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# The Soldier of Joy Sutra

Cain Boney

University of Minnesota, Morris, boney010@morris.umn.edu

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The  
Soldier of Joy  
Sutra



*Nantembo (1839-1925) Procession of Monks. 1924. Ink on Paper.*

by Cain Bonet

*Dedicated to Dr. Tammy Berberi for providing the essay with a title and her enthusiastic support of my practice.*

#### Authors Note

Militant compassion seems like a contradiction but a more engaged form of Buddhism is necessary if Mahayana truly wishes to free all beings from mental affliction. This nontraditional formulation of active Buddhism owes much to Gary Snyder's "Buddhism and the Revolution," one of the first pieces of Buddhist philosophy to acknowledge the political, sociological, cultural, and environmental conditions which makes true mental liberation difficult for many people. My essay encourages Buddhism to grapple with this complex issue on a global level. The aim should be the establishment of a global bodhisattva network, one made of citizens who encourage the societal and political cultivation of compassion rather than accepting anger, greed, and delusion as necessary evils. Bodhisattvas know that in reality, there is nothing tangible that separates us; they realize that they must drink from the same river as everyone else. Likewise, when I purge myself of all abstractions I realize that I am not Cain Bonet. I am not a man. I am not a person of color. I am not an American. I am not a liberal. I am not a Buddhist. But I am. Two horizontal eyes and one vertical nose. The same as you.

PART I

BODHISATTVA BOOT CAMP

### Love-making

Life is a river of mingling flesh. As we flow down its current, we are all linked together in the task of keeping this river, our only source of sustenance, crystal clean. Go observe this fact for yourself instead of taking my word for it. Grab a willing partner, bring them to a quiet place, and sit cross-legged on the floor right in front of them for at least ten minutes. For the entire duration, stare directly into their eyes. Feelings of awkwardness will arise, maybe even fright, but hold still. Instead of looking away, confront the raw power of beholding someone as they behold you. This person sitting in front of you entered their mother's womb as a single sperm cell that emerged victorious amongst millions. Millenia's worth of intercourse went into their making and now here they are, a composite image of thousands of diverse people, a microcosm of the river of flesh. What does this composite image of humanity look like to you? Presumably, it looks like two eyes, horizontal, one nose, vertical. It looks like a mirror looking back at you, a face reflecting your face. Observe as your blinks synchronize with their blinks. Now, smile at them. You will receive a smile back. Aha! No longer is the knowledge of the dharma esoteric, and now it can illuminate all the pages of human history. You can now realize that the individuals within the Nazi ranks were not inherently evil. In fact, they were buddhas who, black-out drunk on the poisons of greed, anger, and desire, were hopelessly blinded to the fact that the Jews, the Gypsies, and other targeted groups were buddhas as well. If anything can be

gained from the horrors of 20th century genocides let it be a secular resolution that we will give each and every person on Planet Earth the capability to recognize the valuable Life within all sentient beings, not just the ones in your national, ideological, or ethnic tribe.

### The Bodhisattva

*Clank, clank, clank*; the sound of the thoughts in your head, the words in your mouth, and the motions of your body. Enabling you to sculpt the world around you, these powers of mind, speech, and action are a chisel in your hand, a gift given to you at birth. Sculptors who turn a raw block of marble into a piece of art are revered by society for bringing joy to the human race. Why, then, does society not place more emphasis on those who craft reality into a masterpiece? Is this not the ultimate gift to the human race? We all share reality but there is a subset of humanity that has taken the time to craft each thought, word, and deed as if it were a masterpiece: bodhisattvas. These individuals, mere mortals like you and I, have harnessed the awesome power of their minds and purged the three poisons of anger, greed, and delusion. Wandering the Earth indiscriminately, these beings have vowed to ease the suffering of all other beings until the river of flesh is crystal clear, free of any of the three poison's contamination.

## Avalokiteśvara

Buddhist mythology speaks of अवलोकितेश्वर or the "Lord who looks down," a bodhisattva who perceives the despairing cries of all sentient beings. He uses his one-thousand eyes to spot their suffering, and he uses his one-thousand arms to relieve it. The one-thousand eyes of Avalokiteśvara close the gaps of geography and culture, concerned solely with the welfare of all living things.

Therefore, when I, aspiring bodhisattva, dive into 24 hour news cycles, I ignore all the mentions of walls, borders, religion, and ethnicity. Instead I listen astutely for the cries growing out of civilian oppression, constant war, and humanity's cannibalization of Planet Earth. Surely, cultivating compassion for all Life is a profound duty to put on one's shoulders. How can a mere mortal reach the same bodhisattva ideal as Avalokiteśvara, without being crushed by the weight of the world's sorrows? With compassionate detachment, the answer to this koan arrived one night, years ago, in my sleep.

## The Dream

“Better than a thousand verses/ composed of meaningless words  
is a single word of verse which,/ having been heard, brings peace.”

— Shakyamuni Buddha (*Dhammapada*, verse 101, 23)

*Amidst a dense sea of smog, rumbling engines, and blaring horns, I meander along an uneven sidewalk, innocuously following a house crow. Fidgety, the bird swivels her head as she hops, keeping an eye on the path in front of her, strewn with plastic, food refuse, feces, and broken glass, and the curious human behind her. We walk alongside a congested road cramped on each side by crumbling buildings. Swathes of uniformed school children and pedestrian commuters rush past the crow, myself, and the multitudes of bodies sprawled along the sidewalk.*

*They are not dead, just decrepit in their poverty. Pushed and pulled by the hordes of people all scrambling to their destinations, I feel as if I am dissolving into a larger organism and losing my identity. Anxiety begins to grip my throat as the dirty air, excessive noise, and heat squirm into my pores. I crave sanctuary, to find a spot where I can let my ancestors lull me with the songs of myself. Intuiting my crisis, the crow points her beak towards a pristine government sign standing on a median. The marker says **Burial Mounds** in big white lettering and points to the resting place of my ancestors.*

