

Winter Retreat 2018: Cultivating the Five Super Powers of Avalokiteshvara  
Dharma Post #6-B: Practicing Gratitude

Dear Thay, dear brother Jerry, dear friends on the path,

**What is the Nature of Gratitude, of Love?**

If we cannot see the beauty in life, the miracle of what is presenting itself to us in this moment, how can we be happy? How can we be well? If we continually walk around with desperation, depression or despair, or we are caught up in our guilt, anxieties or worries, how can we experience well-being—the cessation of suffering? Are we caught in a rut, in our familiar patterns of thinking? As we practice mindfulness in our everyday lives, and if we can see these harmful habits manifesting, then we have a chance to transform them, perhaps lessening them bit-by-bit over time.

This weekend I attended the memorial service for a woman who lived in the life planning community where I work. I didn't know this woman, but I appreciated the photo of her on her memorial folder. She was standing among a field of colorful flowers with her hands folded in front of her and a lovely smile on her face. At the service her son told many stories about her life. The theme of her life, her way of being, shone through the words he shared about her. She was continually cheerful and content, and she loved doing thoughtful things for other people. On a table in the foyer of the church was a display of many African violets she had started and grown. In our community she had started many African violet plants and given them away to others. If an African violet plant was dying, the person would bring it to her and she would nurse it back to health for them. The family was now offering the remainder of her African violets to those attending her service. Several months ago this woman was diagnosed with ALS and her family was asking her to move from her independent home into assisted living so that she could receive the care she needed. At first she said, "No. I am not going to move away from my beautiful home." But a day or so later she changed her mind. She told her family that she was happy to move because then she could be closer to her many friends. This was the nature of her approach to life. Even when difficulties arose, she found a way to be grateful for her situation. When she was told she was the only person in the community with ALS, she laughed and gave a fist bump into the air, as if to say, "Yes!"

You may be thinking, as I was, that she probably had a fortunate childhood, with no major difficulties. She was a woman of faith, had a solid family life, and was able to raise four healthy children in a good community with good schools. But we never know the personal difficulties any one person might face. Certainly we all experience aging, illness, loss and death. This is part of the condition of all living beings—no one is left out. But if we cultivate a mind that bends toward love, that practices gratitude for the preciousness of this life and all that is, right here and now, we do not suffer so much and we can experience—more and more—well being.

Back during the time when I asked my teacher to give me a practice that would scare me to death, she recommended that I read the letters and diaries of Etty Hillesum.<sup>1</sup> Etty was a young Jewish woman born in 1914 in the Netherlands. She began her diary in 1941, nine months after Hitler invaded her country. For several months in 1942, and again from June 1943, she lived in Westbork transit camp in northeastern Netherlands, where detainees were prepared for transport to Nazi death and concentration camps.<sup>2</sup> Etty and her family were transported to Auschwitz in September 1943, where Etty died on November 30th.

According to the inside cover of the book: "Etty's writings reveal a woman who celebrated life and remained an undaunted example of courage, sympathy and compassion. Letters she wrote to friends during her internment at the Westerbork transit camp poignantly describe the day-to-day horrors the Jewish prisoners faced. Nonetheless, Etty's courage and determination remained strong, allowing her to rise above the hate around her and express her irrepressible faith in humanity." At Westbork, Etty reflected on the intertwining enigma of beauty and horror:

My dear people,

Not much heath is left now inside the barbed wire; more barracks are always being added. Only a little piece remains in the farthest corner of the camp, and that's where I'm sitting right now, in the sun under a glorious blue sky, among some low shrubbery. Right across from me only a few meters away, a blue helmet stands in the watchtower. ... When I look to the left I see billowing white smoke and hear the puffing of a locomotive. The people have already been loaded onto the freight cars; the door is closed. ...

Just now I climbed on a box lying among the bushes here to count the freight cars. There were thirty-five, with some second-class cars at the front for the escorts. The freight cars had been completely sealed, but a plank had been left out here and there, and people put their hands through the gaps and waved as if they were drowning.

The sky is full of birds, the purple lupins stand so regally and peacefully, two little old women have sat down on the box for a chat, the sun is shining on my face—and right before our eyes, mass murder. The whole thing is simply beyond comprehension.

I'm fine.

