

SPIRITUAL BYPASSING

What Emptiness Means and What It Doesn't

Spiritual bypassing often adopts a rationale based on using absolute truth to deny or disparage relative truth.

—JOHN WELWOOD

Returning to the subject of living within awareness, we should discuss further the unconditional aspect of awakened mind. It is said that the best way to connect with unconditional or ultimate *bodhicitta* is to connect with emptiness. *Shunyata* in Sanskrit, the study of emptiness becomes relevant when we start to grapple with the reality of just how deeply we grasp on to narratives about our experience. While the concept has several names and is employed differently within the many different Buddhist philosophical schools, the basic point is to examine how reality is actually “empty” of, or lacking, many of the false narratives that the confused mind attributes to it.

The different schools of Buddhist philosophy consider many arguments about the nature of mind and reality in an attempt to deconstruct harmful or confused views. They do this because confused views always eventually lead to destructive actions. These philosophical systems, taken together, operate sort of like

-1—

0—

+1—

the spinal column of the various schools or lineages of practice in Buddhism. While the schools of Buddhist practice go by names like Theravada or Zen or Tantra, the systems of Buddhist philosophy go by names like the Atomists or the Mind-Only system.* These different bodies of philosophy and argumentation are often the skeletal views underlying the various practices we engage in, like meditation and ethics. Each of these philosophical systems approaches the concept of emptiness in a slightly different context, addressing different metaphysical questions and employing slightly different language in order to investigate a certain false view that obstructs perception. Whenever the word “empty” is used, it always refers to the need to deconstruct a problematic story line about reality, the need to release ourselves from the mistaken ideas of a confused and grasping mind.

Emptiness never refers to a nihilistic negation of experience itself (sometimes the word is misguidedly seen as referring to some kind of “void” or black hole for the soul). If human beings recognize emptiness, it’s not that they stop having experiences. Rather, they start experiencing things fully, vividly, and directly, without mistaken filters. Thus, emptiness is usually used in conjunction with another word—luminosity—to describe the rich potency that comes from seeing life clearly, empty of false constructs. In other words, if we let go of our confining narratives about what holding a flower means, we end up enjoying the flower much more. This is emptiness-luminosity.

In one early philosophical system, called *Sautrantika*,[†] emptiness is explored to demonstrate that our tendency to generalize our experiences out of convenience never quite holds up to scrutiny.

*Called *Vaibashika* and *Yogacara*, respectively, in Sanskrit.

[†]Literally, this means something like the “followers of sutra,” or the original discourses of the Buddha.

—-1
—0
—+1

The way we try to put people into generic categories, like queer or straight, always falls flat, especially when it becomes a lazy excuse for not investigating the real person standing in front of us. Every single moment is a specific, snowflakelike arising; each experience is unique. When we begin to generalize, we stop perceiving specificity, and when we stop perceiving specifically, we stop seeing clearly. When you argue with your partner over dishes in the sink, for example, you might say something out of frustration like, “You always leave them there!” But that “always” is just a generalization. In the realm of phenomena, nothing is always happening. That word, “always,” only serves to create a defense against examining the present moment directly, in its specificity. It might not be the first time your partner has left dishes in the sink, but it’s also impossible that they always do it.

When generalizations turn into painful cultural stereotypes and biases, those biased narratives disrupt our ability to see each event as individual, which interrupts our ability to intelligently and compassionately respond to what’s happening now. In many cases, our generalizations cause real harm, like somebody shooting a person who looked “suspicious” because he fits a racial profile. Generalization is what leads to oppression. Deconstructing our generalizations is the only way to overcome bias. This is where studying emptiness is intended to lead us—toward the cessation of prejudice.

In another philosophical system, Mind-Only, emptiness refers to the lack of any true separation between perceiver and perceived, or subject and object, which we discussed in the chapter on karma. From the perspective of Mind-Only, which is the underlying philosophy of a great deal of the Shambhala teachings, emptiness serves as a reminder that chasing after home through the objects we experience, while avoiding our own awareness, simply will not work, because we as subjects are “empty” or lack-

-1—

0—

+1—

ing separation from the objects that our mind perceives. From the standpoint of Mind-Only, when we eat salmon, we don't really experience the salmon as something "out there." We only feel our mind tasting the salmon, inseparable from our awareness. Thus, we need to treat subject and object in a holistic way, not as isolated things.

