyteller and reader that this forthright genre offers. As a generation of readers, we crave authenticity. In *We Came Back to Say*'s twenty-five stories, you'll find the extraordinary in these "ordinary" stories of love and loss, despair and hope. Some of the pieces here are funny, others sad, but all are true, and in all of them, you're certain to find the story of our shared humanity.

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