

Blessings
of the
Creative Buddha
ཨེ་མ་རྟེ་

OTHER BOOKS BY MARTIN LOWENTHAL

Heart to Heart, Hand in Hand, Shoulder to Shoulder

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(co-authored with Lar Short)

Writing in the Dark: Unseen Poems

Blessings
of the
Creative Buddha
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living a sacred life

Martin Lowenthal

Dedicated Life Publications



Published in the United States by

Dedicated Life Publications

Printed by CreateSpace, an Amazon.com company

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ISBN: 978-1456588144

145658141

Library of Congress Number: 2011901677

Cover and book design by Grace E. Pedalino

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Dedication

This humble effort is dedicated to future generations. May these blessings support the growth, happiness, and freedom of all beings.

Prelude

There is an insistent flame that burns in our core. At times it demands attention and at others it draws no attention, yet it is always there, even if hidden. It is what propels our hands to create beauty, our desire to generate new possibilities, and our minds and hearts to live a life that matters and our soul to sanctify life. Absent the subtle quickening of this force of our being, our days would be dull with no horizon, no dream to awaken our longing and stir us into action.

Our passion to create is sustained from a wellspring that is bubbling with energy and excitement for life. This flame is what enables us to serve others, the world and the sacred by making our presence and contributions a blessing. Upon our entrance to the world, we are blessed by the embrace of life in all its rich expressions, by the harvested experience of ancestors, by the dreams of generations past, present and future, and by the challenge of crafting a personal and collective gift of heart pounding, eye popping, and mind dazzling beauty—an offering only we can make.

It would be infinitely deadening to live in world without constant creation. Creation suggests motion, energy, and life itself. Each life is a participant in an endless, interactive dynamic landscape, narrative, and symphony. The process never stops on the highs of joy and moves on from the lows of suffering. Its persistent drive generates, sustains, dissolves and destroys everything.

Creation governs life, just as consciousness governs the mind and connection governs the heart. How we par-

ticipate, harness, and contribute to this force in the living moment shapes the quality of our life and the lives around us. This truth is often lost in our immersion in a culture that encourages a superficial life style and continuous alternation between stimulation and numbness.

As much as our impulse to cocoon ourselves may energize our self-preoccupation and as much as our media, consumer capitalism, and individualistic culture may encourage narcissism, fear and social fragmentation, we need to reawaken our creative imagination to lead us from escapism to engagement, from alienation to belonging, from passivity to pro-activity, from superficiality to substance, from reactivity to creation, from denial to clarity, and from overwhelm to confidence.

In our times, we face challenges of personal, community, national and global proportions. We cannot fully work with the personal without dealing with the forces operating at the other levels of our social environment. All the levels are interrelated and each has a role to play in the bringing of happiness, growth, and beauty to the world.

Some would say these teachings were given long ago, even thousands of years ago and have been passed down in various forms from teachers to students in an unbroken lineage. Others might say that while elements of the teachings have been known since before memory that they are still taking shape and their evolution and elaboration will continue into a future beyond foretelling.

I can pass on only what I have been given by teachers, by practice, and by Grace in the earnest desire to serve others

who yearn for sacred engagement and growth and to make some small contribution to the body of sacred teachings. One could ask “Who is this person who is not even a master of any lineage to have the arrogance to reshape and add to the contours of sacred teachings?” I can only respond by saying that the value of what is presented here be evaluated not by its messenger and his particular limitations and virtues but by its truth, its usefulness, and its ability to enrich the tradition of spiritual teachings.

While drawing on teachings that are thousands of years old, these teachings do not claim to be traditional and yet are not original either. They are part revealed insights, part articulation of the fruits of years of practice, part knowledge of teachings from Buddhism and other religious traditions, and part the expression of a creative vision. These teachings arise from my experience of invisible dimensions beyond the visible world, not as alternative worlds but as enrichments that engender a more fully dimensional life.

What I hope can be said about this work is that it is alive and accessible in a way that can be taken to heart. Part of my task is to convey a sacred view that is beyond the personal, that is transcendent, and yet completely applicable to living an integrated life. I fully and humbly acknowledge that I speak about these things from the perspective of my own life experience and learning. Many of my sacred experiences have transported me beyond any sense of personhood and into ineffable dimensions of being, beyond description and yet, in order to share the value of sacred work in a book, I must use words to convey a sense of the magnificence of this path.

While the word “sacred” in everyday language is used to mean anything of value, we will be exploring the more traditional and deeper meaning that is rooted in spiritual teachings, practices, stories, and experiences. From this point of view, attempts to define what is sacred with any precision are like trying to nail down the shadow of an escaping horse, being unable to hold neither horse nor shadow. What we can start with is that sacred work has value, is self-surpassing, and is all encompassing of the nature of life and of being.

This book is not about Buddhism as a religion or spiritual system, but is profoundly inspired by my own experience as a Buddhist practitioner and what I have come to know as the essence of both Buddhist teachings and the principles of other sacred traditions. Buddhism is a simple yet profound approach to life that emphasizes clarity of mind, openness of heart, the direct intimate experience of life itself, and dedicated service to all sentient beings.

In Buddhism the sacred texts are teachings. Teaching implies learning, learning suggests change and growth. The teachings are blueprints for the creation of new ways of thinking, feeling and being, and the development of wisdom, compassion, and beauty for the benefit of all.

Stephen Batchelor has made the point that in the modern world, the service aspect of Buddhist teachings acquires greater import. “As Buddhism encounters the contemporary world, it discovers a situation where creativity and imagination are central to individual and social freedom. While Buddhist traditions have consistently affirmed freedom from craving and anguish as the *raison d’être* of a culture of

awakening, they have been less consistent in affirming the freedom to respond creatively to the anguish of the world.” Western Buddhist practitioners often are socially engaged. In the Western view, family and community are the living link between the personal and humanity and between us now and generations in the future.

The blessings that this book presents are meant to reveal the core of sacred service that enhances loving aliveness beyond personal history and conceptual understanding and that is rooted in life and contributes to the world. This fully alive spirituality incorporates not only the openly receptive qualities of consciousness that govern our perception and the nature of our sacred connections, it also celebrates the active creative process of sacralizing life in imagination, in growing into a spiritually mature human being, and in generating collective blessings in the form of benefit and beauty.

The sacred themes of love, connection, compassion, presence, service and wisdom can be found in all spiritual traditions. The figure of Buddha, like Jesus, Mohammed, and Solomon, represents the integration of these themes in the embodiment of an individual who made a personal sacred journey and transmitted teachings from that consciousness in ways that sought to transform not only the individual lives of followers, but the organization and values of societies and cultures.

This latter, more revolutionary, aspect of sacred work has often met with resistance, hostility and denial by the larger social and political contexts in which these great luminaries lived. While the radical implications of truly spiritual rela-

tionships and actions that reform a society have been underemphasized, these practices are critical to the understanding and realization of spiritual development and maturity and to the development of a mature culture and an integrally functioning society.

In choosing to join me in this journey, you run the welcome risk that, as you become more aware, present, and actively caring, any indifference will be ceaselessly shattered making it impossible to harbor any old habits of callousness. In engaged sacred work, our heart is broken over and over again, forcing us to grow, to deepen our connection to sacred dimensions that nurture us, engender peace, and impel us to greater dedication. All this enlarges our capacity for love and compassion.

This book offers you the opportunity to open to and develop the sacred qualities of who you are to experience greater aliveness, joy, peace and clarity personally and to take your place as a co-creator of a more peaceful, loving, and beautiful world that is a healthy home for all living beings.

In sacralizing our lives, we want to engage the world and other people from a heart posture that is self-surpassing and all encompassing. Our sensibilities are not confined to the personal on one extreme or fleeing into some amorphous nothingness on the other. In sacred awareness, we may have a sense of self or not. It is possible for some masters to have some attention beyond all self-sense and simultaneously have some attention in awareness that include the self. This is part of what it means to be both self-surpassing and encompassing, everything can be included and hosted.

Although this book uses Buddhism as its platform, the framework and principles presented are relevant to the spiritual structures and practices of other religious traditions and to the lives of those without religious affiliation or belief. You do not need to be religious to understand and get value from the substance of the discussion that follows. The passages are designed to be more of a meditation than a vehicle of information. Use the reading of this book as an opportunity to reflect and to make the goals of creating benefit and beauty in the world a practice in your everyday life. In this way you can make what is offered here your own and use the experiences and insights as part of your development.

A header has been inserted on every other page so that as you read each topic, it is preceded by the Tibetan exclamation E-MA-HO (ཨམ་ཨོ), which is used to announce that what is to follow is a blessing, something wondrous, something to take to heart in our dedication to becoming a compassionate presence for others.

As you read the topics in these teachings, consider that each one is a kind of blessing, conveying something of value that is meant for you personally and sanctifying whatever spiritual effort you are making to understand, practice, cultivate and realize your own sacred nature. I invite you, the reader, to become the creator who takes the sometimes awkward and sometimes elegant but hopefully nourishing offerings of these teachings and metabolizes them in your own body, your own imagination, your own community and your own acts of creating the world in the moment.

Incorporating the teachings of this book in your life will

not only result in your experiencing more aliveness but will positively impact those around you. You become part of a great process and spiritual principle of passing it on. Life is a gift and part of what it takes to fully open that gift is to discover and enact the ways you are a gift to life.

George Bernard Shaw wrote: “This is the true joy of life: the being used up for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clot of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.”



The Art of Living

The bushmen of southern Africa tell a wonderful story about life and how the art of living is a quest. (The following version is based on a version told to Laurence van der Post, who conveyed it to Colin Turnbull, who retold it in his book *The Human Cycle*.)

A Bushman child, in the course of a day of playful wandering, drank from a clear waterhole. In the shimmering surface he beheld the reflection of a beautiful bird. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Even as he looked up, he knew that the bird had already gone. The boy decided he had to follow that vision and find it, so off he went. He sought it throughout his adolescence and throughout his youth as he grew into a hunter. Even as he performed his everyday functional and sacred roles in his community, he kept searching for the bird.

Eventually, as an adult, he abandoned the role of hunting game and concentrated on hunting for truth and beauty. Far from being criticized for his change of direction, the community recognized that he was contributing effectively to their society by pursuing and living both his faith and his belief. The seeker was considered to have a sacred role by his dedication to beauty and goodness.

His quest continued throughout adulthood as the hunter of truth was always one step behind his quarry. Wherever he traveled, village after village would tell him it had just left heading northward. In his old age the hunter reached the lower slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro and was told that the bird

had been seen high up on the snowy summit. With the last of his strength the old man, whose quest began with the vision of a child, climbed laboriously up the mountainside. As he looked around, nowhere did he see any trace of the great bird he had devoted his life to finding.

Finally, he reached the top and he knew that his quest was over, for up there in the equatorial snow and ice all his strength was gone and there was no bird, nothing but emptiness. He lay down to wait for the end, recalling the vision of his childhood, content with a life well spent. He had been fortunate enough to find beauty once, and in his heart he had never lost it. As he closed his eyes for the last time on an empty sky, he called on the name of his mother, who had given him such a wonderful and joyous life. As he stretched out his arms with his hands open to the heavens in a final gesture, down from the sky came a solitary feather and settled in one hand. The hand closed slowly and held it as tightly in death as the vision of beauty had been held during life.



Blessings of Benefit and Beauty

1

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Threefold reality is reflected in our capacities for wisdom, love and beauty.

The threefold nature of reality, found in most religious traditions, can be expressed generically as space, relationship and activity. Namely that everything that exists, exists in space, is in relationship to everything else, and is dynamic as an energetic process that changes over time.

We know these natures in terms of our capacities for consciousness that encompasses life in our awareness, intimacy in our connection to others, and creation in our growth and contributions to the world. The mature or developed forms of these abilities are wisdom, love, and beauty.



The spiritual work of the triune Buddha might be thought of as the triple cultivation of mind, relationship, and action.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the qualities of a Buddha are often depicted in terms of three enlightened beings—Manjushri manifesting wisdom, Avalokiteshvara manifesting all encompassing love and compassion, and Vajrapani manifesting the all accomplishing power to create benefit. These three symbolize the triune principles of the Buddha's nature as they can be cultivated and applied in our lives.

Similar triune principles are found in other traditions as well. For example in Hinduism, the triunity of goddesses include Sarasvati representing wisdom, Lakshmi representing love, and Parvati representing the energy of creation, which includes the full process of creation from generation, sustaining, to dissolution. We find similar trinitarian perspectives in other traditions, including Christianity and Islam.

In referring to the qualities of the triune Buddha, I call them the “wisdom Buddha,” the “intimate Buddha,” and “the creative Buddha.” The spiritual work of the triune Buddha might be thought of as the triple cultivation of mind, relationship, and action.

The recognition and realization of the open, undifferentiated, formless dimension of being is the basis of sacred wisdom. The experience and realization of the interconnect- edness of everything and everyone and of interbeing is the basis of sacred love and compassion. The integration and

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E-MA-HO

cultivation of the spiritual qualities and energies of life, both personally and collectively, is the basis of sacred character and beauty.



To live is to be, to become and to relate.

In spiritual work, what it means to be human cannot be reduced to simply “being,” to some pure state. We are also always becoming and developing what we are able to be and do. In addition, we connect to experiences, to our nature, to others, to the world, and to life. To live is to be, to become and to relate.



Blessing intensifies and sanctifies life by increasing our engagement in the present and planting seeds of a beneficial future.

Bless, blessing as verb: To make holy, to sanctify, to sacralize, to endow.

Blessing as noun: a benefit, something promoting or contributing to happiness, well-being. From the Old English words *blaedsian*, *bledsian*, *bletsian* meaning to bless, wish happiness, and consecrate.

Indo-European root: *bhel-* to bloom, thrive. Related words using this same root: bloom, blossom, flower, bleed and blood.

Blessings intensify life by increasing our engagement in the present. At the same time, we, with the sense of being blessed, access gratitude for the past and the present and with our intention to be a blessing set the stage for the future. In our richly endowed and faceted world, full of variation and unknown, blessings are found everywhere if only we have a mindset and heartspace of sanctification and the willingness to give them form to be passed on.

Becoming a conscious creator in life is the way of sacralizing and being sacralized, sanctifying and being sanctified, blessing and being blessed, working and being worked. This grows out of being gifted and passing it on as giving/gifting.



Blessings of Benefit and Beauty

‘Blessing’ is the theological word for goodness...’

Matthew Fox

Goodness is the proper name of God the Creator.

Meister Eckhart

For Meister Eckhart, the Christian mystic, hidden in all of us is a spark of goodness that reflects the original creative fire and luminosity from which the world came into being. This spark burns and glows constantly. Our opportunity and challenge is to feed that ember through our sense of sacred connection and our becoming an expression of that goodness.



Our present actions create the womb of the future.

Responsibility means to create blessings in the form of benefit and beauty from what is.

To open the gift of life, we take responsibility for that gift. Responsibility from a spiritual standpoint means creating blessings in the form of benefit and beauty from what is. It is not spiritually relevant how the conditions of life got to be as they are. What is significant now is what are we going to do that will create value from the situation.



Life is Stewardship

Human society is not an abstraction. The only real society is the complete society of the natural world. We are awkward at this manner of thinking because our religious as well as our humanist traditions carry a certain antagonism toward the natural world. But now the refusal of human beings to become intimate members of the community of the earth is leading to their own destruction.

Thomas Berry

Life as a gift is also a trust in which we are the stewards of not only our own lives but of our relationships, our possessions, our communities, the earth, and of the sacred potential that is in us and in others. Everything and every moment is entrusted to us personally and collectively. The attitude that all life, the world, and everything is sacred can support the heart posture of real responsibility.

One classic prescription is that we want to leave every situation in better shape than we found it. This applies from the great challenges of our society such as poverty, inequality, alienation, fragmentation and lack of community to the everyday tasks and situations in our homes and families and workplaces.



June 6 We are now in the mountains and they are in us, kindling enthusiasm, making every nerve quiver, filling every pore and cell of us. Our flesh-and-bone tabernacle seems transparent as glass to the beauty about us, as if truly an inseparable part of it, thrilling with the air and trees, streams, and rocks, in the waves of the sun—a part of all nature, neither old nor young, sick nor well, but immortal.... How glorious a conversion, so complete and wholesome it is....

John Muir

The awe embodied in this experience of John Muir reveals both the wondrous benefit of beauty and its transformative power. It energized him to pursue the passion that beauty inspired and to place his life in service to a greater good.

Benefit and beauty have the same Indo-European root: *deu-*, which meant *to do, to show favor, benefit, beauty* and possibly is also related to the word *dynamic*.

Leo Tolstoy, in *What is Art?*, wrote that “All human life is filled with works of art of every kind—from cradlesong, jest, mimicry, the ornamentation of houses, dress, and utensils, up to church services, buildings, monuments, and triumphal processions. It is all artistic activity.”

All action can be creative if done with a sense of generating benefit and beauty and can, in this way transport us beyond ourselves.



Blessings of Benefit and Beauty

Beauty conveys a sense of awe in the presence of a sacred boundless radiance.

Beauty is in the loving heart posture of the beholder. Beauty is created by us from our loving heart posture.

Beauty is a part of all religious traditions. One of the great contributions that we can make to the world is to bring beauty into it. Far from a path of total renunciation, this way involves a certain kind of embrace that expresses love not hate, engagement not detachment and presence not absence. It can be seen as one way to direct our attention to the wonder of the Divine and convey in a small way the larger sense of awe in the presence of a sacred boundless radiance.

The key is in relating to beauty in a sacred way, not the trivialization of beauty as a vanity and self-preoccupation or simply as a comfortable way of feeling good. The sacred way involves having physical beauty evoke the greater and wondrous invisible beauty.

We often employ the word “beauty” to indicate what is pleasing, good, evocative of wonder and even joy, transcendent, sublime. We create and know beauty more from our apprehensive capacity than our comprehensive. Beauty can also give us the experience of beholding and embracing contradictions and complementarities by bringing them together and giving them a rich place within a whole.

Beauty resides not so much in appearances as in the loving heart posture with which it is created and beheld. When we

perceive the world and life with love, we see beauty, making even apparently ugly things endearing and thereby beautiful. We see and connect to everyone and everything as if they are our own children, seeking to bring forth all the beautiful qualities that deepen and share our love.

Beauty unites people by evoking similar experiences and feelings.



Life is Not a Problem. It is a Blessing.

Buddhism suggests that life, even suffering, is not a problem and is in fact an opportunity, a noble blessing. Buddhist practice is not a self-help program to solve the problem of our life. The practices may impact us but it is not basically a problem-solving approach. In fact it is the opposite.

From a Buddhist viewpoint, life simply is. Challenges simply are. Buddhism is a path for opening the precious gift of life and all that that involves. It encourages us to recognize and cultivate our basic wisdom, loving, and radiant nature, so that we are a magnificent contributing presence. We can be transformed into a bestower of blessings.

In some Buddhist mythology, Maitreya, the emerging or coming Buddha, will follow the age of wisdom and intellectual achievements by bringing forth an expanded and intensified intuitive, intimate consciousness, in which the sense of the essential unity of all life will support the active love of fellow beings and the creation of a world of blessings.

This intimate sense of all life and its consequent active love will manifest in the practical integration and application of wisdom. This integration of wisdom, love, and action combines the warmth of caring with the clarity of inner vision and the creation of collective benefit and beauty. Maitreya embodies an all-embracing sacred nature that is spontaneous, connective, lovingly engaged and endlessly creative.



Sacralizing

2

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Sacred work encompasses many spiritual purposes.

Sacred work can be inspired by and encompass one or more goals—from resting in pure being, uniting with the totality or Oneness, abiding in an encompassing sense of home, cultivating unconditional and boundless love, becoming absorbed fully in the process of creation, being fully present, serving transcendent forces and awarenesses, healing all sense of separation, redeeming the world through faith, love and justice, embodying wisdom, love and service, to expressing wonder at and gratitude for the miracle and radiance of life.



If the world is to be lived in, it must be founded—and no world can come to birth in the chaos of the homogeneity and relativity of profane space. The discovery or projection of a fixed point—the center—is equivalent to the creation of the world....

Mircea Eliade

Religious man's desire to live in the sacred is in fact equivalent to this desire to take his abode in objective reality, not let himself be paralyzed by the never-ceasing relativity of purely subjective experiences, to live in a real and effective world, and not in an illusion.

Mircea Eliade

For Eliade, the experiences of a secular/profane world view flatten everything and nothing can stir the heart to deepen and enrich life. From his viewpoint, sacred space orients us in the world, to live with meaning, and to differentiate qualitatively types of space. Even in the profane world, we will tend to invest particular places with special meaning, such as a birthplace, a school we attended, or a scene where we experienced love or great beauty.

A sacred view places us not only in the world of space but in the world of experience. The inner way of relating to outer space creates a rich inner space of meaning, beauty, connection, and shared value.



The sacred is a dimension of life that is self-surpassing, all encompassing, interpenetrating unity and presence, and is beyond yet immanent.

The sacred, in the way we are using the word here, does not have a separate and distinct existence from life but is a dimension of it that is self-surpassing, all encompassing, interpenetrating unity and presence, and is beyond yet immanent in all being, life, and forms.

The sacred integrates all that is, all contradictions, and all possibilities. The way into the sacred is not by escaping existence but by going further and further into life, into the mystery, into experience, into awareness, into love, into creating each moment personally and collectively.

While the particular experiences we have in spiritual practice and sacred moments will be unique and vary from person to person and from time to time, the effect of these experiences is common. These experiences tend to take us deeper into our felt sense of the sacred, give us a sense of greater connection and belonging beyond ourselves, and enhance our sense of purpose in life.



The sacred includes the ineffable, the mystery, the profound experience of the unknown.

For Abraham Joshua Heschel, mystery opens us up to a sacred beyond that inspires awe and engenders a profound experience of home.