In another system, *madyamaka* (middle-way) philosophy, emptiness refers to the inability to isolate events and phenomena from one another. This is where the most popular understanding of the notion of interdependence comes from. From this viewpoint, we remember that our actions affect others all the time. This understanding of emptiness overcomes our libertarian tendencies to view the actions of our life as separate, with no effect on others. What we do in the United States directly affects what happens in Canada and Mexico, despite the lines we created in order to claim that we are separate nations. In this way, emptiness is the flip side of the coin of interdependence. If everything is connected, then no event can be isolated.

In the middle-way system, emptiness also refers to the inadequacy of conceptual or linguistic labels to accurately signal or point to direct experience, the lack of a true relationship between the languages we use to signify an experience and the actual experience signified. This is very similar to the thinking of many twentieth-century Western poststructuralist philosophers. From this point of view, the narrative or story line that we use to describe events is always an approximation of signifiers, not a direct experience. As one of my mentors, Acharya Gaylon Ferguson, likes to say, we receive no real nourishment from just saying the word "pear." The word "pear" only points sloppily to the memory of actually tasting one. Whatever way we try to signify "pear" fails to stand in for the actual experience of eating one. When we solidify a narrative about pears and then replay the narrative as a

—-1
—0
—+1

recurring story line in our mind, we actually slip further and further away from a real pear. The further we move from reality, the more we suffer, because eventually we forget what a pear is altogether.

No matter what the approach, the study of emptiness always has the same punch line, which can be summarized in a two-word mantra: LET GO. LET GO. LET GO.

The purpose of letting go is to release our fixation on narratives that stop us from fully opening to the present moment as it is. When we open to the present moment as it is, we relax and tune our mental radio back into the ultimate, unconditioned aspect of *bodhicitta*. Why do we want to be in touch with openness? Simply to make ourselves more available to our human relationships. For the bodhisattva, relationships are where the rubber meets the road. Relationships are what happen when we stop telling stories about the people we know, and start interacting with them directly in the present moment.

Studying emptiness can lead us down two roads. On the first road, emptiness becomes a view that reminds us to stay open and not take ourselves too seriously. Here, emptiness becomes a kind of protection for our path, a philosophical amulet that reminds us not to fixate on ideology to the point where we become materialistic about our ideas. If we take emptiness as a constant reminder to let go of fixation, and treat its various philosophies as a series of methods for interrogating the conceptual barriers we erect between ourselves and others, emptiness leads to a great capacity for love. Studying emptiness can help us to hold our own story lines in a kind of holographic space, which is where true creativity is possible. The image within a holograph is beautiful and meaningful, but not solid. That's the best way to approach the narratives of your own life. This way of working with emptiness softens the hard edges of our minds and lets us experience the curiosity that

-1—

0—

+1—

comes from not turning reality into a series of black-and-white, all-or-nothing propositions. When we make everything about black and white, friend and foe, right and wrong, we turn our ideas into concrete prisons that cannot adequately prepare us for the fluidity of life. Studying emptiness allows us to see that there are multiple subjectivities happening at the same time, and that our subjective experience is not universal truth.

Seeing emptiness, we don't have to fixate on our idea as the only one that matters. This is utterly key to becoming a good communicator, because it allows us to see other points of view. It also helps us to cultivate the patience to deal with disagreements without freaking out and hardening into a tyrant.

On the second road, however, studying emptiness leads to a much darker place. Here, it becomes a spiritual trap, an analytic poison, a kind of linguistic shield. Sadly, it's possible to use Buddhist philosophy as a way to avoid being touched by our emotions, which is 180 degrees in the wrong direction. If all we do is deconstruct ideas without engaging in the details of life fully, then emptiness simply becomes a way to win an argument, to perpetually play devil's advocate. If we learn the philosophy of emptiness without attending fully to the details of our human relationships, we will walk around deconstructing everything to the point of paralysis, and lose our ability to engage with people. Instead of learning how to listen well, we will just learn how to argue that the act of listening doesn't really matter because it is all "empty" anyway.