*Below the quivering sign, perturbed by the engines' loud opening and closing of mechanical valves, three much quieter valves open and close within the hearts of a mother and her two children. The young boy and girl lay their scrawny naked bodies and matted heads on a bare browned mattress flopped over the median. They appear bored rather than distressed, the*

*little girl standing up to hold her tiny hand out to the cars which fly past her. Beside her, a disembodied pink sari floats in a billowing sea of black. Her mother is kneeling over a pillar of jet black smoke, burying her face in a poisonous pile of plastic. My ears begin to ring as I pant the heavy humid air which blankets the streets. I stare at her, entranced: She appears to me as a faceless creature. Sensing my prying gaze, she peeks her head out of the smoke stack and locks eyes with me across the sea of half-dead dogs and humans. Hers is the face of poverty: hollow, leprosy's boils, skin blackened by the sun, eyes horizontal, nose vertical. My chest spasms and I bend over, hacking up black phlegm.*

*Craving a tidy solution, I continue following the crow. We wander past the sidewalk's end, where the yellowed grass dips under a concrete web of elevated freeways and highways, twisting up into the sky. Rubbish litters down from the vehicles reigning above, their pathways blotting out our sun. With time we reach a clearing, a patch of sunlight illuminating our destination: the burial mound, crowning a small and secluded hill. I see a man sitting cross-legged atop my ancestors.*

*Before my face can twist in rage, my guide makes a grandiose statement to me, turning her back on me and opening her wings. WshWshWsh. Air mercifully fans my moist cheeks and arms. The nerves in my stomach swell. In the same place as before, the crow reveals the gored underside of her wing. She closes it and waddles away before her insides can fall out and nourish the parched ground. Sharp pains seize my chest. Who can escape this hell unmolested?*

*I look to the interloper perching on my ancestral site. I notice he is a decrepit old man. His familiar face sags; loose liver-spotted skin. Soon, he will be an ancestor himself. Is this a*

*sign? I see an island of wisdom in this sea of madness. "Sir, are you a Buddha?" Instead of acknowledging me, he stays submerged in his meditation.*

Toucans scatter. Woooosh. Bulldozing of the Amazon rainforest, one of Planet Earth's last cradles of Life. Bloated cows graze amongst burnt stumps. An emaciated jaguar roars like a chainsaw, pacing back and forth in his iron cage, castrated.

*Face forward and eyes half-shut, one drooping below the other, the Buddha seems to take no notice of my screams, of the despairing cries of the entire world. My eyes bulge as I realize the deafening roar of engines and mechanized horns are swallowing all of my calls for help.*

Mushroom cloud. BIG BANG. A schoolboy, dumbfounded, walks in circles carrying his severed arm. An animate cadaver runs past him, the entirety of its skin hanging from its fingertips. It's his mother and her shocked feet tangle up in her dangling sack of skin. THUMP. She falls over. The boy continues walking in circles blankly. An ocean away, Truman pops a bottle of champagne in giddy celebration.

*I wince. Hyperventilation. Wobbling legs. Surrounded by a hopeless wasteland. OI was overwhelmed and wished for death. In response, a faint smile appears on the old man's lips:*

"It's OK"

*All noise: silenced. "Thus I had heard." A deep breath. Liberation.*

I awake and lay peacefully in bed. My bladder is full and I am thirsty, but I accept my discomfort without complaint. It's OK.

## The Dharma

You are a part of the Earth; in fact, there is no part of you that exists outside of it. If you want to be a bodhisattva, a silencer of noise, then you must be the part of this Planet that is OK. Stating this word aloud is the first step: “It’s OK.” Watch as the “O” leaves your mouth, well-defined like a smoke ring and encompasses the entire planet:

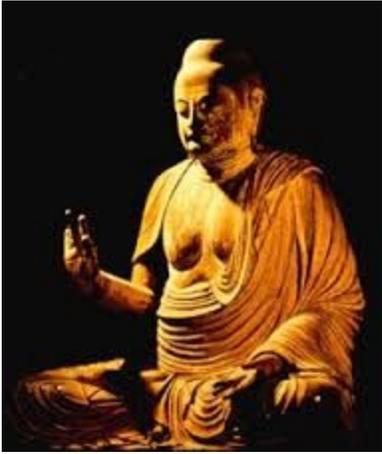


Gazing down from outer space, Avalokiteśvara sees the troubles of sentient beings through the OK lens of Planet Earth. Hell or high water, the globe spins mellow and constant. With detached compassion she shelters and feeds all sentient beings indiscriminately. This nature is your nature.

## Tuesday Morning

I rise from bed at 7am, fully rested. I spend the next hour attending to the needs of my body: washing my skin, brushing my teeth, and emptying my bowels. When I am finished I step outside and am blinded by a white light. No deity, just a snow-covered morning in Morris, Minnesota. I feel joy as I listen to the squeak of the white snow under my purple sneakers.

At 8am I am in a dimly lit room with five others. We are sitting on our *zafus* and *zabutons*, drinking our tea in comfortable silence. The blots of bright-green matcha foam are striking within my blue ceramic cup. I tilt the cup and watch as the islands of foam collide: pangea. They drip onto my tongue moments before the singing bowl resounds. I adjust my body: eyes half shut, legs crossed, back straightened, head bowed. I take on the form of a Heian period masterpiece:



*Diiiiinnnn*

*nnnnnnnnnnnn*

*nnng.*

*Seated Shaka in the Mirokudô Murôji Nara Prefecture C 850 900 - AD - 265.*

The blissful space of no-thought. A zone of liberation called the paper-thin present, detached from the fluff of past and future.

