

# the courage to be present

BUDDHISM, PSYCHOTHERAPY,  
AND THE AWAKENING OF  
NATURAL WISDOM

Karen Kessel Wegela

“Karen Wegela brings a real understanding of the intricacies of Buddhist thought to bear on the challenge of psychotherapy. There is much wisdom here.” —MARK EPSTEIN, MD, *Thoughts without a Thinker*



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## introduction

### *what is a bodhisattva?*

IN THE LATE 1970S, when I first started practicing and studying Buddhist meditation and philosophy, I learned of the ideal of the “bodhisattva,” one who dedicates his or her life to the benefit of all other beings. I thought this notion was inspiring—inspiring, but crazy. A bodhisattva, I learned, was the Sanskrit word for one who put the needs and desires of all others before her own.

Put everyone before myself? I could hardly imagine letting someone go before me in the line at the supermarket. And anyway, isn’t putting everyone else’s needs first a psychological problem—one that we would come to call “codependency”? And yet, there was something that spoke to me, that touched my heart, in the ideal of the bodhisattva. I would have to look further.

I had already begun a regular “sitting practice” of meditation based on Buddhist teachings, which had become a source of immense relief to me at a particularly chaotic and difficult time in my life. Learning to simply be present, to touch my experience and also to let it go, had brought a sense of relaxation and aliveness to my mind and my life. I was grateful to have my meditation practice, and I suspected that the Buddhist teachings contained some essential sanity that I had not found elsewhere. So, I was curious about these bodhisattva teachings, even though they went against the grain of my habitual outlook. Up until now my meditation practice was clearly about me—me and my confusion, me and my pain, me and my relief. From the first moment

I heard of the bodhisattva ideal, I found it both attractive and a bit threatening.

My personal path has always included teaching, beginning in high school when my geometry teacher asked me to tutor a classmate. It has often been through teaching—and also writing—that I have clarified my own understanding. For more than twenty-five years I have been a core faculty member at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, where I have taught “contemplative psychotherapy”—a field of study that brings together Buddhist teachings and psychotherapy training—in one of its graduate psychology programs.

A few years ago I had to fill in for another teacher at the last minute. She was scheduled to teach a class on the *Bodhicharyavatara*<sup>1</sup> (Sanskrit for “The Bodhisattva’s Way of Life”), a classic text by the eighth-century Buddhist scholar and meditation master Shantideva. In the contemplative psychotherapy program, we study this text for the light it sheds on how to integrate the teachings on the bodhisattva path and the contemporary practice of psychotherapy. I have continued to teach that class, among others, and it continues to give me the opportunity to explore the bodhisattva teachings, which I am then able to apply in my own psychotherapy practice.

The bodhisattva teachings are at the heart of the school of Buddhism known as the *Mahayana* (Sanskrit for “Great Vehicle” or “Great Path”). These teachings that arose in India some time between the first century B.C.E. and the first century C.E., emphasize benefiting others. They are sometimes even called the “*bodhisattvayana*” (the “bodhisattva vehicle” or “bodhisattva path”). The American-born Buddhist nun and well-known author, Pema Chödrön, has popularized many of the Mahayana teachings in her books, including *Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living* and *No Time to Lose: A Timely Guide to the Way of the Bodhisattva*.

There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, that the founder of Naropa, Chögyam Trungpa, said that the aim of the contemplative psychotherapy program was to “train bodhisattvas.” As a teacher within this program, I have discovered that the fears I had about the bodhisattva ideal when I first began to study the bodhisattva teachings were well-founded. These teachings ask us to go beyond the narrow outlook of

what is usually called “ego” in Western presentations of Buddhism. As will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3, from the Buddhist point of view, we mistakenly hold on to a sense of self as solid, separate, and permanent. Practicing these teachings exposes this sense of self, this ego, for the illusion that it is. We are not who we think we are. What could be more threatening? Or annoying? Yet, what Buddhism teaches, and what my own experience indicates to be true, is that letting go of this false sense of self is in fact a path to delight, spontaneity, creativity, openness, and (so I have been told) liberation itself. The ongoing dance of letting go and holding on is part of the path of the training of the bodhisattva. By practicing working for the benefit of others, and putting the needs of others first, we begin to disengage from the snare of our habitual ego patterns. When we as mental health practitioners employ these teachings in the context of our counseling and psychotherapeutic work, our clinical work becomes contemplative practice, part of our spiritual path.