John Welwood coined the phrase "spiritual bypassing" to refer to this dangerous way of using spiritual teachings to sidestep the difficult parts of our journey through relationships. Sadly, much of the ancient language of Buddhism is too easily interpreted in translation to facilitate an escapist and nihilistic point of view. If emptiness is used as a linguistic shield to escape experience, it

—-1
—0
—+1

becomes a poisonous bypass, a way to try to get around dealing with the discomforts of learning to live in our awareness. When Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche spoke of this harmful tendency, he called it “*shunyata* poisoning.”

At first glance, it doesn't seem like numbing out with intellectual defenses is a very good painkiller. Morphine or vodka seem like much better choices. But, often, the narratives we cling to can be a remarkable anesthesia to suppress feeling what we don't want to feel. With spiritual bypassing, “emptiness” itself becomes a new narrative to which we cling. However, the purpose of studying emptiness is not to create a new and improved story line but to liberate us from stuck narratives about ourselves and others.

Within the Tibetan Tantric tradition there is a beautiful visual metaphor for misunderstanding spiritual teachings in this way; for becoming imprisoned rather than liberated by them. In the darkest prison of the mind, all of the walls of our jail cell are made out of spiritual texts and teachings that have become rigid and dogmatic. Even the doors and windows that once brought fresh air have been sealed by texts. The trickiest prison is always an internal one, and the trickiest internal prison is always a spiritual one. Once imprisoned, we can no longer access the fresh perspectives that human relationships bring.

Spiritual bypassing is an idea that hits home for me in a way that is not very easy to accept. Below, I've traced out some theoretical examples of how spiritual bypassing might manifest itself. Hopefully, these can allow us to laugh a little at ourselves as much as they offer challenges to our sense of how genuinely we are practicing. All of them come from either my own experience or from the stories of fellow practitioners or students. With any luck, we have a sense of humor about them. I call them “I Might Be Spiritually Bypassing If . . .”

-1—

0—

+1—

- I have credit card, mortgage, or student loan debt and I avoid opening the envelope, because the numbers on the statement are just abstract symbols, all “empty” anyway.
- I avoid taking care of my body through daily nutrition and exercise, because the body is “just a vessel.”
- I refuse to make my bed for exactly the same reason.
- I shy away from any political discussion because the mere thought of actually holding any political positions strikes me as “dualistic.”
- I know what the phrase “*Madhyamaka Sautrantika-Svatantrika*” means, but if during tea break at a meditation workshop someone asks how I’m doing, I freak out on them.
- I am completely in love with my spiritual teacher, but wish all of my fellow students would just go away.
- I avoid pursuing creative or entrepreneurial projects that might benefit people, because whatever I might accomplish is “illusory.”
- I experience loss, heartbreak, or grief but attempt to dismiss feelings such as sadness, anger, and loneliness as not “truly existing,” rather than bringing mindfulness and compassion to the necessary grieving process.
- I sabotage the process of forging intimacy with potential friends or lovers, because I know that any new relationship I enter is just “impermanent” anyway. Why should I call him again? We’re all just gonna die, eventually.

Do any of these sound familiar? As Welwood points to in his work, these examples share a common characteristic. They all use some partial insight from teachings on ultimate truth as a means to justify avoiding relational truth.

Sadly, this isn’t just a modern phenomenon. Sometimes, in

—-1
—0
—+1

ancient texts, relative truth is unfortunately relegated to a form of second-class citizenship, treated as a kind of mirage that only “confused” people see. But from the standpoint of the Shambhala teachings, which attempt to move us toward an awakening that fully embraces the details of life in the world, relational truth is actually our prime concern along the journey, because relational truth is always the final arena of our practice. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said in another context, our entire universe is structured in a relational manner.

Even if we completely realized the ultimate truth of emptiness, we would still have to wake up the next morning and deal with the relationships that make up our life, one simple step at a time. This does not mean that our meditation practice or philosophical study don’t matter—they matter quite a lot. But if we only focus on philosophy, or only focus on what deep state of meditative concentration we have achieved, we might just bypass the truly beautiful work of our relationships. Glimpsing emptiness should move us toward, not away from, the details of relationships. After we deconstruct our false views, we are left on the doorstep of our real life, ready to deal with our families, our friends, our coworkers, and, eventually, all beings.

