

This Day is for Living

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"In an era when metaphysical and existential certainties are in a state of crisis, when people are being uprooted and alienated and are losing their sense of what this world means, ideology inevitably has a certain hypnotic charm. To wandering humankind it offers an immediately available home: all one has to do is accept it, and suddenly everything becomes clear once more, life takes on new meaning, and all mysteries, unanswered questions, anxiety, and loneliness vanish. Of course, one pays dearly for this low-rent home: the price is abdication of one's own reason, conscience, and responsibility, for an essential aspect of ideology is the consignment of reason and conscience to a higher authority."

– from "The Power of the Powerless", by Vaclav Havel, 1978.

"The Bodhisattva acts as a great reservoir of truth for all beings."

– from The Avatamsaka Sutra



I began this essay with a modest intention of paralleling a single session of meditation with the way one might live through a day. As with many of my writing projects, in the process of picking it up and putting it down, time went by, I had fresh thoughts, and the world changed. The financial collapse of 2008, in spite of its challenge to so many people, did offer a glimmer of hope that we might re-evaluate where we (an exponentially growing species) are going and what we are doing. Now as the financial institutions re-group and stock markets and techno-gadget sales soar, it seems that we may have passed through a fever and instead of healing the disease, have just slumped back to where we were before the crisis. The situation is dire. Recently I read a some essays by writer, former 'dissident', and first President of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel, called *Living in Truth*.¹ I warmly recommend them to anyone who is still alive and creative enough to be questioning how we humans are living. Havel's writing has energised me to finish this piece and make it available for reading.



'Organized religion' could be viewed as a social system based on largely unquestioned and unprovable beliefs and assumptions about human beings and their relationship with the rest of nature. Each religion is woven together with formal and informal, rituals and practices that tend to

reinforce its particular assumptions. At times, organised religion can function in a positive fashion, acting as a glue that holds the many apparently diverse parts of a society together and helping individuals to find meaning in the vast, mysterious complexity of transient life. In its negative expression, it can take on the character of an ideology and become a barrier to living in the flow of truth.

Observing the news media and popular culture in these early years of the 21st century, one might think that the most globally, widespread 'religion' of our time has at its heart a belief in a fundamentally mechanical universe made up of countless interacting bits and pieces. It is a universe where 'machine' parts are interchangeable; where people are work-force components: service providers, consumers, tax-payers, investors and so forth; and where all other living beings, plants, fungi, micro-organisms and animals, are seen as potential resources to be used by humans. It is a universe where money is a powerful sacred symbol and where desire for immortality and fear of death drives a compulsive need to make sure the machine keeps running, regardless of the cost to living creature, including ourselves. It is a universe where it is believed that all problems can be resolved with better technical, can-do and know-how.

This machine or machinery – it's sometimes referred to as a machine for producing wealth – is the machinery of economic rationalism. The invisible agents of this secular 'religion' are named 'market forces' which operate in capricious and reactive ways, reminiscent of angels or devils or the behaviour of the mythical gods of Mt. Olympus. Its human priests and acolytes are often designated as C.E.O.s, corporate board members, cabinet ministers and middle managers, along with the myriad ordinary people whose official, public role, frequently involves large amounts of accounting, record keeping, and exercising red tape and control, all sanctioned by the need to uphold the law. (In this situation, justice too often falls by the way with irrational and sometimes even immoral actions being protected because they are technically within the 'law'.)

Of course, the servants of the 'gods', always skimmed off some perks of money, power and prestige, justifying their actions as necessary, in order to oil the workings of this less than sublime mystery! 'Market forces' is just the latest name for the age-old vanities of greed, conceit, pride, fear, anger, general delusion, and a perennial dream, on the part of people who feel insecure, of being effective and powerful. It seems that whether we are considering skulduggery in the halls of power of religious traditions, or in the boardrooms of financial institutions, the pattern is still the same; human beings trying to survive in an ocean of lies, half-truths, abstractions and utopian concepts.

Fortunately, in bright contrast, there have always been renegades: courageous thinkers, outsiders, rebels and wise seers, who have, through the direct examples of their lives, called into question the main-stream religions of their time. These have been the mystics, shamans, yogis, contemplative poets, artists and healers of their day. They have also been the ordinary, unpretentious, basically good people that have shunned the inanities of socially idealized 'success' and given themselves to living in ways that feeds what is creative and alive, both in themselves and in everyone that they meet.

