

SERVICE

The Practice of Going-Beyond

There is no awakening without compassionate action. Many practitioners find their growth and unfoldment has stalled, even though their skills as meditators are well-honed, and their lives well-founded in the practices of non-harming. How can this be?

One contributing factor is misunderstanding the importance of service, in the context of dharma practice. Like all words, service carries a load of cultural conditioning. We think of it as “performing good deeds” or “helping out” or “doing our part.” Volunteering fits into the same mental category as writing a cheque to a community charity . . . something we do in order to be responsible citizens and which makes us feel good about ourselves.

One ingredient for enlightenment is purification, which is accomplished through formal meditation and training in continuum awareness. The other ingredient is the accumulation of merit, which includes service. This prerequisite can be the source of conceptual confusion, resistance and ego-embellishment. But what if there is only a little dust in our eyes? Perhaps exploring the concept of service from a different viewpoint will help to bring greater clarity and ease.

Joanna Macy’s wonderful essay “World as Lover, World as Self” from the book of the same title¹ would be a good place to begin. It helps us to examine what sorts of concepts we might still be holding about the relationship between spiritual work and the world. She identifies “world as trap,” which must somehow be gotten out of, and “world as battlefield,” where the forces of good and evil contend and the outcome is uncertain. Most of us grew up with these ideas, likely rejected them intellectually as part of the process of embracing the Teachings of Awakening. We may think that they are no longer operative, and in our conscious moments they may not be . . . but lying hidden in the recesses of the conditioned mindstream they reinforce a sense of separation and conflict inherent in our approach to the work of liberation.

A wholesome development is to begin to view “world as lover.” This shift leads us to passionate interest in and engagement with our environment, warts and all. Our eyes and hearts are not blind to the imperfections of the

¹ WORLD AS LOVER, WORLD AS SELF, by Joanna Macy, Parallax Press. If you can’t find the book, there are excerpts at: <http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC34/Macy.htm>

lover; in the mysterious alchemy of love, those imperfections enhance our devotion. A lover, however blissful the moments of union and our longing for more of it, is still experienced as separate from and independent of our self. Oh, that pesky self! There is *no* liberation for the self; only liberation from it.

So Macy brings us to “world as self.” In this state, beyond the tight skin of narcissism, we experience an expanded sense of identity which includes all of life. Is this painful? Yes. Is this joyful? Yes. Is this hard? You bet it is. But whether we look through the lens of physics or the lens of mysticism or the lens of ecology . . . or simply through the dusty lens of desire for survival, we come to the same view: we are not separate. No matter how separate we feel, that is not the truth.

Giving service in the totality view of Buddhadharma is a process of experiencing this reality directly, not just as a concept. Service is training in going-beyond. “*Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, Bodhi svaha.*”² Beginning with the practice of generosity,³ we examine what we find easy to give and what we find hard. To serve those who deserve it is easy. For the idealist, ironing the hard-working, compassionate teacher’s shirts or sweeping the floor of the meditation hall is blissful service. But what happens to that bliss when idealism is shattered by the teacher’s direct and perhaps downright rude comment, by inconsiderate people not using the shoe rack provided? Sometimes the bliss is replaced by the fevers and chills of a passing cold, and we just want to be in bed. That’s when service tests us, helps us go beyond.

Weeding the garden is a metaphor for the purification of our negative states of mind. Peeling and chopping vegetables is an opportunity for the contemplation “all beings live by nutriment,” deepening our understanding of what feeds us, and how we feed others. Interconnected. All service can have this quality of metaphor, if we remember to see it that way.

Clean the bathroom, and clean it again, and again, organize the files, edit dharma talks, do the dishes and laundry, put up posters, take care of the

² A helpful, if unconventional, translation of this mantra of Great Perfection, from the *Prajna Paramita Hridaya Sutra* is: “Coming, being, going beyond, going completely beyond. Celebrate the Awakening.” Many studies of this text exist; an accessible scholarly one is *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines and Its Verse Summary* by Edward Conze, South Asia Books, 1994. *Mother of the Buddhas*, by Lex Hixon, Quest Books, 1993, provides a contemporary western introduction to these teachings on transcendent wisdom.

³ Generosity is the first of the Six Perfections, the training ground of the Bodhisattva. The other five are: morality, patience, energy, concentration and wisdom.

library, manage a fund-raising campaign, create and dissolve the shrine -- all these activities in the service of the Dharma have the expanded purpose of showing us that we are capable of going beyond what we perceive as the boundaries or preferences of self. They show us what we are good at and not good at; what we like and what we don't. Most especially they show us how we take pride in our accomplishments and gratify our ego-sense, how we play the martyr, the saint and the sulky child. Gradually, if we engage with the process of serving, with awareness and the intention that it fuel the process of liberation for all beings, we learn that all of life is simply taking care of business; it's inescapable. But if those routine tasks are providing support for awakening, they are transformed into noble, meritorious action that strengthens our aspiration and ensures that we will have the circumstances necessary to do whatever spiritual work we need to do.

