The Path of the Bodhisattva

May all beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering;
May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness.

This simple prayer sums up the yearning of the aspiring bodhisattva—the being who lives and acts, motivated by the desire to be of benefit to all sentient beings. It expresses not only the wish that beings be free from suffering but also that they be free from the causes of suffering. When I first heard this prayer, I felt that the addition of "causes" was superfluous, until it was explained to me that the cause of suffering is selfishness and the cause of happiness is compassion.

The first part of the wish is that others have happiness and freedom from suffering in all ordinary ways in their lives. The addition of the "causes" of happiness and suffering brings in the wish for their spiritual growth

and evolution. We are, in fact, wishing that they become enlightened, that they realize their true nature.

When I began teaching meditation in 2010, I wanted to present meditation in the context of the path of the bodhisattva—also called the path of compassion. I had received teachings on this path during my time at the Tibetan Buddhist center of Chagdud Gonpa called Rigdzin Ling from 1996 to 2008, and the teachings had resonated deeply. They seemed to illuminate a latent strand in the puzzle of my life's purpose.

Although Baba Muktananda, my root guru, was a being of great love and compassion, he did not emphasize the path of compassion, in the way it is laid out by the Buddhists in great detail. In essence, however, it was the same teaching that Baba had given me at the time of my sannyas ordination—when I became a swami. He told me, "Always uplift people. They have such hard lives and suffer so much. Always give them something to uplift them."

From my first day at Rigdzin Ling we recited the Dedication and Aspiration Prayer written by Chagdud

Tulku Rinpoche. It begins with the lines:

> "Throughout my many lives and until this moment, whatever virtue I have accomplished, including the merit generated by this practice, and all that I will ever attain, this I offer for the welfare of sentient beings."

I loved the vast reach—the reference to "my many lives" and "all that I will ever attain." I envisioned this prayer anchoring me to the quality of compassion and feeling of oneness with all of life—connecting me to all the yogis and meditators who have held this motivation through ages past.

The primary practice of the path of the bodhisattva is perhaps the practice of tonglen. When I began to teach, I decided to include a short tonglen practice in my classes to underscore my wish to teach meditation in the context of the path of compassion.

The traditional tonglen practice is one in which the suffering of others is breathed in and compassion is breathed out. One imagines the person or persons that you wish to pray for in this way to be in front of you. Com-

passion is generated in one's heart, one breathes in their suffering and then breathes out that compassion.

I had first heard of this practice when I arrived at the gonpa and a friend gave me a set of audio tapes on tonglen by Pema Chodron. I was impressed and inspired by the teaching, particularly because it provided an actual practice to incorporate the ideals of oneness, generosity, and compassion in one's being.

Years later, when I presented the traditional tonglen practice in a meditation class, I encountered resistance to the idea of breathing in the suffering of others. Although surprised, I immediately realized that it was completely understandable, since the students had no background in the extensive Buddhist teachings which provide an understanding of the reason for such a practice.

These teachings include the purpose of human life, the fact of impermanence and its impact on our psyche, the nature of compassion, the importance of developing compassion for others, and other tenets of the path of the bodhisattva.

I devised an alternative, which was to work with our own suffering. Logically, there could be no resistance to breathing in the contractedness which was already there. Although breathing in one's own suffering might seem like a completely different practice, there is no essential difference in the end result. I knew that a scrutiny of one's own suffering and resistance would bring people face to face with a contemplation of others and their relationships with them. The truth of interdependence would eventually provide the connection to which people had resistance.

I began to teach what I called "tonglen for our own suffering." As time went on, I introduced a number of variations on the core practice and continued to use it as the "inner work" piece in my classes. Essentially, the practice is about looking at oneself as the source, of both one's own suffering and the quality of compassion.

The other piece is the main meditation practice, which I call an awareness meditation. It is the practice of relaxing into—or expanding into—presence or awareness. Baba called this the Self or Consciousness. In the guided

meditations, the energy of expanded consciousness is invoked and held, and people are invited to experience it as their own deeper nature—to touch or commune with what we really are.

At this point, let me mention out that I use the terms "consciousness" and "awareness" almost interchangeably. At Rigdzin Ling I was taught to refer to higher nondual experience, or the nature of mind, as "Awareness." Baba Muktananda always used the term "Consciousness" for this divine Oneness. Over time I concluded that for me there was no significant or essential difference between these terms.

