

“The Bodhisattva Path in the Trump Era”

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It's been two weeks today since the election, and many of us are still in a state of shock — traumatized, disheartened if not depressed, anxious, angry, fearful and somewhat confused, wondering what's going to come next — and wondering if there might be some silver lining to what's happening. My response today has two parts. First I'd like to identify a very real silver lining, or at least the possibility of a silver lining, depending on how we respond to the situation. And then I'd like to say a bit about what I think is the most important contribution of Buddhist teachings to this situation, which can help us understand and respond to it.

Let's begin with a Zen story that's been circulating on the Internet. A student asks the master, "When times of great difficulty visit us, how should we meet them?" And the answer is, "Welcome." This path that we're on is not about avoiding difficulties. That doesn't mean passively accepting those difficulties when they present themselves, but it does mean engaging with them, not trying to avoid them. Another story is also quite relevant here: the student asks the master, "What is the constant activity of all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas?" In other words, what is it that awakened people are doing all the time — what is special about the way they live in the world moment by moment?" And the answer from the master is, "Responding appropriately." In one way that seems very simple, but in another way it's not, because in order to know how to respond appropriately, we have to understand the situation that we are in. There are different ways of understanding a situation, different perspectives. And one of them is how short-term or long-term, how closely we are looking at the situation, and how much can we step back from it and look at the larger perspective.

Anyway, here's the silver lining that I'm wondering about. Again, I'm not saying it's definitely a silver lining, but it has the possibility to become a silver lining: is the distress that we are feeling now opening up a new potential that's exactly what's needed? And here I have to immediately qualify that, because as an older, white, heterosexual male, there are certain types of anxiety that I'm probably not going to have to be concerned about, compared to many women, or gay people, or people of color, or some immigrants. I acknowledge that, yet again, I am in a very privileged situation. Yet there are other important issues here too, other aspects to our distress that need to be emphasized as well, and even to be appreciated. Because perhaps the shock of this election can also help to wake us up. You will remember that Hillary ran her campaign basically on the status quo: more of the same. And from what I can see, that's why she lost. Because for an awful lot of people in this country, that's not what they wanted. It's important to

remember here, among other things, that Democrats have controlled the presidency for 16 of the last 24 years, and that the gap between rich and poor during that period has continued to accelerate. So much for the party of the working class.

So how much has the election of Donald Trump shaken us up, and maybe, in the process, is it waking us up in a way that the election of Hillary Clinton would not have done? I am struck by something that the philosopher-provocateur Slavoj Žižek expressed very succinctly: “The real calamity is the status quo.” In which case, if people are responding, showing their dissatisfaction with the status quo, even if they are doing it for different reasons than I do, is that expression of dissatisfaction what’s needed? Again, that response can be understood in different ways, but let me share with you the way that stands out most for me. Here are a few sentences by James Gustave Speth, from a book he published back in 2008, which means he actually would have written it in 2007. Please keep that year in mind as you listen to what he wrote:

“Half of the world’s tropical and temperate forests are now gone. The rate of deforestation in the tropics continues at about an acre per second, as it has for decades. Half the planet’s wetlands are gone, an estimated 90% of the large predator fish are gone. 75% of marine fisheries are now overfished or fished to capacity. Almost half of the corals are gone or seriously threatened. Species are disappearing at rates about a thousand times faster than normal. The planet hasn’t seen such a spasm of extinction in 65 million years, since the dinosaurs disappeared.”

(More recently, a week or so ago it was announced that from 1970 to 2020, a short 50-year period, two-thirds of all the wild animals on this planet will have disappeared. Some years ago E. O. Wilson, the renowned Harvard biologist, predicted that by the end of this century, half of the earth’s species plant and animal species may be extinct, or so weakened that they will disappear soon thereafter.)

Anyway, back to Speth now: “Desertification claims a Nebraska-sized area of productive capacity each year globally. Persistent toxic chemicals can now be found by the dozens in essentially each and everyone of us.”

Something else I recently came across is that in the last 40 years, that is to say in the lifetime of almost all of us here, about one-third of the world’s cropland has been abandoned because of soil erosion, or because it’s otherwise unusable.

“All we have to do,” continues Speth, “to destroy the planet’s climate and biota and leave a ruined world to our children and grandchildren, is to keep doing exactly what we’re doing today,

with no growth in human population or the world economy. Just continue to generate greenhouse gases at current rates, just continue to impoverish ecosystems and release toxic chemicals at current rates, and the world in the latter part of this century won't be fit to live in. But human activities are not holding at current levels. They're accelerating dramatically."

Remember, he wrote this back in 2007. Did you notice that just last week it was announced that this will be the third year in a row that set a new record as the warmest in recorded history? If all this is true, we need to wake up to it in a way that we haven't yet. Why haven't we, and what does it take to wake us up to it?