Shantideva expressed the wish to be anything someone might need on the journey to full awakening—but he probably didn’t imagine our modern methods of intimate helping called psychotherapy and counseling. I have often thought what a strange thing psychotherapy is: as clients and patients, we seek out total strangers and pay them to be with us as we unburden our hearts to them. We speak of our deepest pain and secrets to people we have never met before. Perhaps we’ve heard a little about them from a trusted friend or doctor. Perhaps we have chosen them from a website based on what they’ve said about themselves, or how they look, or what brand of psychotherapy they espouse. Still, isn’t it a bit odd?

In an earlier time, when change happened less quickly, we might have sought help with our confusion or pain from elders in the family or the community. These days, however, many of us have no extended family nearby: no great-aunts and uncles, no wise old men and women of the clan to whom we can turn. As we struggle with relationships that no longer follow traditional rules and roles, career choices that we no longer expect to last a lifetime, and decisions that seem to multiply daily, we may perhaps think that our elders wouldn’t necessarily know how to help us even if they were nearby. Friends, too, may not

always be helpful, because they are often our own age and struggling with similar issues.

It has become commonplace in the modern Western world to turn to professionals for the wisdom that at one time resided in our elders. For me, the teachings on the path of the bodhisattva are like hearing the wise counsel of an elder of the family. Paradoxically, these teachings by people in the distant past—people who never heard of psychotherapy, feminism, cell phones, electricity, or a host of other modern phenomena—provide me with insight into my own and my clients' dilemmas. Although our problems seem to be unique to our own time, they turn out to be, in many ways, timeless. Each time I turn to these teachings, or present them in class, I find new inspiration to go beyond my own self-centeredness, as well as practical advice for working with my own and others' suffering and confusion.

This book will explore the teachings on the path of the bodhisattva and, more specifically, their application to the work of psychotherapy and counseling, drawing on my work with many students and colleagues over the years in exploring that integration. The format of this book follows the development of an aspiring bodhisattva. Not surprisingly, it also parallels the unfolding of a therapeutic relationship. We will begin in part 1 with some theoretical orientation, by first familiarizing ourselves with the Mahayana Buddhist view of human nature, *bodhichitta* (Sanskrit for “awakened heart”; see chapter 1), and then going on to look at basic Buddhist teachings on the causes of our suffering and confusion and how they may be alleviated (chapters 2 through 5). Then we will look at a pivotal Mahayana teaching, on the nature of emptiness (chapter 6), before discussing some of the underlying principles of contemplative psychotherapy (chapter 7).

As therapists we begin our relationship with a new client by seeking to establish some kind of connection, or rapport; in this book, we will first cultivate such a connection with ourselves, through the sitting practice of meditation, which is introduced at the beginning of part 2 (chapter 8). As we get to know our clients better, we begin to understand their views of themselves and others. We come to understand why they have sought help, what resources they bring, what aspirations they have. In chapters 9 through 12, we will look into the teach-

ings known as the “four immeasurables” or “limitless ones,” which help us clarify and strengthen our own aspirations as bodhisattva-helpers.

Finally, in our professional relationships, we get to the heart of the matter with our clients, profoundly experiencing the wisdom and confusion of ourselves and our clients. In part 3 of this book, our deepening therapeutic engagement is presented through the teachings on the six “awakened” or “transcendent” actions (*paramitas*) of the bodhisattva. Throughout these final chapters we will explore our own development, its application to clinical work, and the possibility of helping clients develop these same qualities and ways of being.

Although I have generally employed English translations of Buddhist terms in the text, I have chosen to retain two Sanskrit terms. I have elected to use *bodhisattva* throughout the book since I haven’t found an English version of it that I like, and I have used *bodhichitta* in many places in addition to the translation “awakened heart,” since it, too, is not a term for which English has a really good equivalent. Throughout the book, the names of clients and the details of their lives have been changed to protect their privacy. Sometimes I have created composites of more than one client for the same reason.

While the teachings in this book are drawn from the Buddhist Mahayana tradition, there is no reason that one needs to be any sort of Buddhist at all to find them helpful. What I suggest to my students at Naropa is that they first just listen, read, and make an effort to understand what is being presented. Then, they should reflect on what they’ve learned; see if it makes sense to them. Talk about it with each other. If it makes sense, then they can begin to apply it in their own lives, test it out for themselves. I would suggest the same to the readers of this book. Perhaps these teachings will augment a tradition with which you are already deeply connected. Perhaps they will present you with a tradition into which you want to delve more deeply.