The practitioners around me have not been sitting Zazen for long. Fidgeting every few moments, they try to get comfortable as their ablaze minds howl. Like self-immolating monks, they sit valiantly with their eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and mind burning. For a lifetime their senses have acted as tinder for their minds, blazing with the three poisons, blazing with birth, aging and death. Staying still instead of running around, they are recognizing the reality of their condition for the first time. An uncomfortable, painful process, they remain unshakable in order to extinguish the flame. They are removing themselves from the unceasing chaos of the world of cause and effect. Once having observed reality from afar, they will then enter back into it as soldiers of joy. I drown as I reflect in my stream-of-thought. My passions are easily ignited by the passions of others, since I am a novice myself.

*“Thump*

*Thump*

*Thump*”

my wooden head reverberates throughout the room. Within my quivering dome, my monkey mind rattles the cage of my skull, screeching and baring his teeth. He is fixated on an itch on my shoulder and pleads for me to scratch it. I stare ahead peacefully, eyelids half-shut, one drooping below the other. *It's ok* I reassure him. The discomfort of the itch rises and falls without any effort from me. Monkey seethes quietly, pouring himself a fine glass of scotch. He takes a sip and grimaces, slamming the glass on the table and putting on his spectacles. Vigorously pacing back and forth, the primate works himself into a frenzy:

“You heartless bastard! Why must you wake me up so early in the morning just to do nothing?!”

“Well, realizing nothingness in the morning allows me to find the reality of everything else during the afternoon. It helps me perceive the realm of nothing, the zen of absolute reality, under the unceasing motion of daily life.”

Hearing its cue, a carpet of small purple particles unrolls in the empty space before me. Two hideously unkempt feet float down the purple stream, balancing on a single Mississippi reed. The stranger's robed body is blank, a white void heavily outlined with ink. Matted hair, bulging eyes, and a misshapen nose under the hood of his robe offsets any uncertainty that it is Bodhidharma. Monkey and I jump in unison as the Zen patriarch skips introductions to bark at us “if you're not sure, don't act!” He points a stubby finger in Monkey's face, “once you act, you wander through birth and death and regret having no refuge! Poverty and hardship are created by false thinking! To understand this mind you have to act without acting. Only then will you see things from a Tathagata's perspective” (Bodhidharma, 33). He looks around and notices the wide-eyed novices staring at him. Getting a handle on himself, Bodhidharma clears his throat

and continues in a harsh whisper: “your nature is the buddha. And the buddha is a person who’s free: free of plans, free of cares. If you don’t see your nature and run around all day looking somewhere else, you’ll never find a buddha. The truth is, there’s nothing to find” (Bodhidharma, 13). Just like that, he vanishes into thin air and I linger on the epiphany in his last statement. “Nothing is something to be found” I say aloud. Monkey claps with one hand obnoxiously, spilling his scotch onto my jeans. Smiling cheek to cheek, he leans into my face. “Ha! You coward! I got you all figured out. You just want to sit in the little sanctuary of your mind as the world burns.”

“No, I just want to ensure that I’m not harming others when I do take action.”

I take out a dusty projector and spool film into my mind’s eye. Monkey and I sit back and watch grainy footage of ourselves at four years old, playing with my best friend Trevor on the sidewalk:

*“Ahhhhh” I scream, my knees jumping up repeatedly in succession. I yell out in delight when I lift my sneakers and see ants imprinted onto the pavement. My best friend Trevor and I watch as the fallen ants’ comrades come and collect the corpses. “My turn!” Trevor says to me, grinning and showing his missing teeth. The 5 o’ clock sun casts a warm glow on my Monkey smile. Form melts.*

The warm images ooze as the film burns under the heat of the projector. With a shrug, I continue on: “ the difference between a child and an adult is the latter has the faculties to discern between beneficial and detrimental actions. Therefore, when I sit on the cushion I am harnessing my mature mind by locating my ocean of OK so when I get off the cushion I can weave this quality into everything I do.

Vimalakirti, a layman who possessed supreme understanding, was well aware of the true value of meditation. When Vimalakirti found Sariputra, a disciple of the buddha's, sitting Zazen under a tree, he chided the monk, saying "Sariputra, meditation is not necessarily sitting!" (Burt Watson, *Vimalakirti Niradesa Sutra*, 20). He knew that once one had located their OK it could be found by giving complete focus to everything one does.

"You are not going to destroy the machine with your starry-eyed idealism."

"You are right. Luckily, the bodhisattva approached his idealist goal of liberation for all like a pragmatist. The actions of Shakyamuni buddha in the first passage of the *Diamond Sutra* serve as a model for bodhisattva behavior:

"One day before noon, the Bhagavan put on his patched robe and picked up his bowl and entered the capital of Shravasti for offerings. After begging for food in the city and eating his meal of rice, he returned from his daily round in the afternoon, put his robe and bowl away, washed his feet, and sat down on the appointed seat. After crossing his legs and adjusting his body, he turned his awareness to what was before him" (Red Pine, *Diamond Sutra*, 1).

"That last sentence, turning your awareness to what is before you. That is the essence of the dharma. From the moment he awakes, the buddha is fully engaged with the Life around him. He goes into the bustling city, the river of mingling flesh, to nourish himself and foster a positive relationship with strangers."

"Stop skewing the buddha as if he was some enlightenment-era logician and not a god."

"On his deathbed, Shakyamuni told his followers to be islands unto themselves.

Shakyamuni buddha merely uncovered the truth of absolute reality, he did not create it. He knew that, ultimately, one must experience nothingness by themselves. Words and teachings were only

a roadmap that could get the practitioner so far. Eventually, each of us have to go on our own quest to discover reality. I motion for Monkey to sit in a desk as I shuffle through my stacked spools of film. “Ah, found it” I say. “Here is a summarized representation of the Buddha’s quest” I tell Monkey as the film begins to play.

### Buddha 101

Before the buddha reached enlightenment he was Prince Shakyamuni, living in a technicolor kingdom filled with gorgeous concubines, the latest technology, fine foods, private concerts, his own zoo, and anything else his heart desired. He was married to the love of his life and would soon have a son and an heir to his riches. Prince Shakyamuni would have to teach him about the ways of world. As he looked around the manicured lawn of his palace a thought began to bother him: *do I know anything about the world?* His Father had given him everything he could ever wish for but by doing so he had limited the prince’s life to a privileged bubble.