Now in response to this, you might say that Hillary, unlike Donald Trump, acknowledged climate change, and intended to do something about it. But, given her public record, just how much was she prepared to do?

The analogy that comes to my mind is that we are all in a big bus, a bus that's hurtling very, very fast toward a precipice. We don't know what lies over that precipice, we don't know if it's a sudden drop or if it's a bumpy collapse, but we have good reason to suspect it's a very long way down. What happened in this election is that two people were fighting for the steering wheel. One person wanted to speed up, step on the accelerator and go faster, because he's not concerned; apparently he doesn't believe there is a precipice. But what about the other person? Was she determined to stop the bus? Maybe she would have slowed down a little bit, maybe turned the wheel a bit, but it seems to me that neither of our two main political parties is interested in acknowledging the crisis in the way that it needs to be acknowledged. Why? I'm reminded of the Louisiana populist Huey Long, who put it very well: "Your government is like a restaurant with Republican waiters on one side and Democratic waiters on the other side. But no matter which set of waiters brings you your food, the legislative grub is all prepared in the same Wall Street kitchen."

Suppose Hillary had won as expected. Would we all have sat back on the bus more comfortably into our seats? If Trump had been defeated, would that have encouraged us to become – or remain – more comfortable? I think you can see what I'm getting at here.

The other side of the question that constantly comes back to me, and it's a question for myself as much it is for anyone else, is: why is it so difficult for us to respond in the way that's necessary? The answer, it seems to me, is that for most of us our concern is not generated by personal discomfort. If you look at the history of the French Revolution or the Russian

Revolution, the people who revolted did so because they were desperate, because they had no choice, because they had to put their lives on the line. And let's be honest, for most of us here in the "Boulder bubble," for how many of us is life essentially very, very comfortable? Whether you look at our lives historically or geographically, we are incredibly privileged. We are the most fortunate generation in human history when you consider the levels of disposable income, of medical care, of freedom and ability to do what we want. Or you can look at it geographically, in contemporaneous terms of what's going on in the world now, and you will come to the same conclusion. How incredibly fortunate, how extraordinarily comfortable we are, compared to life for the vast majority of people on this planet. This is not a criticism, but it's a statement about — and I'm talking as much to myself here — about how difficult it is, therefore, to generate the level of passion and concern and response that is necessary if we're going to leave a decent planet for our descendants and for the other species on this earth.

Because we are all in this bubble together, it's very hard not to take it for granted, and just assume that that's the way things are. But we need to remember that the kind of life that we now enjoy — our great-great-grandchildren are not going to have that kind of life. The Boulder bubble is a bubble; it will be popped. The quality of life here that to some extent we can't help but take for granted, that's not going to go on forever. And it's important for us, rather than simply enjoy our comforts until the bubble pops, to actually respond to this new challenge as much as we can now.

So that's the sense in which the kind of discomfort and anxiety and trauma that most of us have been experiencing in one way or another during the past two weeks might become something positive. It's been encouraging to see the sense of community that has been forming within some groups, people bonding together in the way that is needed if we're going to be able to respond appropriately to the kinds of difficulties that we can now expect.

So please reflect on that. My concern is that those of us who feel momentarily moved to do something will over time -- being surrounded by other people who are not so moved -- lose that energy, and slip back into old, more familiar life-style habits. I think we have to be careful and ask ourselves whether we are doing that and really try to help each other rise to this particular kind of challenge rather than seeing this as a temporary difficulty that we eventually adjust to.

And to some extent our practice can encourage that. It's possible to use our meditation practice, our Buddhist practice, as a kind of refuge from all of this. I'm concerned that we

Buddhists have discovered our own solution to the climate crisis and other ecological and social crises. When we read something of the sort that I mentioned earlier, quoting Speth, we tend to become anxious, but hey, we're Buddhist practitioners, and we know what to do when we are anxious, right? So we sit facing the wall for a while (laughter), let go of our thoughts and feelings and so forth, and after a while, okay, I feel better! That's one kind of Buddhist response — but that's not the kind of response that's needed.

The second thing I want to talk about is perhaps the most important thing that Buddhism has to offer us at this particular point: the bodhisattva path.

The most essential thing about the bodhisattva path is that the bodhisattva has a double practice, or a two-sided practice. On the one hand he or she continues to work for their own awakening, they continue their own meditation and so forth. They work on their self-transformation and thereby realize or get in touch with that dimension or perspective in which there's nothing missing, nothing lacking, no better, no worse, nothing to gain. But they also realize that that dimension by itself is insufficient, is one-sided. Although it's important for us to ground ourselves in meditative equanimity (in Zen we talk about realizing emptiness), it's important that that grounding enables or invigorates us to engage more compassionately and wholeheartedly in social and ecological activities.

