The Bodhisattva's Embrace
Hozan Alan Senauke

1. Introduction

To embrace is to encircle. I wrap my arms around you; you put your arms around me. To embrace is to unify, to make one of two. An act of love. In embrace, the limits of body, skin, feelings, thoughts are all transcended. Seen at a distance, two beings are one.

There is a legend in Asia that Bodhisattvas practice deep in the forests, saving our world from destruction. They enact interdependence by embracing the world, beyond good and bad. Perhaps they even have a special dance. These Bodhisattvas are quiet engines of salvation humming along beneath the surface of our societies and our selves.

Bodhisattvas are spiritual masters who live with a vow to save all sentient beings. The word "Bodhisattva" means "enlightened being" or "enlightening being." Ancient Jataka tales tell about the previous Bodhisattva lives of Śākyamuni Buddha. A prince offered his own body to feed a hungry tigress. A parrot put out a forest fire by endlessly shaking river water from his wings. A hare sacrificed himself to make a meal for a beggar who was actually Śākra, king of the gods, in disguise.[1] In "Bodaisatta Shishobo," (The Bodhisattva's Four Embracing Dharmas)[2] Dogen writes, "In the human world, the Tathāgata took the form of a human being. From this we know that he did the same in other realms."

Even today there are countless Bodhisattvas, taking just the right form to lead us to liberation. Taigen Leighton writes of these Bodhisattvas as psychological archetypes.[3] This is true, of course. Each of us, no matter how deluded, has qualities of mind, character, and action that can benefit others. Instead of saying "Ladies and gentlemen," the Zen teacher Nyogen Senzaki, who brought his "floating zendo" from Japan to California in the early twentieth century, used to greet his Western audiences as "Bodhisattvas!"[4] His greeting was an embrace, and a gentle way of prodding his Zen friends to see their deepest qualities.

The great spirits are more than archetypes. They are real people. They walk and talk and practice Dharma with their bodies. Martin Luther King Jr. or Mother Theresa or the Cambodian monk Maha Ghosananda are Bodhisattva models for us because of what they did in the world, because they persevered in the face of violence, discouragement, and

countless dark nights of the soul. When we meet such beings, whether or not we understand or agree with them, we feel embraced, and instinctively we respond.

A Bodhisattva's vow to save all sentient beings means that she chooses to live within the world of karma, or cause and effect. A Bodhisattva embraces even failure with a willingness to begin again and again.

Buddhism is a universal religion. Its core truth is that each of us is continuously expressing Buddha-nature. This very mind and body are Buddha. You and I are Buddha. No one is outside the circle of awakening. We are Buddhas manifesting as Buddhas. And, although every being is Buddha, we are still in need of cultivation. As Shunryu Suzuki Roshi said, "Each of you is perfect the way you are…and you can use a little improvement."[5] This improvement is cultivation. It consists of practices that each of us must take on, not for self-improvement, but for the sake of peace. The *Vimalakīrti Sutra*, one of Mahayana Buddhism's key texts, describes the Bodhisattva's social mandate for peacemaking both in terms of manifesting and cultivating.

> *During the short eons of swords,*
> *They meditate on love,*
> *Introducing to nonviolence*
> *Hundreds of millions of living beings.*
>
> *In the middle of great battles*
> *They remain impartial to both sides;*
> *For bodhisattvas of great strength*
> *Delight in reconciliation of conflict.*
>
> *In order to help the living beings,*
> *They voluntarily descend into*
> *The hells which are attached*
> *To all the inconceivable Buddha-fields*[6]

In "Bodaisatta Shishobo" Dogen Zenji offers four (or otherwise counted, sixteen) specific tools and practices for cultivating and manifesting our life as Bodhisattvas in the midst of society beyond the temple's walls. And when we use the proper tool to help others --

following Avalokiteśvara, who in each of her thousand hands wields a tool for liberating beings -- we also free ourselves.

2. Dogen Zenji and the *Shobogenzo*

Dogen Zenji brought the traditions of Soto Zen from China in the early part of the thirteenth century. He has become a towering figure in the history of Japanese Buddhism. Dogen's birth is shrouded in mystery, but we do know that in the year 1200 he was born into an aristocratic Kyoto family. His parents died when he was still a child. It is said that, at the age of eight, smoke rising from incense at his mother's funeral impressed upon him the sad and inescapable reality of impermanence. At thirteen Dogen became a monk at Mount Hiei, the great monastic center of Tendai Buddhism in Japan. Practicing meditation and devotion day after day, he sought an answer to a question that fueled his great doubt.