The search of reason ends at the shore of the known. On the immense expanse beyond it, only the sense of the ineffable can glide. It alone knows the route to that which is beyond experience and understanding. We do not leave the shore of the known in search of adventure or suspense or because of the failure of reason to answer our questions. We sail because our mind is like a fantastic seashell, and, when applying our ear to its lips, we hear a perpetual murmur from the waves beyond the shore.

Abraham Joshua Heschel



When we open to the deeper, vaster unknown, it is possible that something sacred can happen to us.

*J*eschel argues that we resist what is coming at us and live on a spiritually “dainty diet” in our superficiality because we are fearful about what is waiting for us beyond our ordinary way of living.

When we open to the deeper, vaster unknown, it is possible that something sacred can happen to us.

A moment comes like a thunderbolt, in which a flash of the undisclosed rends our dark apathy asunder. It is full of overpowering brilliance, like a point in which all moments of life are focused or a thought that outweighs all thoughts ever conceived of. There is so much light in our cage, in our world, it is as if we are suspended amidst the stars. Apathy turns to splendor unawares. The ineffable has shuttered itself into the soul. It has entered our consciousness, like a ray of light passing into a lake. Refraction of that penetrating ray brings about a turning in our mind: We are penetrated by God’s insight. We cannot think anymore as if God were there and we are here. God is both there and here. God is not *a being* but *being in and beyond all beings*.

A tremor seizes our limbs. Our nerves are struck, quiver like strings; our whole being bursts into shudders. But then a cry, wrested from our very core, fills the world around us, as if a mountain were suddenly about to place itself in front of us. It is one word: God. Not an emotion, a stir within us, but a power, a marvel beyond us, tearing the world apart. The word that means more than universe, more than eternity, holy, holy, holy; we cannot comprehend it. We only know it means infinitely more than we are able to echo. Staggered, embarrassed, we stammer

and say, “God, who is more than all there is, who speaks through the ineffable, whose question is more than our mind can answer, God to whom our life can be the spelling of an answer.

Abraham Joshua Heschel



The apprehension of transcendent mystery embeds us in sacredness.

Mystery has always been associated with sacredness. This reminds us that we are dealing with an aspect of life that cannot be comprehended by thinking and concepts. This does not mean that comprehension cannot play a role in approaching sacredness, but that fundamentally, sacredness is not based in ideas and can only be partially grasped through a developed capacity for apprehension.

What has been considered part of the sacred mysteries has varied by culture and historical time but the following have usually been included:

Beyond concepts, Essence

Unknown of the future

Vastness of unconditional love

Vastness of interbeing and interconnection

Invisible forces and intelligences that animate the world

Depth of inner self and expanse of outer world

Movement in stillness, sound in silence, objects in space

Unity of multiplicities

Awakened nature of all beings and the impossibility of every being awakening at the same time

Integration of head and heart

The nature of beauty

The calling to contribute to the unfolding of life and create a sacred legacy



Spirituality places what is and beyond together.

In the sacred dimension of pure being/essence, we abide in the nature of being. In the sacred dimension of becoming, we continuously go beyond the limits of where we have been, renewing ourselves in an eternal presence, opening to the unknown.

The interactive, interconnective nature of life reveals the sacred nature of creation. Spirituality points beyond: beyond the superficial, beyond the ordinary, beyond possessions, beyond feelings, beyond thoughts, beyond expectations and beyond self-concern.

The spiritual can be the highest level of development in mastery of a life work, namely beyond what is taught. It can refer to experiences that are beyond the everyday. To live a spiritual life is to be inspired by and embody the qualities of the sacred that are beyond a life centered in material reality and yet is not divorced from physical reality. It is to be informed by a sacred way of seeing, feeling, being and acting. Spirituality involves both the affirmation of what is as well as what is beyond—what we can know and what is unknown and beyond our comprehension.

Spirituality transcends the ordinary and yet, paradoxically, it can be found in the ordinary. It places *what is* and *beyond* together. It is the extraordinary nature of all that is ordinary. It is also true that by attending to *what is*, the *beyond* can be touched.

The gateway of the spiritual opens us to the true

abundance, to the boundless treasures of the sacred. Spiritual qualities are enlarged as they are shared, rather than diminished as would be the case in the material world. It is in this sacred space of creation and intimacy that everyone can experience wealth.

As we cope with crafting a life of meaning, beauty, and love from the material of our modern world, we seek to overcome our cultural alienation from a sacred life. We do not want to simply be “doing time” with life, surviving as long as possible, cut off from creating a life of meaning and blessings.



Sacred reality is a dimension of life that is hidden and is revealed through experience and sacred imagination.

Prayer is the art of sacred imagining from the heart.

Our knowledge of the sacred is not a rational process of deduction or induction from various kinds of evidence. It is based upon directly experienced intimacy with sacred dimensions and opening to sacred qualities and energies living through us personally and, in sacred gatherings, collectively.

Imagination catalyzes the process as we move beyond the obvious into the hidden dimensions of both the outer world of life around us and the inner world of our own experience. Spiritual teachings use words, images, and practices that are rooted in an invisible reality. This sacred reality is another dimension of life that exists simultaneous with and parallel to our everyday sensory experience.



An optimistic frame of heart and mind activates our motivation and our vision of potential positive futures.

In approaching the sacred, the principle is to experience and integrate what we see and experience into a kind of knowing, rather than to see what we know. When we simply see patterns and familiarity, we are seeing the present in the past tense. Spiritual openness and insight operates in the present and sets the stage for sacred experience in the future.

In following a path of spiritual work, a certain kind of faith also supports our putting the path into practice. This faith is centered on the optimistic frame that our efforts will produce beneficial results. This is important for motivation and envisioning positive futures that can guide us. It has been found that optimism activates the same parts of the anterior cingulate, an integrative part of the brain that connects the frontal lobe to the limbic system, as meditation and prayer and that this also expands our capacity for empathy and compassion.



Most people have no idea what profound is. They go down to the very depths in order to look for it.... But in order to find it...they would have to be quite deep themselves.

Peter Altenberg

The sacred is a quality of being beyond the superficial that cannot be defined but can be experienced and inform the way we live a meaningful and purposeful life.

To ask what is the sacred is to ask about our very nature. It cannot be reduced to a set of concepts, to the measurements of brainwaves, to scientific validation or invalidation, to a set of feelings, to dogmas, to beliefs, to a separate entity, to an interior space, to a religion, nor to ritual activities. Some of these may play a role in sacred experience and development, but none can define authentic answers to what we are asking.

The nature of the sacred demands that we penetrate the world of appearances and the reactive habits of mind, body and heart that keep us preoccupied with the façade of superficiality. This includes not only our thoughts about the world but the world of our everyday emotions as well. The inner life is not one that is centered on our own interior but one that sees, connects, and acts within sacred vision.

When we go beyond the superficial—beyond appearance—and open, what are we opening to? In a sense, nothing. In another sense we could say a new quality of being that is consciously aware of the present moment, relates intimately with what is present, and is alive with the fullness

of life. Beyond appearances lies the living moment in all its dimensions and ultimate unity.

The sacred exists but not in a reducible way. In a sense it is a metaphor we use for a boundless and rich nature that is beyond the surfaces of life. This metaphor is also used to indicate a path of our own possible development.

The suggestion here is also that the opposite of the sacred is not the material or evil. It is being superficial. We are called to move beyond the superficiality of our limiting reactive habits to live spontaneously—our own authentic, unique lives as a contribution to the lives of others. We are called to remember that we are the environment for other people. Becoming freer and finding the light that is hidden in our particular darkness enables us to see with sacred eyes and to live in a heart posture of love.

When we cling to superficial views and addictions, we do not sense all the opportunities for experiencing joy.

The teachings and practices of all religious traditions are aimed at transporting us into the Sacred and rooting us in our own sacred nature as well as all life. Whether we explore the sacred heart of Christianity, the Divine spark in Judaism, or the open and compassionate presencing in Buddhism, we enter an intimate path into the world of the sacred.



We are challenged by our fears, overwhelm, and busy-ness in trying to establish and sustain a spiritual life.

Part of our challenge centers around our human condition in which we not only hear sacred callings and feel the longing for depth and fullness, but we also are pulled by a part of ourselves that can easily be lost in the insistent dynamics of a busy life. We see the chaos, conflicts, and struggles of our own lives and of the lives of so many others throughout the world but wrestle with how to find a way through it all to some kind of clarity, ease, and unconditional belonging.

The tendency to live only on the surface can breed a fear of going deeper, a fear that it all may be meaningless because we mistakenly attach permanence or at least longevity to “real” meaning as if meaning in this sense somehow must endure.



Living meaning is not an answer so much as a sacred process that transforms our consciousness, our sense of connection, and our capacity to act.

Yet meaning exists, not according to some external criteria, not from some outside source, and not based on its ability to be perpetual. Meaning is what we actually experience in the moment. It is our answer to how we should live our lives. To experience living meaning is one of the keys that opens the door to the sacred. Living meaning suggests that a spiritual reality is known as a force in our lives. It has the power to change us—not simply inform our thoughts. It has an energy to enliven our flesh, excite our heart, and engage our mind.



If we looked upon everything we do, everyone we know, and everything we see as sacred, as expressions of the Divine, then our life would transform into a sacred life.

Roshi Bernard Glassman teaches that eating demonstrates a metaphor for the paradoxical nature of life itself. “When we eat a meal we have cooked, we find that everything we have created—all our work—has been for consumption, for annihilation. Life is a constant process of creation and destruction. We can’t hold on to the meal we’ve made. We have to use it. In fact, when we eat our meal thoroughly, with appreciation, we find there’s nothing to hold on to.”

So how do we sacralize life from this viewpoint? Zen master Dogen, who founded the largest Zen Buddhist lineage in Japan, wrote a famous manual called *Instructions to the Cook*. In this book he tells of how he learned a great lesson from his encounter and studies with a Chinese Zen monk who was the head cook at his monastery. As retold by Roshi Glassman and reframed in a modern context, “It was the Zen cook’s duty, Dogen wrote, to make the best and most sumptuous meal possible out of whatever ingredients were available—even if he had only rice and water.”



If we are doing spiritual work to feel good, we are missing the point that spiritual work is about transforming who we are for something greater than ourselves.

In the American context, spiritual work such as Buddhism confronts an on-going historical tension between the forces for a collective, larger community sensibility and responsibility and the forces of an economic system founded on self-interest, the operations of an impersonal and competitive market, and the prominence of the rights of individuals. While respecting the individual and emphasizing personal responsibility, Buddhism also teaches about transcending self-interest in the cultivation of a sincere concern for the welfare of other, the sense of interconnectedness, and compassion as the basis of social justice.

To be free of the narcissism and selfish interests that are so present in our culture and society does not mean to be neutral, indifferent, or devoid of interests, but, on the contrary, to be a committed actor in what transcends our selfishness, accessing and activating a self-surpassing view or heart posture. It is a sense of sacred connection to others and to life that takes us beyond self-preoccupation. We live beyond our selfish inclinations by connecting with our profound passion for serving the sacred in all forms and in all moments. The cultivation of the “self-surpassing,” a heart posture of love, compassion, justice, and dedication, shapes our being into a fully spiritual actor.



The creative aspect of sacred work denotes, not an idea of goodness, but a living caring; not an abstract example, but an ongoing challenge to live from a sacred sensibility; not mere feeling or affection, but a heart posture composed of mature spiritual elements; no detached survey of the state of the world, but a passionate summons to engage with equanimity, love and compassion.

Everything we do can be a sacred act if we sanctify it by investing it with sacred meaning and a loving heart. When we gulp down a glass of water in our thirst, we may either drown our conscious attention or bring it into the moment through our gratitude. In acts of service, we do not sacrifice ourselves; we sanctify these acts with our dedication and whole-heartedness.

From a spiritual point of view, we have the responsibility to manifest sacred qualities through performing our conscious roles in the world. Each of us is an agent of the sacred. Each lives with the powerful seeds of love, connection, growth, and regeneration within and has the lifelong task of planting those seeds in the garden of our experience and feeding them, shaping them as they grow, and exposing them to the warmth and light of conscious attention.

We not only possess the qualities of life, love, meaning, and connection—we are possessed by them. When we surrender to the demands of our sacred elements, we find our

authentic home—where we belong, can create value, can host experience, can be hosted by the beauty of the sacred, and are prepared to contribute our unique gift to the larger dynamic of life.



Buddha is as Buddha does.

By treating everything that arises as a training opportunity in sacralization, we transform our usual sense of powerlessness in the face of difficulties into workout tools in building our spiritual capacity. We approach each moment with a determination to move beyond our addictive self-preoccupation. We grow the seeds of virtue. We interrupt reactive habits and proactively cultivate sacred qualities. We dedicate our efforts on behalf of others. And we acknowledge and celebrate each step in the right direction.

We become what we do because we are always creating or reinforcing patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving. In referring to the “mind reform tradition” in Buddhism, Robert Thurman writes “I have a new English proverb for it: I say, ‘Buddha is as Buddha does.’”

As sacred warriors and celebrants we strive to enact our sacred states of consciousness in deeds. There is a seamless flow between our meditating and our acting.

In the Indian traditions, Karma Yoga is the consecration of all actions, situations, and their results. Beyond special occasions, we use everyday events as opportunities for ceremony and celebration, as a practice of blessing. Karma Yoga is self-surpassing service to life, participating in and contributing to the human community and the greater circle of all living beings. In Karma Yoga authentic sacred imagination works through us to create blessings in the world.

An authentic karma yogi sees the sacred in everyone,

connecting and communicating from the heart posture of sacred love and the desire to be of a vehicle of the good, a blessings bestowing presence. Our practice is to plant seeds and to strengthen our authentic personal, collective, and sacred natures. This kind of practice is done paradoxically with both ease and effort. As we grow stronger in our wisdom, loving, and generative nature, we seek the path of ever greater resistance to challenge and enhance our growth.



The sacred is like a shy lover who must be courted by the earnestness of our efforts, the dedication in our purpose, and the magnificence of our failures.

As a form of experience and certainly as a way of being, the sacred is like a shy lover who must be courted by the earnestness of our efforts, the dedication in our purpose, and the magnificence of our failures. We may get encouraging glimpses of the beauty, peace, and wonder of this hidden lover that inspire us to continue with our practices day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year. As all this work begins to bear fruit, the beauty of the sacred is revealed and experienced increasingly as an integral part of a full life as we engage in an increasingly pervasive process of sacralization.



Creation and Dedicated Presence

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Life maketh all things new.

Longfellow

Life is activity, energy, creative.

The creation we are speaking about here is more circular than linear. It is not concerned with beginnings and endings but the endless dynamic of life where every ending is a beginning and every beginning is only an event in the always flowing river of creation.

The sacred oneness of creation is in the rich particulars of its diversity where every person, every flower, every tree, every song, every flutter of wings, every breath, every birth, and every death is an essential feature of a great ocean of all that is, Reality.



As servants to the creative process of which we are all participants and from which our lives are sustained, we keep the spirit alive through our sustained efforts.

As vast and open as wisdom is, and as deep and intimate as love is, such is the magnificence and beauty of creation. This beauty makes everyone and everything that beholds it flower and grow. Creation is both beyond time and in time. In time this force, this dynamic of being, manifests forms with colors and shapes that hold the footprint of time having passed that way on a path to new formations, new blossoming, and new possibilities.

Yet we must open the eyes of the soul to see the magnificence of creation. Despite the pulsing of our creative nature, we often confine our lives to a series of seemingly endless moments of reenactment of frustrated possibilities and insatiable desires. In this way we feel an alienation from a home in which our visions and dreams can live, be refined, and mature.

We must embrace the fact that creation is a reality of our three-fold nature. We recognize that our creative nature is not the province of a select few, but rather that all human beings are equal in our possibility to create sacred imagination and live from sacred attention. It is our participation in this sacred and creative nature that will embed us in a vibrant life. We become committed servants to the creative process of which we are all participants and from which our lives are sustained. We want to keep the spirit alive through our

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sustained efforts so that things of value do not collapse into the jaws of oblivion that always await our lapses on the shores of memory.



Presence includes all living beings.

The view of enlightenment as some absolute dissolution into nothingness or some dimension of pure awareness that is removed from the nitty-gritty of living is simply reductionist and not Buddhist. It denies a fundamental part of Buddhist teaching that everything is interconnected and always changes, impermanent. It is the deep perception and realization of these principles of the nature of life that can free us. There is no separate you to be enlightened, no non-interconnected thing. You cannot become nothing because “nothing” is simply a word for that which does not exist. Your self-sense may change and you may realize the illusory nature of your identities and preconceptions, but that does not mean that you do not exist, that you are not living. Making *nothing* your deity is quite simply a dead end.

What some people call their experience of nothingness is their experience of their mental construct of what nothing would be. This concept driven nothingness reflects an undeveloped spirituality that often has some kind of escapist motivation lurking in the background.

As Robert Thurman points out: “Enlightenment is not some sort of obliteration. Enlightenment is fully being here now, but the now is of infinite duration and the “here” is of infinite extension. It is not a here and now that is an isolated, private moment of my own.... It is a presence that includes all living beings, all “here”s and all “now”s.”



*Karma means action. Therefore it means creation.
The dynamic of karma and the reality of change are
the creative principles of life.*

The Buddha saw that change is the nature of phenomenality. He was not only concerned with what is beyond phenomena but what is the nature of living in a phenomenal world. One meaning of the word *dharma* centers on the principles by which things exist and change and the reality that every act we take, every word we speak, and every thought we think is not only influenced by the other forces operating in the web of life that we participate in, but also has impacts and reverberations in that web far beyond what we can see or imagine.

The Sanskrit term *karma* literally means action or doing. Any kind of intentional action whether mental, verbal, or physical, is regarded as Karma. It covers all that is included in the phrase “thought, word and deed”. Generally speaking, all good and bad action constitutes Karma.

Karma does not necessarily mean past actions. It embraces both past and present deeds. Hence in one sense, we are the result of what we were; we will be the result of what we are.

In another sense, it should be added, we are not totally the result of what we were; we will not absolutely be the result of what we are. While our current conditions, particularly our inner life and reactive habits, are influenced by our past actions, in Buddhism, Karma can be changed. Because we are conscious beings, we can be aware of our past and strive

to create a change in direction of the flows of events into the future.

The *Dhammapada* states: “All that we are is a result of what we have thought, it is founded on our thoughts and made up of our thoughts.” This points to the power of our creative and sacred imagination. Therefore, the quality of our character is dependent on whether we embrace “good” thoughts, actions, and words or focus on degrading thoughts, that can influence us to speak with hostility and defensiveness and to engage in harmful behaviors.

How we use our mind influences the quality of our presence and the nature of our actions in creating the present. From the standpoint of spiritual work and of sacralizing life, karma is the creative. We are always creating the present and the future through the present.



What we do in this moment shapes not only our present experience but what we are becoming.

As we come to know karma as the creative nature of life, this realization can increase our sense of intensity, immediacy, and eternity of the moment. We sense the preciousness of the moment in the core of our being and can invest in our most profound spiritual growth. What we do in this moment shapes what we are becoming.



*We can enter the eternal beyond time by the
pathway of fullness of presence.*

The creative is intimately connected with time. Temporality necessarily means that each moment arises and is distinct from the last and the next. Two instants can never be together in time.

Yet, within each moment in time we can enter the eternal beyond time by the pathway of fullness of presence. This suggests that we can be both in time and beyond time simultaneously, fully engaged in acting to shape life in time as well as fully present in the dimension of our open awareness that transcends time.



Song itself cannot happen without time,
without the voice rising and falling away.

For is not impermanence the very fragrance of
our days.

Maria Rainer Rilke

Joanna Macy wrote of Rilke in her book *In Praise of Mortality*: “Rilke invites us to experience what mortality makes possible. It links us with life and all time.” “Ours is the suffering and ours is the harvest.”

She goes on to write about the death of a loved one: “The great secret of death, and perhaps its deepest connection with us, is this: in taking from us a being we have loved and venerated, death does not wound us without, at the same time, lifting us toward a more perfect understanding of this being and of ourselves.”



The Creation Mother is always also the Death Mother and visa versa. Because of this dual nature, or double-tasking, the great work before us is to learn to understand what around and about us and what within us must live, and what must die. Our work is to apprehend the timing of both; to allow what must die to die, and what must live to live.

Clarissa Pinkola Estés

As human beings we are confronted not only with death in our future but with our awareness of death. In the dimension of causal relationships, time arises and with time, death keeps the cycles going and makes room for new possibilities.

The creative has multiple expressions, two of which are birth and death, generation and dissolution. We often want to dance with the first and deny the second. Throughout our lives we are accompanied by the unknown companion of death. Death travels through life with us, having joined our journey at birth. Death is the face of Grace that we try to ignore. Death as a presence is known in our fears, but our reactive structure of habits keep us buffered and blinded to the deeper nature of the process of life.

Our issues with death contract our attention and our very being and can haunt our participation in life. Yet death serves as a teacher by reminding us that fear and reaction trap us in linear self-concern causing us to miss life. Only

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through being Present can we experience fully the “Now” of the moment. In that presence is eternity—beyond time and space.



Without death, there is no birth.

Death is not the defeat of life but the stage in the cycle that makes room for what is to come and that transitions what has been into what will be.

The process of birth is also the transition of death. The experience of physical birth is a model for the process of transcending each stage of our development. When the time was ripe, we were painfully pushed from the securely contained, dark, fluid world of the womb into an open world of light and gravity. The cord of automatic nurturance was cut and we now had to actively seek and ingest nourishment. For the infant the process of being born was like a death. Out of this death came new life, new freedoms, new possibilities, and new requirements for growth.