As humans, we have both an ordinary dualistic consciousness and access to nondual awareness as well. The tonglen practice addresses our suffering, or contractedness—the aspects of our ordinary consciousness which get in the way of our awareness of our true nature. In our dualistic nature, we operate in the realm of "good and bad," whereas in the awareness meditation, we meditate on our expanded nondual nature, the realm of the "all-good" which mystically contains all pairs of opposites in a harmonious oneness.

I remember, still quite vividly, an experience I had as a small child of that harmonious oneness, which I much later came to know as nondual awareness. I was alone in the back yard at dusk on a warm summer evening. Suddenly, everything was sublime and wonderful. There was a sense of space and freedom. I felt ageless, not like a child at all. In this magical space which had miraculously descended, there was no limitation of any kind.

I was filled with awe and happiness, and I soon I began to wonder why nobody ever talked about this. It was so palpable, so unmistakably real. Why didn't my parents, who told me about all sorts of things, ever talk about this? Why was this never mentioned in school?

It seemed to me that it must somehow be connected to God, but my edueation on this topic was pretty much limited to learning the Lord's Prayer. I had wondered why God wished to be spoken to with such strange language, and so I was confused about who God really was. Since I had no words for the experience, I couldn't

even ask about it.

There was no answer to this mystery. Without any context for my experience, I forgot about it until many decades later when it came back to me in an appropriate context—the spiritual path—which explained it as the ultimate nature of reality and the goal of human life.

When I began to teach, my vision was to present the essence of what I had studied with Baba—the philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism—in a simple and accessible way. This philosophy lays out three upayas, or skillful means, under which all meditation practices can be categorized. Anavopaya practice uses the body and outer means, shaktopaya uses the mind and energy (or shakti), and shambhavopaya uses the will.

Shambhavopaya is also said to be connected with the heart, although not in the way that bhakti yoga, the yoga of devotion, is. It entails an opening to what might be called the higher octave of heart energy—a love beyond subject/object duality, which is unconditional, nonemotional, and impersonal. Shambhavopaya is the skillful means that we can't practice with our ordinary

dualistic mind. It is said to use the will, but this is not the will that we ordinarily think of, such as in the expression "will power."

The will we are referring to is the kind of effort we make when we are instructed to shift our awareness to "being present." It is neither a physical nor a mental effort that we use in becoming present. One might think of it as an effort of our spirit or our true heart. The realm of shambhavopaya is the realm of this subtle effort or will.

Both Kashmir Shaivism and Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism arose at the same time and place in India, and there seems to have been a great deal of cross-fertilization between what later became two historically separate traditions. Both are nondual tantric traditions, meaning simply that they see all as one thing—as all God, rather than as God and Man, for example—and that the path is based on human experience in the midst of life.

I had studied and practiced dzogchen during my time at the gonpa. Described as the pinnacle of all practices in the Nyingma tradition of Vajrayana, dzogchen is

the simple, unadorned practice of awareness. I found that I could point to the same awareness in the teaching of shambhavopaya.

Although I had no initial intention of teaching Kashmir Shaivism as such, it began to unfold over time due to a number of circumstances which arose. As I found myself teaching aspects of this philosophy, I gradually relaxed my resistance to teaching something "foreign"—something with Sanskrit terminology. I had wanted to teach without any traditional baggage and, as I surrendered to this unfolding, I found great benefit in harking back to the ancient wisdom tradition of Kashmir Shaivism.

Students who had no particular spiritual background were amazed to discover that the very modern interest in consciousness had been known, contemplated, commented upon, and practiced by people more than a thousand years ago. In every age this thread is held and expressed in ways that speak to the conditions and concerns of the people of that time. Although the particulars are unique to time and place, the essence is the same.

My interest has always been in the essence of what we are. As an anthropology graduate student—before going off to India to seek enlightenment—I was always more interested in what was universal in human nature than in the cultural variety that abounds. This essence fascinated me. Baba Muktananda called it the Self. He also called it Paramashiva, Chitishakti, or Consciousness. The Buddhists referred to it as Buddha-nature, dharmakaya, or Awareness. It is not different from Christ Consciousness, the Tao, Spirit, Presence, Being, the Divine, and so many other descriptors.

When I began teaching, I talked about this essence and gave meditation instructions to simply sit in this awareness. I knew that the spirit would descend and create an environment of higher consciousness when I sat with people and spoke about and held this energy. I had experienced this in the mid-1970s when Baba had sent many of us, his students, out to give introductory programs and talk about his work. Many decades later, the magic of this descent is still here, as it has been all along.