In August 1943 Etty wrote to a friend, expressing her realization of the intimate nature of love, even in such horrific circumstances:

Many feel that their love of mankind languishes at Westerbork because it receives no nourishment—meaning that people here don't give you much

occasion to love them. ...But I keep discovering that there is no causal connection between people's behavior and the love you feel for them. Love for one's fellow man is like an elemental glow that sustains you. The fellow man himself has hardly anything to do with it. Oh Maria, it's a little bit bare of love here, and I myself feel so inexpressibly rich; I cannot explain it.

Such is the nature of compassion, love and gratitude. It opens us up to our true nature. Etty's word for "true nature" is God. After her first experience of Westbork, she wrote:

There is such perfect and complete happiness in me, oh God. What he<sup>3</sup> called "reposing in oneself." And that probably best expresses my own love of life: I repose in myself. And that part of myself; that deepest and richest part in which I repose, is what I call "God." In Tide's diary I often read, "Take him gently into Your arms, Father." And that is how I feel, always and without cease: "As if I were lying in Your arms, oh God, so protected and sheltered and so steeped in eternity." As if every breath I take were filled with it and as if my smallest acts and words had a deeper source and a deeper meaning.

It was from this place of resting in the arms of her Father (I might say resting in the arms of Avalokiteshvara), and even in dire circumstances, that Etty opened her own arms and mind to see into the needs of so many people that came to her in the transit camp. Acts of body, speech and mind arising from this deep place are transformative. In our tradition, Etty Hillesum would have been called a bodhisattva.

### **Gratitude and Devotion: The Former Affairs of Bodhisattva Medicine King**

In the 23<sup>rd</sup> Chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, the Buddha tells the story of a previous life of Bodhisattva Medicine King when he was called the Bodhisattva Seen With Joy By All Living Beings. It begins when the Bodhisattva Beflowered By the King of Constellations asks the Buddha how this Bodhisattva Medicine King moves in the saha world,<sup>4</sup> given his immeasurable numbers of difficult and painful deeds throughout incalculable periods of time. How is he able to do this, how is he able to be at ease and enjoy his travels even in the midst of great difficulties, the Bodhisattva wants to know.

Bodhisattva Seen With Joy By All Living Beings lived during the time when the Buddha Pure and Bright Excellence of Sun and Moon lived and taught the *Lotus Sutra* to the bodhisattvas, gods and humans throughout his vast realm. He was loved by everyone—children, adults, even animals. Thus his name is very fitting. Seen With Joy By All Living Beings, "desiring to cultivate painful practices within the dharma of the Buddha Pure and Bright Excellence of Sun and Moon, went about persevering with vigor and single-mindedly seeking Buddhahood for full twelve thousand years." He obtained the samadhi (i.e., concentration) that displays all manner of physical bodies. In **Peaceful Action, Open Heart**, Thay said this

bodhisattva was able to make a lot of progress because of his great love of and devotion to his teacher. This bodhisattva's sphere of action, according to Thay, is the sphere of devotion, faithfulness, love, and gratitude. Thay said, about this bodhisattva's practice:

You might wonder how devotion and affection are part of the practice of looking deeply and attaining enlightenment. Do we need to love our teacher? Do we need to love our disciples? Do we need to love our Dharma brothers and sisters in order to succeed in our practice? The answer is, yes. Just as the loving presence of the parents is crucial for the growth of the baby, the loving presence of a teacher is very important for his or her disciples. The loving presence of our brothers and sisters in the Sangha is very important for us to grow as practitioners. ...We need love and affection, warmth and nurturance in order to grow and progress on the path.

With the samadhi he achieved, Seen With Joy By All Living Beings was able to help many kinds of people. Without attachment to his physical body, he was able to display his body in whatever manner could help others. He could appear as a child, a mother, or a person of any gender, skin color, or nationality—whatever form was most appropriate for the situation. Because he was not caught by the idea of a body as a fixed, permanent self, he was able to manifest in many transformation bodies. He was able to bring great joy and relief to many people.