-1—

0—

+1—

A BODHISATTVA'S BOUNDARIES

*Compassion, Idiot Compassion,
and Knowing the Difference*

The ideal figure of the relational journey, the bodhisattva, can seem like quite an imposing one to emulate. In traditional Buddhism, stories of archetypal bodhisattvas serve a cultural function not unlike many of the comic-book superheroes of our Western culture. When you see a statue of Avalokiteshvara or Tara, male and female bodhisattvas of compassion, you may just as well imagine them with S's on their chest, or wearing a Wonder Woman outfit.

If you commit to staying present with human relationships, if you take the bodhisattva vow, you are taking on quite a formidable task. The traditional texts depicting the bodhisattva's journey don't shy away from intense descriptions of the burden we take on in order to help others. One bodhisattva chant, called the Four Great Vows, originating in the Japanese Zen tradition asks us to proclaim, "Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to save them all."

That statement is not only logistically impossible, it's logically

—-1

—0

—+1

absurd. Even if it made sense given the rules of logic and karma (something like: “There are SO damn many sentient beings! I vow to HELP every single one I come into contact with”), it would still be a massive undertaking. Never mind becoming Superman—sometimes it feels like the tradition is asking us to become Atlas, the Greek god charged with holding the cosmos aloft. In one of my favorite animated movies, *The Incredibles*, Mr. Incredible is a superhero with a bad case of burnout. “No matter how many times you save the world, it always manages to get itself in jeopardy again,” Mr. Incredible says anxiously. “Sometimes I wish it would just *stay* saved, you know?”

While it may seem overwhelming, almost everyone I meet considers the bodhisattva vow—the intention to dedicate one’s life to helping others and alleviating suffering in whatever way we can—an inspiring ideal. There is never one way to work with such a vow, and so many different livelihood and relationship paths that we could take to benefit others. A painter can be a bodhisattva just as much as a president or pope can. To have such an organizing principle for one’s life, for one’s relationships, and for one’s labor, is tremendously empowering. With such a guiding principle, we move beyond just going through the motions of an isolating commute. Such a vow gives us a sense of purpose and energy for the projects we engage in and the relationships we cultivate.

The bodhisattva ideal is especially inspiring when so many aspects of our civilization seem to be moving away from compassion, generosity, and care for others. In our world, Atlas has quite literally shrugged, and the bizarre bodhisattvas of greed seem to have killed off most of our most compassionate superheroes. “Greed is good,” *Wall Street’s* Gordon Gekko famously proclaimed, giving a huge middle finger to bodhisattvas everywhere. We live bombarded by the cultural mantras of selfishness and narcissism, echoing everywhere on invisible speakers, mantras

-1—
0—
+1—

that we know in our hearts are false. Greed is not good—as a mantra, “just looking out for #1” is demonstrably damaging, both psychologically and ethically. It turns a healthy self-awareness into a blinding self-absorption and crushes our empathy. All we end up accumulating is more anxiety, because the objects we accumulate are unstable, and begin to decay the moment we take them into our possession. Greed intensifies the desperation of our commute, while generosity opens us up to what is in front of us, and allows us to relax at home in our own awareness, available for others, too. I am not sure if we need more not-for-profit organizations, but we definitely need more not-for-profit humans, and that is precisely what the bodhisattva agrees to become, because he knows happiness depends on overcoming self-obsession.

If we are going to take on the bodhisattva's journey, we have to find a way to humanize these idealistic archetypes, to make the workload more reasonable for us mere mortals. Otherwise, we will quickly associate the bodhisattva path with a weighty obligation, a form of bitter martyrdom, a new way to beat ourselves up. This road only leads to disheartenment. Discouraged by both our own limitations and by the troubled state of the world, we might look around us and begin to wonder why we ever signed up to help anyone anyway, when narcissism seems to be much more culturally lucrative. We might not shrug off the entire cosmos, but we will shrug off the burden of our human relationships, shrinking back into isolation and self-preservation.