The Sanskrit word *bodhisattva* refers to such a being. *Bodhi* means awakening. *Sat* is short for *sati* which means mindfulness or recollection. *Va* is variously translated as air, wind and weaving. Together, *sattva* means a 'being' or 'one in the process of becoming'. A bodhisattva is 'one in process of becoming awake'. If we play with the derivations we can come up with a number of rich alternatives: an ongoing breathing recollection of awakening; an awakening weaving of mindfulness; an awakening of understanding; an awakening mindfulness of how we – all the living creatures of the earth – are, together with the mountains and streams and the physical forces of the universe, weaving into being the fabric of existence. We are all co-participants; weavers, designers and appreciators of the weaving – each one of us. *Bodhi* or *budh* also means to blossom or bud, so the word bodhisattva points to someone who is a flowering, in other words a living process of beauty and fecundity unfolding – not a machine!

Some texts translate bodhisattva as 'spiritual hero'. Such a person would have the courage and strength; again borrowing words from Havel, to intentionally "live within the truth". A bodhisattva may be someone who feels deeply moved to turn away from the deceptions and lies of 'modern life', the consumerism, the extractive economy, the narrow vision of human chauvinism, and the tragic blindness to life as a planet-wide ecology of becoming and all that this implies. It is through the ordinary acts of daily living that we find the quiet heroism of today's bodhisattva; honouring the intelligence, the sentience and the ultimate unknowability of each being that we meet, and continually engaging with life, however we find it, with attitudes of love, patience and active curiosity.



Some years ago in Calgary, I wrote a poem that described a day in the life of a machine human, *homo consumer marketplaciensis*, or because there is still debate as to this creature's actual taxonomic category, it is also sometimes referred to as *homo lost its wayiens*, or, by some more sharp tongued, *homo delusiens*. The poem, called 'Samsara in Calgary', goes like this.

Each day he rises in a box
Descends the stairs
Undoes the lock
And eats the crisp
Dropped in a bowl
And drinks his coffee, newsprint fresh.
He drives his metal chariot forth
His mind in gear
Fuel tank brimming
And meets the fifty storied mirror of
his own collective making.²

He rises into the sky upright
With seventeen others dressed in grey

And sits down in his contoured chair
The mountains gleaming in the west
And buys and sells and wheels and deals
And figures dance within long lists
While emptiness eats out his core.

At four he walks with fellow twins
The mountains swallowed in the dark
To enter in and then descend
To find his car
— not who we are —
And drive in ant lines
stop and go
Ascends the stairs
Undoes the locks
Continuing in his box.

In Gaza heartless rockets fall,
Far away, sweatshops leaking blood,
Tears of heartache,
Working children,
The unheard plunk as the last
Spotted Owl hits the ground,
— none of this disturbs his sleep.
— or does it!



That's a day in one life. Now let's consider a different possibility, a day in the life of an awake and compassionately engaged human being – a bodhisattva. By 'day', I really mean a flexible unit of time. It could be a 24 hour circadian cycle, what we normally call a day. It could, however, be a lifetime, where the divisions of the 'day' reflect the unfolding stages of maturing experience: birth, infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age and death. It could also refer to a single session of meditation in which the progression of stages clearly outline a form of practice. Though I will write about different parts of a metaphoric day, I don't mean to suggest an arbitrary dividing up of the day. Life is an infinitely creative, seamlessly flowing process. It isn't something done by recipe, or by techniques or stages. What follows, are suggestions for becoming more thoroughly alive and authentic, and in the world of *homo consumer marketplaciensis*, becoming thoroughly alive and authentic is a radical and sometimes *status quo* disturbing thing to do! "None of this disturbs his sleep – or does it!"

Waking Up – Remembering Our Roots – Releasing Into Refuge

Begin your life, begin each day, begin a session of meditation, nourished by the experience of being seamlessly part of a vast living world. Before even getting out of bed, pause for a few moments to feel the rhythm of your breathing and settle into the deep interior sensations of your body, an extraordinary community of tens of trillions of cells – all 'talking' to each other. Imagine uncountable cellular beings, each of them replicating, travelling, repairing, maintaining, eating, breathing, excreting, forming alliances and symbiotic associations, all functioning together in the process that is your body. You are alive! Not only that, but the community that is you, at this very moment is interbeing with myriad other communal beings. Feel this billion year unfolding of embodied mystery. In Buddhism, to enter this remembrance is to touch the essence of what is called 'refuge'; a deep sense of belonging; a vivid acquiescence to participating in a living process that can never be completely mapped out. Everything that you think, do and feel, has an affect on other beings. You matter. We matter. Everyone matters. Remembering our roots, or releasing into refuge, can bring a sense of abiding in a way of deep acceptance, wonderment and utter inclusiveness. This moment before you roll out of bed is a time to feel your own unique sense of being enmeshed in and supported by, the living community of everything and everyone that makes up this world.