### **Seen With Joy By All Living Beings Makes an Offering of His Body**

Seen With Joy By All Living Beings was so grateful to the Buddha and to the *Lotus Sutra* that he rose into the air and rained down a great offering of flowers, scents, etc. as an offering to the Buddha. But then he thought to himself that this was not enough. "Though by resort to supernatural power I have made an offering to the Buddha, it is not as if I had made an offering of my own body." So, in Thay's words, "out of his great love and gratitude, and with the profound insight into his ultimate nature, he was able to relinquish his body quite easily." Displaying this insight, he wrapped his body in a garment adorned with divine jewels, anointed himself with fragrant oils, took a great vow, and burnt his own body. His body burnt in the fire for a thousand two hundred years before it was completely consumed. Thay said the light from this fire was an awakening and an offering of the Dharma. "The bodhisattva shined his light about him so that everyone could see as he could see, giving them the opportunity to see the deathless nature of the ultimate dimension."

"This was a quite radical demonstration of his freedom and insight, one that was made out of a very deep love." Thay goes on: "Many people know about the Vietnamese monks who immolated themselves in the 1960s. This practice has its roots in this chapter of the Lotus Sutra."

When I read that sentence, I had to put Thay's book down. For several days. I still remember seeing the photo of Thich Quang Duc's immolation on TV in 1963. The

photo and video of his immolation are still available on the internet. This 67-year-old monk, with an act of deep love for the people and religious equality,<sup>5</sup> offered his body just as Seen With Joy By All Living Beings did in the *Lotus Sutra*. He was able to sit very still, in deep concentration, as the flames engulfed him. In the letter Thich Quang Duc left behind he wrote:

Before closing my eyes and moving towards the vision of the Buddha, I respectfully plead to President Ngo Dinh Diem to take a mind of compassion towards the people of the nation and implement religious equality to maintain the strength of the homeland eternally..

This act brought international attention to the suffering and persecution of the Vietnamese people. Soon after, the Diem regime was brought down and the policy of discrimination against Buddhism ended.

In 1967, Nhat Chi Mai, a young lay woman and one of the six original members of the Order of Interbeing, immolated herself in an effort to end the war and bring peace to her country. In a letter to the US government, she wrote:

I offer my body as a torch  
to dissipate the dark  
to waken love among men  
to give peace to Vietnam  
the one who burns herself for peace.

I knew about the immolations. I read about Nhat Chi Mai in Sister Chan Khong's book, **Learning True Love: Practicing Buddhism in a Time of War**. But I didn't realize that their actions were rooted in the *Lotus Sutra*—the very book I was holding in my hand. All of a sudden the teaching became present and very real to me, no longer just a teaching story. I remembered back to a time in grade school, in our weekly Catholic catechism class, when we were asked if we could give up our life for someone else. I still remember that question, and the struggle I went through trying to imagine having to choose whose life I might save (either of my parents or any of my five brothers and sisters?), and having to offer up my own. I was never able to answer that question, and hoped I would never have to. But here I was, reading the *Lotus Sutra*, face-to-face with that question once again. How attached am I to my body, to this life I am living? Could I offer it up for the sake of peace? Not as an abstract question, but as a real one? The original Twelfth Precept of the Fourteen Precepts (Mindfulness Trainings) of the Order of Interbeing says, "Do not kill. Do not let others kill. Find whatever means possible to protect life and prevent war." Sister Mai read this precept only a few weeks before she immolated herself. This is a deep bodhisattva practice arising out of our community's experiences during the American war in Vietnam. How do we bring it into our own lives? What does this precept ask of us?

Thay said an act of immolation is, “a very profound offering. What is being offered? The manifestation in action of our bodhicitta, our aspiration to practice wholeheartedly and realize enlightenment in order to help bring all beings to the shore of liberation.” Before she died, Nhat Chi Mai placed two statues before her, the Virgin Mary and Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva. Sister Chan Khong said, “In her poems and letters, she asked Catholics and Buddhists to work together for peace so that people might realize the love of Jesus and the compassion of the Buddha.”<sup>6</sup> Her act of love touched many people who vowed to come together to work toward peace and reconciliation.

Finally, before I could pick up Thay’s book again, I realized that I may never be in a situation that would call for me to immolate myself. As Thay said, that time in Vietnam was an extreme time. “So we have to understand this kind of offering in its proper context. In a time of great suffering, such as in Vietnam during the war, there were many such bodhisattvas among us.” I asked myself, what did it mean for Seen With Joy By Living Beings to immolate himself and burn for a thousand two hundred years? What is the message *for me*?