To avoid burnout, we need a much more balanced approach to the bodhisattva's journey. Most of all, if we are going to make the path workable, we need to spot the obstacle that Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche called “idiot compassion.”

Spiritual bypassing often involves using ultimate truth as an excuse for suppressing our human emotions. In a similar way, idiot compassion involves using the bodhisattva's idealistic mandate

—-1
—0
—+1

to help others as a means to avoid what we are actually feeling. But there is always something our emotions can show us about the present moment. When we are able to rest in the gap—feeling our emotions without reacting to them carelessly—they become a kind of Spidey Sense, a trustworthy radar. They constantly lend us information about how the present moment strikes us, information that we can learn to apply intuitively and skillfully. Anger always has something to tell us. But with idiot compassion, we turn the bodhisattva identity into a kind of impossible ideal, and then hide out in that constructed notion of compassion. We hold on to some Xeroxed image of a saint, an old picture of how a bodhisattva would respond to conflict or confusion, and the Xerox prevents us from responding skillfully to the situation in front of us. Idiot compassion is what happens when we turn the bodhisattva path into a kind of super heroic cocoon. While we are trying to mimic that ideal, we ignore what our emotions are telling us, losing the intelligence that those feelings can offer in knowing how to respond to each unique situation.

Sometimes, the most compassionate thing we can do is say no. Every once in a while, the best way to help another person is to yell at them. This is called an act of wrathful compassion, and it's why many traditional bodhisattvas are depicted carrying iconographic weaponry in Himalayan art, displaying a force that is not caught up within hatred, but that sets firm boundaries which a confused mind cannot cross.

For example, let's say you let someone walk all over you in a contract negotiation because you think you are supposed to be patient and accommodating with that person's desires. "A bodhisattva wouldn't get angry," you say, taking an overly sweet tone during the negotiation. Inside, you feel hurt and disrespected, but you don't say "that's not fair" or push back because you think you are supposed to take a more passive approach, conflating passivity

-1—

0—

+1—

with the bodhisattva's attitude of openness. You project a peaceful image of some ever-smiling Buddha in your mind, becoming someone who pays no attention to how they are valued. When you sign the contract, you deeply resent what you've agreed to. The work that follows is uninspired, and everyone eventually suffers for it. Or maybe a friend asks you to borrow money, and you get the sinking feeling as you give it to them that they are going to use it to feed an addiction, furthering their codependence, but you give it to them anyway, enabling their suffering. Codependence and interdependence are two very different things.

If your work involves helping others through teaching, mental health counseling, or any of the myriad activities where we work with others directly, you might experience little moments of idiot compassion all the time, moments where you flee from the present, hiding within your "Superman" ideals of what it means to be seen as a "good" teacher who is always available to every student, a "good" therapist who always provides the most useful feedback, or a "good" parent who never loses her cool and is always on call when her kids need her. These ideals form a cocoon, an unattainable self-image, and from within one's own cocoon, it's not possible to be very helpful.

There are countless tendencies toward idiot compassion that we can begin to notice in ourselves. I think Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche used the phrase "idiot compassion" humorously, not harshly, not only because he wanted us to be clear about what trips us up along the bodhisattva path, but also so that we might have a sense of humor about the messy task of trying to "help" anyone. Calling something "idiot compassion" is not meant to be a dagger of reproach. For me, keeping this idea in mind allows me to more lightheartedly notice the moments when I think I'm being helpful but I'm really just avoiding what I'm feeling and enabling more confusion. Idiot compassion is actually a good

—-1
—0
—+1

problem for us to have, because at the very least it means we are trying to be compassionate. We are just confused about how to be effective in that pursuit.

It is important to be inspired by the qualities of other compassionate people, but to be a real bodhisattva, we have to let go of fixation on images of what a bodhisattva necessarily does in each situation. We do this by working with our emotions as they come up, and listening to the people in front of us. We can open patiently, while still maintaining boundaries that allow us to conserve our personal resources of time and energy in a sustainable manner, in order to avoid burnout along the path of helping others. The bottom line is that the bodhisattva is still very much on the path of self-awareness and self-care. Otherwise, you just become a martyr-sattva.