Merit is a power, or force, within us that is earned, not just by wholesome *samsaric*⁴ deeds, although there is nothing wrong with them, but by our strong intention to be free infused into actions which support the liberation of others. It is the accumulated charge that attracts the lightning bolt. "All things are done for the sake of self," the Buddha taught. Through practice and service, our definition of self naturally expands into the experience of vast, interconnected manifestations of energy. Spiritual power grows as our conscious understanding of how we share energy grows. This seeming paradox is profound: share with one being, the energy doubles. Share with ten, it increases tenfold. Share with all sentient beings, the energy is revealed as infinite.

For service to be effective as a practice it must be a put-through, ultimately. Whatever romantic notions we may have in the beginning, when we are asked to go beyond our preferences, our fatigue, our ideas of what we are capable of and willing to do, we stretch, and resist. Sometimes we snap. We joke that people who can't afford extensive psychotherapy should invest a few years in service on a Dharma Centre board of directors. Much quicker.

To commit to direct service for a teacher is to put your everyday self on the line. In formal situations, don't you dress it up, seeking approval? As confidence builds between teacher and student, opportunities will present themselves for that relationship to move from formal to informal, and it is *always* the student's decision to engage, or not. Be prepared to be tried, judged and sentenced; not by the lama, but by your own awareness.

⁴ *Samsara* is the world of apparent reality, wherein we are blindly propelled by our ego-conditioning and self-centered motivation.

You have a really good idea . . . and the teacher yawns. You clean and tidy the living room perfectly, and the teacher yells at you. You're feeling happy and enthusiastic, smiling broadly. "What's that fake little smile doing on your face?" the teacher demands. Your good state wavers. "Wow, I thought I was feeling good. What if I *am* faking it?" Now the smile is gone, for sure.

Every game the ego wants to play will be revealed in its nakedness, the patterned reactions of hurt, pride, resentment, anger, guilt, fear, critique, childishness and defense will show up, and through awareness and commitment to the process, dissolve. Maybe more than once; the compassion of the lama is profound. The invitation to join the dance with all your neurotic buttons dangling out there in space, inviting the curious lama-finger's interest, is hard for the teacher too. To give love that cuts and burns is the act of a true physician of the heart. Kindness is not kindness when it denies the obvious suffering.

Service like this is to stand in front of the empty mirror of the lama's mind, and see yourself reflected. If a reflection appears, there is work to be done. When the ego bounces, we willfully ignore Buddhanature manifesting in ways that we don't approve of. The universe shrinks down to me, me, me. My opinions, my views, my self-righteousness. Oops. In the cosmic game of snakes and ladders, welcome back to square one.

One day, you'll feel that lama-finger reach for the old, familiar button. No reaction; nothing happens. Focussed on the carrots you are chopping, you chop carrots, you smile. Love is present. Later, reflecting on the experience, you get excited. "Wow, something's really shifted," you say to yourself. "Maybe I've transcended ego." You decide to test the tester. "Here's that button again, push it if you can. Take your best shot!" But these tests can only happen when you are *not* inviting them; it's wise not to act as if you think the lama is an idiot.

It is true that life itself will provide all these experiences when we are committed to serve. But there is a heightened drama and expectation in engaging with our dharma brothers and sisters, and especially our teachers, as personal allies. They are, after all, as committed, in theory, at least, to our process of awakening as we are. The immediate feedback they provide is more likely to be heard, more skillfully and personally crafted to find its way into the constricted corners of our hearts through love and shared commitment.

When we give service with the clear understanding that donor, recipient and gift are in total union, we experience the transcendent nature of this

practice. A few of us who were committed to shrine creation at our Dharma Centre often worked all night before an empowerment to create the ultimate environment and altar, as perfect in beauty as intention. We would come to the temple early in the morning, to see that everything was as it should be and to warm the space for the our lama. Bone weary, sometimes crabby, sitting in the cold, reciting mantras together, the magic would begin. As the ritual of people entering, prostrating and taking their seats began all our satisfaction and complaint would dissolve into the profound space of mystery. Oneness. No lama, no shrine, no us, no them, only a delicate play of movement, light, smell, taste and sound creating a mindscape in which there was no way to say where one ends and another begins.

Service in the kitchen, in my experience, can be just as evocative. "When all is reduced to the one, what is the one reduced to?" was the koan I had been assigned. Slicing a red pepper, the slices got thinner and thinner. Can space slice space? Traveling with my teacher and some fellow students through the heart of Burgundy in France, I was assigned the task of finding a particular brand of single malt whisky. Day after day, there was none to be found at all. Then, an amazing store that had *everything*. On a high shelf I found my prey, a lone bottle labeled Knockando. Not the variety requested, but, better, I hoped, than nothing. "Well," said the Rinpoche, "I supposed you've failed again?" I tried to look downcast. "No can do, Sir," I said, and held out the bottle. The simple memory of his face, the laughter we all shared -- completely letting go -- brings with it, to this day, a state of total joy.

When people who are not parents look at what parents go through, there is nothing about it that makes any sense. Why would people subject themselves to that? And smile about it? Service for the Dharma is like that. Our willingness comes back to us in unfathomable, inexpressible experience. We are strengthened, and tempered, honed like the finest steel blade, symbol of transcendent wisdom. We gain much more than we ever dreamed possible, discover a way of being that is not buy-able or earn-able or steal-able. Going beyond pleasure and pain, gain and loss, shame and fame, praise and blame is what service provides. When those wordly motivators have dissolved, what is left is nothing but Truth.