And, on the other side, it's just as important for activists to have a meditative practice, because otherwise it's very, very difficult to avoid getting frustrated, burned out, angry, and even despair.

I've spent a lot of my time recently talking to Buddhist groups about how important it is to be socially and ecologically engaged. Here I'm reminded of one of my all-time favorite quotations, by Nisargadatta, who expresses this point very well: "When I look inside and see that I am nothing, that's wisdom. When I look outside and see that I am everything, that's love. Between the two my life moves." This shows the relationship between the two pillars of Buddhism -- wisdom and love, or wisdom and compassion -- because insofar as we overcome the delusion of a separate self, insofar as we're able to let go of ourselves in our practice and realize our non-duality with other people and the world generally, the love that he refers to is how one embodies that realization in how we actually live day by day. This kind of love is not a

feeling but a way of being, the way of living in the world and relating to other people that's implied by this realization of non-separation.

Many things about the bodhisattva path could be mentioned here. Traditionally one of the most important things would be nonviolence, consistent with the first Buddhist precept that we don't injure living beings. And along with that, the idea of non-polarization, which seems especially important now. By non-polarization I mean not objectifying or feeling separate from other people who have different ideas, people that we're trying to convince, or struggling with. It's important not to label them as "evil." From the Buddhist perspective, we're not in a struggle of good against evil, but on a path that transforms delusion into wisdom (or ignorance into awakening), and that involves recognizing how we are all complicit to some degree within webs of delusion such as this election demonstrated.

It's very heartening to see the resistance that's already starting to catalyze. I'm sure most of you have heard about an incident that happened a few days ago at the Broadway show "Hamilton" in New York, where Vice-President-elect Pence was booed by many in the audience, and following the performance some of the cast came back onstage to make a statement. I think we're going to see a lot more of that. My sense is we are going to see the strongest resistance movement since the Vietnam War, maybe since the Civil War. But what isn't clear yet is whether this kind of movement is going to bring us all together in response to Trump and his administration, or are we going to see a growing gap between the people who are appalled by what Trump is doing, and the many people who elected him. Are we going to see greater and greater division, or are we going to accept that, despite the fact that they have different ideas and a different understanding, Trump supporters are also responding to pain, they too are suffering. Will we be able to find ways to communicate, to actually relate to them rather than deepening the chasm between us?

There are other things that the bodhisattva path emphasizes, such as pragmatism and skillful means – which highlights the importance of creativity -- but I want to focus on what may be the most important thing: that the bodhisattva acts without attachment to the fruits of action. This is really important, but it's also very dangerous if we misunderstand it, because it can encourage or rationalize a kind of half-hearted commitment. We might decide, for example, that we need to help convert a fossil fuel plant into a renewable energy plant. And we work hard for a little while

but it doesn't seem to be happening and so we say, "Oh well, I tried. It isn't happening, but I'm not attached to the results of my actions, so I'll just return to my cushion." (Laughter)

Is that kind of nonattachment to the fruits of action that we need? No, I would say that is a misunderstanding of what nonattachment means. One way to make this point is to emphasize the distinction between a 100-yard dash and a marathon. When you're running a 100-yard dash, the only thing that counts is getting to the goal line as quickly as possible; you don't have to think about anything else. But you can't run a marathon that way. If you do, you're going to exhaust yourself awfully quickly. In order to run a marathon, yes, you are running, you are not just sitting by the side, meditating or watching the runners. You are moving in a certain direction. But at the same time, in going that direction, it's one step at a time. [Demonstrates walking deliberately, one step at a time] Just *this!* Just *this!* Only *this* step! Well, maybe a little faster. (Laughter)

In Japanese Zen the term *tada* means "just this!" In this single step nothing is lacking, nothing is missing. We don't have to be thinking about the goal, as long as we're moving in that direction. You are completely one with every moment. And that is one way to understand what it means to be non-attached to the goal, non-attached to the fruits of one's action.