Each bout of love-making and drinking seemed to contain less pleasure than the last. The gaping pores of his concubines and the dull conversations during the feasts began to infect all of his pleasure. One day, the troubled Shakyamuni was strolling the palace grounds deep in thought when he found a small tear in the wallpaper of his technicolor kingdom. When he peeked his head through the hole he shuddered in horror, witnessing the harsh realities of sickness, old age, and death for the first time in his life. That evening he looked in the mirror and watched his beautiful skin wrinkle, grow pale, and decay before his eyes. His stomach felt sick, not even a mountain of riches could stave off this fate. How would he tell his son about these horrors?

In the middle of the night the prince snuck out of his palace and traded the life of a prince for the life of a holy man. Vowing to find an end to suffering, Shakyamuni shed everything: his

wife, newborn son, silk clothes, concubines, feasts, horses, scented oils, his long locks, et cetera. Rid of all material goods, Shakyamuni continued to purge the materials of his mind for another decade. He marveled at the unbelievable amount of useless debris strewn across his mind. Song lyrics, memories, fantasies, anxieties, and bouts of rage.



*Fasting Buddha. Ghandhara Period. Lahore Museum, Pakistan.*

Nine years later, a skeleton of his former self, Shakyamuni sat alone in a cave, allowing himself only one grain of rice a day. Nearing thirty, he had still not found an end to suffering. The ex-prince despaired, the rigors of austerity seemed no more fulfilling than the heat of hedonism.

Seeing the emaciated man meditating yonder, a small peasant girl entered the belly of the beast and brought the emaciated monk a steaming bowl of rice. The little bodhisattva smiled at



“Man, Mara was a badass!” exclaimed the Monkey as I turn off the projector. I chuckle, “yea, you guys have a lot in common. Anyway, with Mara gone, the buddha was able to cure humanity’s illness by formulating the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path.”

### Four Noble Truths

- 1.) The beginning of this path can be found in the truth of दुःख, pronounced *Dukkha*, or the inevitable arising of discontent in Life.
- 2.) The truth of तण्हा, pronounced *Taṇhā*, or craving of sensual desire. Wishing certain things would be, or not be which causes *Dukkha*.
- 3.) The truth that there is a liberation from discontent in निब्बान, pronounced *Nirodha*, or the silencing of noise that is Nirvana.
- 4.) The truth of अरियो अट्ठङ्गिको मग्गो , pronounced *Magga*, or the Noble Eightfold Path, which leads to Nirvana and therefore freedom from suffering (Watson, the Vimalakirti Nirdesa Sutra, 14).

### The Eightfold Path

This system is not a hierarchy, but an interconnected, harmonious code of conduct.

- |                 |                 |                     |                      |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| 1.right views   | 3.right speech  | 5. right livelihood | 7. right mindfulness |
| 2.right thought | 4.right conduct | 6. right efforts    | 8. right meditation  |

(Pine, the Vimalakirti Nirdesa Sutra, 14)

I finish my lecture and look over to see Monkey with his head on his desk. A small river of spittle drips from his slacking jaw onto the floor. I drop a stack of books near his head and he wakes up with a screech.

“Yea, yea — Buddhism is just a system of control, man.”

“Yes, it is a system of self-control.”

“You Fascist! Stop trying to make Buddhism into a science!” Monkey picks his earwax and flicks it in my direction.

“You are right. Buddhism should not be masked as a natural science. Rather, it should be taking the facts given to us from the natural sciences and contextualizing them into a bigger picture in order to direct humanity towards a more harmonious path. For example, the current human population on Planet Earth is expanding to numbers that have never before been seen; 11.2 billion people are projected to be in co-existence by 2100 (American Statistical Association). This future generation will not be able to mindlessly cannibalize Planet Earth with the insatiable appetites of hungry ghosts like we have. If they do, humans will be responsible for the genocide of many fellow humans, cause mass extinction amongst Planet Earth’s 8.7 million animal and plant species, and destroy the globe itself (Census of Marine Life). As a species, we must immediately begin raising people as bodhisattvas.”

“A thought system from ancient India is not going to be the way of the future.”

“The buddha lived in a time of rapid urbanization in India. He knew that increased proximity meant that people would need to increase their self-control or suffer constant fear of living with one another. The buddha’s concerns are only becoming more relevant in our time.”

“I recall the time I sat high above the crowd at the annual Osaka Sumo Tournament. As the giants slammed into each other, a sea of flailing limbs raged below me. Always grasping. Always fidgeting. Even when the sumo wrestlers were not shaking the ground below us, it was impossible for the crowd to sit still in unison. In his time, the buddha realized that this was the

condition of planet Earth. Humanity must recalibrate itself, focusing on a mental evolution rather than a political and social revolution which would only re-scramble the same problems.”

“In order to free ourselves from suffering as a species we must rediscover our womb faces. When you left your Mother, you wailed as she wailed. Both of you shared pain together. Soon after you detached from your Mother, you lost this connection with her needs and began focusing only on your own. Sitting Zazen shows you that the womb mind is not lost, just obscured by the illusory barrier of the self, which leads to the three poisons.”

“You bastard bodhisattva!” Monkey hollers as he staggers drunkenly into his room. I embrace the void which opens in his absence and sit in serenity. He makes a ruckus as he storms around his room, opening and slamming dresser doors while he stuffs his suitcase with velvet vests and corduroy pants. The flurry freezes for a moment after Monkey hops on top of the dresser, staring at the ancient scroll hanging on the back wall of my skull:



*Vegetable parinirvan, circa 1780, ink on paper. Ito Jakuchu.*

“How dare you hang this scroll here!” Monkey accuses me, baring his teeth. “You respect nothing! You kick me out for the buddha yet you slander him by turning him and his followers into vegetables!” Grinning, I patiently explain:

“Ito Jakuchu was both a zen gardener and a zen artist. Moving past the realm of duality, he realized that there was as much buddha nature in the radishes he harvested as there was in Shakyamuni buddha himself. In fact, to Jakuchu they were both the same thing.” Monkey and I looked at each other face to face and began to laugh. Certainly, Life was absurd.