The aspiration is to obtain; the perfection is to dispense. This is the meaning of death: the ultimate self-dedication to the divine. Death so understood will not be distorted by the craving for immortality, for this act of giving away is reciprocity on man's part for God's gift of life. For the pious man it is a privilege to die.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

Death does not come only at the end of this life. Physical death is but a stage in the process of life that began long before our birth. Even physically, our cells are constantly dying and new one being generated. Thoughts are dissolving to make way for new ones. Feelings pass as new feelings appear.

As we grow through the stages of spiritual maturity, each new level involves a death of the old. The world we have known and taken for granted dissolves and we must learn anew how to see, feel, act, and understand as we can no longer live in what has become the prison of an outgrown way of being and understanding.



The secret of village togetherness and happiness has always been the generosity of the people, but the key to that generosity is inefficiency and decay. Because our village huts were not built to last very long, they had to be regularly renewed. To do this, villagers came together, at least once a year, to work on somebody's hut.... In this way, each family's place in the village was reestablished and remembered.

Martín Prechtel

From this point of view, everything we do creates a kind of death, a tear or hole in the fabric of life that must be repaired. This is the destruction of *what is* to create *what is becoming*. This is not a violation but a natural process of life that carries with it responsibility—to create benefit and beauty from what has been destroyed in the process of creating something new.

Every activity that creates something new leaves waste. That waste must also be used in a responsible way to keep the world intact. If we regard it as simply of no value, we lose our connection to it and our personal and collective worlds are diminished. This alienation then haunts both us and what we have created. It becomes like a homeless spirit that will keep seeking a way back into our heart, if not as a friend and ally, then as a stranger and potential enemy.



Eternity is not perpetual future but perpetual presence.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

As creative buddhas we celebrate the incompleteness of life. For the Buddha, the cosmos was beginningless and endless and always evolving. There is no final arrival and no end of days. Rather each moment is an entrance to eternity as well as the creative opportunity to shape the future.

Presence is the entry to the sacred, the opening of a spiritual life. In presence we live life rather than have life as something that happens to us and passes. Rather than unconsciously reacting to events and situations and diminishing the level of consciousness in the world (even through beneficial acts done reactively), we work to intentionally participate, contribute, and bring greater awareness to life as we find it.

To dance with the reality of “what is” requires that we learn to experience and contain our feelings and reactions sufficiently enough that insight arises and we are able to channel our energies into our own sense of presence. When we cannot hold all the energy, it is useful to find healthy ways to discharge some of the excess. The greater goal, however, is to build our capacity to embody and experience the fullness of life and to use all of the energies of living to generate a delightful flow of blessings.

Dancing with presence, with the fullness of *Now*, is often easiest when we have a sense of play. Play takes the edge of seriousness and consuming functionality out of activity in

such a way that we can take delight in what we are doing, not simply focusing on the utilitarian end that we think it serves. Play in this sense is not frivolous. It contains the paradox of being wholeheartedly engaged without an oppressive burden of success and failure.



*A dedicated spiritual life can include freedom,
making a difference, beauty, nurturance and love.*

For some of us the motivation to spiritually mature is our desire to lead a dedicated life that is free, that matters, that makes a difference, that creates beauty, that is aligned with a deep integrity, and that demonstrates the power of example. We seek to express the boundless radiance of the infinite sacred and to realize and embody supreme awareness.

Others of us yearn for love, for the connections that flow from sharing the great and small, always passionate dramas of life, and from making a home filled with beauty, caring, and nurturance. We want to dance the play of life's sacred energy as a way of making love and creating life, using all the senses as an expression our divinely rich nature.



*The sacred erotic activates wholehearted intimacy,
a commitment to mature and the capacity to create
blessings for the benefit of the greater community.*

The spiritual union of creative aliveness and love constitutes the “sacred erotic,” where we experience everything, not only sex, with wholehearted intimacy and engagement. This greater, sacred meaning of the erotic suggests that the divorce of our sensory and passionate nature from our spiritual nature can lead to distortions in the way we live and spiritually mature.

One purpose of the process and experience of initiation is the activation of our potential to fully realize sacred consciousness, to engage and commit to relationships in a wholehearted way, to grow into emotional, intellectual and spiritual maturity, and to create blessings within ourselves and for others for the benefit of the whole community.



The heart postures of love and beauty are ways of seeing and relating to life.

*H*appiness in the core of our being is sacred beauty. Beauty, like love, is both a way of seeing and relating to life and an expression, a manifestation, of happiness as love, freedom, and joy.

What we experience is very much determined by what we attend to and what heart postures we bring to each situation and relationship. If we hold the heart posture of being able to grow throughout our life and attend to learning and cultivating our intellectual, emotional and spiritual capacities, we will experience a more wholehearted and richly textured life. On the other hand, if we operate from a belief that we are too damaged to learn and grow, we will attend to our fears and will pass through life as if “doing time” in a prison of numbness or pain and will simply add evidence to our “proof” of our own inadequacy.

Our heart posture is our sense of the nature of reality as we have come to know it and experience it. It includes our attitudes about ourselves and the world and determines much of our perceptions, ways of relating and blueprints for action. A heart posture is a framework for our experience and the world we inhabit. Our imagination sets up a heart posture and populates the world we encounter with extensions of that heart posture.

If our heart posture is governed by fear and the idea that we are vulnerable and the world is a dangerous place, we will look for threats and behave defensively. If our heart posture

is governed by love, we see ourselves as a lover of life, seeking opportunities for relationships and engaging intimately in the world with all of its challenges.

Our heart posture is not simply a repository of fixed concepts and memories but rather an orientation toward and a perspective from which life is apprehended as well as comprehended. Whenever we feel imprisoned in a limiting and isolating heart posture, one of the most difficult tasks we face in breaking out of our confinement is having to realize how much of what we think we know about ourselves, human nature, emotions, love, and creativity “isn’t necessarily so.” All of us come face to face with the realization that what we thought we understood is fundamentally colored by our reactive feelings of fear, anger, sadness and hope.

When we take on a new heart posture, it is like living in a different culture with its own codification of reality, its own guidelines for maturity, and its own possibilities for transformation. A new heart posture takes work and is based on opening to the direct experience of reality as it is. It requires that our relationship with life become fresh, allowing our deeper nature to emerge.



Inner Wisdom is the wisdom that arises from inside the sacred.

When the spiritual traditions talk about inner wisdom, they refer not only to what is inside us but also to the wisdom that arises from inside the sacred, a sacred way of being, seeing, and acting. In Tibetan, *tag nang* refers to the experience of *sacred outlook* and literally means “pure perception.” As my first Buddhist teacher, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche said, “Sacred outlook means perceiving the world and oneself as intrinsically good and unconditionally free.”

The sacred is not a thing, not apart from the world or us. It is a way of perceiving, relating, and engaging with life. The sacred dimensions of our being are not visible but are a way of seeing, are not tangible but can be felt, and are not heard but resonate in the core of our being.

It is our soul that invests the world and our lives with meaning and each time we make meaning we are connecting to what we make meaning of. The twin drives to create meaning and to connect are the vitalizing impulses of creation and love that place us in the world and the world in us. The soul is both a creator and a lover.



The relative awakened mind is divided into the loving and compassionate intention and dedication to become a fully embodied beneficial presence and actor on behalf of all others and the training of oneself to actualize this intention.

One of the central ideas in Buddhism is *bodhichitta* or “awakened mind.” The Buddhist idea of *mind* is not confined to the brain. It encompasses the entire being and all the various awarenesses, capacities for consciousness, and applications of attention. We do not have words in English that can readily translate and convey the depth and breadth of the words *bodhi* and *chitta*.

In the Tibetan tradition, *bodhichitta* is seen as having two aspects, relative (conditional, ordinary) and absolute (unconditional, transcendent). The relative awakened mind is divided into the loving and compassionate intention and dedication to become a fully embodied beneficial presence and actor on behalf of all others and the training of oneself to actualize this intention.

Absolute *bodhichitta* is viewed as the realization of the open nature of all phenomena. The pure, unconditioned awareness that transcends everything can, in a realized master, be present along with ability to practice relative *bodhichitta*. They are not really phases or in any way opposed to each other. They are two sides of the same awakening, the same wisdom presence.

It is not a psychological phenomenon, although it involves psychological components. The term does not denote a function but, rather, an ideal of the soul. It is a quality

of being that expresses itself in various ways according to the character of the person who embodies it.

Bodhichitta, while it suggests something having to do with an accomplished mind, is not an outgrowth of innate intelligence. Its power arises more from an openness of heart and mind to both what is and what is transcendent. We are present with all dimensions of reality, including the sacred. With this heart posture, we eat, drink, work and play with a sense of the fullness of sacred presence.



Indra's Lesson

At one time a great monster had captured all the waters of the earth, so there was a terrible drought, and the world was starving. Upon seeing this the great king god Indra dropped a thunderbolt on the monster and blew him away. Then the waters flowed again, and the world was refreshed. Indra said to himself, "What a great god am I."

So Indra goes up to the cosmic mountain, the central mountain of the world, and decides to build a palace worthy of a god such as he. The main builder of the gods quickly constructs a great palace for Indra. When Indra inspects the great structure, he wants it to be even more splendid and grandiose.

The builder adds more rooms and gardens and grand halls, but Indra is still not satisfied. This happens over and over again. Finally, the builder says, "My god, we are both immortal, and there is no end to his desires. I am caught for eternity." He then complains to Brahma, the creator god.

Brahma sits on a lotus, the symbol of divine energy and divine grace. The lotus grows from the navel of Vishnu, who is the sleeping god, whose dream is the universe. Standing at the edge of the great pond of the universe, the builder tells his story to Brahma. Brahma says, "Go home. I'll take care of this." Brahma gets off his lotus and kneels down and speaks to the sleeping Vishnu. Vishnu makes a gesture as if to say "This is an easy matter."

The very next morning, at the gate of the great palace

still under construction, a beautiful blue boy arrives with a bunch of admiring children. The gatekeeper goes running to Indra, and Indra says, “Well, bring in the boy.” The boy is brought before Indra, sitting on his throne, who says, “Young man, welcome. And what brings you to my palace?” “Well,” says the boy with a voice like thunder rolling on the horizon, “I have come to see the great palace that supposedly surpasses any that the Indras before you have ever built.” Startled, Indra asks, “Indras before me, young man—what are you talking about?”

The youth casually says, “Ah, so many Indras before you. I have seen them come and go, come and go. As you know, Vishnu sleeps in the cosmic ocean, and the lotus of the cosmos grows from his navel. On the lotus sits Brahma, the creator. When Brahma opens his eyes, a world comes into being and is governed by an Indra. When Brahma closes his eyes, a world goes out of being, and so too its Indra. The life of a Brahma is 432,000 years. When he dies, the lotus goes back, and another lotus is formed, and another Brahma. Then think of the universes beyond universes in infinite space, each a lotus, with a Brahma sitting on it, opening his eyes, closing his eyes. And Indras? Imagine the number of drops of water in the oceans or the grains of sand on the beaches and still you could not come close to the number of Brahmin, let alone all the Indras.”

As the young man finished making his point, an army of ants marches across the floor. Seeing them, the youth laughs in a way that makes Indra’s hair stand on end. Indra says,

“Why do you laugh?” The young man answers, “Don’t ask unless you are willing to really listen to the answer.”

Indra says, “I ask. Teach.” The youth then continues saying as he points to the ants, “They are all former Indras. Through many lifetimes they have risen from the lowest life forms to the highest illumination. And then they drop their thunderbolt on a monster, and they think, ‘What a great god am I.’ And down they go again.”

At this same time, an old yogi enters the palace with a banana leaf parasol. He wears only loincloth, and on his naked chest is a little disk of hair, and half the hairs in the middle are missing.

Indra and the youth greet the yogi and ask, “Old man, what is your name? Where do you come from? Where is your family? Where is your house? And what is the meaning of this curious constellation of hair on your chest?”

“My name is not important. I don’t have a house for life is too short for that. I simply carry this parasol. I don’t have a family. I just meditate on Vishnu and contemplate about eternity and the passing of time. You know, each Indra comes and goes like a flash. Every time an Indra dies, a world disappears, and one hair drops out of this circle on my chest. Half the hairs are gone now. Pretty soon they will all be gone. Life is fleeting and so I choose not to build a house.”

As it turns out, the youth was Vishnu, the Lord Protector, and the old yogi was Shiva, the creator and destroyer of the world. They had come to the palace to give Indra a teaching about how he is simply a god of history but thinks he is the

whole show and now needs to see that he is not The One and so gain a greater perspective.

After these teachings, they depart leaving Indra sitting on his throne. He has had all his illusions and grandiosity blown away. He calls his builder and informs him that he wants to discontinue the work on the expansion of the palace.

At this point Indra's intention swings in the opposite direction and he decides to go out, be a yogi and just meditate on the lotus feet of Vishnu. His beautiful wife and queen, Indrani, becomes upset with this plan and seeks the help of the priest of the gods saying, "Now Indra has become obsessed with the idea of becoming an ascetic yogi."

The priest reassures her and talks to Indra. "I have advised you over the years in the art of governance because you occupy a significant and critical position in this universe. You are a manifestation of the mystery of Brahma in the field of time. This is a high privilege and a great responsibility. Be grateful for this role, honor it, and deal with life as what you really are—an important creator, a sustainer, a nurturer, and a protector of this world. In addition, you must practice the art of love so that you and your wife will know that in the wonderful mystery of the two that are one, Brahma is radiantly present also."

Indra gives up his idea of leaving the world to become a yogi. He finds that, in life, he can represent and manifest the eternal aspect of Brahma in time.

So each of us is, in our own way, the Indra of our own life. We must make the choices that Indra has faced and must see

how we are not only a part, but a feature of a greater whole. How we embody a heart posture, act and relate makes a difference and that our particular contribution can only be made by each one of us.



The experience of awe, at its core, centers upon the recognition of the limitations of the self.

Awe is wonder inspired by authority, genius, great beauty, sublimity, or might and the attitude of profound reverence in the presence of supreme authority, sublimity, or mysterious sacredness.

In one Greek mythical explanation of the origins of human beings, Zeus gave humans two capacities after Prometheus had given humans fire, namely technology for survival. The first was a sense of justice so that the needs of all in a community would be met. The second was the ability to develop reverence through the experience of awe.

The experience of awe, at its core, centers upon the recognition of the limitations of the self. We sense that we are small events in the sweep of history and human history is but a speck of time and matter in the vastness of the cosmos and its continuous unfolding.



Awe shifts our sense of self to elements that unite us and emphasize our common humanity beyond the things that separate and differentiate us.

Paul Woodruff in his book *Reverence* argues that the experience of awe leads to modesty. Modesty engenders both the sense of unity as part of some larger whole and a feeling of common humanity in that context. This, in turn, gives rise to a sense of reverence. This sensibility fosters a feeling of respect and gratitude for what we do have in our lives.

Dacher Keltner argues that for groups to work well, “... we must often subordinate self-interest in the service of the collective. The collective must often supersede the concerns, needs, and demands of the self. Awe evolved to meet this demand of human sociality.”

Awe shifts our sense of self to elements that unite us and emphasize our common humanity beyond the things that separate and differentiate us. “The experience of awe is about finding our place in the large scheme of things. It is about quieting the press of self-interest. It is about folding into social collectives. It is about feeling reverential toward participating in some expansive process that unites us all and that ennobles our life’s endeavors.” —Keltner



Sacred Imagination

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This is the meaning of existence: To reconcile liberty with service, the passing with the lasting, to weave the threads of temporality into the fabric of eternity.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

In some sacred dimensions of being, we recognize pure awareness, our Buddha nature. In other sacred dimensions that involve sacred love and compassion our recognition flows from the cultivation and maturation of sacred imagination.

There are sacred dimensions of being that can be recognized because they always there and simply “are.” These would be pure awareness, intimate witnessing, and suchness. One realization of a Buddhist path involves a lucid awareness of the “mind’s” ultimate nature beyond all concepts of self and other, and resting in that nature, called “Buddha Mind.” You recognize your nature as Buddha Nature.

There are other sacred dimensions that can only be recognized after a disciplined cultivation of sacred imagination. These might include deeper levels of compassion, sacred love, and the paradise of challenge. The cultivation of creative imagination that can perceive the sacred nature of life opens us to the mysteries beyond the usual structures of the rational mind. We undergo a maturing process of the psyche as it abandons naïve certainties and

fear-based efforts to control experience and gradually opens to the richness and dynamism of the world as it is.



Sacredness is an attitude in relation to life.

Just as suffering is a particular attitude in relation to pain, so sacredness is an attitude in relation to life. When our imagination is not governed by the reactive habit body, consciously or unconsciously, and we develop the spiritual qualities and heart postures of fullness of presence, transcendence, transformation, and unconditional love, we live in and from a profound sense of sacredness.



In our creative imagination, we set time in motion as we give birth to our personal history, a new and never before seen flower taking its place with all the other flowers in the field of life.

As learners we turn raw sensory data into meaningful information and we assign value to some things more than others. In this process, we engage in a fundamental creative cognitive phenomenon. The world simply presents itself to us. We transform some parts of it into a personal palace with the pillars of meaning, the windows of selective perception, the inhabitants of relationships, and the treasures of values. We give form to the chaos of life through our structure of meanings and understandings, create gods to be followed and worshipped through our values, and generate bonds through our caring, affections, and ties to other people. In other words, we set time in motion as we give birth to our personal history, a new and never before seen flower taking its place with all the other flowers in the field of life.



The imagination is one of the highest prerogatives of man. By this faculty he unites former images and ideas, independently of the will, and thus creates brilliant and novel results.

Charles Darwin

Our heart posture is ordinarily conditioned by our experiences, our assumptions, ways of thinking, sensitivities, emotional predilections, cultural background, and social situation. We will habitually see and understand and react according to our heart postures. Our consumer culture has trained our imagination to operate from a heart posture of want, need, and dissatisfaction. We occupy a world of addictions, comforts, and self-preoccupations.

One of the tasks of spiritual development is to decondition our heart postures of reactivity and to recondition us into sacred heart postures that are cultivated by practice and watered with inspiration. Conscious imagination can open us and create a heart posture that activates our body/mind that brings forth greater potential for life, for realization, for growth, for love, and for wisdom qualities. In other words, sacred heart postures open us to perceiving differently.



The trouble with most people of learning is that
their learning goes to their head.

Isaac Goldberg

“Math-” in Greek meant “to learn.”

We have many examples in the history of human cultures of how fields of endeavor have developed systems of imagination that enable us to perceive, relate and act in the world in ways that could not be discovered or enacted without the use of imagination. One of the most prominent of these is mathematics.

“Mathematical” has acquired a meaning in the west that is contrary to the spirit of the root meaning from the Greek, *math-*, which is *to learn*. Since the age of science and so-called rationalism, mathematical has come to be associated with exactness, absoluteness, and certainty. The quality of learning is based in openness and not knowing and seeking, not so much certainty as knowledge, understanding, and wisdom.

The attempts to make philosophy and religion more of a science by making them more mathematical, logical and exacting violates a basic principle of learning which is to remain open and growing even if what we are learning is an approximation, relative, messy, and not subject to articulation.

What we call mathematics now is a field where reality is represented and articulated in numbers and symbols in

particular configurations. When we say something is rational, we are generally saying that it can be articulated in a precise and consistent way in terms of words, symbols, or numbers.



The invention of imaginary numbers made new ways of perceiving and working with physical reality possible.

Everyone sits in the prison of his own ideas.

Albert Einstein

In mathematics, the invention of imaginary numbers made new ways of perceiving and working with physical reality possible. An imaginary number is a mathematical term for a number whose square is a negative real number. When imaginary numbers were first defined by Rafael Bombelli in 1572, mathematicians believed that they did not really exist, hence their name. Descartes coined the term imaginary in reference to these numbers.

However, imaginary numbers are as real as any other and have come to be accepted by the mathematicians and the world at large. For most human tasks, “real” numbers offer an adequate description of what we see and work with. Fractions such as $\frac{2}{3}$ and $\frac{1}{8}$ are meaningless to a person counting stones, but essential to a person comparing the sizes of different collections of stones. Negative numbers such as -3 and -5 are meaningless when measuring the mass of an object, but essential when keeping track of monetary debits and credits. Similarly, imaginary numbers have essential concrete applications in a variety of sciences and related areas such as signal processing, control theory, computer programming, electromagnetism, fluid dynamics, quantum mechanics, cartography, and vibration analysis.



Poetic and mythic imagery activates our sacred imagination so that we can imagine ourselves into a sacred and more expansive existence.

The development of music theory and musical imagination has made it possible for us to shape sounds into creative patterns and to explore entire new worlds of auditory possibilities and experiences. In music the inner and outer are merged in the process of deep listening. In deep listening our mind and body dance inside the flow of sound and are actively carried away by the currents of notes, rhythms, and movements. As we develop musical sensibilities, we create new ears.

The use of poetic and mythic imagery activates the sacred imagination to open, explore and cultivate the qualities, capacities, and energies of the heart, a profound and deeper dimension of being in which seekers imagine themselves into a sacred and more expansive existence.

The cultivation of love, for example, opens us to new sensibilities. In this development the world becomes more alive, inner qualities and capacities are enhanced, and our heart reaches out beyond the confines of the personal.



The world has multiple dimensions of being, each charged with its own configurations of energies, each with its own potential for cultivation.

In the tantric view of life, according to a number of Asian traditions and particularly Tibetan Buddhism, the world has multiple dimensions of being, each charged with its own configurations of energies, each with its own potential for cultivation. The dimension of pure being, fundamental nature, simply is and so there is nothing to cultivate but to recognize. Each of the other dimensions has its own potentials. The objective is not so much enlightenment as it is full aliveness and development and integration of these potentials.

As we develop the capacity to live within the sacred creative, inner and outer experience and landscape merge into an integrated dreamlike state in which everyday limitations and habitual relevancies give way to a multitude of possibilities. Eventually all experience, whether inside us individually, inside us collectively, or externally stimulated, is sacred, manifesting as a fullness of presence and the dynamically creative moment beyond time yet inclusive of all time.