Nonetheless, a marathon is only 26 miles or so, and even if you are quite slow, even if you walk it, you're going to be able to finish it within a day. But what about the actual situation we're faced with today, where we don't know how far the goal line is, or how long it will take us to get there. Where we have to be in it for the really, really long haul, which is more discouraging or intimidating in the sense that we don't know what or where the goal is, or if there even is a finish line. Here I'm reminded of something recited in Zen centers every day, the four bodhisattva vows, the first of which is very pertinent: "Living beings are numberless. I vow to save them all." Or liberate them all, help all of them to realize their true nature. Basically one is taking a vow to do something that actually can't be done, that can't be fulfilled, which makes it a "goal-less goal." Which means that it's not actually about achieving a particular goal at all. It's about a fundamental reorientation in the meaning of one's life, away from my usual preoccupation with my own comfort, my own separate well-being. The vow is a commitment to transform those habits: "No, the fundamental meaning of my life is working for the well-being of everyone." You can call this a goal, you can call this an attachment if you like, but I think it's something deeper: it really is a transformation at the core that cuts through one's usual self-preoccupation. And the reason I emphasize that is, if you think about what that vow really means

and take it seriously, you are not going to be intimidated by the comparatively minor task of working with others to save global civilization from destroying itself. (Laughter) The point is, whether or not we become temporarily discouraged, we don't stop, we get on with it. Because this bodhisattva commitment and activity becomes the only game in town, as the meaning of one's life. And I think it's not a vow that many of us can embody very successfully unless one also has a meditation practice, or some other spiritual practice.

However, that still doesn't get at the most important thing that we need to say about what it means to act without attachment to the results of that action. What pushes me in this direction is what some scientists seem to be saying, among themselves behind closed doors: *It might be too late*. What if it is too late? Well, first question, too late for what? Too late to avoid a breakdown of the kind of global civilization that we've achieved in the last couple of generations? As Paul Ehrlich put it, in pushing other species to extinction, we are busy sawing off the limb on which we perch. It's quite ironic, isn't it, that just as we've achieved a truly global civilization, it's busy destroying itself.

I'm not a scientist and not in a position to offer any authoritative judgment on this matter, but scientists themselves are very concerned about what are called *tipping points*: for example, the fact that Arctic ice is melting ever more quickly than expected, and without the white ice the ocean absorbs more heat, which causes more ice to melt and so forth. And another example is methane gas, which is much more potent than carbon dioxide. I've read that there are approximately 400 *billion* tons of methane frozen at the bottom of the Arctic and Antarctic Ocean, and also buried in the permafrost, the tundra – and both of these are now melting. We seem to be getting into a positive feedback loop, positive in the sense that the problem tends to aggravate and escalate itself.

So is it maybe too late? And if so, what does that mean? We just don't know, do we? The extra problem with that, of course, is that normally there is something paralyzing about “not knowing.” It's scary that we don't even know what's happening right now, and that we don't really know what's likely to happen, or what's possible. We just... don't... know.

But wait a minute! In Zen “don't know mind” is an essential aspect of realization and practice. Enlightenment or awakening isn't about suddenly, “Oh, now I understand everything about the way the world is and what's happening.” It's just the opposite. It's opening up to a one's “don't know” mind. Bernie Glassman, founder of the Zen peacemakers, made this the first

of his three principles: *don't know mind*. And for practitioners, there's something very invigorating about don't know mind. One of my teachers, Robert Aitken, said, "Our task isn't about clearing up the mystery, but rather making the mystery clear." When we open up to what's actually happening, we open up to a world that's fundamentally mysterious. And essential to that mystery is how little we actually know. But that doesn't stop us from acting.

When we open up in our practice, and "return to the Source," it's not about grasping that ground, to cling to it or rest in it, indifferent to what's happening in the world, but to be *taken by it*, and thereafter we find ourselves manifesting something greater than our egos. We become a vehicle of something greater than ourselves. We become instruments of that Source. And that means our job is to respond appropriately to whatever situation that arises for us, as well as we can. What that implies, I think, is this: *our task is to do the very best that we can, not knowing if anything we do is going to make any difference whatsoever*. That's an important part of what *don't know mind* means. We don't know if what we do is important, but it is very important that we do it. Because it's what we are here for and what we find ourselves called to do.

Again, I think we can only do this if we have a meditation practice. That brings us back to that two-sided practice that I started out referring to. If we are able to ground ourselves in the equanimity, in the emptiness, in this fundamental perspective where nothing is lacking, then we can act in the world in the ways that are becoming necessary, with nonattachment. Continue to walk step-by-step and moment by moment in the direction that's needed, as part of a fundamental reorientation of what it means to be a practitioner living in a world that's changing so quickly. And doing the very best that we can, joyfully, without knowing if anything we do makes any difference whatsoever. We don't know, but that's okay. Knowing is not part of the job description. There's a famous Jewish saying from the *Perkei Avot* which says something like that: "It's not your responsibility to finish the work of healing the earth, but neither are you free to desist from it either."

Let me conclude by saying that, if we're not able to respond in these ways -- if we still understand our practice only as a refuge, simply as away of avoiding the great challenges that we are now faced with -- then perhaps Buddhism isn't what's needed right now. But I think this is exactly why and where Buddhism is so important, because it can teach us that our engagement with the world is not a distraction from our practice, but an essential part of our practice.

Thank you very much.