

Insight Meditation Community of Washington

The Path of Caring

By Tara Brach

The Dalai Lama once remarked, “I don’t know why people like me so much...It must be because I value bodhichitta (the awakened heart/mind). I can’t claim to practice... but I value it.”

This story is so human and reassuring. It reminds us that even when we feel disconnected and our heart is tight or numb, we still care about caring. When we are angry or afraid, it is because we value life and fear rejection or separation. Love matters—and we long for connection—because that is our nature. Even though we may sometimes feel like a separate wave—lonely and filled with a sense of deficiency—in the depth of our awareness we know that we never really left the ocean.

When the
animals come to us,
Asking for our help, Will we know what they are saying?
When the plants speak to us
In their delicate, beautiful language,
Will we be able
to answer them?
When the planet herself
Sings to us in
our dreams,
Will we be able
to wake ourselves, and act?
--Gary Lawless

We realize the truth of our relatedness by learning to pay attention. On my son’s sixth birthday I gave him an ant farm. He spent hours watching with fascination as these little creatures magically created their network of tunnels. He gave them names and followed them closely. After several weeks he pointed out with wonder the graveyard where the ants heroically dragged and deposited their dead. The following day, when I picked him up after school, he was visibly distressed. He described how the kids in the playground made a game out of stepping on ants. He was horrified that they would hurt these friends he so admired. He couldn’t understand why they didn’t care.

Krishnamurti writes that “to pay attention means we care, which means we really love.” We connect with what we attend to, the life we are aware of becomes part of our being. I tried to explain to my son that when we really spend time with a part of life—the way he had with the ants—we discover that we’re friends. His schoolmates hadn’t had the chance to get to know the ants. If they had, they wouldn’t have carelessly hurt them.

THE BODHISATTVA'S PRAYER

Our deepest prayer is to be fully who we are—awake, connected, in love with life. The practice of reflecting on this aspiration—remembering what most matters—helps us deepen our attention. In classical descriptions, the bodhisattva’s aspiration has two parts. The receptive aspect is like breathing in: May whatever arises in this life serve to awaken our heart/mind. The active element is like breathing out: May this life be of benefit to all beings.

MAY ALL CIRCUMSTANCES SERVE TO AWAKEN COMPASSION

We are each embedded in a web of relationships—with our body and heart, our parents, children, friends, partners, pets, earth, ants. Our experiences of pain and pleasure, hope and fear, in these relationships are the circumstances of our life. It is here that we encounter the wounds of severed belonging, the fear of unworthiness, the longing for love, the acute pain of loss and the truth of connection. Our relationships are our bodhisattva training ground par excellence, the place where the trance of separateness can fall away. When we scan our life and sense where the challenges are, we can hold these challenges with the aspiration, “May this serve to awaken compassion.” Or we can inquire, “How might this serve to awaken my heart/mind?” This prayer powerfully dissolves the belief that “something is wrong,” and opens us to the life that moves through us.

When we touch what is painful, the armoring around our heart melts and we become more tender and kind. When we touch what is joyful, we open in love. Either way, we melt and awaken into the stream of life. As we do, we start to feel fluid, raw, vulnerable, soft, alive, warmhearted, real. We learn to look into the eyes of another, and see the same fear that binds our heart, the same love that is the ground of our being.

There is a Sikh story about a holy man who gave two men each a chicken and said, “Go kill them where no one can see.” One man went behind the fence and slaughtered the chicken. The other man walked for two days and finally returned with the chicken. The holy man said, “You didn’t kill the chicken.” The other man replied, “Everywhere I go, the chicken sees.” When we go beneath mental concepts of self and other, and touch the realness of our life, the entire world becomes real. As we see that all of life is included in this awareness, our caring becomes unconditional.

MAY THIS LIFE BE OF BENEFIT

By breathing in, we allow ourselves to feel the inevitable pain of life. Our heart’s natural response to this pain —breathing out—is compassion. Joanna Macy describes this process as *breathing through* and instructs: “Breathe in that pain like a dark stream... let it pass through your heart... surrender it for now to the healing resources of life’s vast web... by breathing through... rather than bracing ourselves against... we can let it strengthen our sense of belonging in the larger web of being.” In classical Buddhist texts the bodhisattva of compassion has been described as the “listener of the sufferings.” She breathes in, receives the cries of the world and responds with care. The traditional vow made by

the bodhisattva is to alleviate the suffering of all beings. Many people ask me if we can really hold all the suffering and respond in a way that helps. Zen teacher Bernard Glassman addresses these questions with one version of the bodhisattva's story:

Listening to suffering means fully embodying listening, not with the ears, but listening with the pores of the body, with the hairs on the head, with the feet, listening and fully coming the pains of the world... So the bodhisattva vows to bring an end to the suffering, but he/she/ it was put into the position of listening to all this stuff and having no answers. Do you know what happened? She burst into millions of pieces! Then all those pieces came back together—now we have thousand-armed bodhisattvas—and each hand holds a different implement. One had a pen, one had a sword, one had a hoe, and one had a flower.

Now the bodhisattva is doing the work. He/she is listening, still having no answers, but is doing everything in every sphere where she/he appears, doing the things that need to be done in that sphere.

Our individual lives—like the arms of the bodhisattva—express care through words, prayers and actions. The capacity to respond to suffering arises from the depths of our listening. Often we notice that people who have experienced great pain and loss emerge compassionate and generous. A friend's son committed suicide after years of emotional difficulty. She describes how having the worst thing happen stripped her of all pretense. With nothing left to lose, there was no reason not to be real. She found that she could meet people in an absolutely open and undefended way. Though the pain of her loss will never be extinguished, this openness has flowered. She now serves as a pastoral counselor, helping others find the courage and the greatness of heart to face life.

While opening to pain burns through the trance of being separate, relinquishing our sense of a separate self usually happens gradually. When I was pregnant, not only was I attuned to the preciousness of life inside me, I responded to babies the world over. When I saw news reports of children suffering, the pain was almost unbearable. I felt like the mother of all young beings, and my prayers included vulnerable ones everywhere. I didn't notice the gradual fading away of this sensitivity and, by the time my son was a toddler, I didn't feel such an alive connection. One day when we were out walking, a bus stopped nearby. On the side of the bus, a huge poster showed dozens of children in an urban war zone, staring out through a barbed wire fence. The caption read: "I am your child." Suddenly, the feelings I'd had during pregnancy flooded me, and I wept freely for these young ones facing such a harsh life. I also cried for having forgotten how much suffering takes place in each human heart, that it is *our suffering*.

In the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., a message written by German pastor Martin Niemoller is inscribed on a wall: "They came for the socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me."

The path of the bodhisattva is to remember our belonging. When we know that we're connected to the ants and trees and every living being, we don't violate ourselves. Rather, we become attuned to the cries of the world, and respond with wisdom and care.

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