

Boundaries Make Good Bodhisattvas

Pilar Jennings • Summer 2018 • Tricycle

Of all the teachings given by the Buddha that I encountered, his teaching on bodhicitta had the greatest impact on me when I first heard it in my early adulthood. This great resolve for an awakened heart and mind, I learned, was not for me alone but for the benefit of all....

....In our conversations, we discussed the difference between bodhicitta and obligatory caregiving. Bodhicitta doesn't mean that you are always available for everyone else's needs. Feeling compelled or expected to care for children, elders, one's partner, one's supervisor, and others at one's own expense is very different from bodhicitta, which is a heart and mind primed to stay open for the benefit of all.

....So many of us—whether we were encouraged to be too self-focused or too other-focused—struggle to imagine what it would be like to feel capable of ushering in well-being for others while simultaneously honoring our own limits, time, and energy. Here, our feelings can be a trustworthy guide. With enlightenment mind, one feels motivated to awaken fully and begins to do so through increasingly hearing and responding to the experience of all, including ourselves, until we all feel freed up and on board with reality. Bodhicitta creates a sense of abundance, of having great capacity to open up, tap into deeper internal resources, and trust that these are shared resources of compassion, insight, and wisdom. Chronic sublimation and compulsive caretaking, in contrast, usually cause feelings of impingement and stress, or the fear that if you don't offer care, the other person's affection or respect will be withdrawn.

It is important to know the difference between these two projects. Preserving yourself and knowing your boundaries is not the same thing as exclusively seeking your own happiness. It's about the healing process of learning to skillfully discern what will and will not serve all beings, yourself included. This balance is beautifully illustrated by the image of Green Tara, sometimes called the Mother of all Buddhas. With regal humility, she sits with one leg extended, symbolizing her wish to join you in your efforts to establish and share well-being. Her other leg is tucked inward, symbolizing her continued commitment to containing and developing her own mind and body energies that offer sustenance in these efforts. So too, her hands symbolize both her generosity and her need for support from teachers, spiritual methods, and community. This image offers an inspiring symbol of enlightenment mind, letting us see what it looks like to be devoted to our collective well-being. Green Tara reminds us that bodhicitta doesn't involve a minimization of our subjective experience, or require that our own needs be eclipsed; rather, it invites us to locate our spiritual efforts within a larger frame. Bodhicitta nurtures our sense of agency.