> *Both exoteric and esoteric teachings explain that a person in essence has true Dharma-nature and is originally a body of "Buddha-nature." If so, why do all Buddhas in the past, present, and future arouse the wish for and seek enlightenment?*[7]

More succinctly, if we are already Buddhas—if we are already saved and inherently awake—why do we need to practice? Actually this is a central issue in every faith tradition.

Dogen's Tendai teachers suggested that an answer might be more readily found in the Zen school, which didn't flinch at ambiguity. Dogen took up studies with Master Eisai, a monk who had studied Rinzai-style Zen in China, bringing it to Japan for the first time in 1191. Eisai died in 1215, and Dogen continued his studies with Eisai's successor Myozen, who became Dogen's close friend and mentor.

Together Myozen and Dogen made the perilous journey to China in 1223, visiting the Zen monasteries of Southern China. Myozen settled down at one of these training centers, but Dogen continued to look for his true teacher. In 1225 Myozen passed away. In the same year Dogen found his teacher Rujing at Mount Tiantong. Rujing and Dogen recognized each other immediately, and Rujing gave this young disciple permission to come to his room with questions at any time of day or night.

One evening during the summer training period, Rujing shouted at a sleepy monk, "When you study under a master, you must drop body and mind. What is the use of single-minded

intense sleeping?" Dogen, who had been sitting next to the chastened monk, suddenly experienced a great awakening. All his previous doubts were resolved. He went to Rujing's quarters and offered incense. Rujing asked, "What is the incense burning for?" Dogen replied, "My body and mind have dropped away. That is why I come."[8] Rujing verified this experience and formally transmitted the Dharma to Dogen.

Dogen returned to Japan as a Zen master. He later wrote:

> Not having visited too many Zen monasteries, but having only studied under my Late Master Rujing, I plainly realized that the eyes are horizontal and the nose vertical. Without being deceived by anyone, I came home empty-handed.[9]

But he did come home with clear ideas about Buddhism rooted in *zazen*, the meditation practice he described as "practice-enlightenment." Against the notion of meditating in order to attain realization, Dogen proposed that the practice of *zazen* is itself the expression of realization. He stood conventional notions of Zen on their head. Yet he was clear one still had to take up a rigorous practice of self-study in order to see the truth that is always right before our eyes.

So Dogen set up temples and monasteries, with rules based on his Chinese experience. And he began to write about Zen practice from every imaginable angle. *Shobogenzo* (*Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*), his masterwork, was begun in 1233 and its writing continued for fifteen years. As a religious and philosophical work, it is perhaps unmatched in any culture for the depth and challenge of its ideas, and for the difficult beauty of Dogen's language. Dogen was one of those rare writers who used words themselves to go beneath and beyond the conceptual trap of words. We can see this in "Bodaisatta Shishobo" *(*The Bodhisattva's Four Embracing Dharmas), which became Chapter Twenty-Eight of the *Shobogenzo.* The "Bodaisatta Shishobo" was written in the summer of 1243, shortly before Dogen's community abruptly left Kyoto for the remote mountain forests of Echizen. Historians are not certain why this move was so sudden, but there is a strong suggestion of sectarian conflict and possibly violence between Dogen's community and other more established sects. Perhaps it was the urgency of conflict that turned Dogen's thoughts in the direction of these Bodhisattva practices.

3. The Bodhisattva's Four Embracing Dharmas

The Four Embracing Dharmas are Giving, or *dāna;* Loving-Speech; Beneficial-Action; and what Dogen calls Identity-Action. Each dharma or practice is a method for connecting -- a way to manifest the truth that we are not separate from each other. Because we are truly not separate from others, these four Dharmas allow Bodhisattvas and sentient beings to become free from the poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion. In embrace there is no distinction between self and other, between a Bodhisattva and an ordinary being.

These were already ancient practices in Dogen's time. They are found as the four *sangaha vatthu*, the Foundations for Social Unity in early Pali texts like the *Sangaha Sutta*: *dāna*, generosity; *piyavaca*, kindly speech; *atthacariya*, helpful action; and *samanattata*, cooperation or impartiality. In the Mahayana tradition, they appear in the *Lotus Sutra, Māhaprajnāpāramitā Sutra*, the *Vimalakīrti Sutra* and many other well-known teachings.