Just as subatomic particles appear in the world in response to our method of inquiry, potential realities are realized by first imagining their possibility.

Ian Baker

According to quantum physics, the viewpoint and act of observation affects not only what phenomena are observed but also the phenomena being observed. How we look determines what we perceive and affects the reality we are trying to see. According to Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, the spatial location of a particle is undetermined and probabilistic until subjected to an observer's method of inquiry that causes the particle to manifest in a particular time and space.

“In Buddhist Tantra the world is perceived as a luminous web of energies and possibilities. Just as the physicist's intent influences where, when, and how electrons manifest from the vast field of probability, Tantric practitioners apply a similar principle to alter and expand their view of reality, to free it from the reference point of an observing subject and still more from the oxymoron of an objective object wholly distinct from human consciousness. By altering states of consciousness through ritual and meditation, adepts manifest latent, simultaneous realities, beyond the bounds of conventional perception.” —Ian Baker



Tantra is a technology for building a sacred imaginal world based on wisdom and compassion to replace a superficial imaginal world based on ignorance, alienation, and reaction.

A deep understanding, knowing about the openness of the moment, about the impermanence of current existence, about the ways that our current heart posture and imagining is shaping our experience—all this sets the conditions for us to reimagine the world in a wise, loving, and beautiful way. As we unravel, untangle and clear away limiting heart postures and habits based in reactions (our reactive habit body), we naturally undertake creating heart postures of connection and actions based in wisdom, love and creativity.

Our capacity for imagination, when properly trained, can reveal dimensions of awareness and aspects of reality that are hidden to the ordinary mind. Tantra is such a technology for building a sacred imaginal world based on wisdom and compassion to replace a superficial imaginal world based on ignorance, alienation, and reaction.

In many ways the world conforms to our inner vision, our imaginative perception of reality. In making the sacred journey beyond ordinary perception into a more complete consciousness, we become aware of the interpretive role our imagination plays in determining reality and the recognition that what we think we know is, according to Padmasambhava, the great Buddhist sage and founder of Tibetan Buddhism, “in essence, the magical display of mind.”

With practice and conscious intention, sacred

imagination can work with simultaneous levels or dimensions of perception. The tantric practitioner, for example, sees beneath the surface of experience into qualities and energies and fundamental openness that are not apparent in our casual and literal habituated mind.



The hero's journey is a mythological representation of how to meet the challenges we face in ways that reveal how to transcend, grow, and live a sacred life.

Sacred imagination, while operating within the structure and nature of the sacredness, represents the dimensions of the sacred in culturally and historically relevant ways so that different people can integrate sacred living with the requirements of their contemporary conditions and societies. The collective sacred representations take the form of stories, visual images, rituals, music, dance, and spiritual theories. The story of the hero's journey is one such mythological representation that has evolved to address the developmental, social and spiritual needs of various times and places.

The journey of the hero who could lead the hunting peoples of thousands of years ago involved establishing a psychic relationship with the animals that posed a danger or provided sustenance and entering into a sacred accord to share the world of the wilderness. The sacred imagination would carry people beyond themselves by entering the world of the animals through observation, learning, imitation, and ritual enactment that cultivated both sacred and social sensibilities in a kind of sacred and social ecology.

This kind of transcendence and sacred relationship took on other forms with the development of agricultural societies. In these societies, the challenging concerns in everyday life had shifted from the mystery, dangers and uses of the animal world, to the need to relate to the cycles of planting

and harvesting and the external and internal requirements of this way of living. The sacred imagination addressed this change with the transformation of animal totem imagery to an imagery of seasons and stages of life in the progression to maturity.

As these agriculturally-based societies developed into empires and weaving together extensive social structures became a focus of attention, sacred imagination became concerned with the mystery and challenge of the laws that governed the cosmos, the heavens, the earth, the history of peoples, the structure of authority and legitimacy, and the relationship between the macrocosm of life and the microcosm of the individual. The cosmic laws during this long phase of thousands of years were viewed as having both manifest and hidden faces.

For the last hundred years, the idea of a cosmic law has been reduced to the manifest, material realm and the focus has shifted to both the global mechanisms of interactions, particularly economic, and to human beings themselves. The secular preoccupation with markets, social organization, and material well-being marginalizes any sacred dimensions at best and denies their existence at worst. The locus of attention falls on the constituent elements and interactions that make up functioning wholes whether one is exploring the biochemical properties of the brain or the operations of the production, distribution and consumption of goods. Everything is deconstructed into units that can be aggregated, quantified, and manipulated. The individual

emerges as a critical unit of social, economic functioning in the social world much as an earlier science had posited atoms as the basic particles upon which the universe is built. In this way the psychological functioning of individuals emerges as a major center for study and development.

As Joseph Campbell pointed out more than a half century ago: “Not the animal world, not the plant world, not the miracle of the spheres, but man himself is now the crucial mystery. Man is that alien presence with whom the forces of egoism must come to terms, through whom the ego is to be crucified and resurrected, and in whose image society is to be reformed.”

The modern challenge is not so much how to relate to the personal “I” but the “I” as a particular instance of a collective nature and of the nature of life itself. This aspect of ourselves transcends our ethnic group, social class, generation, and location and gets at the transcendent nature of life that is in all of us.

The task of freeing all of us and supporting our growth and happiness may be part of the task of the modern hero. Each of us is called to be the hero that seeks and lives with sacred presence and to become a force that challenges our society to move beyond its superficiality, narcissism, pride, fear, rationalized greed, and reductionist, righteous misunderstanding.

As creative heroes we cannot look to our contemporary cultures to guide us but must find within ourselves, in each other and in the practices of enduring sacred teachings,

the support for our dedicated work even in face of difficult ordeals, personal despair, and institutional resistance. It is becoming clear that the modern hero is not simply an individual but communities of individuals who personally and collectively lay down the foundations upon which future generations can build.



A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.

Joseph Campbell

Myths and legends, even of actual personages, are stories of journeys, deeds, and successes, represented, not in literal lifelike ways, but in imaginative configurations. The point is not so much what was accomplished in the material and superficial world but in the more important dimension of the sacred world with all its riddles and challenges to our established heart postures. The journey depicts the landscape of hidden resistances that must be overcome, of secret or forgotten powers that must be retrieved and used skillfully, and of the growth from innocence to maturity.

All of this is designed to be applied to the transformation of the world. We then act with a vision of possibility undeterred by recurrent disasters, the cries of anguish, and the tumultuous shifting of events. Inflamed by the fire of an all-sustaining awakening and self-surpassing love, we are dedicated to repairing the world, to generating beauty, and to a process of continual enlivening.

In many myths, the hero and the supreme realization are united in the story that mirrors the mystery of life. The great deed of the hero is to acquire the hard won wisdom of the unity in multiplicity and to make this manifest in the

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world for others. The success of the journey opens the gates for the flow of sacred life energy into the body of the world spreading the seeds of beauty and creative possibility.



Story of the Buddha

The challenges of the journey of the spiritual hero are presented in the legend of the Buddha. Having grown up in comfort and secure within a palace, prince Gautama Sakyamuni, also known as Siddhartha, secretly set out from his gilded prison of wealth to understand life and the world and to find the highest and most perfect happiness. Having had the initial awakening to the reality that life involves pain, old age and death, he alone of everyone in the palace remains awake when a strange force puts everyone else to sleep enabling him to leave that life. He cut his flowing hair, a sign of his royal station, and assumed the garments of a spiritual beggar, seeking out teachers, learning the ways of meditation, training to deny his desires, and living a life of abstinence and poverty.

Siddhartha found teachers and mastered everything they taught. But he still was not satisfied. Even though this did not result in his finding answers to the questions of suffering, impermanence, and death, this period served to break deep rooted habits acquired in his life as a prince. Not succeeding in his quest, he redoubled his efforts over the course of six years, carrying austerity to extremes until he finally collapsed near death.

Even these extremes did not bring him any closer to the truth he sought than had his pleasures. Realizing that the struggle of depriving his body was not working, he recalled a time when he meditated on death and he had become

calm and clear. He decided to meditate in this way again but realized it was too difficult to meditate when he was starving and tired. To initiate himself in this new direction he bathed himself in a river but was so weak he nearly drowned and was barely able to pull himself to the shore.

As happens in stories like this, a young woman came along with offerings to the spirit for the wonderful birth of her first child. Seeing Siddhartha she offered him the specially prepared food. He slowly ate the food and his strength gradually returned. Having been saved by Sujata, for that was her name, he resumed his quest in a renewed way. He made his way to a great tree where he decided to sit until he had reached his goal or die in the attempt. He put everything on the line and approached his task with his whole mind, heart, and being.

As Siddhartha sat beneath the tree on the Immovable Spot, the center around which the earth revolved, he was approached by Mara, the god of love and death. This dangerous god threatened Siddhartha with weapons that he held in his thousand hands and with his vast army that extended throughout the universe in an effort to break the determined seeker's concentration. When that failed, Mara brought on violent storms, burning coals, boiling mud, extreme darkness and poisoned arrows, but Siddhartha transformed them all into flowers and healing ointments. Mara then deployed his daughters, Desire, Longing, and Lust, but Siddhartha could not be distracted or tempted.

Finally Mara challenged Siddhartha's right to sit upon

the Immovable Spot, calling upon the forces of the earth to rise up and dislodge this peaceful warrior. Siddhartha simply extended his hand to touch the ground with his fingertips, inviting the goddess Earth to bear witness to his right to be sitting where he was. She acknowledged him with such a vast roar that Mara fell to his knees, offering to serve the future Buddha.

Having won these battles, he examined the nature of life, looking both extensively into the entire universe and deeply within himself. He saw how everything, from the smallest grain of sand to the largest galaxy, was constantly changing—emerging, growing, decaying, dying and emerging again. He saw the dynamic of continual creation in which everything that exists resulted from a prior cause and that every effect was a cause of further effects. He perceived that everything was linked to everything else in this dynamic of creation and that the universe was made up of interactions, interconnections, and interbeing. In this process of change, he became clear that everything is also recycled, including physical elements, life energies, and awarenesses.

As he sat, now as the awakened one, Buddha, he reflected on the spot on which he became enlightened. According to Joseph Campbell, it is said that “beneath this spot is the earth-supporting head of the cosmic serpent, the dragon, symbolical of the waters of the abyss, which are the divine life-creative energy and substance of the demiurge, the world-generative aspect of immortal being. The tree of life, i.e., the universe itself, grows from this point.” Campbell

points out, the Buddha as hero, is like “...the navel of the world, the umbilical point through which the energies of eternity break into time. Thus the World Navel is the symbol of the continuous creation.”

After all his realizations and with his embodiment of all the sacred qualities, the Buddha doubted whether he could communicate and share his wisdom. It is said that the great god Brahma descended from the highest point in the heavens to implore Buddha to teach both gods and humans. The Buddha was then persuaded to articulate and teach the path, the way to sacred wisdom, compassion and sacred living. He knew that the awakening of his mind, heart, and being could not be communicated but that he could teach *the way* to become a Buddha.

And so he taught for the rest of his life. His teachings of *the way* included basic principles and practices for training the mind in wisdom, for developing the capacity of the heart for love and compassion, and instructions on right living—how to lead a virtuous life that is dedicated to the happiness, growth and freedom of all sentient beings.



To identify with a sacred deity is to see through those eyes, to listen in the way of the deity, to taste as the deity, to feel as the deity, and to experience and act as the sacred deity.

In spiritual development, just as we work in order to be worked, so we create in order to be created, to become fresh and grow.

Identifying ourselves with a set of attributes such as good, bad, bright, dumb, attractive, or ugly, in most ordinary ways limits us to our reactive habit body. However, identification as a process of imagination gives us the keys to endless and wonderful worlds, giving us access to countless treasures to be found there. Our capacity for identification not only connects us but enables us to inhabit the perspective of someone or something and to have experiences that flow from that. To identify with a sacred deity is to see through those eyes, to listen in the way of the deity, to taste as the deity, to feel as the deity, and to experience and act as the sacred deity.

In our practice to become embodied as a sacred figure in terms of our heart posture, we can then extend this kind of spiritual work to the activity of sacralizing life with this way of being and the quality of this sacred presence. Sacred creative imagination extrapolates and extends spiritual qualities that are experienced into states and worlds of being.



Ideas cannot guide man's conduct, cannot point toward meaning, unless they are felt in the way and in the manner in which real feeling operates.

Jacob Needleman

Teachings and their practices cannot train us and cannot provide a pathway into sacred dimensions, unless they are authentically felt—apprehended and not simply comprehended.

This wholeheartedness is a kind of passion. Abraham Joshua Heschel, when writing about the prophets of the bible, describes the passion of a calling, a mission, in terms of *pathos*, what some others, such as Plato, would say is a form of *eros*. Plato defined love as a striving, a seeking for that which is beyond oneself in the forms of truth, love and beauty. Not only do we strive for a deeper, more profound sense of being, we also seek to do this through consciousness and to gain some measure of understanding of our journey.

For Plato, as for the ancient Greeks in general, *eros* was the kind of love that is not merely an emotion, it is a spiritual force, a quality of the sacred that makes a bridge of the world of the superficial to the realm of the sacred.

For Heschel and Plato, *pathos* and *eros* are not unreasoned emotion but intentional direction of life energy to benefit the world. In this formulation, there is no conflict between *pathos/eros* and *ethos*, between strong motivation and the goodness of behavior. For them, *pathos/eros* and *ethos* presuppose each other.

The *pathos/eros* of the spiritual practitioner is not only

directed to his or her own development but is directed toward others, for our capacities for wisdom, love and beauty can only be exercised in the workout facility of the world that calls upon us to become ever greater embodiments of the sacred qualities that inspire us.

When we go to the core of our sensibilities about what is spiritually valuable, we see that the collective dimensions of the sacred are not neutral. In these aspects of sacred life, we are always partial to compassion, to justice, and to the happiness, growth and freedom of others.

Sacred pathos/eros integrates the eternal and the temporal, the mysterious and meaning, and sacred qualities with the flow of everyday life.



A lotus blossom makes its way through the murky water to emerge as a beautiful flower.

We can think of working with sacred consciousness as a process of growing from a personal soul into a sacred soul. Creation is a critical part of this process. The Indo-European root of the word “create” (*ker-2*) also means “to grow.” A related association can be made in terms of key words in Sanskrit. The Indo-European root syllable *bodh*, which is the root for the Sanskrit words *Bodhisattva* and *Buddha*, is also the root of the English word *bud*, as in the beginning of a flower.

In much of Buddhist art, deities are placed upon a lotus blossom indicating that the qualities represented by the particular figure arise from a process of growth that makes its way through the murkiness of the world to emerge as a form of beauty.



In Buddhism, two central principles are the interconnectedness of all life and that all living systems, whether individuals or communities, evolve along a developmental path with distinct stages.

The idea in Buddhism that we all have the natural capacity for learning, enlightenment and spiritual realization fits well with the findings in the neurosciences that we can learn throughout most of our lives.

In the Buddhist tradition, it is understood that we have a capacity for learning and transforming our ways of thinking, feeling, behaving, and being throughout our lifetimes. Recently, modern neuroscience is gradually coming to a similar conclusion as it moves beyond older assumptions that our brains become somewhat fixed and unchangeable sometime after adolescence. Now neuroscientists are talking about “brain plasticity” and pointing to the possibility of developing new neural networks throughout our life. Some studies that included experienced meditators found that they have more activity in the left frontal lobe, the part of the brain most associated with emotions such as happiness, joy and wellbeing.

The idea in Buddhism that we all have the natural capacity for learning, enlightenment and spiritual realization fits well with the findings in the neurosciences that we can learn throughout most of our lives. This suggests that, although it may not be easy, we can, through regular practice, train our minds to improve the capacities of our attention, will,

tenacity, stamina, and ways of acting. Athletes and musicians demonstrate clearly the value that prolonged and regular practice can have on our habit body to be able to perform in extraordinary ways.



Experience knows about life not as an object to study but as a vibrant reality that can be embraced and that fully returns the embrace.

The word *experience* speaks to a unity of feeling, knowing, and living. *Experience* is beyond simply feeling in that it involves knowing, not only perceiving but also knowing about. *Experience* reaches out to taste honey and comes to know sweetness as well as lemon to know tartness. *Experience* knows about life not as an object to study but as a vibrant reality that can be embraced and that fully returns the embrace.

It is vital that our primary teacher be direct experience. Beyond theories and beliefs, there is the reality of direct experience.

The only thing we can know of existence is the present moment. Yet the present moment can never be held, our memories are of moments that no longer exist and what is to come is beyond our immediate experience. At the same time, the present departs before we can grasp it. It is paradoxically true that the one thing we can claim ownership of, our experience, we can never actually possess.

Human life consists of experiences much as a body consists of cells, yet a bunch of experiences is no more a full and satisfying life than a mass of cells is a functioning body. A happy life involves having purpose, a sense of home in the world, and connectedness.

What is essential in each moment is the completeness of

experience of that moment. When we apprehend this in the depth of our being, we begin to have a soul life. We bring the intensity of soul to life and life to the sacred dimensions of our being.



A healthy soul...must do two things for us. First, it must put some fire in our veins, keep us energized, vibrant, living with zest, and full of hope as we sense that life is, ultimately, beautiful and worth living.... Second, a healthy soul has to keep us fixed together.... In a manner of speaking, the soul has a principle of chaos and a principle of order within it and its health depends upon giving each its due. Too much order and you die of suffocation; too much chaos and you die of dissipation. Every healthy spirituality, therefore, will have to worship at two shrines: the shrines of the God of chaos and the God of order. One God will keep us energized, the other will keep us joined together. These two functions of the soul are always in a creative tension.

Ronald Rolheiser



*Our dance teachers for life are—The Unknown,
Transience, and Death*

In our dance with Grace, we have many teachers. One that has been pointed out repeatedly is the unknown and the heart posture of not knowing.

Another uncompromising teacher is impermanence. Transience is the force of time that makes every event a ghost. There was never a sunrise that did not progress through the day to sunset. There never was a sunset, no matter how stunning, that did not become night and a night that did not give way to dawn.

The same is true of our experience. Our experiences are as close to us as our skin, surround us like the air and are inside us like our mind. Our experiences can weigh us down or inspire us to take flight. Yet each experience dissolves and is gone, giving way to some new experience.

Through this transience, the self-sense witnesses what happens and our ever learning soul fashions memory and meaning from the experiences that have passed. These memories and meanings become the vehicle for connection, learning, and growth or, if reactively formed, establish an inner world of saviors and demons battling for control of the imagination. As we mature we realize that impermanence reflects the open, renewing and refreshing nature of reality. Each moment gives us a new opportunity to join the flow, to experience wonder and to express love.

Like our physical digestive system that is a chemical

energetic system, we have a digestive system of life force energies that processes and transforms the energies of the body and of our experience. We have the choice to use this system to feed our reactive habit body or to nurture and grow a joyful, loving, wisdom body.

We are working to shift the way energy is processed by our being from reinforcing our habit body of thoughts and feelings to supporting being a beneficial presence, radiating qualities such as love, compassion, and harmony, and resting in our wisdom nature. We transform our soul from reacting with thoughts and feelings to proactively engaging the world with a sense of freedom, joy, connection and contribution.



*The completion of our goal is not an end state
but being totally in the flow of ever becoming, in the
dynamic of life.*

As creative buddhas we confront the paradox that we are completely fine in this very moment, fully awakened, and boundlessly connected and are continuously called upon to grow and realize even deeper wisdom, feel greater love, and create more benefit and beauty. Our perfection is not an end state but being totally in the flow of ever becoming, in the dynamic of life.



To create beauty, whether through service, art, or simple actions that flow from love, means surrendering ourselves to what is greater than us, offering our egoic sense of privilege and transcending our reactive body of habits.

Buddhist thinking has given a primary place to the role of consciousness in determining whether we experience happiness or suffering and are able to transform reactive habits into heart postures that reflect our basic sanity, love and impulse to contribute to life. This enables us to develop wiser ways of being even as we experience the ups and downs of life and the effects of our personal histories.

The Buddhist way does not promise immortality (in fact it makes death an ally and a profound teacher), physical health, pleasure (all life involves pain from time to time), or emotional happiness. It does point the way to the eternal in the moment, the aliveness of engagement, and happiness as a ground of being that can include the feelings of sadness, joy, fear, delight, longing, and peace. It also moves us beyond our self-preoccupations with the realization that each of us is not “the one.”

Our reactive habit body has its own momentum and can continue in the tendencies of even highly developed spiritual people. The profundity of our realization does not mean that our bodymind is not affected by past experiences and patterns and present habits, not to mention external situations. This simply is what is. We may change it to some

extent but that is not an excuse for not being aware, awake and present right now with those patterns and everything else. Open to the experience of the moment, whatever it is, and offer your gifts of presence and love in the midst of it all.

The persistent pains and issues of self-worth and self-esteem are not necessarily going to be resolved by choosing to follow a path of our heart's integrity, dedication and service. While this is the only way to live out our soul's authentic journey, it does not necessarily change our genetic tendencies toward depression, our desire for the kind of love we thought we should have received in childhood, or our ability to financially succeed in the world. Rather we recognize our limitations and tendencies and do not get hijacked by them. We may even relate to them with a sense of equanimity. At the same time we can practice being open and a loving presence in this very moment and every moment, however problematic our lives and the world seem to be and to remain. To create beauty in the world, whether through service, art, or simple actions that flow from love, means surrendering ourselves to what is greater than us and offering our egoic sense of privilege.



Imagine yourself being part of a sacred stream of energy that is dedicated to creating benefit and beauty and is supported by the sacred masters of the past and present.