In any case, it is my deep wish to present the teachings of the path of the bodhisattva to you as well as I can while recognizing that I am a fellow traveler on the path. Any errors in understanding presented here are my own.



# Part One

## the path of awakening natural wisdom

Just like a blindman  
Discovering a jewel in a heap of rubbish,  
Likewise by some coincidence  
[Bodhichitta] has been born within me.

—*Shantideva*,  
A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life<sup>1</sup>

# 1

## the awakened heart of the bodhisattva

ELLIE WAS TELLING me about what it was like for her growing up. She remembered that she always felt afraid and that she often spent time hiding from people behind the sofa in the living room. However, it was only when she was an adult and her elderly mother told her the following story that Ellie got a clearer sense of why she had always been so afraid and lonely.

Ellie's mother described a warm southern afternoon when the family was sitting outside enjoying a few drinks. Ellie was an infant, just a few months old, and lay on a blanket under a shady tree. At one point she began to cry. No one made a move to see what was wrong. Then, as she continued to cry, her father took a switch and sat down next to her. "Whenever you cried, he'd switch you. You stopped soon enough," Ellie's mother told her. As she told the story, Ellie's mother laughed a bit and added, "He didn't really hurt you, you know." Ellie told me that she learned never to cry or call out for her mother.

As I listened to Ellie's story, I felt tremendous pain. I was horrified by a mother who could laugh about her infant child being struck and not see that it did hurt her; I was angry at this man who would hit a baby; I was brokenhearted for this infant and now this woman who still carried the scars of his unacknowledged cruelty. I found it difficult to tolerate this mixture of pain.

For psychotherapists and counselors, this is exactly what we have signed up for. We offer to go along with our clients as they explore their pain and learn how to work with it. In the contemplative approach,

which we will look at in more detail in chapter 7, we do not try to distance ourselves from our clients' pain. I suspect that no matter what theoretical orientation a practitioner has, there is no escaping discomfort in our work. We may experience anguish while listening to our clients' pain; sometimes our clients become angry at us; sometimes we feel helpless and uncertain.

If someone had said to me when I was a young person, "Someday would you like to earn your living sitting down with people who are suffering and share their suffering?" I don't know that I would have said yes. If that someone had gone on and said, "Sometimes you would be able to help; sometimes you would just feel stupid and helpless. Often the results of your work would be unclear; you would never be sure of what you had or had not accomplished," I would hardly have felt enthusiastic about such a prospect.

## DISCOVERING BODHICHITTA

Why *would* anyone want to do this kind of work? What does inspire us to become counselors and psychotherapists? It's not an inordinately lucrative profession; it is difficult and often personally disconfirming; it's not even glamorous. From the point of view of ego, it's completely crazy. There must be something in us that's stronger than ego—and from the Mahayana Buddhist perspective, that "something" is *bodhichitta*, the inherent and natural motivation we feel to alleviate the suffering of ourselves and others. Bodhichitta can be understood as having two aspects: we can speak of "absolute bodhichitta" and "relative bodhichitta."

### *Absolute Bodhichitta*

In Buddhism, *absolute* refers to the way things actually are, while *relative* refers to how they appear or how we experience them. "Absolute bodhichitta" refers to our natural wisdom, which recognizes the truth of how things are. The experience of absolute bodhichitta is nonconceptual; it cannot be captured in words. Often translated as "awakened heart" or "awakened mind," absolute bodhichitta allows us to

perceive the nature of ourselves and all phenomena as “empty,” a topic we will look at more closely in chapter 6.

Perhaps the following example will suggest something of the nondual and nonconceptual nature of bodhichitta. My friend Philip and his wife, Sandra, recently had an infant daughter, Jessica. Philip described to me how difficult he was finding it to be wholeheartedly loving toward this child. His own experience growing up was of being alternately neglected and criticized. In addition, he was afraid that Sandra’s devotion to the child would take away from the love she had been sharing with him. He was quite uncomfortable with both his halfheartedness and with his jealousy. “How can I offer love to a baby when I never experienced it myself from my own parents?” he wondered.

I offered a suggestion to him. “Maybe,” I said, “you could pretend that the baby is also you as a child, and you could give her all the love you wish you had gotten.” Philip looked skeptical but said he’d give it a try.