A. Giving

The Bodhisattva's essential practice of peace is giving. Giving one's attention, friendship, and material aid. Giving spiritual teachings, community, and organization. Giving fearlessness. Giving is the first *pāramitā* or perfection, and it includes all other perfections. Dogen begins "Bodaisatta Shishobo*"* by explaining that

> Giving or Offering means not being greedy. Not to be greedy means not to covet. Not to covet commonly means not to flatter. Even if we rule the four continents, in order to offer teachings of the true Way we must simply and unfailingly not be greedy. It is like offering treasures we are about to discard to those we do not know. We give flowers blooming on the distant mountains to the Tathāgata, and offer treasures accumulated in past lives to living beings. Whether our gifts are Dharma or material objects, each gift is truly endowed with the virtue of offering, or *dāna.*

Giving begins with oneself. I give myself to practice, and practice offers itself to me. In my search for peace, I find there is always the pervasive smell of war. The taste of tears, corrosive doubt, and decay fall within the circle of my own body and mind. A war goes on here, right where I hide behind a mask of self-attachment. Hiding out in a shelter of privilege, I cut myself off from others. True giving is receiving the gift of *zazen* mind and passing it to others in words and deeds. It means not hiding. It also means giving

fearlessness by showing others that I am willing to face my own failure and despair as a natural part of being completely alive.

We offer gifts and guidance in many forms. At the heart of these teachings is the understanding that peace is making connection. On a basic, level material goods are given. On a higher level, teaching is shared. And on the highest level, there is just connection, the endless society of being, the vast assembly of Bodhisattvas. In his wonderful book *The Gift,* Lewis Hyde describes dinner in a cheap restaurant in the South of France.

> *The patrons sit at a long communal table, and each finds before his plate a modest bottle of wine. Before the meal begins, a man will pour his wine not into his own glass but into his neighbor's. And his neighbor will return the gesture, filling the first man's empty glass. In an economic sense nothing has happened. No one has any more wine than he did to begin with. But society has appeared where there was none before.*[10]

The gift itself is only a gift so long as it remains in circulation. A monk or nun carries an empty bowl from house to house. The bowl is emptiness, yet in this material world, food is offered so that one may live. Emptiness and form embrace and dance. Having eaten, the monk or nun transforms food into action and practice, which is again offered up to nourish all beings. The dance of peace continues. Again from Lewis Hyde:

> *I would like to speak of gratitude as a labor undertaken by the soul to effect the transformation after a gift has been received. Between the time a gift comes to us and the time we pass it along, we suffer gratitude. Moreover, with gifts that are agents of change, it is only when the gift has worked in us, only when we come up to its level, as it were, that we can give it away again. Passing the gift along is the act of gratitude that finishes the labor.*[11]

Giving is not an abstract thing. It takes place in the world itself. Dogen writes:

> *To provide a boat or build a bridge is offering as the practice of dāna-pāramitā. When we carefully learn the meaning of giving, both receiving our body and giving up our body are offering. Earning our livelihood and managing our business are, from the outset, nothing other than giving.*

> *Trusting flowers to the wind, and trusting birds to the season may also be the meritorious action of dāna.*

In all our worldly actions, we should consider what others need and what we can give them without nourishing our own self-centeredness. This is always a difficult practice. Dogen says bluntly, “The mind of a sentient being is difficult to change.” Amen to that! This is true for others, and doubly for ourselves.

B. Loving-Speech

Loving or kind speech means telling the truth in a way that leads to right action. The Buddha suggested that before speaking we consider whether our words are true, useful, and timely. Will they actually be heard? And will they have a good effect?

Words are like arrows, or heat-seeking missiles. Once spoken they head straight for their target and cannot be called back. They have a capacity to wound or to heal, so their use calls for great care. Dogen writes:

> Loving-Speech mean, first of all, to arouse compassionate mind when meeting with living beings, and to offer caring and loving words. In general, we should not use any violent or harmful words.

Two books by the late Zen teacher Dainin Katagiri were edited from his talks. The first book was titled *Returning to Silence*. This is the silence of *zazen*, the vast and still ground of being which is spoken about in the mystic teachings of every tradition. His second book was *You Have to Say Something*. I don’t know whether this pairing was the editors’ conscious intention, but it represents something basic about a life of Buddhist practice. After his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, Śākyamuni Buddha was intending to remain in blissful silence. But the gods Brahma and Indra begged him to teach, to say something, And so he did. He taught us how to be intimate with the silence in all things. Silence informs all we are and all we do. And for the sake of all beings, we have to come forth from that silence into the world of words and actions.

“To speak with a mind that ‘compassionately cares for living beings as if they were our own babies’ is Loving-Speech.” We speak in a kindly voice to our children. But in emergency a parent will shout a warning or a corrective. It often takes a raised voice to get someone’s attention. This is also Loving-Speech

Dogen writes, “We should study how Loving-Speech has power to transform the world.” Our everyday language is often debased. Advertisements bombard us with lies and false claims. Politicians and leaders carefully select words, but their care is about self-protection and/or national chauvinism. When was the last time we have a leader apologize for an injustice or violence imposed on their own citizens or another nation? But words can convey honesty, repentance, and generosity. Then they move the world towards peace. Narrowly crafted policy pronouncements are not Loving-Speech. Yet Loving-Speech is actually all around us. It is spoken by mothers and children, poets and writers. It actually goes beyond words to include music, dance, and silent prayer. Such speech is the source of our truest, most enduring power.