Dissolve the rigid self-orientations, self-definitions, identities, and reactive attitudes so that you can reform yourself as part of an energy stream of wisdom, love and beauty that flows from the distant past into an indefinite future. Sense being a member of a community of sacred workers that includes the realizations of members in the past, the inspired efforts of contemporary members, and the ever expanding possibilities of future members. Imagine all the sacred beings of the past and present as figures along the sides of this stream and that sacred energy is flowing from them into the main stream of sacred energy, amplifying its magnitude and enhancing its luminosity.

These figures can include Buddha, Jesus, Mary, Mohammed, Moses, the Prophets, Mother Teresa, and your own teachers. Your sacred stream can inspire and support you as you sense the presence of all your own sacred teachers. The energy of this majestic stream can accelerate your spiritual development if you join it and open to its vitality and wisdom.

Joining this sacred stream engages you in creating a beneficent and beauty environment for all beings. Your motivation can open or close you to the fullness of that flow. Holding yourself at the center of your caring prevents entering the stream. Working on behalf of others draws you

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in and carries you along. Your fears contract you and result in sinking while your trust relaxes you and allows you to float and even swim with the currents of the stream.



Mastery is something we work for. Maturity is something we are given as we grow.

In our efforts to cultivate wisdom, love and service, we come to value maturity as well as mastery. Mastery is something we work for. Maturity is something we are given as we grow. While the first emphasizes effort and then surrender, the second is surrender in the midst of effort.

In maturity we realize that being fully present and open as a loving bringer of blessings means we dance with the circumstances of life and play in the field of Reality. We choose to swing with the rhythms of the moment at one time and to express our freedom by intentionally opposing circumstance at another time. We express our essential free nature to be present with the act of choosing. We realize that our growth is not linear, resembling more of a spiral that moves in the right direction. We come to know the limits of our capacity for control and power as we understand that a mature heart posture embraces both mastery and being mastered.

As we dance with and in the midst of all that arises, we become engaged in an ongoing practice of alchemy, of transformation of the ordinary into the extraordinary, of the lead of experience into the gold of wisdom, love and blessing. The world is our stage on which to act with clarity and love.

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Our simple actions reverberate with the immediacy and power of thunder as the forces of the Divine are channeled and expressed as naturally as the cry of a hawk and song of a bluebird.



To spiritually mature we work not only to embody sacred qualities; we also serve others and contribute to their growth and freedom.

Spiritual maturity is a gradual development that takes conscious work and dedication. It takes a lifetime. This conscious work shapes and refines our way of being and the depth of our relating, our loving.

Spiritual maturity is not about personal fulfillment, emotional well-being or even spiritual achievement. It is not about living a well-adjusted life. None of these is excluded but they often support narcissistic agendas rather than a larger sacred purpose. To spiritually mature we work not only to embody sacred qualities; we also serve others and contribute to their growth and freedom.



The transcendent refers not only to greater dimensions of being but also to the movement from one stage of our development to another.

Myth, poetry, and sacred practices are the openings through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into our personal narratives and our collective culture.

It is the function of practices, rituals, inspiring stories, and teachings to supply the experiences and meaningful symbols that can carry us forward in our development and counteract the constant pull of old reactive habits and fantasies that tend to hold us back and even regress us. Without these personal and collective supports, we will tend toward not only narcissism but also addiction to superficial substitutes for authentic, living, spiritual fulfillment.

Myth, poetry, and sacred practices are the openings through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into our personal narratives and our collective culture. Rites of passage, initiations (birth, naming, puberty, marriage, leadership, burial, etc.), often involve challenging exercises of severance where our ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving from a previous stage are left behind and we are introduced and trained for a new heart posture befitting our new responsibilities in our community and in life.

The transcendent refers not only to more sacred dimensions of being. It is also a characteristic of the movement from one stage of our development to another.



Sacred sensibilities are the kindling for the fire of spiritual growth.

The foundation of living a meaningful life is built upon sacred sensibilities and growth. Without these, nothing of spiritual significance happens. It is like the story of a young apprentice to a master baker who learned how to mix the ingredients for fine breads, how to knead the dough, how to judge the cooking time and how to clean the oven. Having finished the apprenticeship, the newly minted baker was chosen to cater a state dinner. The delight at being chosen soon turned to fear when the young baker realized that with all his skills and knowledge in working with bread, he had overlooked how to make the fire in the oven.



As we develop confidence in the sacred, we open our heart and welcome the fullness of life.

We construct doors for our heart to close some things in and other things out. When we are born, there are no doors, only doorways and thresholds. We greet every new moment with freshness and a desire to connect and learn. Part of the process of spiritually maturing involves removing the doors to reclaim the freshness. Now, however, we bring a greater capacity to actually welcome and host everything in the space of our heart without developing reactions and overriding the instinct to construct new doors when pain arrives.



*Sincerity appreciates what has come before,
embraces what is, and dances the future into life.*

As we pursue any path, in order for it to bear fruit, our efforts must be sincere, wholehearted. Without the full engagement of sincerity, we remain superficial, unable to sense life deeply, to open to the vastness of reality, and to celebrate what has been, what is, and what is becoming. The word *sincere* shares the same Indo-European root as the word *create*. Sincerity appreciates what has come before, embraces what is, and dances the future into life.



It is a blessing to create benefit and beauty.

The calling of *eros* draws us to relate to the larger world of other people and of life by making a contribution, serving something greater than ourselves in a beneficial way. It is a blessing to create benefit and beauty. To be a blessing and beneficial presence means we promote and enhance the well-being of others, supporting their happiness and freedom.



Path of More Resistance

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Virtue trains us to live beyond our self-preoccupations into sacred and collective centeredness, a heart posture that is both self-surpassing and all-encompassing.

Virtues are intended to be guides that train us on a personal path, collective ideals that shape social behavior based on caring and harmony, and qualities that activate the personal and collective conditions for sacred sensibilities. Virtues as guides for social behavior and collective action reflect the principles of compassion, caring, justice, fairness, and inclusion in a community. The practice of virtues shapes the character of the society.

Virtues involve three principle aspects: a behavioral aspect—doing right action, a psychological aspect—operating from good intentions, and an energetic aspect—acting in alignment with and as a conduit for sacred wisdom energy.

From the time of the ancient Greeks, it has been recognized that it is generally easier to exercise and develop virtue when we are part of a group with shared interests and aims. It has also been known that the value and development of virtuous qualities is supported by self-reflection and understanding. In addition, having other people who are making a similar journey and support our development, aids in the establishment of friendships. Through these relationships of caring and common purpose, a naturally supportive and virtuous community emerges. Over time we refine our abilities to contemplate and work for the common good even as our enjoyment in learning and our commitment

grows and shifts our heart postures. Generosity, friendliness, love, and authentic presence blossom from the soil of our personal and collective dedication.

Virtue can guide, promote and sustain a conscious life, including a life of action. Virtue can be defined as living within the guidance of spiritual principles. These spiritual principles all support a kind of self-transcendence. We transcend our reactive habit self. We train ourselves to transcend our limiting beliefs, self-images and attitudes. We transcend self-concern, entering the realm of a larger caring.

Through virtue we embody and create blessings in the world. Virtue preserves or enhances what is good. It begins by not polluting or contaminating our lives, our relationships, and our environment—being a presence that is not harmful. Beyond that, it has to do with making the world better through our presence and our actions. The practice of certain qualities of virtue serves to retrain our body of habits so that our lives are increasingly an expression of our authentic and wisdom nature. Virtues ground us in the way we live life and interact with each other.

The word is derived from the Latin *virtus* meaning excellence, strength, courage. An old definition meant the embodiment of a supernatural power or influence of a divine being. Its more common usage is in terms of right action, excellence, and integrity of character.

From a Buddhist point of view, embodied virtue is our Buddha nature acting through us. The Buddhist tradition, like all the spiritual traditions, also emphasizes virtues as guides

and supports for the transformation of our reactive habit body into an embodiment of wisdom, or what many would call character. The development of character continues even after we have realized “enlightenment” and is the ongoing work of both formal spiritual practice and participation in everyday relationships. As Yamada Roshi says, “There is really no end to the practice of Zen. You cannot accomplish a perfect character in forty years. Practicing a million years is still insufficient.”



*Te is both active living as an expression of the Tao
and the virtue and integrity of the way.*

In Taoism, the Tao, which is ever-present, must be cultivated in order to be realized and its deeper potential becomes manifest. It is the source of the universe and the primordial seed in all things. The manifestation of Tao, “*Te*”, brings the world to life through its radiance of the Tao. *Te* is both active living as an expression of the Tao and the virtue and integrity of the way. *Te* is the quality in our conscious actions that can manifest the essential creative power of the universe, of life.



The qualities of virtue, such as consciousness, courage, kindness, patience, generosity, humor, and gratitude, enable us to be fully present, intimate with what is, and act beneficially.

Being present in all our aliveness means bringing forth more of who we are and making ourselves more available to whatever arises in life for the benefit of all. The qualities of virtue, such as consciousness, courage, kindness, patience, generosity, humor, and gratitude, enable us to be fully present, intimate with what is, and act beneficially. Consciousness, for instance, keeps us aware and intentional as we open to what is within and around us. Kindness and generosity extend the reach of our caring impulse to others and calls upon us to be the creator of blessings. Humor helps us play with our situation and keeps us from making everything heavy and burdensome. Each quality of virtue helps to train us as a weaver of blessings, connecting everyone and everything with threads made of love. The more proficient we become with these qualities, the more we can embrace the whole of life as an expression of the creative force of sacred being.



Integrity aligns our actions, our values, our heart postures, our interconnections with others, and our deepest wisdom nature.

One of the core virtues is living with integrity. Integrity has many levels of meaning but at the core it concerns the alignment of our actions, our values, our heart postures, our interconnections with others, and our deepest wisdom nature. It does not mean being true to our reactive emotions that are distorted responses and projections that arise from confusion, fears, hopes, and feeling overwhelmed. It also does not mean the unwavering pursuit of what we want. Integrity involves clarity of mind, openness of heart, presence in the moment, and the equanimity of being at home in ourselves, with other people, and in the world.

Having a spiritual practice brings the hidden gold of love and wisdom to the surface, makes it available to our conscious mind and manifests it through conscious actions. When we are spiritually mature, we are able to reveal and extract wisdom and peace from situations where others find only distress.

Virtue uses, exercises and eventually embodies, sacred qualities such as love, courage, integrity, kindness, compassion, equanimity, and integrity. When we deviate from the path of these virtues, we scatter our energies, pollute our social environment and harvest the disconnecting reactions of others as well as ourselves. Virtue in action supports retraining our reactive habit body into a sacred body.

Making distinctions about the way we use the term “virtue” helps to reveal how we can make this idea a support, rather than a judgment, in shaping our lives and building relationships. At the core, virtue concerns sacred qualities rooted in our basic goodness, our fundamental wisdom nature. Virtue is also a sacred force that shapes us—a force of the sacred that finds expression in our conscience and works through us when we seek to be a beneficial force ourselves. As we make this force part of our lives, virtue becomes a personal quality of our character. As we access and use our sacred nature we manifest virtue as a personal behavior through our beneficial presence and our actions that contribute value to the lives of others.



*The three jewels of aliveness: Consciousness,
Participation, Contribution*

The foundation for the sacred virtues rests on three impulses that we have as human beings. These impulses of aliveness are consciousness, participation, and contribution. From the point of view of the impulses, our impulse to make meaning, grant significance, to be aware and give direction to life is consciousness. Participation is the impulse to “show up,” to exist and express aliveness, to “participate” in life. Contribution is the impulse to relate to our surroundings, to belong, and to make a difference. Participation and contribution are given shape and purpose by our consciousness as it defines context, meaning and caring.

When we live in and from our limiting beliefs, distressing feelings, and reactions, we turn consciousness, participation and contribution into fixations of attention that become crystallized and result in reactive patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving. When our consciousness is reactive, we go numb, deny reality or try to fit everything into what we already understand and conceptually know. Our fixated reactive forms of participation are fear, struggle and avoidance. Our reactive forms of contribution and relating are neediness, wanting and attachment. We call these three patterns of fixation the “three poisons.” Not realizing that these poisons are contracted forms of natural impulses, we treat the sense of ignoring, fear, and need, as if *they* are the basic impulses.

When we live in a conscious, open way, the three impulses become the jewels of wisdom of consciousness, presence of participation, and radiance of contribution. Our challenge then is to take a path of virtue, namely to use these three jewels to consciously access our wisdom qualities, to become present in ways that manifest these qualities and to enact them by creating benefit and beauty in the world.



In trying to live an authentic and spiritual life, we must reconcile our sense of a basic desire to be “good” with the recurring reality that for most of human history, if not all of it, outrageous behaviors occur and people behave badly, including ourselves. This reconciliation requires the practice of virtue.

The first step is to refrain from habitually reacting in ways that diminish ourselves or others or our environment. We don’t dump our uncomfortable feelings inappropriately. We resist speaking ill of others and of life except when it clearly serves a beneficial purpose. We avoid meaningless gossip, habitual criticism, trivial talk and disconnecting communication. Basically we examine our motivations and behaviors in order to get beyond those that derive from reactive fears, insatiable neediness and insensitivity.

One does not need to be a sociopath to fail to live according the dictates of wisdom, love and beauty. When we live with fears, longings, addictions, and limiting beliefs and self-images, each of us can find the same dramas and the same failures to act according to our better nature and or even work to strengthen what we know to be good. Yet this first step encourages us to be aware and to follow our intention to grow beyond our reactive habit body.

In the second step we consciously seek to know 1) our own essential nature, 2) what contributes to the life and environment we know to be good for ourselves, others and the world, and 3) the qualities of character and skill in action that will be effective in creating value, benefit, and evoking these qualities in others.

The third step involves bringing virtue to life by placing attention on sacred qualities, aligning our actions accordingly, and opening to feedback on the results. By regularly placing attention in qualities such as praise, kindness, and generosity, we access and cultivate these within ourselves. It is a way to employ everyday life as a gym for using and developing the muscle of sacred energy. In this way we increase and strengthen our capacity.

In trying to live an authentic and spiritual life, we must reconcile our sense of a basic desire to be “good” with the recurring reality that for most of human history, if not all of it, outrageous behaviors occur and people behave badly, including ourselves.



Our dignity is our intrinsic nobility of character as a manifestation of sacredness.

Virtue further develops our heart posture of basic dignity. Our dignity is our intrinsic nobility of character as a manifestation of sacredness. As we retrain habits, our sense of life, quality of presence and beneficial actions reveal the majesty that was always our potential. Just as in mythologies where the hero or heroine begins as a lowly peasant, makes a journey of challenges that confronts their greatest fears, and arrives finally to a position of sovereignty as king or queen, so we must find our own path of dignity. In the traditional stories certain qualities are generally highlighted: loving connection, serving a great cause that serves all of life, humility, honoring, gratitude, courage, compassion, and stamina. These are considered to be the requirements for successfully traversing the way.

In sacred iconography thrones are used to represent those virtues upon which the others can be built. These thrones include:

love that embraces all life,
discipline that is solid and vital, like an elephant
or bulldozer removing obstacles,
adaptability that is unstoppable in moving
towards its goal,
playfulness as a sense of humor and an attitude of
perkiness,
home in the sense of being a part of life, of a
community, of the world,

freedom in the sense of having choice and thriving in the space of possibilities, and dynamic engagement in the energy, communications, and activity of interactions.



Spiritual work that reveals and cultivates the sacred dimensions of life is not an answer to our problems, nor is it some technique for escaping the requirements of life.

When we live in the elaborately outfitted cell within the prison of our habits of fears, addiction to comfort, hopes, conflicts, despairs, passing delights, and numbing distractions, we are lived by these habits rather than living our life. We may strive for happiness, love, creativity, integrity, understanding, passion, and service to something beyond ourselves, but unless we can enter the world of the sacred, the authentic sources of these qualities are beyond our grasp. Most of the time we do not even remember what the sacred is or its real role in our lives. It has been relegated to a matter of beliefs, of dictated faith, or reduced to a set of conceptual propositions to be dismissed as irrational, irrelevant, and even destructive.

Spiritual work that reveals and cultivates the sacred dimensions of life is not an answer to our problems, nor is it some technique for escaping the requirements of life. While it can be joyful, it often is not. While it can make us feel peaceful, it is also challenging, disturbing, and demanding.



*To remember forward integrates what is emerging
and will flower into a dynamic present.*

Each of us is tasked with remembering forward the sacred teachings and possibilities that are offered to us. Remembering suggests making something an integral part of us. Remembering the future indicates that we can integrate what is emerging, what is going to flower and become radiant, what is going to die, and the streams of energy that are flowing forward—we can integrate all these—into the body of the now, so that the present is not reduced to something frozen, static, and closed.

When we use spiritual practices simply as a way of escaping from the challenges of human life in order to enter some removed blissful state, we often miss a key element and this omission can ultimately undermine our efforts and distort our realization. This involves a hidden desire to escape life and treat spiritual work as a solution to the problem of life. Such an approach to life may produce many exalted experiences and cultivate many valuable qualities, but it tends to overlook much of the richness of having a human life and potential of our humanity. It does not, as such, develop our capacity for connection and love nor incorporate the conditions of others nor the impulse to create value in our personal and collective lives.



Facing the situations and challenges of life, we are not simply looking for what is ultimate but for the activities of the head and heart that expose our illusions, confront our contradictions and habits, and reveal what we can be.

The spiritual journey requires many skills—the ability to concentrate, to open and host all that arises, to regularly engage in self-inquiry, to maintain conscious effort, to relax into a natural sense of presence, to feel deeply without constriction or drama, to release ourselves into the moment, to welcome sacred energies, to act and live a life dedicated to creating beauty, and to connect to others with love and compassion. Spiritual training, while similar to the training of an Olympic athlete or a virtuoso violinist, is more encompassing in the completeness of its scope and the expanse and strength of its love, its eros.

Facing the situations and challenges of life, we are not simply looking for what is ultimate but for the activities of the head and heart that expose our illusions, confront our contradictions and habits, and reveal what we can be.



The crazy wisdom tradition challenges all forms of dualism that separates the spiritual from the material and the sacred from living life.

The trickster in the mythology of many indigenous peoples and that of the “crazy wisdom” teacher in Buddhism exemplify a type of creative hero who challenges us to become more conscious. These characters, whether animal or human, play with the assumed boundaries of reality of both ordinary people and religious establishments. Their stories challenge the listener, or the reader, to confront their own limitations and the paradoxical nature of life with humor and openness to the unknown.

The “crazy wisdom” tradition found in Tibetan Buddhism was practiced by yogis who lived in the wilderness and often challenged the institutional practitioners in the monasteries. For example, Drukpa Kunley wandered through many areas of Tibet and criticized the rules of morality and the conventions of both secular and religious society. He made his life an example of the great teachings using poetry, song, dance, humor, drink and even sex to transmit the essence of an authentically spiritual life that integrated the transcendental Reality of pure sacred awareness with the relationships and creative actions of the phenomenal world.

One mission of the crazy wisdom yogis was to challenge dualistic fundamentalism that created false oppositions between spiritual awareness and bodily existence and that sought to simply escape from the pain and constant change of worldly living. These great masters did not accept the

presumption that all human existence can be reduced to an illusion and that the essence of a spiritual life is only to seek some disembodied, unchanging, unattached, and relationless essence that is beyond activity in the world. For the yogi, spiritual realization is fully embodied, lovingly connected to all life, and endlessly creative and playful.

The difference between the experience of the world for undeveloped souls and the crazy wisdom yogi is profound. In an undeveloped state, we struggle with the apparent chaotic, nonsensical and undependable ways of the world. We cling to meanings and reactions developed in childhood in trying to build a secure and comfortable life for ourselves, experiencing frustration, annoyance, and suffering.

A spiritually mature life appears to be in opposition to the strategies of most people to find safety from their reactive fears, to pursue the satisfaction of their cravings for pleasure and comfort, to avoid the intrusion of pain that disrupts their comfort, and to find emotional outlets for undigested feelings. The mature yogi sees the futility of these conventional struggles, perceives the open nature of the arising conditions in each moment and encounters them with a sense of delightful humor, creative opportunity, and a sense of sacred play. As the Sufis would say, the practitioner is “drunk with God.”



Character is the body of qualities that are our habits of the heart. It is the core way we personally and collectively live.

The qualities that we personally and collectively embody and that show up in our behavior represent our character, what Alexis de Tocqueville called “habits of the heart.” The word “character” is derived from the Greek word *charaktêr*, which was originally used as a mark impressed upon a coin. Later and more generally, it came to mean a point by which one thing was told apart from others.

In more recent usage, character refers to that core, interior part of ourselves that holds our values, our conscience, our convictions, and the virtues we operate from day to day as well as in crisis. It is not the same as personality and is not developed suddenly. It is character that reflects our capacity to live according to our sacred nature and how much we have matured. The real strength of character is built on having the courage to actively engage the world, not in abstaining from life by seeking some personal nirvana.



No man is free who is not a master of himself...
The more liberties we enjoy, the more discipline
we need.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

Life is a gym.

Our capacity for consciousness, for loving, for contributing to the world, for embodying sacred qualities that bring maturity, happiness, and satisfaction must be developed, something like a spiritual muscle. Just as our physical muscles are strengthened and become more flexible as we use them, so our sacred potentials must be nourished, exercised, and developed.

We could say that all life is an opportunity to exercise sacred consciousness, moment to moment. In order to realize and even embody the sacred qualities of wisdom, love and generating beauty, we use the materials of life that we are given—our genetic tendencies, our physical body, our family history, our culture, our experiences, our wounds, our blessings, our challenges, our fears, our longings, our relationships and the unknown. These are the exercise equipment that we can embrace and use to strengthen the qualities we value both for us personally and for the larger community collectively. It is through working out in life that we cultivate what is commonly called *character*.



We learn to walk our talk through the exercise of discipline as a form of love.

