



FLOWERS FALL

By Bethany Saltman

Yet, though it is like this, simply, flowers fall amid our longing,
and weeds spring up amid our antipathy.

— Dogen Zenji, *Genjokoan*

The Way of the Bodhisattva: Really?

Taking this [bodhisattva bow] of benevolence means giving up privacy and developing a sense of greater vision. Rather than focusing on our own little projects, we expand our vision immensely to embrace working with the rest of the world, the rest of the galaxies, the rest of the universes.

—Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche

This morning I woke up at 5:25 a.m. I had already heard the tea beginning to drip into the coffee pot downstairs. It was dark, as it is these days, and cool, the comforter pulled up to my chin, T's warm body just a reach away. Still aching for sleep, I heard A's bare little feet tapping along on the wooden stairs, and the deep meow of our Siamese cat, who I could tell was being carried in her arms.

"Jimmy's clawing me," she said.

T rolled into wakefulness, then rose.

"Lie down here," he said. "I'll take Jimmy. Good morning, cutie." Kiss.

A went back to sleep in T's spot as I drifted in mine.

T returned with two teas.

It was still dark. 5:35 a.m.

"Morning, babe." Kiss.

T and I did zazen together for a while as the sun rose, then got A up and ready for school, all dressed in an outfit picked out last night, hair dealt with, teeth brushed, then breakfasted, lunched, and snacked: Spirulina smoothie, bacon-y mashed potatoes in a thermos, avocado with salt and olive oil, popcorn, apple, almonds. T and A practiced piano while I made what may well be the last of the CSA heirloom tomato-and-basil sauces to put in the freezer for when we need it most. I did the dishes as they drove away.

The way of the compassionate, expansive bodhisattva? Please.

One of the things we hear in Zen is the encouragement to "give it all away." When we're sitting there on our cushion, hour after hour, day after day, maybe in a retreat, or living at the monastery, or just in our lives, and we get slack or bored or particularly self-absorbed, it can be helpful to remember that we are sitting, indeed practicing (living!), for other people. While we need to take note of what arises as we sit, each and every deeply personal, sometimes complicated...thing, and we need to learn how to work with all of it, and the process can take years, or lifetimes, the ultimate hope is that through the practice of zazen, we can so harmonize inner and outer, as Master Dogen put it, that the self disappears and we can truly hold and take care of this sad, suffering world. Moment by moment, step by step.

And so when I am reminded to give it all away, what I hear is a nod to the world outside of my solipsism, and also a practice, a way of enlarging my view, my body even, to include everyone who needs a moment of stillness or intimate connection with their perfect, delightful, true nature. We are one body, after all.

Not that making myself bigger is easy, but steeped in deep quiet and stillness of the zendo or the monastery, or even my own predawn room, I can at least feel my way, and I know when I am touching in, and it feels right. Put me in my life, however, this palace of cushy pleasure/this dungeon of cruel samsara, and I get lost. I mean, come on. How the heck is this coziness, and my cooking and cleaning and schlepping

and writing and working, helping anyone but my beloveds, or a few kind readers here or there, or a handful of online writing students who are happy to receive an understanding email from a virtual teacher? And more to the point, no matter how much I might like the idea of giving to others, of manifesting the bodhisattva's vow of not being satisfied until all beings are free (never), I really want the goods for myself, and it can be hard to be truly generous. And the craziest part is that the more I practice, the more satisfied I am. Like, big-time. And so when I am lazy and cut off from the cries of the world, I don't even feel guilty. Yikes!

So when I was recently reminded of some of the practices on offer from the classic text *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, by the eighth-century Indian master, Shantideva, I was intrigued.

I offer every fruit and flower

And every kind of healing medicine;

And all the precious things the world affords,

With all pure waters of refreshment.

Pema Chödrön, commenting on this section of the text, says: "The special intention of making offerings of real value is to gain the precious attitude of bodhichitta [the awakened heart]. For example, when we're feeling inadequate or closed-hearted, we could uplift ourselves with the simple but potent gesture of mentally offering the most pleasing things in our lives."

Practices like this that involve mere visualization have always seemed like hogwash to me. When I am sitting, which I am 100 percent certain is a good thing to do, it is helpful to consider giving my practice away. But when I am in the world, when I feel as certain that I could (should?) be doing something else, like feeding truly hungry people instead of my healthy brood, it seems this type of practice, where I invoke an image of myself giving, and the world receiving, is actually just a self-soothing fantasy that I am doing something important, and certainly not real bodhisattva activity. As Chödrön says, just another way to uplift myself.

But wait.

I have been thinking: If I can't even *imagine* myself offering up what is dear to me—my time, my energy, my life—how do I expect to ever be able to do it? In real life?

I once asked my teacher, Daido Roshi, what the difference is between invoking and pretending. He said, "Not much." The Buddha taught that we create karma by what we do with our bodies, mouths, and *thoughts*. Now I am not going to sit here and say that as I clean out the fridge to make way for a new week's worth of bounty, and pretend, elaborately, in my mind, that I am preparing to feed the universe of suffering beings, and imagine their living bodies beneath their clothes, the giant human smell mixed with the garlic heating up on the stove, billions of human feet traipsing through my tidy little house, that by doing that little invocation I am actually putting food in anyone's mouth.

But I am definitely feeding something, and it's galaxies away from nothing. ●