C. Beneficial-Action

Beneficial-Action is the work of harmonizing ourselves and the whole world. The Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara has a thousand arms. Each hand wields a tool of liberation and each palm has its own discerning eye. Beneficial-Action means looking, listening, and helping without thinking about what we will get out of it. Dogen Zenji explains:

> *Ignorant people may think that if we benefit others too much, our own benefit will be excluded. This is not the case. Beneficial-Action is the whole of Dharma; it benefits both self and other widely.*

Like Loving-Speech, Beneficial-Action is clearly an expression of Giving. It is not charity, though. In the West, charity is often motivated by two factors, the first a sense of moral or social obligation, *noblesse oblige*, and the second is the benefit, real or imagined, that accrues to oneself in return for an act of charity. Beneficial-Action is done simply for the sake of the action itself, without concern for any outcome or benefit.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells his followers, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Preaching on this verse, Martin Luther King Jr. said that in seeking to love one’s enemy, one must

> *discover the element of good in one’s enemy. And every time you begin to hate that person, realize that there is some good there and look at those good points which will over-balance the bad point…There is a recalcitrant South of our soul revolting against the North of our soul…There is something within each of us that*

causes us to cry out with Goethe: "There is enough stuff in me to make both a gentleman and a rogue."[12]

Dogen Zenji writes in the same spirit, but he extends Beneficial-Action to the whole earth and its elements.

We should equally benefit friends and foes alike; we should benefit self and others alike.… If we attain such a mind we can perform Beneficial-Action even for grass, trees, wind, and water.

Our meditation practice or *zazen* is the essence of Beneficial-Action. *Zazen* is selfless activity beyond the usual meaning of "good" and "bad." It is a rare kind of body-mind practice that transcends *karma*. As we harmonize our individual body and mind, *zazen* mysteriously harmonizes the whole world. Maybe there is no mystery. As each of us is at peace, those around us naturally resonate with the energy of peace. Peace ripples out in widening circles.

D. Identity-Action

A great Bodhisattva lives in this suffering world with a vow to save all beings before saving herself. She or he may appear as a street person, as a soldier, as a bank teller, a mechanic, a prostitute, short-order cook, musician, preacher, mail carrier, or monk. The practice of Identity-Action entails the continuous reinvention of self. This is what Buddhist call "skillful means" or *upāya*, meeting each suffering being exactly as he or she needs to be met. Such a reinvention is neither pretense nor act. Using Identity-Action we reinvent ourselves according to our inborn Bodhisattva instinct.

This, I think is the deepest of the Four Embracing Dharmas. While the Old Testament of the Bible teaches Justice and the New Testament teaches Love, Buddhism teaches about Identity, the oneness of all being, and the difference of each interwoven existence. *Samanattata,* as it is used in the early Pali text quoted above, may be translated as cooperation, impartiality, or consistency. Dogen reaches further:

Identity-Action means not to be different — neither different from self nor from others. For example, it is how, in the human world, the Tathāgata identifies himself with human beings. Because he identifies himself in the human world, we

know that he must be the same in other worlds. When we realize Identity-Action, self and others are one suchness.

Dogen's presentation on Identity-Action closes with a meditation on relations between a nation's people and their ruler.

Because mountains do not refuse to be mountains, they can be mountains and reach great heights. Because wise rulers do not weary of their people they attract many people. "Many people" means a nation. "A wise ruler" may mean an emperor. Emperors do not weary of their people. This does not mean that they fail to offer rewards and punishments, but that they never tire of their people…Because wise rulers are clear, they do not weary of their people. Although people always desire to form a nation and to find a wise ruler, few of them fully understand the reason why a wise ruler is wise. Therefore, they are simply glad to be embraced by the wise ruler. They don't realize that they themselves are embracing a wise ruler. Thus the principle of Identity-Action exists both in the wise ruler and ignorant people.

Like much of Dogen's writing, this metaphor works on several levels at once. On one level, each of us, citizens in a national state, feels related our president, prime minister or king…whether we like it or not. On another level, our own body is kind of a nation. Mind is ruler, but for its own proper function it depends on the function of muscles, bones, and organs. When all elements are working together our body is healthy, even though we ourselves are never fully aware of how this functioning occurs. In this way, we ourselves are "the wise ruler and ignorant people."