*“Chop*

*Chop*

*Chop”* my knife reveals the yam’s brilliant orange obscured within it’s uninspiring brown exterior. I immerse myself in the tearing up of collard greens, the peeling of

onions, and the mincing of tomatoes. I follow the *Instructions for the Cook* closely, in which Zen master Dogen recommends that “you prepare food and cook it” “with the aspiration of taking tens of thousands of births and concentrating them into this one day, this one time, that you may be able to bind together in good karmic result the bodies of millions of past births” (Dogen, 33). Following his instructions, I pay close attention to what is before me as I combine the ingredients on the cutting board and scrape them into the broth. I add a tablespoon of peanut butter into my West African stew and watch as it begins to simmer.

#### Recitation

Gazing into the hearty stew, I chant *the Heart Sutra*, a concise summary of the traditional bodhisattva's worldview, as I patiently wait for the vegetables to cook:

“The noble Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva,  
while practicing the deep practice of Prajnaparamita,  
Looked upon the Five Skandhas  
And seeing they were empty of self-existence,  
Said, “Here, Shariputra,  
Form is emptiness, emptiness is form;  
Emptiness is not separate from form,  
Form is not separate from emptiness;  
Whatever is form is emptiness,  
Whatever is emptiness is form,  
The same holds for sensation and perception,  
Memory and consciousness,

Here, Shariputra, all dharmas are defined by emptiness

Not birth or destruction, purity or defilement,

Completeness or deficiency.

Therefore, Shariputra, in emptiness there is no form,

no sensation, no perception, no memory and no

consciousness;

no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body and no mind;

no shape, no sound, no smell, no taste, no feeling

and no thought;

no element of perception, from eye to conceptual

consciousness;

no causal link, from ignorance to old age and death,

and no end of causal link, from ignorance to old age and death;

no suffering, no source, no relief, no path;

no knowledge, no attainment and no non-attainment.

Therefore, Shariputra, without attainment,

bodhisattvas take refuge in Prajnaparamita

and live without walls of the mind.

Without walls of the mind and thus without fears,

They see through delusions and finally nirvana.

All buddhas past, present, and future

also take refuge in Prajnaparamita

and realize unexcelled, perfect enlightenment.

You should therefore know the great mantra of Prajnaparamita,

The mantra of great magic,

The unexcelled mantra,

The mantra equal to the unequalled,

Which heals all suffering and is true, not false,

The mantra in Prajnaparamita spoken thus:

‘Gate gate, paragate, parasangate, bodhi svah (Pine, Heart Sutra).’”

I look out over the landscape of my life, past, present, and future, and try to remove every wall I can find.

### Adolescence

17 years old, I meander home in my pizza-boy uniform. As I walk the manicured sidewalks of suburbia, a parade of faces zoom past me at 60 mph. Through their tinted windshields we make fleeting eye contact; they examine me as they fly by, the pedestrian inching forward, a periphery person in a fast-moving world. A shiny blazer, shaking with subwoofers, pulls over. The window rolls down, bass thumping, to reveal the platinum blonde from my math class: “Hey Cain, you walking to Niggerville? Want a lift?” I pause, banging my head against the walls of my negritude. The cage seems inescapable, so I shrug and take what I can get. “Sure” I say.

Niggerville, a low-income apartment complex, built on the highest point in town and the former site of indigenous burial mounds. The remains had been dug up and relocated during Niggerville’s construction and I wonder morosely whether any of them were my ancestors. In

my dingy apartment I recline on my shabby floral-patterned couch and let myself be swept away by the cacophony of the highway outside my patio window. The rumble of engines, loud radios, and honking are punctured by the incessant yips of the tiny dogs in the apartment below me.

Having had enough, I pull on my subwoofer headphones, blasting Dr. Dre's clunky rhymes:

*Yo man/ there's a lot of brothers out there/*

*Flaking and perpetrating but scared to kick reality* (N.W.A., Express Yourself)

*To kick reality* I repeat in my head. The smell of reality: dog feces combined with cigarette smoke wafting up into my living room from the patio below. The reality of their owner, a morbidly obese woman unable to leave her home and unable to let her dogs go outside and roam free. I walk into my room and look at the reality of my four walls, roof, and ceiling. The thin wall I share with my next door neighbor begins shaking as he bumps techno music, and marijuana fumes started coming out of my vent. I think of his reality, the week before he had slit his wrists and changed his mind at the last second. My eight year old sister and I came home to see bloodstains all over the carpet and the lower portion of the hallway walls and our door, where he had crawled around screaming for help.

A month later my sister ran out of her room, eyes bulging, arms latching onto my Mother's leg. "Call an ambulance, I can't breath!" she whispered. A few moments later the paramedics stormed into our home and were examining her all over. Physically, she was fine. "She had a panic attack" shrugged the EMT. The result of poverty's relentless noise. Like our ancestors before us, we were incarcerated in the noisy jail-cell of poverty, a reality which denied us even a sliver of tranquility. I thought of the similar situations which occurred in apartment

block after apartment block of Niggerville. I put my headphones on once again, tuning out reality's chaos and letting the drum-loop shake my skull:

*"I'm expressin' with my full capabilities,*

*And now I'm livin' in correctional facilities,*

*Cause some don't agree with how I do this.*

*I get straight, meditate like a Buddhist"* (N.W.A., Express Yourself)

### Kickin' Reality

*Diiiiinnng.* I looked at my phone and feel proud that I had sat totally still for half an hour. A week before it had seemed impossible.

