

Order of Service
What This World Needs Is a Few More Bodhisattvas
March 28, 2010

Call to Worship and Chalice Lighting

We come together seeking truth and meaning,
And ultimately what we find is the strength of community.

We teach and are taught by each other.

We guide and are guided by each other.

We love and are loved by each other.

Transformed by community, we are filled
By truth and meaning.

Readings

“Prophets,” by Clinton Lee Scott

Always it is easier to pay homage to prophets
Than to heed the direction of their vision.

It is easier blindly to venerate the saints than to learn
The human quality of their sainthood.

It is easier to glorify the heroes of the race
Than to give weight to their examples.

To worship the wise is much easier
Than to profit by their wisdom.

Great leaders are honored, not by adulation,
But by sharing their insights and values.

Grandchildren of those who stoned the prophet sometimes

Gather up the stones to build the prophet's monument.

Always it is easier to pay homage to prophets

Than to heed the direction of their vision.

“Sangha,” by Danna Faulds

Teach me what I cannot learn alone.

Let us share what we know, and what

We cannot fathom. Speak to me of

Mysteries, and let us never lie

To one another.

May our fierce and tender longing

Fuel the fire of our souls. When we

Stand side by side, let us dare to focus

Our desire on the truth. May we be

Reminders, each for the other, that

The path of transformation passes

Through the flames.

To take one step is courageous;

To stay on the path day after day,

Choosing the unknown, and facing

Yet another fear, that is nothing

Short of grace.

To drive north from Rishikesh into the Himalayas is to drive back in time to an earlier century. As the plains give way to the mountains, we find the Mother Ganges cascading and twisting through valleys defined by the high Himalayan foothills that would themselves be called mountains on any other continent. The road quickly narrows to one track, and paving becomes an intermittent luxury.

A comfortable car has no advantage in this setting. You can only travel as fast as the slowest vehicle, and you have to wait out the constant delays, caused by slides, construction, or a crash, along with everyone else. Habits of the West tell us that in an hour we should be able to cover sixty miles. The Tibetan border is only about 150 miles to the north. Two or three hours of driving would get us there at home. But not here.

It took my new friend, Lama, five days to get to Rishikesh from his remote village on the Tibetan border. In the Rishikesh ashram I mostly ate alone in silence, which was one of my practices during my recent retreat to India. I looked up from my simple fare to see a robed monk standing next to me, and he asked if he might join me for dinner. He looked like the Dalai Lama with his shaved head, his deeply lined face and magenta robe, and I moved over so he could join me. His winning smile consumed his entire face, and he put his arm around my shoulders in friendship before he even sat down. He simply overwhelmed me with his positive presence.

I learned that he was a student of the Dalai Lama from the time of his youth. He was guided to get a PhD in ancient and modern languages, so he spoke beautiful English. He told me to call him Lama. It's the only name he ever used. Lama.

Being a monk in the ashram of one of the world's greatest spiritual teachers, Lama's path of practice has been profound. Largely without the influence of Western distractions, I don't doubt that he's had experiences of enlightenment for many years. Dwelling in the cloisters of Dharam Sala with his brother monks for many years, Lama enjoyed a nest of spiritual comfort and safety.

Yet, Lama felt the call to do something more than dwell in the lap of enlightenment. With the blessings of his teacher, Lama wandered to the most remote villages on the border with Tibet with the intention of starting a school. He told me how he went door to door, asking families if they might have a child whom he could

educate in his forming school. For the most part education was itself foreign to these simple villagers. Here the value of a child is one more pair of hands to employ in the field. Here a future that would be enhanced by education cannot even be imagined by the parents.

He has been about this task for many years now. Beginning in one small room, where the children and he learned, ate, and slept, he has found Western donations that have culminated in a modest building. He and about forty children still sleep on mats on the same floor where they eat and learn, only now there's a bit of room to stretch out. Boys and girls are learning English, math, science, and life skills—tools with little *apparent* relevance on the border of Tibet but with latent power to change their lives and their families' lives and their destitute region for the better.

Lama brought 25 of his children to Rishikesh. He is as much parent as teacher to them, and they exude the same energy and positivity that I found immediately in him. Their English is excellent and their manners are impeccable.

I asked Lama how many monks he was aware of who were undertaking a ministry like this, living in the world for the betterment of children and their families. He knew of none. His practice is unique under the umbrella of his teacher. His work is blessed by the Dalai Lama, who recently traveled to Lamas village to support him and to greet the children and their families.

“Bodhisattva” is a Sanskrit term that describes a unique variety of spiritual aspirant. According to Buddhist tradition, once one has attained to the condition of grace or enlightenment, one transcends the cycles of birth and death that characterize the material plane of existence. The spiritual master is no longer of this world, no longer touched by suffering, no longer in the bondage of attachment. The Bodhisattva is a being who, having realized enlightenment, chooses to return their attention back toward the benefit of others. Though she is not *of* this world, the Bodhisattwa is very much *in* this world. We would think of Mother Teresa, caring for the sick in Calcutta, or St. Francis, feeding the poor, as examples of the compassionate service of a Bodhisattwa.