The next time I saw Philip, he was glowing. He had taken my suggestion and gone far beyond it. “When I held Jessica and tried to feel the love toward her that I wished I had gotten, the strangest thing happened. Something just opened up, and I felt filled with love. It wasn’t just that I loved Jessica, I was just feeling love altogether. It’s hard to describe, but when I felt that love, I got to feel loving and loved all at once. I was the love itself in that moment.”

What Philip described was the experience of bodhichitta, or natural compassion, experienced as an expansive, nondual wisdom. In moments of experiencing this absolute bodhichitta, a person is able to perceive that compassion doesn’t have to belong to anyone; it is not limited by the confines of ego or any ideas of separation between self and other. It is as though it is part of the air, the environment.

### *Relative Bodhichitta*

Another aspect of bodhichitta is “relative bodhichitta,” our aspiration to wake up so that we can benefit all beings. As the Buddhists would put it, we aspire to attain enlightenment or liberation so that we can

actually do what it takes to truly alleviate suffering. Until we are fully awakened, we experience bodhichitta's relative aspect: the desire to awaken so that we could act in accordance with our natural wisdom, our absolute bodhichitta. Relative bodhichitta is further divided into two kinds: "aspiring" bodhichitta and "applying" or "active" bodhichitta. "Aspiring bodhichitta" is the desire (the thought, the inspiration) to benefit beings, and there are practices associated with it that we will explore later in part 2. "Applying bodhichitta," by contrast, is associated with actually beginning the work of helping others, which in this book is addressed in part 3.

As already noted, according to the Buddhist view, our minds are generally clouded by the distortion of ego-clinging. As a result, we are easily confused about what will help and what will make things worse. Therefore, we need to begin first with clarifying our own confusion. Only then can we act on our intention to be of help. Some Buddhists take this advice quite literally and go on multiyear meditation retreats to work with their own confusion before attempting to help others. My own teacher, Chögyam Trungpa, encouraged his students to work on their own minds but also to take a "leap" and work with others as well, and that is the view I am presenting here.

### *Connecting with Bodhichitta*

I am always interested in how people connect with or "arouse" bodhichitta. When we interview applicants for Naropa's MA program in contemplative psychotherapy, we ask them why they want to become therapists. Often they have become inspired by seeing the deep suffering of someone close to them. I remember one woman who had a brother who struggled with debilitating bipolar symptoms. Her deepest wish was to know how to help him and others like him. Many applicants have recovered from addictive behaviors and wish to repay the kindness of those who had helped them; often that kindness has involved not only helping them to overcome their addictions but also helping them regain their self-respect.

A traditional way to arouse bodhichitta is to think of one's mother and all she did for us when we were helpless infants. We might contemplate the endless diapers, the nighttime feedings, the runny noses,

and realize how grateful we are for our mother's generosity. We then imagine that all beings have been our mothers, and we aspire to repay their kindness.

I have found, however, that this traditional contemplation doesn't work for many of my students. Like Ellie, they may have had difficult relationships with their mothers, and bodhichitta doesn't particularly arise when they think of her. Under these circumstances, other contemplations may be helpful. Some students prefer simply to think of someone else who cared for them: their father, a teacher, a relative. This helps them touch a quality of tenderness in themselves that they can then imagine extending to others.

Another gateway into bodhichitta is to think of someone we ourselves have cared for: a child or a pet, for instance. In the same way we would do anything for our beloved child or our suffering and helpless animal, we aspire to do whatever is needed for other beings.

One morning I woke up to find my elderly dog, Molly, sniffing near a bird in the backyard. It was a small crow, and it was squawking and walking up and down the walkway. I called the people from the local wildlife agency, who arrived quickly to deal with this bird that didn't seem able to fly. As they worked with the bird, gently washing its mouth clean from some kind of foamy stuff, two large crows showed up, cawing loudly and circling over us. These were this adolescent crow's parents, and they were expressing their concern very clearly. They followed as the wildlife officers carried the youngster up the road and placed it in a nearby tree. Then, they swooped down and joined it. Even crows have bodhichitta.

Chögyam Trungpa used to point out that everyone has a "soft spot" somewhere, even if it's just for their favorite food. And any "soft spot" can be a place to start in accessing our inherent compassion, first for ourselves and then for others. The idea is that all of us have a compassionate heart, although many of us have learned to cover it up.

