

My garden Buddha's head fell off - but not to worry, it is resting comfortably in her lap. This image has acted as a powerful metaphor, pointing to the possibility of living life in a more embodied way. As I take on the role of guiding teacher for the next 6 months and as we explore together this Bodhisattva path, One Thing I Know to be True: it is not about thinking more, judging ourselves more, doubting ourselves more, but is about coming back to our bodies, our hearts and our breath again and again.

What gets in the way of living with an open heart? This was the question that was asked of us during a recent 9 day Dharma Ocean silent retreat in Crestone Colorado entitled 'The Body Loves' . This question has become an ever present personal koan that continues to be so alive for me on this journey.

Every Tuesday evening we chant the Bodhisattva Vow:

Beings are numberless, I vow to awaken with them.
Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to end them.
Dharma gates are boundless, I vow to enter them.
Buddha's way is unsurpassable, I vow to become it.

This is a serious vow we make in the Mahayana tradition - to awaken with all beings. Waking up requires courage, curiosity and tremendous compassion. But, Buddhism is good medicine and helps illuminate this path we tread together. In Zazen, our posture of pure awareness, we start to recognize our delusions and habits of mind. As we vow to end our delusions, we allow ourselves to acknowledge the entirety of who we are and make room for the light and the dark within ourselves and in our shared humanity. Brene Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston studying vulnerability, courage, authenticity and shame, states, "In order to practice compassion, we have to know our own darkness well enough so that we can sit in the dark with others."

To enter our dharma gates means to face our lives directly. We develop the intention and courage to sit on these very hot seats regardless of how intolerable it seems. We learn to view the difficult emotions that arise as portals of transformation. In the study of Nonviolent Communication, these 'red lights on the dashboard' can serve to inform us and to point us in the direction of our deepest intentions and unmet needs. To do this necessitates tremendous loving kindness - first towards ourselves and eventually rippling out to others. Maitri is a Sanskrit term meaning 'being in a friendly way.' Reggie Ray, founder of Dharma Ocean. Buddhist teacher and author, reminds us that in order to love anything - other people, our children, the world , we must first open our hearts to ourselves. The practice of maitri is to make room for and to allow whatever arises. As we recognize that we are continually airing our version of 'fake news', we start to let the constant ongoing judgements, criticisms, opinions that fill our heads be as a radio on in another room - we hear it, but it doesn't have to take all our attention. We can keep saying YES and.... , realizing we are so much more than these habitual thoughts.

Becoming Buddha's unsurpassable Way makes meditation practice our ultimate healing ground, where we start to experience life unmediated by our stories. We remember to 'brush away the fabrications of our mind'. Our beloved Katherine Thanas used to remind us that our practice is a body practice. `Our bodies experience life directly. We realize that as humans we can be discerning without being judgmental, we start to recognize the punitive and habitual nature of our perfectionism. We learn to listen in a different way. Buddhism teaches that enlightenment is in our bodies. We keep coming back to our hearts - allowing them to break open again and again. We keep coming back to our breath, our intention and open ourselves to the wisdom and love inherent in every cell of our bodies. We can let our heads rest comfortably in our laps.