What came to me was that there is a fire in me, the fire of bodhicitta, which fuels a deep desire to help relieve suffering. As Etty Hillesum said, “Love for one’s fellow man is like an elemental glow that sustains you.” Do I have the courage to open myself up and allow that fire to consume me, so that I can respond from a place of love and not fear? Sister Chan Khong said of Nhat Chi Mai, “When you want something ordinary, you can just go out and buy it, but when you want something extraordinary, like love, understanding, and peace for a whole nation, you have to pay for it with something much more precious than money. My sister, Nhat Chi Mai... sacrificed her life because, more than anything, she wanted the killing to stop. She tried to bring peace to Vietnam by paying for it with her life.”

Coconut Monk, one of Thay’s students in Vietnam, wrote in a tribute to Nhat Chi Mai, “Mai, my niece [he called her niece in the Vietnamese manner], I am burning myself like you. The only difference is that I am burning myself more slowly.” The Coconut Monk dedicated his life to peace, and did many things to educate people, even government officials, about the practice of peace “...just as the body of Bodhisattva Seen with Joy by All Living Beings took over a thousand years to burn, and all that time he was educating people, allowing them to look deeply into the ultimate reality of no birth, no death.”

We might wish to see Thich Quang Duc, Nhat Chi Mai, Coconut Monk, and many unnamed others as real, true emanation bodies of Bodhisattva Seen With Joy By All Living Beings. Their courageous actions, motivated by deep love, enter the river of phenomena and have the power to touch everyone and everything in their path. We can use their energy to encourage and support us as we walk the bodhisattva path.

## **Devotion and Gratitude as a Practice**

After Bodhisattva Seen With Joy By All Living Beings' body was totally consumed, he was immediately reborn as a prince in the realm of Buddha Pure and Bright Excellence of Sun and Moon. He was overjoyed to realize his teacher was still alive and teaching, and vowed to visit him and make offerings. When he reached the Buddha he touched the earth with his head bowed, joined his palms and praised the Buddha:

O most wondrous and fine of countenance  
Whose bright glow illuminates all ten quarters,  
Formerly I have made offerings to you,  
And now once again I come to behold you in person.

Even after being reborn into another form, Seen With Joy By All Living Beings continued to be nourished by and devoted to his teacher, making offerings even up until his teacher's passing into extinction. In so many ways he reminds me of my dharma sister Suzanne, who exemplifies for me the qualities of devotion and commitment to the well-being of others. As a single mother, Suzanne has always been dedicated to the health, growth and happiness of her children. As a nurse practitioner, she is always available on retreats to make sure that those who attend receive good medical attention when necessary. She does not hesitate to step in and help whenever she sees a need. Her devotion to Thay, and to her primary teacher, Eileen Kiera, is so strong. To support Eileen and the Mountain Lamp practice center over the years Suzanne has served on the board, attended many weekend work retreats, and supported Eileen on retreats at Mountain Lamp and elsewhere. Now she is training under Eileen to be a dharma teacher, and she said the reason she would ever consider being a dharma teacher is to honor Eileen, her teachings and her practice. Thay said that love and devotion to our teachers and our sangha are necessary for us to grow in our practice, and I have witnessed this most clearly in my friend Suzanne.

When we cultivate and offer deep gratitude to teachers and friends who practice ways that lead to love, freshness, happiness, kindness, and realization, we see the way toward more and more freedom. The qualities we see in them, we learn how to develop in ourselves. In this way we progress together along the path of realization and transformation of suffering. As Thay has said, awakening is not an individual matter. We must practice diligently and wisely, honoring and learning from those who are worthy of our attention, in order to transform suffering and realize our bodhisattva ideal of collective awakening.

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<sup>1</sup> **Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943.**

<sup>2</sup> Approximately 89,000 Jews and 500 Roma were deported from Westbork during the war.

<sup>3</sup> Her friend, Henny Tideman

<sup>4</sup> The saha world is the phenomenal world, the world of birth, old age, sickness, and death (i.e. the world that experiences impermanence and change).

<sup>5</sup> The president of South Vietnam was persecuting Buddhists and favoring Catholics in a country that was 90% Buddhist.

<sup>6</sup> From **Learning True Love: Practicing Buddhism in a Time of War.**