

stranger, enemy, friend

Bodhisattvas are where you find them, says BOB SAUNDERS.



Illustration: Benjamin Michael Worden

stranger friend enemy
equanimity
stranger enemy friend

My initial image of a six-hour Greyhound Bus ride from Santa Rosa to Eureka involved reading Dharma books on a half-empty bus and watching the verdant northern California coastal forest sliding by – a veritable bus retreat after the Dalai Lama's Heart of Wisdom teachings in Mountain View, California.

Few people were waiting at the bus depot. I struck up a conversation with a clean-cut young man who was going to help his father in Ukiah, near Indian country. My initial interest in his circumstances waned as he described how the insurance company, and the halfway house, were mistreating him. The insurance people's refusal to pay up for his wrecked car kept twisting with the unwarranted accusations of the halfway house manager. My attention sharpened, however, as he concluded that, "In the joint, people know how to behave and how to communicate respectfully – because if they don't, they get their faces smashed in." Was he tensing up at this point?

This conversation had distracted me from noticing that a steady trickle of people had arrived for the northbound bus. When it pulled in, even more people emerged from the depot

or from parked cars to get in line.

The bus driver looked harried as he opened up the luggage compartment and started loading bags into it. I heard him say that there weren't enough seats for everyone. "If Greyhound bumps people," I wondered, "do you get a free Greyhound ticket to anywhere in the country?" "No," someone explained. "People stand in the aisles, at least as many as can fit in." My vision of a Greyhound retreat receded as I contemplated standing for six hours. But as a former mountain climber and budding bodhisattva, fresh from seeing the Dalai Lama, I resisted elbowing my way to the front of the line.

"Women and older people on first," announced the bus driver and my gray hair qualified me. I nodded sympathetically at my muscular buddy heading for Ukiah. He clearly fitted the criteria for standing in the aisle. I hoped he realized that smashing the bus driver in the face was not going to improve his prospects for getting to Ukiah any more comfortably.

As the people in front of me peeled off into the few remaining empty seats, my option became the non-reclining, three-person seat across the back of the bus next to the toilet.

I swung into the middle seat next to a man with short hair and a '70s style mustache down almost to his jaw line. He looked like he might smell. This impression may have been heightened by his first communication to me, which went something like: "I don't want to sit next to *you*. I want to sit by some girl. Get up and let one of them girls get in here, man. Come on, I don't want *you* here. I don't mean anything personal, you know, I just want to sit next to one of these girls, get up, man." I suspect the intensity of these utterances qualified his mental state as one of "afflicted emotion" in the Dharma texts I probably wasn't going to get to read.

I decided to stay put. The least I could do was to protect some young woman from the harassment that obviously would have ensued. He continued to grumble, until I finally mumbled, "I think it's kind of first come, first served here; I can't really do anything about it."

Normally, in these circumstances, I would resort to silence or monosyllables to discourage further communication – all the more so because I was still clinging to the idea of some deep reading alternated with serious gazing and reflection if enough people eventually exited. It seemed pretty clear that my seat companion was not likely to pull out a *New York Times* best seller or even a *Rolling Stone*, but would probably keep talking.

With echoes of the bodhisattva ideal reverberating in my head, I made a second decision to engage in the moment rather than escape from it. My plan was to switch the conversation to another topic, and try to reduce the tension.

I learned that Mike was going to Garberville, a good four and a half hours' worth of bus time. He wanted to know where the road to Reno was in relation to this road. The only place he had ever been outside of the San Jose-Hollister area was Reno, and he seemed slightly confused to be going in a different direction. As I tried to explain the major north-south and east-west routes in northern California, it was quickly evident that Mike wasn't the brightest light on the block. But he was a talker, so without too much effort on my part, the conversation progressed at a steady clip. The initial unpleasantness faded quickly and I was becoming bored with the chitchat when some surprising information dramatically shifted my perception of Mike and the whole situation.

He lived with his mother and brother in a brand new house. The buoyant housing market had allowed his mother to sell the family home in San Jose and make enough money to buy outright a house in Hollister about 50 miles south. While I wasn't surprised that Mike at age 35 or 40 was still living with his mother and brother, what sharply changed my view of him

was that they were both disabled and he was taking care of them. His mother had emphysema and his brother was in a wheelchair as a result of a stroke at age 52 brought on by a serious drug habit. When he wasn't at the body shop, he spent most of his time taking care of his family. When an old friend had asked him to help on a barn project for a few weeks in Garberville, his mother had said he should go because he worked too hard taking care of them all the time and they would get someone else in to help.

Mike suddenly looked like a completely different person. Someone who had initially appeared scuzzy and dirty now shone under another light. His crude appearance was transformed by a gentle, warm reflection of the bodhisattva-like deeds of caring for his family. I found myself moving beyond my initial self-interested strategic engagement to a deeper feeling of kindness and interest in Mike. For the next several hours I shared his offerings of Ritz crackers with spray-on cheese, got excited with him about the adventures to unfold in Garberville and, most importantly, truly enjoyed his company.

The true import of the teachings of the Dalai Lama on emptiness came home to me in a very powerful way. We conventionally see the people and events around us as real and fixed "things." We ignore the causes and conditions that are actually inseparable from the "things" or events and immediately attach a label of good or bad, desirable or undesirable. We then experience the event primarily as a reaction to this label. The power

of emptiness is that we can apply our own label. Our experience of the next moment is not restricted to a conditioned reaction based on conventional labeling derived from a circumscribed view of external appearance or "reality." If we rely on the discriminating awareness that recognizes this truth, we can transform reality.

By remaining open to the situation on the bus and being mindful rather than reacting and putting up a wall, I saw something quite beautiful instead of something ugly. Mike became a bodhisattva, not only in his generosity and kindness to his family, but in the powerful teaching that this situation became – as beautiful and inspiring as it was to experience the wisdom, humor and humility of His Holiness' teaching. Its illumination through this incident, from the most unlikely source I could imagine, became the true teaching from Mountain View. ☸

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