FOUR TYPES OF IDIOT COMPASSION

Here are four possible examples of idiot compassion, each of which undermines and distorts the meaning of true compassion.

Being a Doormat

With doormat compassion, we stamp “welcome” on our foreheads, idealizing stories we’ve heard about how a great being should be able to be patient with anger and aggression from others, and should be able to handle any outrage. We feel, in our fixation, that a bodhisattva should put up with anything. So we decide to silently grin and bear interactions with very difficult people, taking on all the burden of their terror.

There is a famous story in my tradition of an ancient teacher from Bengal, now Bangladesh, named Atisha. Atisha was one of

-1—

0—

+1—

the major pioneers of Mahayana Buddhism, who brought large bodies of teachings on the bodhisattva path to Tibet in the eleventh century. The story says that he had an assistant, known as the Bengali Tea Boy, who was ridiculously annoying. Sometimes we have a hard time working with a person with whom everybody else manages to get along, and we can't believe it. Sometimes we find someone supremely challenging and find out that pretty much everybody else agrees with us. The Bengali Tea Boy was supposedly the latter type. Perhaps he just had a difficult time, as many people do, picking up on subtle social cues, or he just felt shame about his service job and longed for a higher station in life, and so felt that he needed to prove his intelligence all the time, consuming all available space in any conversation. Supposedly, when he served tea, it felt like you were doing him a favor by putting up with him, not the other way around. One of the main marks of a bodhisattva throughout ancient teachings is the ability to remain remarkably calm in difficult situations. So, the story goes that Atisha, wanting to stay on his toes and keep his training in patience strong, invited the Tea Boy to accompany him on the long and grueling trip to Tibet. That seems like an act of patience many of us would be unwilling to bear.

Inspired by this story, we have a little joke in the Shambhala community that the person in your life or work environment who is super annoying is your Bengali Tea Boy, regardless of where they're from, their age, or their gender. It's meant to be an endearing term of annoyance (if there is such a thing), a role we've all played ourselves from time to time.

While this Tea Boy story is extremely well intentioned and brings needed humor and validation to working with difficult people, two parts of the tale have always bothered me. First, people often forget the story's ending. It's said that when Atisha arrived

—-1
—0
—+1

in Tibet after putting up with the Tea Boy during the whole treacherous trip, he realized that there were plenty of annoying people in this new country, as well. In fact, there are plenty of annoying people everywhere—it is the necessary result of multiple beings attempting to share the same space, the friction that results from distinct subjective experiences rubbing up against each other. What Atisha realized was he didn't really need to drag the Tea Boy along for the sole purpose of furthering his own patience practice; he would have plenty of new opportunities to do so. The lesson I take from the story is that we will always have opportunities to work with people we perceive as annoying and difficult, and we don't necessarily need to ride shotgun with every Tea Boy just to feel compassionate. Not every Tea Boy has to be your Tea Boy. Taking on all the difficult relationships you encounter may trigger and deplete you in ways that make it hard for you to show up for your other human relationships. That's not really compassionate, and it's definitely not smart.

The second problem with the idea that you always have to stay in difficult situations with people who trigger you is that it ignores what might be best for the annoying person, the one the bodhisattva is supposed to care about, after all! If our Tea Boy never has any boundaries set, if we never tell him what we are willing to take and what we aren't willing to tolerate, then the Tea Boy never learns how to be aware of his own actions and behaviors. It's quite possible that each Tea Boy remains a Tea Boy because he doesn't ever realize that he's wiping his feet all over the doormat of your humanity.

The doormat version of idiot compassion always involves allowing ourselves to feel walked all over in the name of idealizing what it means to be patient with another person's aggressive behavior. It's an unwillingness to face the uncomfortable truth that it's okay to feel angry and irritated.