A favourite teaching metaphor in both Sufi and Zen traditions is that of the host and the guest. The guest is forever travelling; a tourist on the move, perpetually seeking, yet never quite finding, and often uncertain as to whether or not they are welcome. Can I stay? Should I leave? How should I behave so that I am accepted, tolerated or, at least not thrown out? The guest is frequently concerned with what others think about them while in the back of his or her mind hovers a barely noticed yearning for eventually, somehow, finding their way home. We become guests in our work places, guests in our houses, guests in our families and guests on earth. Granted, being a tourist can have its moments of excitement, but even the most fanatically dedicated tourist will eventually find themselves yearning for roots, wondering "Where do I belong?"

The host, on the other hand, is already at home. There is no question of being turfed out. With the deep-rooted strength of being grounded in place, really belonging with this particular time and environment, the host welcomes whoever arrives at the doorways of perception. Hello, welcome, would you like to rest a while? Have you eaten? For the host there is no question as to where they belong. Moment by moment they feel solid and at home. Wherever they are is it!

What is your refuge? Where is your sense of belonging? Where is your real home? Where is your feeling of authenticity and presence? Can you let go into the rich fabric of what is already occurring? If love is your refuge, rest in the flowing of love. If a sense of being a beginningless, endless, inter-becoming of life is refuge, rest in the experience of being this living matrix. If wisdom, compassion and awareness are refuge or Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, allow time to marinate in these qualities and feel them manifesting in your body, speech and mind. Taking refuge is much more than a prayer or a hope. The real taking of refuge, going for refuge or being in the flow of refuge, is always coupled with an indescribable letting be into faith and trust and wonderment.

Every morning is a birth, a new beginning. Every session of meditation is a fresh opportunity. Every meeting, every new project, is a dancing of life unfolding. Wake each morning and feel the groundedness of being and belonging. This is very different from waking up to list making, driven by undercurrents of worry or planning or the hyper-vigilance of fussing over what one has to do today.

Breakfast – Nourishing the *Bodhicitta*

For billions of years, life has been unfolding in myriad interwoven structures of co-operation and discernment. Atoms gathering as molecules. Molecules linking in extraordinary arabesques of space and time, to lend their lives to miraculous living societies called cells. Cells selecting, replicating, repairing, joining, transforming and linking into organs and organisms. Organisms interpenetrating other organisms. Eating each other. Being homes for each other – environments for each other. Nurturing, playing, living and dying; a dancing of life bursting forth in ever changing forms of symbioses and embodied knowing. This is what you are! It is what politicians are, what philosophers, artists, sales clerks, carpenters, teachers, nurses, soldiers, drop-outs and slum dwellers, labourers and bank managers are, what believers and sceptics, agnostics and atheists are, what scientists, mystics, conformists and mavericks are. It is the true work and working of everyone. In Buddhism, this vast, cosmos-wide journeying of aliveness-unfolding is called *bodhicitta*; a heart/mind awakening in action.

Having woken up and reconnected with a deepening sense of belonging, now it's time for 'breakfast', time to feed this delicate sense of belonging, this gestating wisdom. In Buddhist traditions there are numerous prayers for nourishing or reflecting on *bodhicitta* however, this 'breakfast' doesn't necessarily call for the reciting of traditional prayers. For some people, prayer might provide a framework for contemplation but you could have this breakfast in the silence of wordless appreciation. One way of doing this is to take to heart the intent behind one or more of the following verses of bodhisattva heart-commitment.

However innumerable beings are, I aspire to meet them with kindness and interest. Breathe with this intent. Meeting each being with kindness and interest. How would your body meet beings with kindness and interest? How would your speech meet them? How would your attitudes and mental activity meet them? Explore the possibilities in this. Meeting people with kindness and interest. Meeting inner feelings and sensations; memories and emotions, happiness and sadness, elation and boredom, success and failure. Everything is 'being' exactly what it is. Meeting all 'beings' with kindness and interest. Meeting creatures, micro-organisms, plants and fungi with kindness and interest. Meeting your boss, your employees, your children, your spouse or a stranger on the street. How might doing this bring something fresh into your day?

However inexhaustible the states of suffering are, I aspire to touch them with patience and love. In the process of living; illness, death, grief and dissatisfaction are inevitable experiences. As sentient beings, we are sensitive beings, and this sensitivity will sometimes arise in the form of difficult emotions which in turn can shape the workings of our bodies and minds. Reflecting on the immensity of suffering that is happening in all spheres of life, all over the world, feel a determination that when you touch and are touched by the suffering of living, whether it is your

own suffering or the suffering of others, that you do so with patience and love and a deep well of caring. Allow this mysterious commitment to life, to fill your entire being.