The word “discipline” has its root in the word “disciple,” one who is committed to learning and growing out of love. Discipline, derived from love and sense of value, is a critical ingredient in retraining our body of impulsive and reactive habits to embody the qualities of wisdom. “Will” gives us the juice to start our work. It is discipline that keeps us going and makes conscious creation of blessings a part of our lives. Discipline is like a muscle in that the more we exercise it, the stronger it gets.

Without discipline, habits and addictions that are so prevalent in our consumer society will continue to keep us wrapped in a cocoon of self-concern governing our behaviors and our heart postures as we remain trapped in the clutches of comfort, reaction, and fear.

Guided by our sense of value, our discipline can grow in the soil of love, divine support, community, and the larger contexts that we are dedicated to serve. We align our inner resources with the efforts of others. Discipline is not a punishment for our habits but a vehicle for realizing our deeper nature and a greater joy. Discipline makes us conscious actors as we seek to manifest love and wisdom moment to moment.



Building Buddha character means turning everything into an opportunity to create value.

To actively participate and contribute to the creative dynamics of life, we want to treat everything that happens to us as having spiritual significance and turn everything into an opportunity to create something of value. In this way we build Buddha character.

We uncover and recognize Buddha nature, we connect through Buddha love and compassion, and we build Buddha character. The qualities of Buddha character we want to develop: love, compassion, joy, peace, fullness of presence, generosity, kindness, freshness, patience, discriminating wisdom, bliss of pure being, and endless service.



Our capacity to make meaning, when turned toward spiritual development, can create sacred treasures.

Based on the physical and emotional survival and well-being requirements of early life, we, as young children, formed patterns of thought and emotional reaction to understand and cope with an unknown world. This process of making sense of life became our personal story and personal universe where we created mental and emotional order and value from the chaos of impressions of living in the world. This formed the foundation for our reactive habit body.

This early act of creating meaning and value is the same principle that operates in the work with the sacred. The difference now is that we are working consciously to create sacred value, gold, and that we have the additional task of retraining our habit body. Our reactive habit body turns everything, even gold, into the lead of ordinariness and distress. We want to transform this body into a vehicle for turning everything into the gold of the spiritual value and the elixir of sacred delight. We want to remove the muck of reaction from the hidden diamond of natural awareness, love and energy.



*In the world of spiritual alchemy, everything,
including science, is a path to God.*

It is useful to think of ourselves as a Learning Being. We, as a Learning Being, are both a unique manifestation of the nature of life and are malleable and capable of being shaped by experience, culture, examples of others and whatever successfully seduces our interest. The Learning Being aspect of us is made up of three parts: (1) imagination in the form of memory, story, beliefs, fantasy, fears and hopes, (2) habits of mind and body that make up everyday time, and (3) longings fed by the light and heat of our sacred soul and connection to the Divine Essence of all things.

In the early stages of life, the tasks of the Learning Being were survival and growing. As we get older and survival is generally felt to be less important, our task becomes less about the personal soul and more about the nourishing of our sacred soul. Our sacred soul grows through a diet of experiences that transforms the lead of everyday life into the gold of wisdom, the silken threads of love, and the blessings of beneficial action in becoming the embodiment of a sacred presence and as a member of a sacred community. At its core, a sacred life is not about moral judgment and condemnation. It is about healing and enriching the world and creating beauty. It builds on the past, improves the present, plants the seeds of a better future, and honors the sacred that is manifesting in all life.

In the world of spiritual alchemy, everything, including science, is a path to God. Inner work and outer actions

become a building process of a temple of sacred blessings. Alchemy refines and polishes the emotions such as hate and grief with love so that these can be used in building a sacred inner temple to serve the temple of the world. This golden inner temple, made up of heart postures, meanings, and rituals, is maintained by being rebuilt each day. It is not confined to one place or time as the material world is. It is portable and can be recreated at any time. In spiritual masters this sacred temple is being recreated all the time in each and every moment.

When conscious work is done in the context of creating blessings in the world, it can naturally support both personal and collective growth. The cultivation of states of consciousness and sacred imagination that embody increasing levels of wisdom and love, when continuously applied to living in a community, has the potential to transform life for everybody from superficial preoccupations to conscious, loving, and blessed engagement.



The Path of More Resistance

When the biblical Jacob wrestles with the angel, he says something very profound and unexpected. He says, “I will not let you go until you bless me.”

When faced with overwhelming situations, as well as times when something bad happens, we are called upon to consciously work with these until we have discovered the blessing that lies within them or that can flow from them. The conditions of human existence, as well as the reality of change, challenge us to make our way in a paradoxical world filled with the support that makes life possible and the treacherous dangers that surround us all the time.

In dealing with the challenges of modern life, we cannot turn the clock of history back and return to an earlier, simpler time. Both at the personal and collective levels, as we face daunting challenges, just as we cannot return to “the good old days,” nor can we live in some idealized future, nor can we hold onto current arrangements by resisting the far-reaching changes unfolding as a result of powerful forces and long term trends. As Joseph Campbell points out in discussing Arnold Toynbee: “Only birth can conquer death—the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new. Within the soul, within the body social, there must be...a continuous ‘recurrence of birth’ (*palingenesia*) to nullify the unremitting recurrences of death.”

The spiritual challenge is to make the modern world spiritually meaningful, to create the conditions in which

each of us can grow to full maturity within the conditions of contemporary life. Often the biggest obstacle to spiritual work is not giving ourselves the time necessary to do the work. We have developed habits of busy-ness in which we are driven by the fear of boredom and the constant need for activity and stimulation. Many times when we are not overwhelmed by these needs and fears and become depressed, we plunge forward thirsting to do as many things as possible, filling any sense of void.

Clearly, to be conscious in our work and contributions to the world we need to organize our time and energy to support what we value. In this we always start by working with what we have now. To practice virtues is to use time as a training tool for developing qualities, capacities, and skills. This changes our relationship to time from one of pressure to one of support for growth.



Our own nature is paradoxical in that, as Buddha nature, it is both beyond what is and is what is, both beyond and immanent. It is always opening and always forming; always formless, formative, and form; always no-thing and yet many things; not what we create but our creative process.

Paradox can be defined as an *apparent* contradiction in that it combines two or more realities that don't *appear* to belong together. One core paradox of human spirituality is the haunting sense of the burden of the consequences of past actions by us, as well as other people, along with the existential freedom of *Now* to consciously act to create blessings, benefit and beauty on behalf something greater than ourselves. This gets at the paradox of *karma* which means both action and the results of action. In other words, *karma* is about creation as a process and creation as a resulting reality.

Our own nature is paradoxical in that, as Buddha nature, it is both beyond what is and is what is, both beyond and immanent. It is always opening and always forming; always formless, formative, and form; always no-thing and yet many things; not what we create but our creative process.

Paradoxical imperatives not only get us to pause before reacting, they open up an entirely fresh way of perceiving and approaching life. As we apply this to our own growth and to service in the world, these are some of the paradoxical imperatives that we may want to encompass in our consciousness: to free all beings with our limited capacity, to master the teachings that are endless within our lifetime,

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and to work as if everything depends on us and let go of the results as if everything is an act of Grace.



We are challenged to live with the sacred mission of acting as a good person in a complicated social world of competing “benefits” and persistent pains.

Individually we can live a wise life but it gets more complicated when we add the context of other people. The difficulty that we have as individuals in becoming wise and acting beneficially is compounded a thousand fold in a society. The complexity of competing interests and social trade-off means that few actions do not harm someone or lead to someone’s discomfort. Reinhold Neibuhr embraces this tension between the virtuous individual and the morally complicated context of society. Rather than escape this tension through illusory withdrawal, each of us is challenged to live with this sacred paradox as a path to deepening our spiritual capacity and vision—to be alive in the middle of this great tension.



Spiritual work centers around the development of our “personal soul” into “Sacred Soul.” The former relates to that capacity in us to learn and grow. The latter encompasses our potential for profound wisdom, encompassing love, the embodiment of sacred qualities and the creation of a legacy of benefit and beauty.

I teach and write books with the assumption that we can take responsibility to create blessings of benefit and beauty in the world and can transform the world as we currently see it into a glorious manifestation of a sacred vision. Philosophy, religion, much of art, social action, and the quest for justice are all based on the optimistic assumption that improvement in the human condition is possible and that we can all play a role in that process.

Yet thinkers and luminaries through the ages have known that, while great visions, great leaders, great spiritual beings have inspired and motivated humanity, this is not embodied by most people individually and collectively.

As committed as I am to spiritual work and leading a spiritual life, to being present in the moment, to remaining mindful, to relating lovingly and compassionately, and to creating a flow of benefit and beauty in each situation, I do not. My habits of thought and my reactive feelings are often in the driver’s seat of my life. On top of this, I often fail to notice that they have taken the wheel until some damage has been done or I realize that I have been missing the journey as an alternate world of distraction seduced my attention. Like many people, I have good intentions and powerful ideas but they do not transform my life or develop the capacities I

value and honor.

Our sacred journey must include the confrontation of this human situation in ourselves and in the whole of life. Every one of us must begin with humility that the challenge of a virtuous and spiritual life means we must outgrow our limiting self-images, beliefs, opinions, reactive feelings, narcissistic impulses, and everyday identities. We are called to retrain our habit body to develop capacities of mind, heart and action that mature us from a personal soul into a sacred soul.

Spiritual work centers around the development of our “personal soul” into “Sacred Soul.” The former relates to that capacity in us to learn and grow. The latter encompasses our potential for profound wisdom, encompassing love, the embodiment of sacred qualities and the creation of a legacy of benefit and beauty.



The happy ending of the fairy tale, the myth, and the divine comedy of the soul, is to be read, not as a contradiction, but as a transcendence of the universal tragedy of man. The objective world remains what it was, but, because of a shift of emphasis within the subject, is beheld as though transformed.

Joseph Campbell

Being dedicated to the generation of kindness, respect and beauty can spread virally through our actions.

In Islam, the Arabic word for goodness, beauty and virtue is the same. Similarly, the Confucian concept of *jen* refers to a configuration of kindness, humanity, and respect that transpires between people. Dacher Keltner, following Confucius, points out that “A person of *jen*, wishing to establish his own character, also establishes the character of others. (A person of *jen*) brings the good things of others to completion and does not bring the bad things of others to completion’ ”...“*Jen* becomes viral through behaviors that spread goodness from one individual to the next, thus setting in motion reinforcing, reciprocal cooperation.”



Born to Give

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We are the environment that others experience.

As the environment that other people experience, we seek to become conscious of the qualities of our presence and the nature of our contributions. What are the states of our being that are manifesting in the presence that others see, feel, hear, and are impacted by? What would a social and spiritual environmental impact study of us reveal? Are we ready to step up and be consciously responsible in the ways we show up, the communications we make, the actions we take, and multitude of ways we interactively touch the lives of others?

Here we are challenged to participate in life entirely beyond self-preoccupation even as we intentionally use ourselves to create conditions of blessing for others. There are a nearly infinite number of actions that create a welcoming, beneficial environment: a smile to a stranger while walking, a “thank you” when someone holds a door for you, joining children in their play, hugging as a greeting, rubbing the shoulders of friends who have been engaged in long conversations over dinner, singing together, dancing, finding small ways to support others, decorating a space so that others can enjoy being there, and so many more.



Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition, teaches that what we say creates angels that go out into the world and have a life of their own.

What we say matters. Our communications are intended to direct the attention of others and, along with our presence, actions and work, create the environment for others. Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition, teaches that what we say creates angels that go out into the world and have a life of their own. It is impossible to re-call an angel, so it is incumbent on us to be very conscious in what we say, for what we say is always contributing to the environment that we all live in.

The idea of etiquette has as its central concern the environment that is created by our words, dress, and deeds. At minimum, etiquette creates mechanisms for the smooth interaction between people. At best, it becomes a vehicle within which people can reliably engage each other and meet in deeper ways that are authentic and wholehearted. Etiquette considerations you might reflect on are:

Is this the environment you want to be making?

Does what you say and the way you say it really reflect the world you want to live in and share with others?

Does your communication contribute to the wisdom, caring, beauty, and better working of the world?

Does it feed the sacred?

Are you being conscious or simply reactive?

Does your speech embody and carry a basic caring

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within which all other virtues of speech such as honesty, fidelity, love, and gentleness must operate?



Conscious speech includes conscious listening.

Conscious speech requires that you notice how you show up in your communications.

Are you usually the subject?

Do you call attention to yourself or to others?

Do you acknowledge all that is greater than you?

Do your stories focus attention on you or do they carry the listener to worlds of wonder, wisdom, and growth?

Conscious speech includes conscious listening. When we speak, we are closing our attention around the words we want to say. When we listen, we open to the unknown of what is coming in. Conscious conversation is a dance of opening and receiving through listening and closing and sending through speaking as we articulate what we want to share. In time it is possible to train ourselves to remain open as we are speaking and to transmit even as we are listening.

Conscious listening involves not only the brain but also our entire being. We listen with all our channels of awareness, not only to words and meanings but also to the silence within which the words arise.



I would say to young people....be sure that every little deed counts, that every word has power, and that we can do—every one—our share to redeem the world despite of all absurdities and all the frustration and all disappointments. And above all, remember that the meaning of life is to live life as it if were a work of art. You're not a machine. When you are young, start working on this great work of art called your own existence.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

Being fully alive means being dedicated to receiving everything as a blessing and creating blessings in return. Blessing means to strengthen. Whatever strengthens us is a blessing. When we act in ways that strengthen benefit and beauty in the world, it is a blessing.

Our deep calling, our fire within, what Robert Graves referred to as our genius and Joseph Campbell called our bliss, inspires and informs our path of growth and contribution. It defines that domain of our heart that is committed to a mission. It reflects our desire to create a legacy that is beneficial. It grows out of our fundamental sense of being an intimate part of a larger story and our impulse to contribute.

We find our calling not from working it out, but from uncovering our true intent. When we live with tremendous attention, the world calls us. The world sometimes whispers, sometimes shouts, what our mission is, what needs our contributions and participation.



Dedication brings soul to life and life to our work, relationships, and play. It transforms tasks from burdens into sacred rites.

Dedication is not simply about meaning; it is about the shape we give our vitality, our energy of aliveness. It is about the way in which we honor the gift of life, the magnificence of the world, and our connections to family, friends, community, all peoples, and nature. It is perceiving and living beyond the superficial to experiencing the deeper, more open dimensions of the sacred. Dedication brings soul to life and life to our work, relationships, and play. It transforms tasks from burdens into sacred rites.

Failure can be a blessing as long as we make something of value out of it. The Buddha tried many paths, including asceticism, that did not open him to enlightenment until he sat under the Bodhi tree and faced all his demons, fears, and longings. While he might have been disappointed at his early attempts to become free of his body of habits, he did not become bitter but rather learned and grew from the experiences. He also knew that he had developed great capacities from his various trainings.



Legacy is our contribution to the lives of others.

While we have our deepest roots in the sacred nature of being, we grow the tree of our life with our responses to and relationships with and ideas about the events and situations we encounter. Our legacy is our fruits not our roots.

Legacy is our contribution to the lives of others. Our world today is the legacy of those who have gone before us. Our actions and the way we show up in the world now creates a legacy for those who will follow. In this way we become intimate with the future.

The qualities we want to make our legacy are discovered through our life experience and inquiry into the deeper nature of soul. This work requires a great faith. A faith that what is here in this moment can grow something that will flower and bear fruit. It comes from a deep place that we do not know. These seeds are always buried in the dark earth of our experience. By becoming intimate with these deeper domains of our soul, we tap the aliveness residing there. As we bring that to the surface, we find that our intimacy with each other and with life itself enlivens and becomes ever more radiant and can create never before seen possibilities.



The best use of life is to spend it for something
that outlasts it.

William James

*As a creative Buddha, we are a blessing bestowing
being.*

The purpose of heroic sacred work is not to control
our lives but to submit to life in all its challenges and
inevabilities and to prepare us personally and collectively
to utilize what arises for growth and the creation of beauty.
As a creative Buddha, we are a blessing bestowing being.
Our presence, our actions, and our connections generate an
environment of beauty.



To save one soul is to save the world.

Talmud

Our greatest challenge is not immortality but how to pass on all the gifts of life and the beauty of sacred realization.

A friend remarked to me that the Dalai Lama took compassion so seriously that he did not need to take himself seriously.

The Buddha taught that all phenomena co-arise interdependently. In view of this perspective, ethical action grows out of the simple, profound awareness that everything is interdependent and creating the conditions for everything else. This includes our thoughts, words, deeds, and qualities of our presence. We are all a part of the vast web of life. Thus, our actions are both an opportunity and responsibility to create blessings in the world.

As Joanna Macy points out, “this is not a burden that we nobly assume: ‘I am going out and save the world.’ That is very tedious, and the context for burning out. But when you experience it as being liberated into your true nature, which is inextricably interwoven with that of every other being, then your conceptual structure of reality and your response to it are inseparable. Each act becomes a way of affirming and knowing afresh the reality that the doctrine gives form to.”

In interdependent arising we see ourselves as co-contributing in the existence of all beings and in the world we co-create with them. (Interdependent arising is also

called “dependent arising,” “dependent co-arising,” and
“conditioned genesis.”)



Bringing love, compassion, rejoicing in the happiness of others, and equanimity to the pursuit of social justice makes social action sacred.

We often have far greater compassion for someone else's misfortune than the pleasure we take in their good fortune.

The four immeasurable qualities are Buddhist principles that are intended to guide a conscious life engaged in the world. They are *metta*, *karuna*, *mudita*, and *upekkha* (loving-kindness, compassion, joy in the happiness of others, and equanimity). *Metta* points to bringing a deep love and respect toward all beings that connects you and involves you in their lives. Compassion extends your connection such that you feel the pains and struggles that others experience and you dedicate yourself to their happiness. *Mudita* includes the unconditional joy you experience at the success and happiness of others and the pleasure you find in being of service. Like a parent observing the successes of a growing child, you rejoice with deep appreciation and love. Equanimity grounds you in an unshakable openness and presence that can face the challenges of conflicts, failures, successes, hostile criticism, and seductive praise.

These four principles are meant to be applied to not only our spiritual life but our social, political and economic participation and contributions. Applied to the work of social justice, the immeasurables are the way we make social actions sacred.



Compassion

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Travel the path of both profound realization and living a compassionate life that supports your own growth by opening you to the greater dimension of humanity and all living beings.

A compassionate life suggests a positive dissatisfaction, not because we do not have enough, but because we are satisfied with what we have and not with the suffering of others. We are always a work in progress and so is the world around us. We assume the obligation to bring benefit and beauty to our community and to life around us.

Our sense of having enough is not a self-sufficiency, but a more encompassing sufficiency. It includes the fullness of the moment, the expanse of our interconnections, and the sense of home in the world.

Sacred aliveness and compassion is what lights and sustains the fire of our dedication to grow and continually generate benefit and beauty in the world. Unless we access this power, what is it that will sustain us in loving what will serve others rather than ourselves?

Buddhism, like Judaism, is not a religion based in beliefs but is about doing things with a sacred heart posture. It is a path not only to profound realization but also about living a compassionate life that supports your own growth by opening you to the larger level of humanity and all living beings.



Our sense of fragility can help keep us more conscious and alert, making our drive to create a life of meaning and blessings even more urgent.

Becoming more conscious not only develops states of awareness, it supports our personal growth. It also enables us to act in ways that further enhance not only our consciousness, but also our capacity for further action. There is always an element of fragility to life. We do not want to be consumed by that fact and live in fear and anxiety. Rather the sense of fragility can help keep us more conscious and alert, making our drive to create a life of meaning and blessings even more urgent.

Whether we are driven by *doing* to prove we are good enough, by *having* to prove we are worthy, or by *merging* into the dramas of love and loss, at heart we all long for the depth of sacred belonging as *home*, unconditional giving as *love*, the serenity and clarity of profound *wisdom*, and wanting our life to make a difference, to create a legacy of *blessings*.

Every activity, every feeling, and every relationship in your life can be an offering in which you give yourself fully. Make everything and everyone an opportunity for creating blessings from the fullness of your heart and the depth of your soul. Do not reduce your work, your marriage, and your family to dramatic substitutes for the bliss that is at the heart of life and the core of the Sacred.



The most important gifts we can give are our attention, our caring, our time and our energy.

Conscious action not only transcends reaction, it cultivates beauty and benefit for others. It creates harmony and promotes creativity. Conscious action makes a difference in ways that are aligned with our deepest purposes and our sense of what is needed.

Generosity is one of the great action virtues emphasized in all spiritual traditions. The most important gifts we can give are our attention, our caring, our time and our energy.

Conscious action is always informed by clarity and intention. It arises from our intimacy with and our awareness of the nature of Reality. As an active, creative participant in life, we are always making a contribution and our contributions are guided by our conscious intentions.



To be conscious in our jobs is to see the way we can beneficially complement the work of others in weaving a more beautiful tapestry of colors and shapes in the functioning of our community.

All forms of work whether in a job, raising children, caring for the ill, or maintaining a household constitute our livelihood. The operating principles for conscious livelihood are 1) not causing harm and 2) helping others with our minds, our hands, and our hearts. Conscious livelihood merges the practical contributions of work with the sacred heart posture of love and compassion. The opposite of conscious work is not play, but not investing ourselves in anything of value.

Often our employment situations are physically, intellectually, and/or emotionally challenging. We may get discouraged when we want to be inspired, offended when we want peace, diminished when we want to be encouraged, and exploited when we want to be respected. If we can release the grip of fear, insecurity, and the haunting self-concern of not being good enough, we can find ways to relax in the midst of pressure, to project confidence in the center of chaos, to be kind because that is what others need, and to be supportive in the face of competition. To be conscious in our jobs is to see the links between what we do and the blessings we create and the work of others as we collectively weave the tapestry of colors and shapes of our community.