## A MAN CALLED THE BUDDHA

The man who has come to be known as the Buddha was born as a prince about twenty-five hundred years ago. The king, his father, like all fathers, wanted to protect his son from pain, and so he kept the

prince walled up in the palace compound. The king also wanted to distract his son, whose name was Siddhartha, from any interest he might have in doing something other than becoming the king himself when the time came. Even though the king provided the young prince with all the luxury and entertainment he could possibly desire, Siddhartha was still curious about what went on outside the palace walls. As the story goes, he was able to convince his chariot driver to take him on a journey into the city outside the walls, where the evidence of poverty, old age, and sickness was readily apparent all around him. Having been shielded from the suffering of others his whole life, these sights were shocking to him. Siddhartha also saw a mendicant monk, a holy man who had dedicated himself to spiritual seeking. Unlike any other people whom the prince had seen before, this man seemed special. He was dignified and calm. (As I imagine this encounter, I think of inspiring people I have met in my life: people who emanate a sense of serenity, liveliness, and wisdom.) The prince felt very drawn to the qualities he saw in this spiritual seeker. Appalled by the suffering he had seen, the young prince resolved to leave his privileged life and dedicate himself to understanding the nature of suffering and its relief.

To make the rest of this long tale shorter, we can simply note that ultimately, by sitting down and observing his own direct experience, Siddhartha realized his true nature and penetrated to the causes of suffering. It was at that point that he became known as the Buddha, “the awakened one.” For the rest of his long life, he taught what he had discovered to disciples, royal patrons, and common people. His teachings are known as the *dharma*, and the first teaching he gave addressed the concept of the “Four Noble Truths.”

Like the Buddha, we are curious and want to understand our own and others’ minds and experiences. Although we may distract ourselves, our bodhichitta impulses are strong, and as therapists we long to find skillful ways to work with the suffering we find in ourselves, in our clients, and in the wider world.

#### THE HINAYANA PATH

Not unlike other spiritual traditions—Christianity and Judaism, for example—Buddhism has within it a number of different schools

and traditions. In the Tibetan tradition in which I was trained there are three main sets of teachings. The first of these is known as the *Hinayana* or “foundational vehicle.” Without it our aspirations to be of help would be nothing more than fleeting ideas floating in air. The first thing we do on the Buddhist spiritual path is to become familiar with our own minds. We come to know, in great detail, exactly how our own minds work not by just by studying *about* them but by bringing our focused attention to our experience, particularly through the practice of mindfulness-awareness meditation (introduced in chapter 8). The foundational or Hinayana path, not to be confused with the Theravadin school of Buddhism, is also called the “narrow” vehicle, since we begin by narrowing our attention to our moment-to-moment experience.<sup>1</sup>

Where I live in Colorado, there are a number of beautiful narrow roads that go up into the mountain canyons. The Hinayana path reminds me of biking up the Left Hand Canyon Road, which parallels a mountain creek. It winds and twists along with the creek, which pours down from the mountains in the springtime. As I bike up the canyon road, I can’t see very far ahead. I have to pay attention to what is immediately in front of me. The walls of the canyon are high and rocky. Around each bend is something new: a different tree, a different texture in the road, a new large boulder. It requires great attention and concentration to stay on the far right and not wander into the traffic of this very narrow road. The foundational path is like this, too. One pays close attention to all the details of one’s experience as one sits on one’s meditation cushion.

## THE MAHAYANA PATH

Both historically and in the unfolding path of a particular practitioner, the narrow focus of the Hinayana path is followed by the expanded approach of the Mahayana teachings. The Mahayana path is like coming to the top of a mountain canyon road and turning around and looking back. The narrow roadway is replaced with an enormous vista over the plains. Suddenly, the view becomes enormous, breathtaking. Bodhichitta, which marks the entrance into the Mahayana, may feel just as startling and vast. We may recognize—for perhaps just a

moment—that the world is filled with beings suffering just as we do. In that same moment the longing to relieve that suffering arises, without deliberation or thought. It is momentarily obvious that we can be much more open, much more heartfelt and expansive. As Shantideva points out in the passage cited at the start of this section of the book, the experience of bodhichitta is rare and unexpected. We are as likely to find it as a blind person is to find a diamond in a dumpster. Still, if we pay attention, we may discover the heart of bodhichitta in ourselves.