However immeasurable the manifestations of nature are, I aspire to explore them deeply. Aspire to move through the day with curiosity and a passion for exploration. What am I? What are you? What is mind, emotion, perception, and health? What is education? How do we relate? How do we support each other? – hinder each other? What experiences support co-operation and wholeness? What experiences support a sense of fragmentation and conflict? Nourish this mind of curiosity that moves in the direction of deepening understanding.

However incomparable the mystery of interbeing I vow to surrender to it freely. Contemplating the living network of relating, the interpenetrating lives of myriad creatures in so many vastly different dimensions of being: atoms, molecules, cells, multi-celled collectives, creatures we can see and living eco-systems we can only intuit. We are part of all of this. How could we be separate? Where did we begin? What is it all about? Explore the possibility that all lives are inter-meshings of ultimately unknowable mystery. As the Vietnamese teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh has said, "We inter-are!" With trust and wonderment, find a way to surrender into this 'mystery of interbeing'.

Any one or combination of these four contemplations can be a nourishing start for a day, for a life, or for a single session of contemplation or exploration. Each one, when fully unfolded embraces and contains the spirit of the other three. Resting in the healing space of what is refuge for you, nourish the great aspiration to embody these wholesome ways of being throughout the coming day. How might these affect your relationships, the way you earn your living and the way you see the world? Do they have any implications for our education system, our approach to healing, policing, law, business, social cooperation and so forth?

Mapping the Day – Reflecting on *Adhitthana*

Having touched the ground of refuge and belonging, and been nurtured with a breakfast of wholesome aspiration, now we get on with the 'day'. In terms of a life, this phase might correspond to adolescence. What will I be when I grow up? What will I do today? *Adhitthana* is a Pali word meaning intent or determination. If you are a list maker, this is your moment. Solid in refuge and well breakfasted on bodhicitta aspiration, consider in detail what you intend to do or explore in this session of meditation, in this day, in this life. Now is the moment to be quite specific. For example, today, using the sensations of breathing for a support, I am going to explore resting in a continuity of awareness in the midst of whatever is happening. Or, I am going to explore this particular *sadhana* or meditation practice, giving special attention to this or that part. Or, I am going to drive to work, meet with so and so, remember to pick up such and such and not to loose my temper.

Essentially, reflecting on *adhitthana* is a moment for clarifying what you are intending to explore in the coming day. It doesn't necessarily mean that you will succeed in doing these things, such is the unpredictability of life, it does however mean that you begin the session with some clear intent and this includes intent for how to engage the unexpected!

Going to Work

Having woken up and refreshed in a remembrance of deep connection, having breakfasted on nourishing *bodhicitta* and breathed your intent about what you aspire to explore today, now you enter the adult stage of life and 'go to work'. By work, I'm not suggesting a lot of huffing and puffing with sweat and struggle, and I don't mean work as opposed to play. Your real work is simply and profoundly you, all of you – functioning well, working smoothly, a humming of myriad, living, intelligent beings, from cells to ecosystems, seamlessly fitting together and shimmering for a moment through time, as you.

From a certain point of view there are only two places where bodhisattvas work. One place is the laboratory and the other is the hospital. The laboratory is a place of curiosity and experimentation. It is a place for investigation and enquiry; for measuring and weighing, timing and quantifying, for studying connections and patterns. What, where, when, how, who and why, are our lab assistants and we work silently together, drawn into a community of wonderment that involves muscle and metabolism, feeling and memory, categorizing and conceptualizing, focus and amazement. It is a mind curious about living in all its richness and un-pin-downableness. It is life touching life; a communion of generosity and deepening understanding. Our commute to work doesn't take long. This lab is located right in the midst of our immediate experience and can be entered as soon as we care to be there.

The hospital is a place of healing, of caring, of hospitality. It is a place for rest and recuperation, a place to cry, to grieve and to cradle the pain of disrupted lives. It is a place for hunkering down, for waiting; a place to invite a nameless breath of blessing to softly, gently, caringly, bring us back into the world of the living. This bodhisattva-hospital is stocked with medicines of forgiveness, empathy and profound acceptance. Its floors and rooms are regularly disinfected with the timeless skills of all doctoring: love, compassion, deep listening and an ocean of patience arising out of realising that every living being grows and unfolds with its own unique and wondrous timing.