There is a Buddhist teaching about hell that imagines hungry people sitting around a great banquet table filled with all kinds of delicious dishes trying to feed themselves with very long spoons attached to their hands. No matter how hard they try, they cannot manage to get the food in the spoon to their mouths.

In the heavenly image, people are sitting around the same kind of table with the same predicament only these people are feeding each other with their long spoons so that all can eat.

A prominent Buddhist virtue is *dana*—generosity, sharing, the giving of our time, energy, skills, goods, and information. Many heroes in the Buddhist tradition, like other religious traditions, grew to embody and teach this quality of self-surpassing giving. Shantideva, the great Indian Buddhist saint of the eighth century, taught that self-surpassing service to others is a path to enlightenment because it takes one beyond self-concern.



At a basic level, we give our presence and receive the presence of the world.

In our daily lives with other people, giving and receiving attention creates an environment of caring, presence, and connection. Giving and receiving is one of the guiding practices in Buddhism. At a basic level, we give our presence and receive the presence of the world.

Heschel also points out that “in receiving a gift the recipient obtains, besides the present, also the love of the giver. A gift is thus the vessel that contains the affection, which is destroyed as soon as the recipient begins to look on it as a possession.”

Giving and receiving are two sides of one coin. When receiving we are hosting the presence of another as an honored guest. In terms of Indo-European origins, the words “host” and “guest” have the same root in the word “ghosti.” From the perspective of this wisdom of inseparability, when the host gives to the guest, the host gives to the host. When the guest receives from the host, the host receives from guest. Host and guest actually host each other. One primary quality of a Bodhisattva, someone dedicated to the enlightenment, happiness, and freedom of all beings, centers on the capacity to host and to be constantly engaged in giving and receiving.



We must be strong enough to change the things
we can change, accept the things that we cannot
change and be wise enough to know the difference.

Reinhold Niebuhr

In our service in the world, we want to maintain a sober perspective, dedicated to a vision and viable in the application of action toward that vision. Reinhold Niebuhr said we must be strong enough to change the things we can change, accept the things that we cannot change and be wise enough to know the difference. This is the basis of the “Serenity Prayer”.

Hope may be an uplifting feeling for awhile, but it usually has the danger of disappointment, discouragement, and wearing us out. We do not need to see ourselves as saviors of the world or the world as being close to some ideal. Rather, in the teachings, the gift we give is our full presence, showing up and working to expand our capacity to embrace the world, not because it is in good shape but because it needs our love of life to become better and heal.

In becoming a spiritual activist on behalf of the sacred, on behalf of humanity, and on behalf of all life, we do this moment to moment, one feeling, one thought, one interaction, one embrace, one smile, one gratitude, and one action at a time, day by day and week by week and year by year.

As bodhisattvas we see the people and needs around us and act beyond our self-interest. Our concern incorporates the situation of others and takes the form of generosity, kindness, patience, support, and genuine interest. In

the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism, including most of the schools of Buddhism in Tibet, China, and Japan, the bodhisattva understands the interconnectedness and unity of all life and realizes that complete awakening is not simply a personal process but a collective responsibility, that the path requires that we work on behalf of others rather than some kind of individual salvation.



The bodhisattva way is a sacred heart posture that is embodied in a way of living.

What constitutes the way of the bodhisattva is not so much the performance of particular good deeds as the establishment of a way of being as a presence and actor in the world. We become committed to a pattern of living and behaving that includes deeds, compassionate feelings, and ethical sensibilities.

The term *bodhisattva* is used in two ways. It can indicate an ideal of someone who has attained enlightenment, embodies the qualities of a Buddha, and could step out of the cycle of life and death but chooses to remain in the world in order to support the enlightenment of all other beings. There are many stories in Buddhist mythology of such bodhisattvas and they are given a status like a deity.

The usage of the term in the Buddhist path refers to someone who seeks to become a Buddha on behalf of others by training the mind, the heart and the body. The bodhisattva takes on the suffering of others and generates the beneficial qualities of love, wisdom and beauty to them. The bodhisattva, foregoing the opportunity to pursue a self-contained personal happiness and satisfaction, commits his or her life to improving the lives of others and helping them to realize the true happiness to be found in the sacred.

In describing the transcendent virtues of the bodhisattva, Robert Thurman points out that one of these is “creativity transcendence.” “Creativity here means the joyous energy with which you address positive activities of body, speech,

and mind. It means inexhaustible resourcefulness, artfulness, and effectiveness in pursuing the welfare of all beings, yourself included.”

The bodhisattva way is a heart posture, a way of living, and a path of action to create blessings as benefit and beauty in the world. This self-surpassing, altruistic direction takes us beyond the personal and embeds us in the interconnectedness of all life. The bodhisattva is attuned to the dignity and beauty of every human being and therefore serves others not because they are needy but out of reverence and the realization that “I am the other.”

As a conscious actor in the world we sense that all events are interrelated and that the sweep of all we are being and doing reaches beyond the horizon of our comprehension. This realization both humbles us and, at the same time, gives import to even our smallest behaviors. While we cannot know all the effects of our deeds and do not presume to be able to personally control outcomes, we approach actions with momentous concentration, as if we matter.



The life of a bodhisattva is concerned with the common acts of life.

The life of a bodhisattva is concerned with the common acts of life, not so much with the training for exceptional skills and feats. The predominant feature of this way of life is unassuming and even hidden. Part of the purpose is to ennoble the common, to endow worldly things and events with sacred beauty, to integrate the relative with the ultimate, to make details suggestive of the whole, to express the unity of being in the plurality.

The scope of this kind of life is not confined to good deeds but covers the whole of life. The bodhisattva life is bound up with all actions, all doings, showing up in all of our dealings. Yet part of the challenge is that we do not have complete power over either our environment or even ourselves. This perception can lead us to the realization that our life is not wholly ours, that we are parts and features of much large dynamics in which we can only be and do our best. We also realize that all our resources and apparent achievements are not something we possess, but are blessings that are entrusted to us.



The dedicated person, even before embodying great qualities of wisdom, love and beauty, generates a beneficial atmosphere through their example of conscious work.

There is a difference between an aspiring sacred warrior and a dedicated sacred warrior, between an aspiring bodhisattva and a dedicated bodhisattva. The aspirant is someone who holds the intention to embody sacred qualities for the benefit of all and the dedicated person moves beyond intention to organizing his or her life to accomplishing that aspiration.

The dedicated person, even before embodying great qualities of wisdom, love and beauty, generates a beneficial atmosphere through their example of conscious work. In this sense, no matter what your starting point on the journey, your continuous effort in the right direction improves the environment for everybody.

There are many ways to serve the world. It is also important to realize that serving others does not simply revolve around material needs and relief from social, economic and political injustice. We serve by exemplification—being an example, by providing others with food, shelter and comfort, by listening to their story and sharing our own, by improving the communities and environments we share, and by teaching and supporting them in their own journeys toward authentic happiness and sacred realization. All of these forms of service should be valued.

Clearly service is not determined simply by “what we do” but also by the way we do it. By doing acts of kindness

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with joy, love, presence, and respect for all life, without exception, creates a welcoming environment of belonging and care.



The heart posture of a bodhisattva is like a sacred world-embracing warrior mother having many qualities of love, wisdom, and creativity.

By developing *equanimity* we regard all beings as equal and all events as simply passing moments in time in our collective evolution toward sacred embodiment.

By *knowing our infinite interconnectedness* and that our very existence and experiences in life are parented by everything else that exists, we participate in a vast web of interaction where our actions plant the seeds and grow the fruits of future environments and experiences for others. In a sense, we realize that we give birth to the future and we want to give the kind of loving attention and care to the potentials we carry inside and to children we have birthed as if we are the mother of life. As every mother knows, this task requires daily investment of love, time and energy, not to mention patience and stamina.

Gratitude opens our heart to not only the sense of connection but the impulse to give ourselves. We want to give something in return to those who gave us life and who support us. This gratitude begins with particular people and situations and grows to cosmic proportions as we realize the splendor of life itself. We want our freedom and joy to be experienced by others and we seek to pass on all our blessings.

Identity with others grows out of our realizing our common humanity, our precious living nature, and our sharing desires. In this understanding, we can see our

differences in the particulars, in the details, but also see the core of aliveness and connection that is beyond the surfaces of appearances, reactive habits, and cultural expressions. We incorporate a genuine concern for the happiness of others and for their spiritual growth and freedom. In this process we imagine being the other and inquire about what would promote their happiness. We do not imagine how we would be as another person but how that person is in their own terms.

Love and Compassion grow out of deep knowing of others. We see their struggles as magnificent efforts to realize happiness and fulfill their nature and we love that spirit in them. We love them for the aliveness that is there and for the potential that can yet come to fruition. We love them because of the deep connection we feel with them and the sense that we are all members of a much larger body of humanity and nature that is working out how to create and manifest the fullness of its beauty. We love them because of our gratitude for how all of us have collectively made this very moment possible. And out of that love and sense of kinship, we develop compassion for others and their struggles with the challenges of growth and the full accomplishment of potential. We open to taking on their pain so that we can transform it into something of value that we can send out to them.

Understanding our self-addiction reveals the roots of our own suffering and the limitations this places on our growth, freedom, ability to fully connect, and work on

behalf of what is greater than us. Our ability to connect to the sacred depends on seeing beyond the surface of self-concern and perceiving the sacred aspects of other people, of nature, and of life. We come to realize the prison of self-preoccupation and the wondrous and beautiful home we experience in deep connection to the sacred through living beyond the personal. We know in some deep way that not only our lives but our language, our food, our clothing, our shelter, and so many other things did not arise from us but are possible because of others and of larger dynamics of life. It is our communion with others, with the sacred, and with the unfolding of life itself that makes our maturation possible and our contributions of value.

Dedication to the happiness, growth and freedom of all living beings becomes our great mission in life. We gradually develop the capacity to eat, sleep and breathe our dedication as a bodhisattva with the sense that the future of the world depends on our work, our creating benefit and beauty from the materials of our own lives and those of the world around us. We work on ourselves to be able to help others and we help others to continue and amplify that work we do on ourselves.



A great Hasidic teacher once said, “Somebody else’s material needs are my spiritual duties.”

The concern for others is not an extension in breadth but an ascension, a rise. Man reaches a new vertical dimension, the dimension of the holy, when he grows beyond his self-interests, when that which of interest to others becomes vital to him, and it is only in this dimension, in the understanding of its perennial validity, that the concern for other human beings and the devotion to ideals may reach the degree of self-denial. Distant ends, religious, moral and artistic interests, may become as relevant to man as his concern for food. The self, the fellow-man and the dimension of the holy are the three dimensions of a mature human concern.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

As humans, we can never be self-sufficient, not only because of our interconnections and interdependencies, but also because of what we are instinctually designed to give. While a rock is self-sustaining, humans are self-surpassing, always in need of something to give ourselves to, to dedicate ourselves to. We are designed to bond with, care for and act in behalf of our children, our families, and those we have developed caring for. This caring at some level recognizes others as having concerns that we can and do become concerned about.



Caring and the ability to include the perspectives, pains, passions, and positions of others provide a foundation for relationally-based ethics.

Caring is a way of making meaning and connecting. Care connects us to others and brings the sense of other into us, with the obvious examples of being a parent with an infant or a lover with a loved one. Caring and the ability to include the perspectives, pains, passions, and positions of others provide a foundation for relationally-based ethics (vs. ethics based on dogma) and for developing virtuous actions. Caring moves our attention from our interior world to the exterior world of others.

Martin Buber calls this the *I* and *Thou* relationship in which the other fills the space of my awareness. There is a sense of collective awareness in which we are mutually engaged in the collective virtues of love, intimacy, friendship, compassion, empathy, communion, and loyalty.

This conscious relating is the basis for ethical action and the social use of virtues for both personal and collective development.



Ethics at its best and as a caring practice (not a doctrine or dogma) bridges the gap between social responsibility and personal virtue.

We transform the activity of energy into the activity of deeds.

With these deeds we contribute to the larger community. As a sacred actor we work to remain sensitive to other people so that we hear the cries of a small child, feel the pain of wounds, and taste the bitterness of enslavement to reaction. Our service reflects the caring of a lover and parent.

It is from this caring that appropriate and ethical actions will flow. Without the core of love and caring, ethics degenerates into rules that polarize rather than connect, that inhibit growth rather than open us to maturity, and that can lead to unquestioning extremism rather than the clarity needed to respect each other and all life.

Ethics at its best and as a practice (not a doctrine or dogma) bridges the gap between social responsibility and personal virtue.

Ethics based on absolutist moral rules cannot take into account the subtleties and variety of human situations and the full complexity of our humanity. The concern about being “right” according to a formula dehumanizes everyone by equating people with particular behaviors that we approve of or condemn. This polarization vacates sacredness and reduces society and religion to a system of managed and judged activities rather than a community of relationships.

Part of our challenge, personally and collectively, in our

polarizing society is to release ethics from the prison cell of rigid morality and to reclaim the role of sacred intimacy as a guide for ethical behavior. An authentic ethics which builds and reflects our personal and collective character will only emerge when we are rooted in a sacred, yet humanizing, fundamental love and respect and approach each other with humility, courage, and compassion.



Compassionate ethics dethrones us from being the center of our world and puts other people and the larger community there. An effective ethics transforms not only individuals but the culture of the greater society.

The path of a bodhisattva forms a kind of ethical, as well as spiritual, alchemy. We behave in a compassionate way and this changes us. The development of authentic ethical concerns diminishes our self-centeredness, our inclination to be greedy, and impulse to seek security. Compassionate ethics dethrones us from being the center of our world and puts other people and the larger community there. An effective ethics transforms not only individuals but the culture of the greater society.



If you want to be happy, practice compassion: if
you want others to be happy, practice compassion.

H.H. the Dalai Lama

Compassion draws upon our capacity to take seriously and get inside the reality of others—their pains and inner lives, their emotions, and their external circumstances. It is our impulse to open our hearts and to help and support those in need. In compassion we engage each other in our mutual humanity and divinity. It reflects our ability to invest mental, physical, emotional and spiritual energy in what happens to others and to manifest our caring in action. The heart of creating blessings is not great gestures or grand deeds or spectacular feats, but small deeds done with great love. This is the heart of moral awareness.

Using the power of awareness and imagination, compassion not only places us in the position of other people, it also accesses our own best intentions, caring, and wisdom. We radiate these qualities from our hearts into the world, contributing love and wisdom to the environment of consciousness that surrounds us all. These encouraging and embracing qualities can be sensed even if they cannot be seen, creating an intimate home for all.

Compassion is not an idea but an authentic connective response. It is felt in the core of our body from our belly through our heart center up to the throat. In fact, Dacher Keltner has found that feelings of compassion increased as vagus nerve activity increased. Elevated vagus nerve activity oriented us toward greater social connection, sense

of belonging, positive emotions, behaving in helpful ways, and an increased likelihood of having a transformative experience. Compassion and increased vagus nerve activity also expands the circle of people included in the sense of caring and increases the sense of similarity. These expanded perspectives correlated with belief in equality and sensitivity to the rights of others.

Compassion is what we feel when we see a small child fall off a swing and we want to pick him or her up and comfort them. We want them to feel the warmth of caring so that the heart connection will heal the sense of tearing that the fall and its shock induced in their spirit. We send the loving, healing energy from our being to theirs without condition or hesitation. This is the type of connective, loving energy of compassion that we want to apply to ourselves as well as others.

As we grow in our spiritual development, we can experience the freedom and joy of deep realization but this is tempered by the felt connection to those who are caught up in distress. We sense the incompleteness of our collective well-being. The distress of others inspires us to share our realizations and work harder. We do not make the distress of others a distracting suffering for ourselves but rather our heart connection uncovers a kind of wise knowing and love that activates our caring. We know the other without taking on another illusory identity and reactive habit body. Compassion works for many reasons and one is that we are often most creative when we are in the process of giving

ourselves away.

The Buddha taught that our true nature is inseparable from the nature of all being and is open, radiant and lacking a permanent separate self. In the Buddhist teaching on presence, we are all features of Reality. When our authentic nature is realized, certain wisdom ways of being naturally emerge such as compassion, loving-kindness, equanimity, and generosity (*Brahma-viharas*). From this profound realization, we develop the heart posture of *bodhichitta*, the desire and dedication to free all beings from suffering.

In Jesus's teachings, love is at the center of all being—love that is forgiving, unconditional, and generously unself-centered. For many Christians, Jesus was a human being whose great gift was that as a human with all our frailties he could incorporate the true nature of the Divine.

For Karen Armstrong, the noted writer on comparative religion, “Compassion is the key to religion, the key to spirituality. It is the litmus test of religiosity in all the major world religions. It is the key to the experience of what we call God—that when you dethrone yourself from the center of your world and put another there, you achieve *extasis*, you go beyond yourself.” She quotes the Buddha: “First, live in a compassionate way, and then you will know.”

Translating the great Buddhist Indian master of two thousand years ago, Nagarjuna, Robert Thurman says that Nagarjuna's phrase “voidness is the womb of compassion” really means “Freedom is the womb of compassion.”

Keltner, in his book *Born to Be Good*, suggests that we

evolved neurologically to feel compassion in part to facilitate stronger bonding in families and communities. “Compassion does not render people tearful idlers, moral weaklings, or passive onlookers but individuals who will take on the pain of others, even when given the chance to skip out on such difficult action or in anonymous conditions. The kindness, sacrifice, and *jen* that make up healthy communities are rooted in a bundle of nerves that has been producing caretaking behavior for over 100 million years of mammalian evolution. And the lives of individuals with highly active vagus nerves add yet another chapter to the story of how we are wired to be good.”



In One Is All, In Many Is One

In another story about Indra, Indra, having accepted the responsibility for the world as the god of natural forces that nurture and protect life, he longed to fulfill his mission and was not sure how.

Perceiving that the entire cosmos could be seen in a single grain of dust, Indra hung a net around the Universe so that it stretched out in all directions. The net was infinite, with no beginning and no end. At each intersection of the forces of nature where the net came together Indra placed a knot.

In an elegant way that only a God can manage, on each knot Indra hung a beautiful jewel that contains and reflects every other jewel in the net. Not only that, when Indra touched any jewel in the net, all other jewels in the web resonated.

If we select a jewel for viewing and look deeply, we find that each jewel contains every other jewel in the net, connecting us to all life and to the universe.



Sacred and Just Community

8

E-MA-HO

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We realize that, in a sacred life, creating benefit and beauty is collective and the embodiment of the sacred is not only a personal goal but a community objective as well.

What we can do when we live whole-heartedly is lose ourselves deep inside our doing, traveling a road of love and longing for beauty paved with the joy of living and the music of creation. As we work with other people, shoulder to shoulder, we establish a way of speaking and knowing that establishes a corridor between us. This, in turn, amplifies the art of possibility in our collective shaping of the world.

As we become more conscious, we discover that the collective dimensions of our being cannot become truly free as long as others, who also make up the collective, are not also awakened. We are not isolated, self-arising, self-sufficient beings. Our existence came from a social act, our survival depended on others, and our learning was facilitated by teachers. Nothing that we are or could be is totally independent. We are embedded in a world of relationships and our actions have impacts on others, directly and indirectly. We are both a part and a feature of larger wholes. To be fully awake requires that we accept and engage those aspects of our being and of life. Otherwise it is like wanting to dance with a very strong heart and fit lungs but with legs that have atrophied muscles and broken bones.

When we realize that a sacred life involves engagement with the world in beneficial ways, it becomes clear that creating value is collective and the embodiment of the sacred is not only a personal goal but a community objective as well.



Sacred and Just Community

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs
to you.

Walt Whitman

As Whitman so eloquently expresses in such dramatic and meditative ways in his great poem, “*song of myself*”, we share all the fundamentals in common. The collective forces are the currents that flow through all of us engendering the abundance and variety of human imagination and experience. These forces connect us in elemental ways, in the rhythms of life, in the teeming aliveness of our larger community, and in the immensity and diversity of the ways we individually and collectively sanctify the land, life, and world we share. For Whitman our collective vitality and beauty manifests the divinity that is our nature. In his ardently democratic approach, all are included in his subjects, in his admiration, in imagination, in the music of the voices of the world, and in his language. He casts a net that includes and beautifies all he sees, even encompassing death and especially love.



I think I will do nothing for a long time but
listen,...

I hear the sound of the human voice....a sound I
love,

I hear all sounds as they are tuned to their uses....
sounds of the city and sounds out of the city....sounds
of the day and night;

Talkative young ones to those that like them....the
recitative of fish-peddlars and fruit-peddlars....the loud
laugh of workpeople at their meals,

The angry base of disjointed friendship....the faint
tones of the sick,

The judge with hands tight to the desk, his shaky
lips pronouncing a death-sentence,

The heave'e'yo of stevedores unlading ships by the
wharves....the refrain of the anchor-lifters;

The ring of alarm-bells....the cry of fire....the
whirr of swift-streaking engines and hose-carts with
premonitory tinkles and colored lights,

The steam-whistle....the solid roll of the train of
approaching cars;

The slow-march played at night at the head of the
association,

They go to guard some corpse....the flag-tops are
draped with black muslin.

I hear the violincello or man's heart's complaint,

And hear the keyed cornet or else the echo of
sunset.

Sacred and Just Community

I hear the chorus....it is a grand opera....this indeed
is music!

A tenor large and fresh as the creation fills me,

The orbic flex of his mouth is pouring and filling
me full.

I hear the trained soprano....she convulses me like
the climax of my love-grip;

The orchestra whirls me wider than Uranus flies,

It wrenches unnamable ardors from my breast,

It throbs me to gulps of the farthest down horror,

It sails me....I dab with bare feet....they are licked
by the indolent waves,

I am exposed....cut by bitter and poisoned hail,

Steeped amid honeyed morphine....my windpipe
squeezed in the fakes of death,

Let up again to feel the puzzle of puzzles,

And that we call Being.