That night I lay in bed and look at the world map plastered upon my wall. My finger retraces the various journeys that culminated in my DNA, forming a triangle between the black of Western Africa, the white of Europe, and the red of North America. The deplorable noise of the Potato famine, and the war of 1862, and the middle-passage rattle throughout my brain. I vow to turn it into the middle way. I get out of bed and look at my face in my closet mirror: a human pangea.

Ever since I can remember, people have been asking me the question "What are you?" I eventually got sick of answering this question and as I scrutinized my racial essence I found I didn't have one. Race is an entity of the mind, existing only because we all claim it exists (Red Pine, 75-76). Bodhidharma tried to explain this to Emperor Wu when he came to China:

Emperor Wu: "So what is the highest meaning of noble truth?"

Bodhidharma: "There is no noble truth, there is only emptiness."

Emperor Wu: "Then, who is standing before me?"

Bodhidharma: "I know not, Your Majesty." (Broughten)

I know not what I am but I do know what I am not. Race, gender, and nationality fall apart when examined closely. In fact, I myself fall apart when examined closely. There is no essence to me, I can be reduced to a series of interconnected body parts, personality traits, and situations which are in a constant state of flux. Indeed, to gain the truth of one's own emptiness requires a lot of work and meditation. After Zen master Dogen achieved this knowledge he returned from China to Japan and explained "I learned that my eyes are horizontal and my nose is vertical" (Dogen, 35). With this epiphany Dogen gave humanity an inscrutable truth.

PART II

MISSION: FIND BUDDHA



front of the door as a security measure. My stomach turns as I walk past a woman burying her face in a pillar of jet black smoke.

The loop continues to play in my head. निब्बान, the demon of fear and desire, certainly seemed present in this land. I walk to the bathroom and look at my beet red eyes in the mirror. I gulp from a plastic water bottle and dare to look outside of my window. I see a boy my age lying on his side, sound asleep on the median while cars, speeding in both directions, puke gas on him. I yearned for a buddha.

### Bamboozled

The conductor stands alongside a makeshift gate, guiding people into the train station, “pass, pass, pass, halt!” He scrutinizes my train ticket. “Where are you from, sir? Nepal?” “The U.S.” “I see — no, no, no, you need a stamp sir, I have a tuk-tuk for you right here.” Within seconds I’m whisked into a tuk-tuk with three other men already sitting in it. I check my phone. Five minutes until my train leaves. At warp speed the tuk-tuk weaves through Delhi’s urban sprawl.

**Government Office** says a peeling paint sign. I look around at the piles of burning trash and mangy gangs of stray dogs. A group of teenage boys smirk at me from across the street. I’m in a slum. A man bursts out of the shabby office with his arms extended, welcoming me in.

My shoulders and face feel tight. “Goddamnit!” I yell. I look to the driver “how much did they pay you to bring me here?” He looks nervously at the others who continue to urge me into the office. “Hey, look at me, I’ll give you double if you bring me back right now.” The driver widens his eyes and looks at the grimacing con-men surrounding me. With a shrug of his

shoulders he starts up the engine. *FUCKFUCKFUCKFUCKFUCK* the loop of rage in my head screams.

When I arrive to my platform I see my train picking up speed. Sprinting alongside the behemoth, I chuck my bag to a fellow passenger hanging out of the doorway. He catches it and extends his arm as I run at top speed, my vision blurring. The platform's end is quickly approaching. We clasp arms and suddenly I am gasping for air inside the train.

Rage's red glow casts over me at sunset as the train window magically transforms the shantytowns of Delhi into bright green rice paddy fields. My head lulls with the movement of the train and the man sitting next to me smiles, opening the car window so he can be drizzled by the warm monsoon rains. A stray drop dots my third eye and I recall a verse from the *Dhammapada*: "just as rain pierces/ a poorly roofed house/ so passion pierces/ an uncultivated mind" (verse 13, page 5). Clearly, my mind is still afflicted by passion. Glimmers of bucolic Life fly past me as I wrestle with my immaturity.

*Upon enlightenment the buddha walked by a plowed rice field and shed a tear for the insects which had perished during the plow. Do ants feel pain? Does the Life of a tiny ant matter enough to ease its suffering? How far should one's compassion extend?* A group of boys stand at the edge of a rice patty, one plugging his nose and jumping in.

I feel something tugging on my leg and when I look down I see a man's face looking up at me. My heart plunges and I turn my head away, refusing to acknowledge the legless beggar, his torn, ragged shirt displaying boils on his chest. Tears well in my eyes as I stew in fear. The woman next to me hands the beggar a coin and shoos him away. I watch the back of his head as he continues down the aisle. The woman motions for me to scoot over as she sprawls out onto

the bench. Her face is etched deeply with the lines of the last century. *Buddha?* I wonder. Fluorescent lights flicker as the windows go dark.

### Bodhgaya

After a sleepless night of receiving a folk curse from a hijra and mistaking a rambunctious train-hopping soccer team for a communist insurgency, I reach the Bodhgaya train station at sunrise. Seeing my arrival, two tuk-tuk drivers begin shoving each other aggressively, on the brink of a fist fight for the right to my fare. I choose one quickly to defuse the threat of an altercation.

Barreling down the unpaved road, I brace myself as the rickety tuk-tuk threatens to break apart whenever it hits a bump. A wild hog darts in front of us and the tuk-tuk swerves, crashing into a boy on his bike instead. My driver jumps out of the tuk-tuk screaming like a madman, picking the boy up off the ground so he can smack him across the face.

What seems like a different man entirely shakes my hand and gives me his card as he drops me off at my hotel. Roused by the coughing tuk-tuk, a boy of about eight years old comes out to greet me. He shows me my room overlooking the ramshackle village of Bodhgaya. When I look into my room I see that it is infested with mosquitos. Malaria crosses my mind. “Great — I’ll come back later” I say, heading down the stairs. “OK, well can I take your bag for you.” “No” I say, we make fleeting eye contact and I shift my weight uncomfortably.