Such is the life of Lama. Might he not simply continue to dwell in the spiritual havens of Dharam Sala? Yet, he chooses not to. He chooses to sleep on the floor with his village children, attending to their needs as father and mother both.

It costs a dollar per child per day to keep his school afloat. I happened to have some American dollars with me, so I gave Lama the money to support one child for a year. He didn't ask. He didn't have to. His level of personal commitment to this project called to me to provide at least some small support. I could not do otherwise. In future I hope to offer more.

The classical story of the Bodhisattva is about the seeker who finds the enchanted garden. Wandering on a little-used trail, she encounters a wall, and climbing this wall she sees a garden of bliss and delight. Like those before her, she could drop down into the garden and enjoy the sweetness and magic of that exalted place. But if she does that, it may be a long time before anyone else finds the enchanted garden. So, she sits atop the wall, enjoying the garden only at a distance, waiting to enlighten others who might come this way. She becomes the gatekeeper, not to keep people out, but to invite them in. Or she may choose a place to sit where she can greet more passers by, telling them of the whereabouts of the enchanted garden. She thus forgoes the delight of full immersion in the garden, for now, so that others might themselves bathe in its bliss.

Sometimes a spiritual great like the Dalai Lama comes to town. As the gatekeeper of the garden, he brings a taste of that bliss with him and shares it with thousands at a time. "The garden is this way," he invites us. Those who have ears to hear take further steps toward the Good. No doubt this is a Bodhisattva, here for our further illumination.

Yet, sometimes it's not so obvious that we are in the presence of such a guide. I was about half a day north of Rishikesh. There is a cave called Vasishta Guha, where according to tradition the great sage and yogi Vasishta, an ancient and near-mythic spiritual figure in India, lived in solitude during his later years. In more recent times Swami Yogananda and disciples of Sri Ramakrishna lived and taught from this sacred cave on the Mother Ganges. I stopped in with several other spiritual aspirants to catch the holy vibe of this extraordinary place. Another group was in the cave, so we sat and waited our turn. I noticed an old man in the traditional ochre garb of the renunciate, hunkered down in a corner, pulling leaves off a stem and putting them into a bowl. My first thought was that this was an intellectually challenged, perhaps demented, old man, given this menial task because it was something he could manage to do.

Parenthetically, notice how my perception here is clouded by my own shadow. I see the old man and am making judgments about who and what he is. Don't bother me with the facts.

One of our group knelt near the old man and asked if he knew anything about the cave. He got up slowly, handed everyone a sacred leaf, and sat down in our midst. He proceeded to narrate the history of the cave from ancient times, speaking of the great spiritual figures who had lived here over the years, including his own guru decades ago. His English was impeccable, and his knowledge of history was deep. Turns out he is the venerated Swami Shantananda Puri. He is now the guru of Vashishta Guha.

Later that morning I sought him out, and he invited me into his small room at the ashram near the cave. I asked for spiritual guidance, and he gave me a book that he'd written—little stories from the ancient scriptures that pointed to qualities and practices of meditation. Now 86, he journeys back and forth from the cave to Kerala in south India, where the great saint, one of his teachers, Ramana Maharshi had lived. With his former academic career faded entirely into the past, his sole purpose now is to invite others into their own realization of higher Self. Surely he could be sitting blissfully in Samadhi in some remote place, but instead here he was sitting with a Western seeker, offering guidance on the path to the enchanted garden.

What he gave me was much like what Lama gave me. A simple, gracious, even innocent presence. An affirmation without words, not of my personality, not of my egoic self, but of my very existence. I might call it a blessing of presence, conferred spontaneously. If I could I would soon walk again, arm in arm, with Lama or sit quietly at the feet of Shantananda Puri. As it is I have these pictures in my imagination and these tender feelings in my heart, that must be enough for now.

I will loosely call both men saints. They look like saints. They dress like saints. What I know is that not all saints look like saints. Look around you. You are surrounded by saints.

Bodhisattva is what we all may be. It's about taking care of each other. It's as our second principle says, we encourage each other in our spiritual growth. It's about the service we provide to others in the world.

I had a teacher in my twenties who was one of those saintly spiritual leaders. One day someone asked him why he spent himself utterly, day and night, reaching

out to enlighten a dark world. He put it this way. However deeply one is illumined spiritually, any bastion of prejudice or ignorance in the world is felt as a pain, as a diminution of the light. He said there can be no ultimate well being of any one person absent the well being of all. The purpose of the enlightened soul must be to see the light spreading everywhere.

The Buddhist term *sangha* means community of truth. Yes, as individuals we are growing toward our spiritual depth. And yet our twofold common purpose as a *sangha* means that we commit ourselves to the growth and well being of each other and from this base reach out to heal our world. We are each Bodhisattvas and *must* be until peace and joy and health become the norm, here and everywhere.

May it be so.

Amen.