Actually every good lab has at least a first-aid room and every good hospital has a laboratory. The two go together. Sometimes we find ourselves in the lab, curious, experimenting, probing, questioning. This is the alertness and attentiveness of life. In Buddhist teaching it is called the process of insight or *vipassana*. Sometimes we find ourselves in the hospital of our life situation where the emphasis is on kindness, caring, patience, and spaciousness. This is the deep process of healing, both for oneself and for others. When the hospital work works well, it supports increasing degrees of well-being, peace, ease and acceptance. This is the cultivation of tranquil abiding, called *samatha*.

It doesn't matter where you outwardly work, be it an office, a factory, a garden, or a meditation cave. It doesn't matter what particular technique or skills your employment requires. As a bodhisattva you will find yourself either working in the hospital or in the lab or in a combination of both. You arrive at work, ready for action. You never know what the day or the needs of the moment will bring forth. The public address system of your body/mind sounds, "Will doctor, (*fill in your own name*), please report to the cardiac unit!" "Will professor, (*fill in your name*), please report to the particle accelerator." A bodhisattva's true work is both exploration that unfolds ever

deepening appreciation and wonder about this universe *and* the work of looking after that which is doing the exploration, caring for it, supporting its innate process of healing and whole-ing. The deeper we look, the more we understand that we are all profoundly coupled together, a seamless interweaving of aliveness. How does it work? How does it all fit together? How can I help? Your lab work helps me and my hospital work helps you. Your hospital work helps us and our lab work helps all beings; each one a unique and precious part of this unbroken living wholeness.

Review – Retirement

After the day's work, a rich life of working well, a our career begins to draw to an end and we enter the retirement phase of our journey. The end of a life, the end of the day, the end of the meditation session is a time to relax and review what happened during the preceding 'day'. By review, I don't mean critical analysis. This is a time for quiet integration, for coming to understand the extraordinary rightness of how it all flowed together, whatever it was. Let the day's experience wash through you and allow yourself to reverberate with whatever implications: philosophically, morally, ethically, or meaningfully, that might arise for you. Allow a wordless intuition to bless you with a sense of life richly lived or a session well explored; with a sense of being immersed in a vast ongoing mystery that involves every being on this planet. Create some space for the whole day/life/meditation, to reveal itself as a mandala of unexpected wonder.

Letting the Energy Flow – Sharing the Merit

As old age moves towards death and the day eases into night, we finish with a spontaneous meditation of loving-kindness, profound respect, or of caring and reverence, for the living mystery all around. Sitting in the glow of your review, allow the creative energy that has bubbled forth during the day, during the meditation, during your life, to continue to flow. Appreciate everyone, everything, every place and situation that has nurtured you. Appreciate how the flow of you, your own unique life, has nurtured everyone that you have met, physically, emotionally and mentally, in ways you know, as well as in ways you can hardly imagine. Feel the reverberations, the wake of your journey, rippling with the lives of other beings: beings you know, beings you don't know; other species you know and a vast numbers of life forms you don't know; beings you like and beings you dislike. With a deepening faith/trust in the unbroken wholeness of this transforming community that we call life, rest in confidence that all that was good about this day of exploration is continuing to enliven myriad others, resonating their own innate capacities for authenticity, presence, and compassionate engagement in this extraordinary world of becoming.



Such is another day, a life-affirming possibility that is in dramatic contrast to that day in Calgary. It involves a very different creature from *homo consumer marketplaciensis* or *homo delusiens*. To be the fullness of human animal that one is – to recognize and then to interact from an experience of deeply alive, seamless interdependency with all living beings – is to enter a mystery that can be both hair-raisingly awesome and, at the same time, utterly ordinary.

We began this essay with a brief consideration of organized religion. We seem to have forgotten that 'organ'-ized begins with 'organ' and organs are complex living communities of cells that, in communion with other organs, make up organisms. They are not mechanical parts. The *organization* of life gives rise to all the physical and conceptual social structures in which we participate. Perhaps this is the basis of true religion. If we were able to experience the world this way, there may come a day when, taxonomists will chronicle how *homo lost its wayiens*, a sub-species of *homo sapiens*, evolved into such a dramatically different way of being that a new category became necessary. It might be something like *homo bodhisatviens*.



Endnotes:

1. Havel's collection of essays called "Living in Truth" was edited by Jan Vladislav and published by Faber and Faber 1986. Two of the essays "The Power of the Powerless" and "Politics and Conscience" I feel should be required reading by anyone deeply moved by social issues and the well-being of this living world. These two essays are available from Havel's website <www.vaclavhavel.cz> They are, however, full of typographic errors. I have cleaned up these two essays. If you would like a PDF of either or both of them, contact us at greendharmatreasury and we will send you them.
2. The downtown core of Calgary has huge skyscrapers, mostly banks and oil companies, which are clad in reflective glass.