### BODHISATTVA VOW

In the Buddhist tradition, people who dedicate themselves to cultivating bodhichitta and working for the benefit of all beings may choose to take “the bodhisattva vow.”<sup>2</sup> In taking this vow, they pledge to progressively train themselves in the practices that will not only reduce their own confusion but also develop the qualities and skills that will relieve others’ suffering. These are the people who are known as “bodhisattvas.” Counselors and psychotherapists who are committed to working to alleviate the suffering of their clients may have a similar aspiration without taking a formal vow.

### BODHICHITTA ORIENTATION

All counselors and psychotherapists base their work on some theoretical orientation. It may be psychoanalytic, cognitive-behavioral, contemplative, or any number of others. Part of any theoretical orientation is a view of human nature and a way of understanding how suffering arises and may be alleviated. Whatever our view is, it will determine what we pay attention to, how we understand what healing is, and also how we evaluate whether our work is successful.

We may have a view that holds, for example, that people are always thinking something and that some thoughts lead to depression and others lead to active engagement in life. If that’s our view, it will direct our attention to what our clients think and how they deal with those

thoughts. Cognitive-behavioral therapies, for example, help clients identify dysfunctional patterns of thinking that lead to depression and replace them with more beneficial thoughts.

In Mahayana Buddhism and likewise in contemplative psychotherapy, our view, our orientation, is that all beings have the potential described by “absolute bodhichitta.” We are interested not only in our clients’ pain and dysfunctional patterns but also in their inherent wisdom and compassion. Our task is to help our clients bring awareness and kindness to their own experience and to support them in seeing beyond their ego-limited views of themselves and their lives. The rest of this book explores the implications of such an orientation for counseling and psychotherapy.

#### GLIMPSING BODHICHITTA IN OURSELVES AND IN OUR CLIENTS

Most of us do not live our lives in touch with our awakened hearts, our bodhichitta. Yet, we do have hints of it from time to time. We also recognize signs of its presence in our clients.

Sarah, a woman I worked with for a while, had struggled with depression most of her life. One aspect of depression for her was a sense that her life had no direction, no purpose, no meaning. As a result she had difficulty making decisions about her work, her living situation, and her relationships. We spent time together talking about what really mattered to her. Then, one day she came in and said, “Really, I just want to be a decent person. That’s what matters.”

Being “decent” for her was about treating others with kindness and consideration. It meant putting herself in another’s place and trying to see what the world was like for the other person. Being a decent person became her orientation, her reference point for what to do and what not to do.

In one instance, for example, she had to decide whether to help her parents move. This was a difficult decision because they were quite critical of her. It was always challenging to be around them. At the same time, they were now quite elderly and had asked for her help. “What,”

Sarah asked herself, “is the decent thing to do here?” How could she behave decently with them and also with herself? She devised a plan that allowed her to go and help her parents move but that also built in support for herself through staying with friends, practicing yoga, and limiting the time of her visit. Having the reference point of decency has opened up a sense of direction for her and reflects her inherent awakened heart.

Another woman, Bethany, had long been diagnosed with major mental illness. She lived in a private mental world that she almost never revealed to others. One day, in an anguished voice, she said, “What about the children? Someone has to take care of the children!” I had no idea what children she might have been talking about: real children? imaginary children? herself as a child? There was no way to know, but it was clear that the children needed help and care and that Bethany was in pain contemplating their unmet needs. Even in the confusion of psychosis, bodhichitta may be glimpsed.

Bodhichitta is sometimes even more disguised. Evidence of bodhichitta may appear as irritation or impatience. I wanted my client Charlie to make a different choice from the one he made. Instead of letting go of a job that he hated and taking the risk to accept another one, he chose to keep the old one. I felt despairing—and annoyed. I was sure that I was right and that he was wrong. My feeling that Charlie would probably continue to suffer in his present job and that he could, perhaps, suffer less in a different situation was a glimpse of bodhichitta: I wanted him to suffer less. However, instead of allowing myself to feel the despair and helplessness that arose for me along with that insight, I turned it into the less vulnerable experience of annoyance. That is to say: underneath my irritation was the cool insight and tender compassion of bodhichitta, but on top was my desire to avoid feeling useless, and so I felt frustration and annoyance instead. Still, those unpleasant feelings were an indication of my underlying awakened heart.

One need look no further than the daily news to see that the world is filled with people behaving seemingly without compassion and without awareness. Still, the Buddhist view is that underneath the surface of all of our actions, there exists our inherent bodhichitta. Understanding how we lose touch with these natural capacities forms an important part of the training of a bodhisattva.