Walt Whitman in "song of myself"



One of the sacred principles of spiritual growth is that we work in order to be worked.

We are not only a part of a community of human beings, we are also a participant in the multiplicity of forces shaping the world. Our aspiration is to become a member of a community of sacred influences that nurtures freedom from reactive habits, happiness, and growth into spiritual maturity. One of the sacred principles of spiritual growth is that we work in order to be worked.

We trust that as we work to develop spiritual capacity the processes of sacred consciousness will have their own dynamics and development and will carry us along and accelerate our growth. It is similar to an experienced runner who moves into the zone of the flow of running or to a cyclist who pumps to ascend an incline and then uses mostly momentum and gravity to descend on the other side.



By making ceremonies and rites beautiful and inspiring, we shape our collective consciousness and create a collective art form.

Aliveness is a celebration of the moment. Through our consciousness and love, our celebration sanctifies the living of each moment. When we celebrate with others we bring the community to life and sanctify our communal bonds. Collectively performing rituals leads all of us to transcendence, as long as we do not participate mechanically or automatically. By making ceremonies and rites beautiful and inspiring, we shape our collective consciousness and create a collective art form.



The reason all the spiritual traditions in their own ways place love and compassion at the heart of their teachings and practices is not simply because it helps groups function better, but because individuals grow in this way and because it is a recognition of our collective nature.

In 1800 the “Wild Boy of Aveyron” was discovered. He was 12 years old and had survived on his own in the forest, scavenging for acorns and hunting small animals. When he was taken in he could only grunt, howl and cackle in attempts to communicate. He never smiled, cried, touched, or met the gaze of other humans. After five years of care and teaching by Jean Itard, Victor, the name he was given, did learn to wear cloths, sleep in beds, eat at table and have a bond with Jean Itard. However, like the other documented cases of feral children, he did not develop language, a moral sense, or an ability to interact with and cooperate with other people. Further Victor and similar children remained incapable of self-awareness. It is hypothesized that the absence of early experiences of connection and care with a parent or caretaker deprived these children of necessary conditions of love and examples that are required to develop cognitive, intellectual, emotional, interpersonal, and reflective abilities.

This suggests that we, as a species, cannot realize our Buddha nature, cultivate our capacity for love and compassion, or develop Buddha character in isolation. Certain basic social relationships and activities must be present early in life. As Dacher Keltner points out: the sense of connection “is laid down in a rich vocabulary of touch,

voice, gaze and facial display, it is evident in the merging of minds, heartbeats, and nervous systems of caretaker and young child. These processes establish deep patterns of neural response in the pro-social nervous system...”

Research is increasingly showing that connective love, not loving desire, increases our levels of oxytocin and, thereby, amplifies our sense of belonging with humanity. This connective love enhances our propensity to help others, to trust, and to sacrifice on behalf of others and a purpose beyond ourselves.

When we speak of the human design, we are not pointing to the makeup and potential of an individual in isolation. The human design is both individual and social. It is a collective design. The reason all the spiritual traditions in their own ways place love and compassion at the heart of their teachings and practices is not simply because it helps groups function better, but because individuals grow in this way and because it is a recognition of our collective nature.



Cultivate full aliveness at both personal and collective levels.

We want to cultivate full aliveness at both personal and collective levels. At the personal level, this is accomplished through the way we care for and train our body to become fit and support our beneficial actions and the way we cultivate wise and loving heart postures. Collectively, we want to engender a society that functions well on behalf of all members, promotes respect for everyone, nurtures and grows collective sacredness, encourages personal development and fosters justice.



*To hoard the self is to grow a colossal sense for the
futility of living.*

Sophisticated thinking may enable man to
feign his being sufficient to himself. Yet the way to
insanity is paved with such illusions.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

Our desire to do the right thing, to be good, and to
promote justice arises from an impulse in our being to
strive for goals that are considered good, not only personally
but collectively. We may disagree on the particulars but we
share the striving itself.

In everything we do, we operate from a sense of meaning.
Our actions bring together our being with our sense of
meaning to create a relationship with life in the moment. It
is not enough for us to simply sense our existence and the
nature of awareness. We are designed to go beyond questions
of “who we are” and “what are we?” We are beings in quest of
meaning not only in the moment but also for all of life.

As Viktor Frankl and Abraham Joshua Heschel have
argued, the question “what is the meaning of life” is usually
asked from the wrong point of view. This is not a question
we should ask of life but, rather, it is a question life asks of us.
Life is asking us the question: What is the meaning we are
creating with the life we are given? The way we live our lives
is our answer, not only personally but collectively.



Compassion means justice....The person who understands what I have to say about justice understands everything I have to say.

Meister Eckhart

Justice is the virtue of treating others as if they were yourself, just appropriately in an optimal way for their actual situation. It is a transcendence when it is performed with the insight of wisdom, which does not differentiate between self, other, and the just right action.

Robert Thurman

Justice, from the standpoint of spiritual work, combines compassion with the impulse for fairness. Just as compassion is built into our human design, so fairness is “wired” into the brain. We have a basic need to be treated fairly and to have a sense of fairness for those we feel connected to.

On a sacred level, the meaning of an eye for an eye means transferring the eye of wisdom to replace the eye of confusion, the eye that connects and is intimate for the eye of alienation, separation, and dehumanization, the eye that sees the sacred for the eye that sees superficially, and the eye that creates in the sacred imagination for the eye that destroys out of reactive fear, addiction, or confusion.



One way of referring to God is that God, the sacred, is love, is wisdom, is creation. It is not that God has love, wisdom and creativity. God is love, wisdom and creation. The sacred is the potential for these qualities and is these qualities manifesting through us and through life.

The work of creating a cultural environment and social support system for the maturation of humanity in contemporary society will not be easy and certainly not be the product of some grand scheme. Such ambitious conceptual prescriptions readily become dogma and ideology and tend to further fracture our social and religious world rather than repair and develop it. This process takes generations to evolve and it works on the level of the collective psyche. Even as the speed of change accelerates and the accessibility of information becomes widespread, the forces of superficiality that tend to make everything reductionist challenge attempts by the individual and collective souls to forge a path for an authentic sacred life.

While we cannot have a complete idea of the shape of a better world, we do know that we collectively need to embrace and support many different sacred paths even as we deeply understand the unity of them and the sacred truths they seek to make accessible. We may not all sing the same song but we are all making music.



Loving Life and the World

9

E-MA-HO

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*We see the faces of God in everyone, in everything,
in all experiences, and in the unknown as we become
the dance with Grace that is eternally everywhere.*

Sacred wisdom is clarity about life and living in alignment with all dimensions of our being. In wisdom we dance with all aspects of the Divine. As we come home to our deeper wisdom nature, we unify the dimensions of our being and integrate our experiences and understandings into a stronger, fuller, more poised sense of being than when we were reactively and unconsciously rushing through our days. Our sense of peace, belonging, gratitude, and contribution infiltrates more and more of our life, until it permeates our being and radiates from our presence.

Love and Compassion become the natural expression of our open heart. We treat all people and living beings as part of our family. As we give to others, we are mending the world and creating an environment of love for everyone. We see the faces of God in everyone, in everything, in all experiences, and in the unknown as we become the dance with Grace that is eternally everywhere.



There's absolutely no excuse for our making our passionate love for our world dependent on what we think of its degree of health, whether we think it's going to go on forever. Those are just thoughts anyway. But this moment you're alive, so you can just dial up the magic of that at any time.

Joanna Macy

Life is always asking us to stretch a little more and we are made for that. We are made to learn, transcend, transform and grow. There is a great story that wants to be told through us, a song of praise or of grief that needs to be sung through us, a symphony that weaves together the complex feelings and themes that reflect the nuances of our inner life and outer engagements, a dance that expresses the flows of life energies in movements, a play in which the characters interact to create a transcending drama, or the cultivation of a rich landscape that reflects aliveness and tranquility.



Sonnet to Orpheus XXIX

Silent friend of those so distant from us, feel
 how your breathing still enlarges space.
 Fill the bell tower with your pealing
 into the darkness. What feeds upon you
 is growing stronger.

Move back and forth through this transformation.
 What is it like, this profound grief?
 If the drink is bitter, turn yourself to wine.

In this immeasurable night,
 be the powerful mystery at the crossroads of your senses,
 the meaning encountered there.

And if the world shall cease to remember you,
 whisper to the silent earth: I flow.
 And to the rushing water, say: I am.

Rainer Marie Rilke



Practices

E-MA-HO

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Practices

Remain sitting at your table and listen. Do not even listen; simply wait. Do not even wait; be quite still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked; it has no choice; it will roll in ecstasy at your feet.

Franz Kafka

Five Spiritual Powers

The Buddha taught that there are five spiritual powers that create the ground for inner balance, outer harmony, and authentic freedom. The first is faith (*saddha* in Pali) which points to a basic confidence in the possibility of a beneficial outcome of action and practice and arises from clarity about the nature of the present opportunity. The second power is making the effort, acting on the vision in the faith. This is the energetic component. The third spiritual faculty is consciousness, being alert and awake in our faith and effort and maintaining our attention in the moment and not being hijacked by reactive habits of thought and feeling. The fourth power is concentration that strengthens our efforts so we can persevere. Concentration carries us through the challenges we face on our path. The fifth faculty is simple wisdom to receive feedback and revise our efforts to become more skillful in the world and in manifesting the more profound wisdom qualities of compassion, love, and equanimity.



Yawning

Andrew Newberg and Mark Waldman advocate yawning as a regular practice. They argue that yawning stimulates alertness, supports concentration, enhances consciousness, lowers stress, increases awareness and empathy, and a number of other functions. While yawning is usually associated with being tired, it is also a way that the body resets the alertness of the brain and releases tension. Conscious yawning can make you more present, relaxed and alert.

Intentionally yawn at least seven times.

Ten to twelve yawns can make a difference and more may flow naturally.

This often requires that we begin by faking it for two or three times before a more natural yawn kicks in.



Radiating From The Inside Out

PURPOSE

1. To move attention through the body
2. To relax and open the body with our awareness using our attention
3. To establish a harmonious relationship with the body as our temple
4. To cultivate the heart posture of love and gratitude, to perceive the world from that view, and to radiate that wisdom energy to the world

MEDITATION

SET UP

1. Sit up in a way that the crown of your head is aligned over your perineum so that you are relaxed, alert, and can breathe easily.
2. Place your hands in your lap or on your legs with your thumbs and index fingers connected or clasp them together, right hand on top and place them in your lap.

SMILING THROUGH THE BODY

1. Begin by establishing the sense of being a hosting presence. Notice the sensations in your hands. As you experience some tingling or pulsing sensations in your hands, also place some of your attention on the sensation of your breathing. Hear sounds. Listen not only with your ears but also with your whole body.

Listen particularly from the back of the head. Have a sense of listening to not only the sounds but also to the silence in which the sounds arise. Notice that thoughts come and go and the feelings as they arise, pass on through, and disappear. Experience yourself hosting the sensations, the listening, the thoughts, and the feelings. Host everything that arises.

2. With this sense of being a hosting presence, also experience being a grateful and loving presence. Sense this grateful and loving presence as an inner smile in your heart center. Fill your heart with this radiant loving smiling energy.

3. Radiate this loving inner smile from the heart center throughout your chest, filling your entire chest cavity with the loving smiling energy, much like a warm sun.

4. Radiate this **loving smiling energy** across your shoulders and down through your arms into your hands and all the way out to your finger tips.

5. Experience this **loving smiling energy** flowing through your neck, up the back of your head, across the top of your head and into your forehead. Sense this **loving smiling energy** in your eyes, particularly at the edges of your eyes. Sense it radiating out to your ears and into your mouth and jaw. Fill your entire cranial cavity with this **loving smiling energy**.

6. Radiate this **loving smiling energy** into your abdomen, filling all your organs and the entire

abdominal cavity with this **loving smiling energy**.

7. Radiate this **loving smiling energy** into your pelvic cavity and fill your pelvic cavity with the radiance of this **loving smiling energy**.

8. Experience this **loving smiling energy**, flowing down into your legs and through your legs into your feet. Sense this **loving smiling energy** flowing into and from the earth.

9. Experience your entire body being filled with and radiating your **loving smiling energy**. Feel this energy in your bones, in your muscles, in every organ, in your nervous system, pumping through your circulatory system with every beat of your heart, and radiating from your skin in all directions.

10. Sense your entire being and way of perceiving the world now embodying your **loving smiling energy**, dedicating this for benefit of the happiness, growth and freedom of all living beings.



Meditation

Consciousness brings us into the present, makes us more intentional and can interrupt the patterns of our reactive behaviors. We can find many devices and practices to help us remain conscious, some that are traditional and others that are creative and uniquely our own. Among the practices that are very powerful, mindfulness meditation stands out as one of the most useful.

The purpose of meditation is to make us consciously aware and to bring us home to our authentic nature—being totally open, boundlessly radiant, and always presencing. The basis of meditation is experience, recognition and cultivation.

Meditation is a path of growth that initially involves relaxing the body and the mind, training the mind to stabilize attention, training the will, witnessing and hosting whatever arises, cultivating wisdom qualities, and training the bodymind to manifest those qualities in generating the blessings of benefit and beauty.

When we meditate, we begin by consciously placing and maintaining attention. The capacity for intentionally using attention is one of the precious gifts of life. Attention directs the mind and focuses the range of energies of our being. Attention is a beacon that reveals the nearest and farthest reaches of the inner world and brings the outer world into intimate relationship with us.

We can attend to things, thoughts, feelings, witnessing, and/or the sense of our own being. Our attention can be

captive to the content of our mental commentary on what we think of this book, namely the surface dimension of awareness. Or we can intentionally place our attention in other dimensions of awareness such as the sensations in our hands, or sounds in the room, or the value of the suggestions, or the feelings we are having as we read, or in witnessing all those sensations, sounds, thoughts, and feelings.

In the experience of mindfulness we are consciously aware and present in the moment. Mindfulness keeps us present and allows us to see clearly things as they are. Mindfulness is the simultaneous practice of concentration, the ability to stabilize the mind in a state without distraction, and deceneration, the ability to open attention to whatever is arising. It integrates insightful intimacy with being engaged through our sense of presence and our connectedness.

As our skill develops with mindfulness, we move from the sense of working hard at it, to having it arise more naturally and finally it becomes a stable part of our lives. Initially we apply effort to attend consciously. With practice, our natural awake quality begins to emerge, but it tends to come and go and we move back and forth between effortful and natural mindfulness. Eventually, being naturally awake becomes stable and we can abide and operate from within that state.

In this progression we begin by intentionally placing our attention in a witness dimension of awareness, becoming aware of the surface thoughts, feelings and reactions. Since we normally become hijacked by these surface phenomena,

it takes real effort to stay alert and notice what is happening. In time we develop a capacity for multiple attention so that we can both experience and witness, thereby remaining consciously present.



Intimate Witnessing

Intimate Witnessing is the direct, immediate quality of being present in the moment. It is intimate and involved but unattached, making no judgments and bringing no commentary or agenda. Like a mirror that reflects all images without having the qualities of any image, so the intimate witness remains open without being disturbed by changes in our lives.

The witness we are discussing here is not the “numb observer” that is disassociated, remote, and experiences events as though they are happening to someone else. The numb observer is distant and unfeeling and withdraws the energy of aliveness from situations. Everything is reduced to information rather than energetic engagement and reciprocal flow.

This witness is also not to be confused with the reactive critical observer that judges, feels needy, is haunted by longing, feels diminished or defeated by painful experience, and/or wants to merge with pleasurable experiences.

To the intimate witness, all phenomena simply are and we experience both a connection with and detachment from all this. The attention of witnessing brings a sense of inclusion, of hosting, to our sense of presence. This intimate sense of presence and hosting in the moment is both transcending and transformative.



Applying Witnessing to Emotional Reactions

Our reactive stories about our lives are like the tar baby that Br'er Rabbit encounters in the Uncle Remus tale where the more our mind strikes out and struggles with it, the more stuck in our reactions we are. If we feel hurt, frightened, disrespected, frustrated and/or angry, our attention gets hijacked by predator thoughts, painful associations, and hostile feelings. We become a vortex of thoughts, images and feelings feeding the intensity of each other and amplifying small incidents in cyclones, momentarily obliterating the reality of what is happening.

Learning a mindfulness practice supports our ability to intentionally take a break from reactive dramas and whirlwinds of emotion and to witness what we are doing and become more present at the time. Then we can notice what is happening now and experience our various feelings with a sense of greater presence without the need to react. Instead of being hijacked by it, we can even use it to become more conscious and deal with the issues that need to be addressed. Having greater clarity, we are free to become more actively engaged rather than reactively attacking or withdrawing.

A common mindfulness practice that you can use involves sitting in a posture of basic dignity, hosting everything that arises with a sense of presence, attending to the breath, witnessing whatever arises, particularly thoughts and feelings, and always returning to simple presence. This practice allows everything to be hosted in the space of

your awareness as you continue to embrace it all with your presence. You intimately witness the way your stories about who you are, what has happened, what you are doing, and what will happen next and your feelings about all these. You become simultaneously engaged in the experience of each moment and witnessing the content and process of what arises. Over time you will experience a more settled sense of your own being, a clear, open, flowing, and abiding sense of presence that hosts all your various experiences and states of mind.

Through this kind of practice you can learn to be more present, affirming, and intimate with whatever is happening in your life. You can be with each moment just as it is without adding the baggage of beliefs, fears, hopes, judgments, and fantasies. This helps you connect with your basic sense of aliveness and wellbeing and develops a fundamental confidence in your own sacred nature.

We may not like what we see in our witnessing about ourselves and our behaviors. As we examine failures, disappointments, and frustrations, we may doubt our capacity to create a life of blessings. This is where we must have courage and determination to confront ourselves and dedicate ourselves to moving in a direction that we value.



Receiving and Sending

This simple practice develops the sense of connection with and compassion for others.

Bring to mind a particular person or persons who you know or know about who are experiencing suffering. Also sense how they may suffer in similar ways and how a greater circle of other beings is also suffering in this way.

Sense a black hole—so intense that not even light escapes its gravitational pull—in your heart and breathe in all this suffering. Realizing that, if it were possible, you would give your life to remove all the suffering in the world, hold that suffering in your heart.

Feeling the pressure of your held breath and of your heart center breaking the suffering down into its essential life energy, bring to mind a joy, a beneficial quality, that makes life worth living and the world a more beautiful place. Feel your heart being saturated with that quality. When you exhale, radiate that joyous quality as a white light to the hearts of all other beings.

As you inhale and exhale in a more natural way, sense that your heart center continues to transform the suffering and generates value. In this way your heart digests the energy of suffering and uses it as food for generating aliveness in yourself and others.

Close your practice with the sense that all beings are collectively receiving and, in turn, radiating the energy of the joyous quality from their heart centers.

Abide in the pervasive atmosphere of the joyous quality.

AH Practice

This meditation uses the sound *AH*. This practice is adapted from a Tibetan *Dzogchen* practice and the Japanese tantric practice of *Ajikan*. *AH* is considered the primal sound of the universe from which all other sounds, speech, and language derive. Its vibration penetrates all things. The sound made when the mouth first opens is the sound *AH*.

This practice consists of the repetition of *AH* aloud four times and listening silently to the *AH* of the universe on what would be the fifth time. Each repetition is done with a breath, saying the syllable on the exhalation. During each spoken repetition, visualize an ever-encompassing radiant sphere of light.

You can begin sensing this vibration and imagining this light radiating from the core of your heart and filling your body on the first sounding of *AH*.

Then sense and visualize filling your immediate surroundings on the second *AH*.

On the third *AH*, expand your imagination and extend your senses to include the entire universe.

On the fourth *AH*, extend your sense and imagination beyond the universe into the unknown with a sense of the vibration and light being all encompassing.

Then simply listen and abide with your whole being on the fifth breath as if *AH* is arising and vibrating within an all encompassing silence.

This can be done as many times as feels comfortable.

Close your practice by dedicating the positive qualities and energies you have generated to the happiness, growth, and freedom of all beings.



Just as we can grow our capacity to *be* a blessing, so we can also develop our skills and capacity to *create* blessings. In the Tibetan tradition of Buddhism, certain practices have the practitioner identify with a particular deity such as Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. This deity not only represents the idea of compassion but is an embodiment of awareness as compassion, and the energy and radiance of compassion. In the practice we not only think about our connection to this deity and the idea of compassion, we gradually imagine ourselves as the deity, as compassion itself. This increasing identification allows us to think as compassion, to feel as compassion, open to others as compassion, to walk, talk and breathe as compassion, now and in every moment of the day. We feel the texture of each moment as a compassionate being, aligning our words and deeds, our touch and our gaze so that a field of love and compassion radiates from us and pervades the atmosphere.



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Acknowledgments

There are many people who directly and indirectly assisted in the development and completion of this book.

I am grateful to the members of the Dedicated Life Institute for their support and encouragement. The Dedicated Life Institute is an organizational vehicle for presenting these teachings and for students to support their spiritual growth together.

Special gratitude is due Grace Pedalino for her helpful editing and her wonderful aesthetic sensibility that she brought to the design and layout of the entire book.

Lastly, but not least, I am grateful for the support, encouragement, and editorial comments of my wife Karen Edwards.



The Dedicated Life Institute (DLI) supports spiritual exploration and growth and is dedicated to making the essence teachings of many traditions accessible in a Western idiom. Incorporating the principles of the mystic way, we promote both recovery of our wisdom ground of being and development of our capacity to use our daily conditions as a means of growth and the opportunity to manifest our true wisdom and loving nature. Our dedication to living as an expression of wisdom and love serves to encourage both personal and social transformation. The Institute offers meditation groups, retreats, workshops, and a home study program. For more information please visit our website at www.dli.org.



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