-1—
0—
+1—

Being Popular

No one, not a political leader and not even a great bodhisattva, can be universally liked. But we live in a society of opinion polling and social networking scores, one that encourages us to maximize “likes” and acclaim. The social anxiety of existing in a world where popularity is statistically quantifiable, where we can literally count “likes” and read our approval ratings daily, can lead to a lot of idiot compassion. We have this strange idea that being a decent person means that nobody is ever upset with us. But if you examine every greatly compassionate person throughout human history, they always managed to piss off at least some people, sometimes quite a lot of people. Some of the greatest bodhisattvas in human history drove the powers that be crazy, because that was the only way to enact compassion. For example, if we are going to solve the crisis of global warming, some politicians need to be willing to sacrifice their short-term popularity and financial safety to make tough long-term choices that will make our society more sustainable. They probably will not get credit for doing so.

With the idiot compassion of popularity, we feel the very bodily fear of being disliked, which every human encounters at some point. However, if we are unwilling to stay present with that discomfort, we cave in to the scary thought that our popularity might be replaced by infamy or, even worse, anonymity. We become susceptible to manipulation, because even the threat that somebody might speak ill of us or “un-follow” us causes us to cut deals with people in order to remain on their good side.

For the last few years, I've noticed this peculiar phenomenon on my social media pages. When I share a post or tweet, it is often the vague and generically positive thoughts that get the most “likes” immediately. If I make a statement that sounds more controversial or political, I feel the immediate anxiety that perhaps my intelligence, as well as my standing as a well-intentioned

—-1
—0
—+1

thinker, is about to be attacked. Caving in to this fear, rather than staying present with it, would lead to always trying to calculate the path to maximum popularity. This would be like opening an organic restaurant, but then at the last minute deciding to only serve cotton candy because you know all the kids like it. That restaurant might get popular, but it wouldn't be good for anyone.

When we are able to stay present with the internal discomfort created by the idea that somebody else might be mad at us, we end up becoming a bodhisattva with tremendous integrity. We end up building confidence that we can say what we think and mean what we say, more and more often. This kind of integrity and dignity become contagious, and in the end, even if somebody doesn't agree with us, they at least respect us for being a person of deep principles.

Making Nice

What happens when we are trying to be present for a conflict between others? "Making nice" is the version of idiot compassion that comes about when we cannot stay with the uncomfortable truth of disharmony between people we care about, and instead feel a need to squash or quell conflict. Human relationships have friction and conflict built into them. It is often the case that insight lies within disagreement. When we don't suppress disagreement, we might learn more about where everyone stands and what matters to all the different subjective beings involved. Within the disclosure of multiple perspectives, we may learn something new about the issues involved.

When we rush to try to create harmony, it is often because disharmony makes us deeply uncomfortable, not because we are actually trying to help bring about clarity and insight. This tendency could be even more pressing if we grew up in an arena or

-1—

0—

+1—

household of conflict. We end up saying things to the people who are fighting like, "We need to work this out." Projecting our needs onto somebody else's disagreement is very manipulative and makes it impossible for the parties involved to come to an understanding of what they want and need for themselves. It may also lead us to draw false equivalences between people's behavior, where we just assume that both sides have equal truth because we are unwilling to accept that there might be very valid grievances at play, and that the people involved might never agree to a solution. What we should be saying instead is, "What do you really want here? Do you want to work this out, or do you want to go your separate ways?"

Giving Away Everything

In this version of idiot compassion, we suppress our own needs, feeling like we should just give away everything we have all the time. To be a saint, we should generously offer all our time, all our money, all our energy. The problem here is that generosity is a two-way street. Even if you were to dedicate your life to the benefit of all beings, you should never forget that you are one of those beings! When the lifelong practice of generosity is considered as only an external act, it bends and twists into martyrdom. Many of us hide out in service work, and suppress the uncomfortable feelings that arise when attention turns to taking care of ourselves. If we serve others because we are afraid to be with ourselves, then we need to ask the question: What are we really offering to them except our self-avoidance?

I have often noticed that when I give time or energy to somebody who requests my help, I need to set clear boundaries around what I am able to offer, and under what conditions I'm able to offer it. This is not because I am trying to take some Gordon

—-1

—0

—+1

Gekko approach to life, but rather, it's a realization that we all need to calculate the resources we can offer today in order to be able to offer ourselves to others again tomorrow. I have also found that clarifying what I can offer when others request my help allows them to be clear about valuing my time and energy. This clarity helps everyone. When I am able to balance generosity with clarity about what I need, my own energy becomes much more sustainable, and the result is that I can actually offer more. If we burn out, we help nobody, and we actually might end up romanticizing destructive tendencies as some kind of spiritual narrative. Thinking that we have to always burn our candle at both ends in order to benefit others is perhaps the greatest idiot compassion of all.