Dogen's metaphor of governance is as much rotted in Confucian values as in Buddhadharma. Yet it accords with his vision of Buddhism, offering both a critique and a directive about how to understand society. Identity-Action is simply an expression of what the ancestors called Dependent Origination. Because there is this, there is that. Because this arises, that arises. Together they make up an inseparable whole that we conventionally call a nation. But each nation and each person is part of an endless tapestry of existence made of whole cloth. Katagiri Roshi said: "Differentiation must be formed not in differentiation, but in equality. Then, differentiation and equality are working in Identity-Action."

Like Confucius, Dogen was an idealist. But Dogen was unafraid to roll up the long sleeves of his robe. Confucius wrote, “When the perfect order prevails, the world is like a home shared by all.” Soon after writing *Shishobo,* Dogen set out for the forests of Echizen province to build a great monastery, Eiheiji, his “Temple of Eternal Peace.” Seven hundred years later, Eiheiji monks still blend with each other “like milk and water.” The great trees and the long monastic halls embrace and dance together as Dogen would have wished. The Bodhisattvas rejoice.

4. “I Know Just How You Feel”

In June of 1964 three civil rights workers — James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Mickey Schwerener — were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan in Neshoba County, Mississippi. Klan member Horace Burnette later gave a confession to the FBI. Burnette described the events of that terrible night. By the side of a country road Alton Wayne Roberts pulled Mickey Schwerner out of the rights workers’ car. He put a gun to Schwerner’s head, saying, “Are you that nigger lover?” Schwerner replied, “Sir, I know just how you feel.” Schwerner and his co-workers were shot and buried beneath an earthen dam. [13]

A Bodhisattva practices without regard for success or failure. Civil rights workers in Mississippi were thoroughly trained in the practice of nonviolence, which is in fact the Bodhisattva’s Four Embracing Dharmas. Because he understood Identity-Action, Mickey Schwerner could say, “Sir, I know just how you feel.” What did he mean? Did he understand Wayne Roberts’ fear or his hatred? Were they, in fact Mickey Schwerner’s own feelings? We will never know. Schwerner’s compassionate response did not save his life, but the *karma* of his words is still unfolding. Because of his courage, a man confessed to these murders. We are still studying his words and actions, vowing to make them our own.

At the end of *Bodaisatta Shishobo,* Dogen writes, “Because each of these Four Embracing Dharmas includes all the Four Embracing Dharmas, there are Sixteen Embracing Dharmas.” This is another way of expressing the interpenetrating nature of things. None of these practices exists apart from the others. Giving implies Loving-Speech, Beneficial-Action, and Identity-Action. Identity-Action is our true nature, bringing forth all the other Dharmas. And so on. Practicing one Dharma, we practice all four. Practicing all four Dharmas, we embrace all being, dancing with our head among the clouds of heaven and our feet stepping along the ocean’s muddy bottom.

Biographical Information

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[1] Jataka 315: "Sasa-Jatata," in *The Jataka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births, Vol. III,* edited by E.B. Cowell, (London: Pali Text Society, 1957).

[2] "Shobogenzo Shishobo" (The Bodhisattva's Four Embracing Dharmas), fascicle 28 in Dogen Zenji's 60-fascicle version of the *Shobogenzo, (Treasury of the True Dharma Eye).*

[3] *Faces of Compassion: Classic Bodhisattva Archetypes and Their Modern Expression*, by Taigen Dan Leighton, (Somerville, Ma., Wisdom Publications 2005).

[4] *Taking the Path of Zen*, by Robert Aitken, (San Francisco, North Point, 1982), p. 61.

[5] *To Shine One Corner of the World: Moments with Shunryu Suzuki*, by Shunryu Suzuki, edited by David Chadwick, (New York, Broadway, 2001), p.3.

[6] *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti*, translated by Robert Thurman, (University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), pp.67-72.

[7] *Moon in a Dew Drop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen*, edited by Kazuaki Tanahashi, (San Francisco, North Point, 1985), p. 4.

[8] *Dogen's Formative Years in China*, by Takashi James Kodera, (Boulder, Prajna Press, 1980), pp. 60-61.

[9] Dogen's Formative Years…, p. 77.

[10] *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, by Lewis Hyde (New York, Vintage, 1979), pp. 56-57.

[11] *The Gift*, p. 47.

[12] from “Loving Your Enemies,” by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Al., 17 November 1957. (www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/sermons/571117.002_Loving_Your_Enemies.html).

[13] *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-65*, by Taylor Branch (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1998), pp.508-509.