



bodhisattva in training

JANE COSKRY, mother of three and champion of the homeless, has been inching her way towards bodhisattva-hood since she read a book by Christmas Humphreys with Buddha on the front cover when she was 11. Jane, who now manages accommodation projects for young people in Essex, UK, has had 16 years of helping the socially excluded, asylum seekers, homeless families and (soon) teenage mothers and babies in a deprived area. She and Alison Murdoch, Jamyang Buddhist Centre's director, also put together a training session around stress, safety and support issues for the National Homeless Alliance.



Photo: Tim Fox Evans

I talked my way into university to do a Philosophy degree by debating Buddhism with a former Jesuit monk. While I was at university, I took a job as a housing benefits assessor.

Buddhist. Bodhisattva-hood is a big deal; I am really fascinated by bodhisattvas [beings whose task is to take care of others].

I also love the energy of the Gelug tradition. It has a very active practice, which suits me as I've more energy than I can shake a stick at and I find it hard to sit still. I find visualization easy. Visualizing ourselves as deities is a very practical way to dig out our own, hidden resources, particularly courage and strength, and can be very useful in a practical sense, particularly when things look like they're getting out of hand.

The following 13 years as a project worker for a local authority in reception centers for homeless families and individuals were real Dharma practice.

I actually spent a while avoiding Buddhism until I made sure I had looked at everything else. But deep down [and after a few years of depression following the sudden death of her father when she was 17] I knew I would find what I needed in the Dharma, and began to learn meditation with The Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. I also enrolled in the Buddhist

Working in homelessness, and with poverty generally, has provided endless opportunities to challenge my limitations and develop all sorts of useful skills. I have learned so much from listening to people's problems, and have really had to face some very heavy and sometimes dangerous situations. I really

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Society's correspondence course. I read everything I could find about meditation and consciousness and did a diploma in psychotherapy and hypnosis around my shifts at work.

Then I began to move towards Tibetan Buddhism, and eventually found myself sitting in Jamyang Buddhist Centre in Finsbury Park, London, having tea with John Feuille, probably around 1990. After months of gazing at pictures of His Holiness, and attending teachings, I finally decided I'd better go to his teachings in Dharamsala, which I first did in 1994.

Finding the right practice, which I did, is very similar to falling in love — lots of mad moments followed by life-long commitments and huge responsibilities! Personally, I am very drawn to simple Zen-like iconography and monosyllabic mantras and silence. So how come I have spent hours sitting on stone floors before huge shrines full of thangkhas and golden statues, deafened by cymbals and bells, frantically trying to memorize mantras that take five minutes to say once? I think this is due to me being more of a 'bodhisattvaist' than a

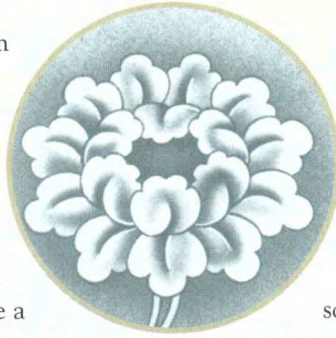
relate personally to people in trouble — it could so easily be me, and has been in the past. I've had my share of waking up in strange places not knowing how the hell I got there!

I have developed self-confidence through my work, and I think that this comes from having to deal with situations that, given the choice, I would run from. Sometimes I have had to open doors I didn't want to open, or tell someone something bound to provoke a violent response. Opening the door despite the fear has been the biggest challenge, and I have had to deal with these kinds of dilemmas frequently.

Working from a personal Buddhist context has enabled me to realize that compassion is the key to being able to cope and act positively on a very practical level. If the situation is urgent, I want something that will always work, and remembering compassion always has some kind of calming effect, and has prevented me from losing patience and becoming angry and scared.

Forgetting is easier than remembering, though, and I worry about inflicting harm by not being mindful. For me, the bottom line is how far I can work for others while being able to support

my family and ensure that I give as much to them as I can. I hardly ever get the chance to sit on my backside on any cushion, let alone a meditation cushion! Behaving myself doesn't come easily to me, and I really need to sit quietly in the corner 'like a normal person' and practice meditation, and study, on a regular basis.



I suffer from stress when I don't meditate, and need to relax quite thoroughly to really have a good go at meditating, so I am currently using any means to relax. I travel around a lot at work, and sometimes wander off in the woods or through the fields between meetings. I must look strange wandering around in my suit in the mud, or sitting on the bonnet of my car eating sandwiches in a cornfield.

At the end of the day, all I've got the strength to do for relaxation is listen to music – at the moment I'm listening exclusively to blues singer Kelly Joe Phelps. I've remembered him because of one of the lines in a song: "I can't spend my life only believing that I'll be saved," which sums it up, really.

I don't believe in 'burn-out' or compassion fatigue. I think it's nature's way of telling us we'd be of more benefit to others elsewhere. It's unfortunate that we so often choose to perceive ourselves as failures instead, whereas it's usually just nature moving us along, and this is quite normal.

It's hard to sustain a formal practice when you don't live near a Dharma center [she moved to Essex in 1998], and when

there are no other Buddhists around, and when all your time is spent working and looking after the family. Obviously, I need support too, and I am used to being able to access this via my involvement with a Buddhist sangha and broader community. With no spare time to attend teachings or even just visit a center, it can feel like I'm alone, with only my own, sorry understanding propping me up like a scarecrow in the middle of great big field always at risk of being blown away.

On the up side, I am much more aware of the value of being part of a spiritual community. I have to accept that I might not ever be able to attend more teachings, or have the opportunity for retreat and study, and that is very tough, but how much more do I really need when I can barely understand the basics? For me, social action is crucial, every beggar and every drug addict, every abused child and sex offender is the same as us. This is something that I think really dawns on us when we become involved. We have to spend so much time working just to survive well, that for me, Right Livelihood has become the most important part to get right, or as right as I can. ☸

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