When I walk outside, two boys, no older than sixteen, latch onto me immediately. The bigger, jittery and with dark circle under his eyes, gets close to my face “Sir, you will be staying with us tonight, no?” I ignore him. “If you pay us now we will leave you alone. ” I freeze and

scowl at the two boys. “This is a small place, sir, we’ll see you again” the other says and they disappear into a back-alley. I go back upstairs and order a cab for Varanasi.

### Mahabodhi Temple

My taxi waits in the parking area with his engine on as I approach the goal of my pilgrimage, the exact spot where Shakyamuni reached enlightenment. At the complex’s entrance I am greeted by a wall of stone-faced soldiers holding machine guns. A month prior, a *jihad* had taken place at the temple in an attempt to destroy the Bodhi Tree. The *jihadi* failed but did manage to seriously injure a monk and several laypeople. The act was thought to be in response to Myanmar’s 969 movement, a political campaign for ethnic cleansing of the muslim minority. The perpetrators of the movement masked themselves in monk’s robes. *Is there anything more absurd than killing or dying for a buddha?* I wonder to myself.

I slip off my shoes and breathe deeply. Ignoring the scowling military lining the walkway, I focus on the burning sensation of the soles of my feet as I walk down the ancient stone path. Inside the temple, I kneel down in respect to a golden buddha statue. Head bowed, I make my way into the leafy garden.

Under the scorching noonday sun I meet the Bodhi Tree, a direct descendent of the tree the buddha had reached awakening under. I sit down and scooch as close as I can to the base of the tree, its branches hovering over my head. My eyes scrunch as I meditate with fervor. I wait for half an hour but nothing happens. I am centuries too late. No buddha.

PART III  
ACTIVE DUTY

## Facetime

I return home, disenfranchised. On my wall I now have a framed leaf which I had collected from the Mahabodhi garden. The memory of my pilgrimage soon turned into a blur, but my baptism in the sea of faces played daily on a loop in my head. Anxiety and depression filled me and I felt withdrawn; there was no buddha in sight. One day, during a morose and sunny afternoon, I lay in bed with the lights off. My eyes begin to flicker:

*Primordial darkness. Absolute awareness in the infinite ocean of calm. If I have brought my body along I do not notice it. Quadrillions of purple particles, atoms possibly, fly around me in jet streams this way and that. I inquire into the void: "buddha?" In response, the atoms disappear and a robust face emerges from the darkness. I drop to my knees in devotion. The face rolls closer to me on a giant wooden cart with squeaking wheels. Mine is bowed in reverence, but I do dare to look up for a moment to catch a glimpse. My buddha has a broad domed chest and a giant square head; it looks as if his features were painted on hastily. Looking at each other, I cannot help but chuckle. Embarrassed by my irreverence, the wooden Bhagavan disperses into atoms.*

*Liberated, the atoms combine again and the infinite darkness bursts into an equally infinite light. I find myself in an energetic realm, pregnant with possibility. Amidst the empty landscape of light stands a simple marble white archway. Peering into the gate, I am met by a disembodied face staring back at me. Immediately, the walls between us flatten and our blinking synchronizes. We are two mingling drops in the river of flesh. With a detached love I watch as the face glides away, disappearing behind the other side of the archway. As if on an invisible*



## DMZ

Between two plain blue buildings, known as “the joint security area,” is a linear concrete slab on the ground. For half a century, two groups of men have stood on opposite sides of this line that pretends to divide the Planet Earth. Each group contorts their faces into the most hateful possible expression. Mirroring their severity, I furrow my perplexed brow as I observe the spectacle. The South Korean guards stand in a subverted buddhist triad formation. The militarized buddha stands with clenched fists in the center of the two buildings, flanked on both sides by his scowling bodhisattvas. A North Korean guard stands across from the South Korean guard with his back turned. They refuse to look each other in the face, to recognize each other's buddha nature. In allegiance to their abstract ideals they have made artificial borders that split up families, the globe, and humanity.

## Amazen

A half asleep guinea pig lazes in a hole deep in the jungles of the Pacaya Samiria reserve. He watches me curiously as I pass by with my guide, Mario. We are following Jaguar tracks in hopes of catching a glimpse of it. Much like the dharma, the large cat is silent and hard to find. I lie back in the hollowed-out-tree that is our canoe and look up at the canopy hovering above me. The branches and leaves intertwine with one another, filtering the sky above into a complex geometric pattern. It reminds me of the Shipibo tapestries indigenous to this area. I notice a furry head pop up out of the water.

*Thump*

*Thump*

### *Thump*

A giant Amazonian otter haphazardly bangs his paw against the canoe. *Heh heh heh* he pants at us, excitedly. In unison, Mario and I pant back at him, responding to him in his language. The creature yelps in surprise and swims quickly back to the banks, scampering loudly into the jungle. In a few minutes he will repeat this cycle, the same one he has been repeating for the last half hour. We paddle the canoe slowly, waiting.

*Splloosh.* A torpedo blasts out of the forest and dives into the water. Tickled to my core, I let out a belly laugh that shakes our canoe, making ripples across the river of flesh. Surrounded completely by the bustling jungle's buddha nature, I am confronted by a mirror. I no longer need two eyes and a nose to recognize a buddha. I look at a long blade of grass and feel fraternity with it.

Both the sun and the moon, full and empty ensos, hover in the sky. I feel raindrops pepper my face when I look up at them. They both fade into a sea of white as a storm rolls in without warning. The sky above me rages and I let my shoulders soften. My slow breathing synchronizes with the lightning that shatters the sky and the thunder that rumbles the Earth. I remain still. "It's OK." Mara slinks off, discouraged.

When the sun emerges once again a rainbow is crowning the jungle canopy. An imposing Amazonian Eagle poses valiantly in front of this tableau with her wings outspread. She stands erect and still like a Heian period masterpiece, carefully drying her wings out before she flies.

Mother Ayahuasca

*pit*

*pat*

*pit*

*pat*

*pit*

*pat*

Scream rainfall acoustics.