In this way, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche has been a great example to me. He seems to have an incredible amount of discipline with the usage of his personal energy and the many demands upon his time. Because his commitment to self-care seems so unwavering, he literally seems to grow younger as he ages, and therefore is able to stay present with others over a longer and more fruitful life span. This is very different from somebody like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

One physician estimated that Dr. King, who died at age thirty-nine, had the heart muscle of a sixty-year-old man when he was autopsied, because he refused to take care of himself. While his example is immensely inspiring in so many ways, and while he is one of our American bodhisattva superheroes, one wonders, if he wasn't assassinated, how much longer he could have kept up that pace. One could wonder the same about Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who died at forty-seven. I hope future Dr. Kings and Trungpa Rinpoches live beyond a hundred, and the only path to that outcome is if future bodhisattvas treat generosity as a practice that includes self-care.

-1—

0—

+1—

THINKING BIGGER THAN "ME"

Rather than thinking of the bodhisattva path as one of forsaking oneself for others, we could think of the phrase "equalizing self and other." From the perceptual standpoint of subject-object, this balance helps us to overcome the objectification of others as a means to further our own pleasure. From this harmony, a direct and situationally appropriate empathy grows. We relate to others based on thoughtful principles applied to specific situations, not on black-and-white rules. Hopefully, we can always find ways to stay open and generous, but without depleting our own life-force energy in the process.

At the same time, the imperative of bodhisattva examples throughout history illustrates that somebody always has to be the first person to think bigger than the cocoon of "me." Where would we be without the beings who have stepped up and been examples of the possibility of opening one's heart and putting others first? These beings always have to be willing to get stepped on or taken advantage of in order to stretch the imagination of those who live in the anxiety that self-absorption produces, those who don't think it's possible to open up at all.

In the "greed is good" world, everybody shrinks away from helping each other. In this frame of mind, all relationships become transactional and commodified. We say things like, "I'm only going to help you if you help me," or "I'm only going to deal with you if and when I know that you won't hurt me." Somebody has to go a little further to stretch their heartmind open and say, "You know what, I might get hurt here. I might get taken advantage of sometimes. I might get my heart broken." But if nobody makes the first move into a kind of compassionate magnanimity, then the anti-bodhisattvas will always win.

If we learn to live in our awareness a bit more, then we also

—-1

—0

—+1

realize that there is no permanent damage that another human being can do to our true home. Of course, we must work carefully with instances of trauma, but when we realize that our awareness is an accommodating space, not a damaged “thing,” it becomes safe to extend ourselves a little ways beyond our comfort zone. Ideally, with the obstacle of idiot compassion in mind, we can set clear but porous boundaries for what we are willing to deal with in relationships.

We should also remember that there is no such thing as permanence and apply this to whatever temporary boundaries we set in our relationships. Seeing impermanence can grant us the insight to never shut the door on anyone forever. I remember a conversation I once had with my father. A long relationship had recently ended, and it happened to be with someone whom I had experienced as a major Tea Boy for quite a long time. In an attempt to create good boundaries, I said something along the lines of “good riddance.” I don’t think my voice was particularly harsh in that moment, but it was clear that I thought the parting of ways was a good thing. Dad cut me off midsentence. “You know, Eth, I really don’t think about these things that way anymore. I think that every conflict we have is just a little blip on the radar screen. Everybody we’ve ever known and loved, we’re going to know them again and again and again.” While I’m not sure I believe that we will necessarily encounter the same beings again, the reminder is undeniably powerful. The bodhisattva never abandons any relationship permanently. To avoid idiot compassion, we will have to set boundaries and say “not now” to some of our most difficult relationships. That’s the only way our practice can evolve. But the bodhisattva never says never. This vast view of time, this willingness to never give up on anyone, is a super heroic trait of forgiveness that any of us can start to embody.

-1—

0—

+1—