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The Buddysattva Promise

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In the East — maybe now in the West —
They have these folks called Bodhisattvas.
“Bodhi” is a heavy word.
It means things like Love, Joy, Compassion,
Equanimity, Energy, Essence
And more.
Much, much more.
“Sattvas,” I guess, means folks who live these kind of virtues.
So a Bodhisattva is quite a person.
At least a saint, or better.

What makes me shiver to even think about
Is that these Bodhisattva ladies and gents
Are not just Buddhas,
But they are Buddhas who’ve chosen not to go
 into the Great Beyond,
Into endless realms of Bliss and Joy and
 Knowledge and Freedom,
For ever and ever,
But have vowed to stick around here,
To keep coming back.
And back and back and back,
For all eternity, if need be.

Why?

To help you
And me
And every sentient being
 — people and dogs and worms and even gods —
Until we are all Buddhas.

Wow!

Does that blow your mind?

Does that melt your heart?

That's why I shiver

When I think about these Bodhisattva folks.

What makes the shiver even deeper

Is that "I" want to take the Bodhisattva Vow too.

(I almost said "yearn to,"

but real men don't use words like yearn.)

But Jesus!

That heavy stuff is for Big Guys and Big Gals,

Not for an ordinary Joe like me.

It would be embarrassing,

Presumptuous!

Oh, I know the Bodhisattvas wouldn't mind.

In their Infinite Compassion and Good Will

They would probably try to help me.

But, says "I,"

Let's get real.

I'm not a bad man.

When I was four, this bully was always pushing me around,

Until I hit him over the head

With a toy shotgun

And he ran away crying.

I was glad then, and would do it again

under similar circumstances.

But Bodhisattvas help folks,

Even before they get fully realized,

They would have used more skillful means,

I suppose.

And certainly not be proud of whacking that kid over the head,

Even today.

As an adult I've had to threaten

And verbally defend myself from a few people

Who were doing me wrong.

I won, and I'm pretty proud,

But I don't like the feelings of righteousness

And power

And pleasure

That I got caught up in.

I suppose even a Bodhisattva trainee could have done it
With compassion,
So right was preserved,
Yet all involved grew in wisdom and compassion.

Yet, as I said,
I'm not a bad man.
These are pretty petty "sins" as sins go.
So I'm not morally disqualified
From trying to follow
The Path of the Bodhisattvas.

It's ordinariness that makes my yearning
(I will admit to that word)
Presumptuous and premature.

I want to be helpful to people,
But lots of times I'd rather take a break,
Have a good meal and a glass of wine with friends,
Lose myself in a good novel,
Try to not see the homeless person on the street
(I'm afraid of them anyway),
Ignore the perilous state of the world
And take it easy.

So you see this Bodhisattva stuff,
This idea of Eternal Vows
Is too much.
It would inflate my ego to do it,
And then disappoint me,
And make me retreat even more,
When I didn't take the extra step to help a friend
Because I was tired
(Or embarrassed or afraid).
Who likes repeated failure experiences?

You know that superego psychologists talk about?
That part of your mind you get as a kid,
That part that knows the Rules,
Right and Wrong!
And knows how to punish
With guilt and shame?
I've got one.

It's heard about Bodhisattvas,
And wants to know why I don't shape up?
What's this crap about taking a break just because I'm tired?
Or, worse yet,
Just because I feel like it?
I should be sitting on my cushion
In the meditation hall
Training my mind!
At least.
And better, out there twenty plus hours a day
Saving the world!
Here's a few shots of
Guilt!
Physical pain!
Images of shame!
To fix me.
Plus neatly packaged images of how the rest of my life
Will go down the tubes
'Cause of my moral laziness.

So what jerk let my superego,
Old judge, jury and executioner,
Hear about Bodhisattvas?
It gives me enough trouble over my ordinary
Failings.

Forget this Bodhisattva stuff!

And yet...

I do ... at least sometimes...
I do love.
I do care.
I want to help.
If not all sentient beings
At least some of them.
And while eternity is too mind-boggling
To think of,
And I might change my mind in a few years
Or sooner, or later,
I'd like to help for now.

And I just might want to retain my option
To whack the next bully over the head,
Just in case.

A Vow for Eternity?
That's too much.
But I know a promise
Can help keep me on track.

So I'm thinking about something
That's more in my,
And my friends'
League.

A sort of junior, little league
Want to be
Bodhisattva.

A hope, a promise,
Little p promise,
Not big V Vow,
That me
And my ordinariness
(And hopefully my superego)
Can live with
And love with
And learn from.

How about a buddysattva promise?

We've all had buddies
And been buddies.
It's not high falutin
And doesn't go too much to the head.

A buddy is somebody you like
(Maybe a little like the Love of Bodhi),
And who likes you.
Oh, it's not a Perfect Love.
Sometimes you fight and are kind of cold
with each other for a while,
But because you're buddies
You'll make some allowance for each other
And apologize.

You'll put more energies into what
Makes you buddies,
Not into picking at each other
And finding fault.

And you really wish a buddy well,
And are usually glad to do a favor,
And like to see your buddy happy,
Even if you're not of Infinite, Enlightened Service
to each other.

Circumstances might let you drift apart,
But you're still buddies.

You don't make too big a deal about it.
Being a buddy doesn't make you all that wise,
Resourceful, god-like or a Teacher of Wisdom.
But buddies are a damn good part
Of being human!

Where would we be without them?

So here's my buddysattva promise:

I will try to see everybody
(Or at least as many people as I can)
As my buddy,
Or at least my maybe-possible buddy.
I will try to listen to them,
See who they are
And what makes them happy,
And take some of those little extra steps
That will make them happier.
And sometimes I'll take the chance
To help them be a little wiser
Even if they don't like it at first,
Because I want my real buddies to tell me
When I'm getting off the wall
Or unbearable.

That's a real buddy
Who will take the chance
Of losing a friendship
Because your buddy needs to know,
Even if your buddy doesn't want to hear.

So I won't always know
The Right Thing to do,
And I'll make some mistakes,
But apologize for them,
And hopefully become a little smarter.
And when that superego starts to lecture,
I'll tell it to shut up!

I've got room to maneuver now.
I can be a good buddy, a buddysattva,
And just me, too.

I've made my buddysattva promise.

Funny thing, though.
I keep thinking one of the Big Guys,
Or Big Gals, those Bodhisattvas,
Is looking down from Up There
(Or is it Over There? Under There? In There?
Elsewhere? Everywhere? Nowhere?)
Looking at me with a little smile
(They always have delicate little smiles —
Isn't there room for big laughs?)
Looking at me,
And thinking,
"Gotcha!"



Notes

This poem was written in four sittings, January 1 and 2, 1992, at the Immaculate Heart of Mary Seminary, Santa Fe, New Mexico, during a Vipassana Retreat led by Shinzen Young, Shirley Fenton, and Shelly Young. They are starting a program of training meditation "facilitators" (nobody is sure of just the right terms here yet) who will devote themselves to helping several "clients" develop a deep meditation practice. The program inspires, impresses, and scares my ordinary self.