A silhouette hunches over me

chanting in circles

ventilating my brain

with bright feather fan.

He claims he is a bat

who knows all the nooks and crannies

in the cave of the mind.

He blows smoke

between my toes.

I leave the mosquito net

and splatter the 3 poisons

onto the jungle floor:

anger

greed

delusion

mercifully cleansed from my bowels.

I return

& feel leaves brush

against my face.

The wiping away

of civilized grime.

Tree roots reconnect

to my navel.

Womb face:

Two eyes -- horizontal

one nose ! vertical

i am a

tabula

rasa.

Seeing my transformation

batman

celebrates

with a centuries-old

Shipibo shuffle.

His rhythm weaves through

womb-shaped geometrics

of co-dependent creation.

The pattern of nature.

I call it the dharma,

others don't.

that's OK.

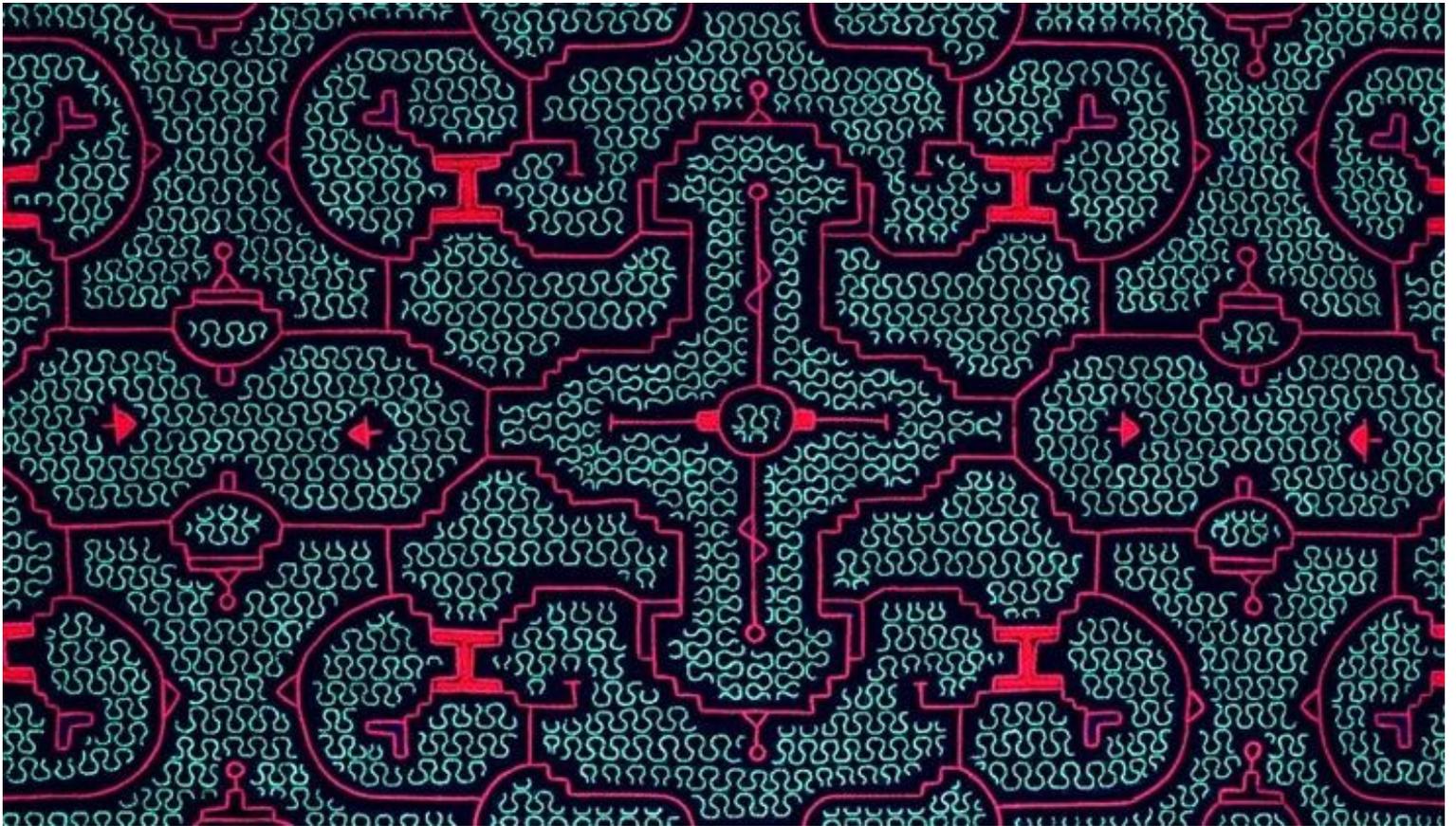
she's OK.

he's OK.

their OK

they're OK.

*it's OK.*



*Shipibo Tapestry*

## Blank Slate

Abrasive noise and the filthy air assault my senses when I emerge from the silence of the Jungle into the bustling city. Dark sunglasses cover my blank womb-face as I look with compassion at the squalor that surrounds me. I buy potatoes for lunch and split them with a skinny man sitting on the sidewalk. He shares his portion with his equally scrawny dog.

I have joined the global army of joy. Transformed into a Tabula Rasa, a blank slate bodhisattva, I have pledged allegiance to protecting Life across the globe. I have liberated my mind from the artificial walls of race, gender, nation, and buddha, now encountering all living things on an even plane, worshipping Life wherever I find it. From my pocket I pull a crumpled piece of paper; it is a bodhisattva pledge I have written for myself. A work in progress. I read it as I meander past large ships transporting swathes of old-growth mahogany wood and scowling conquistador statues which glisten in the unrelenting South American sun.

## Pledge of Allegiance for the 21st Century

“I pledge allegiance to all sentient beings on the various parts of Pangea, and to the value of all life for which it stands, one Earth, indivisible, equally employing my compassion to all.”



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