

Bodhisattva Ksitigarba

Homage to Thich Nhat Hanh ~ Rhonda Gudewich

“I Am Not in Here” (from *At Home in the World* by Thich Nhat Hanh)

“I have a disciple in Vietnam who wants to build a stupa for my ashes when I die. He and others want to include a plaque with the words “Here lies my beloved teacher.” I told them not to waste the temple land. “Do not put me in a small pot and put me in there!” I said. “I don’t want to continue like that. It would be better to scatter the ashes outside to help the trees to grow.” I suggested that, if they still insist on building a stupa, they have the plaque say, “I am not in here.” But in case people don’t get it, they could add a second plaque, “I am not out there either.” If people still don’t understand, then you can write on the third and last plaque, “I may be found in your way of breathing and walking.”

This body of mine will disintegrate, but my actions will continue me. In my daily life, I always practice to see my continuation all around me. We don’t need to wait until the total dissolution of this body to continue- we continue in every moment. If you think that I am only this body, then you have not truly seen me. When you look at my friends, you see my continuation. When you see someone walking with mindfulness and compassion, you know he is my continuation. I don’t see why we have to say “I will die,” because I can already see myself in you, in other people, and in future generations. Even when the cloud is not there, it continues as snow or rain. It is impossible for a cloud to die. It can become rain or ice, but it cannot become nothing. The cloud does not need to have a soul in order to continue. There’s no beginning and no end. I will never die. There will be a dissolution of this body, but that does not mean my death. I will continue, always.”

Song: “Two Arrows” ~ Brian Kimmel

Dharma Talk~ Terry Cortés-Vega

We come now to the last of the four Great Bodhisattvas, Ksitigarbha.

His name is usually translated as “Earth Store,” because of his Earth-like character: vastness, stillness, patience, deepness, equanimity, generosity.

Like mother earth, Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha is able to make countless beings grow. Like mother earth, he has endless, boundless treasures for us to uncover.

Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha has made the focus of his work freeing all beings from suffering, but especially those who are suffering from the most intense pain as well as those who are, for various reasons, very difficult to help. His aspiration is to free all *people* who suffer, but also all animals, plants and minerals—our Mother, Earth.

Because of this deep yearning, in *our* tradition Ksitigarbha is called the Bodhisattva of Great Aspiration.

Shakyamuni Buddha had so much respect for and confidence in Ksitigarbha that he asked him to be the..... the *headmaster*, the CEO of Buddhism from when he, Shakamuni, died until Maitreya, the next Buddha born on Earth, arrived.

Let's listen to a conversation between Shakyamuni Buddha and Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha.

Buddha:

Ksitigarbha, find ways to liberate all beings from now until the time when Maitreya comes into the world. Help all of them escape suffering forever—including those who suffer immensely. Help even the intractable ones who are difficult to free from suffering. Obstinate beings are like fish swimming through waters laced with nets; they may slip through, but sooner or later they will be caught. I am concerned about such beings.

Ksitigarbha:

"World Honored One, throughout long eons I have been receiving the Buddha's guidance and from that have developed inconceivable spiritual power and great wisdom.

I vow *never* to give up on beings who are suffering with intense physical or emotional pain. Lord Buddha, I have found that the bad habits of human beings range from minor to major. I teach and *transform obstinate* beings; I cause their minds to be subdued so they renounce the corrupt and return to the proper. One or two out of ten still cling to their bad habits..... and some who encounter hardship make their suffering bigger with their every thought....but I don't give up on them.

And...a few beings *use up* the wholesome benefits they gain and end up retreating from their initial wholesome resolve, but for them I use numerous expedient means.

Some are like people trying to carry heavy rocks while walking through mud. Each step becomes more difficult and the rocks more cumbersome as their feet sink deeper. I show them how to lighten or even totally remove their burdens. Helping them thus, I urge them to step on solid ground, and....I point out that once they reach a level place they should remain aware of that bad path and never traverse it again.

Even if the good deeds of human beings amount to as little as a strand of hair, or a grain of sand, I will gradually liberate them.

"I only hope that the World Honored One will not be concerned about beings of the future. "

Buddha:

"Excellent! Excellent! I will help you in this work you so willingly undertake.

Since you keep making extensive vows to save all beings repeatedly throughout successive *eons*, what further worries need I have?

In paintings, Ksitigarbha is portrayed as an old man dressed as a simple monk, barefoot, with a shaved head. Sometimes he has a little dog in tow. So, unlike the other Bodhisattvas who are portrayed as Indian royalty, Ksitigarbha is depicted as quite humble.

It's interesting that the word "humble" comes from the Latin word that means "of the earth." So to be humble means to be well-grounded.

Although in our culture humility is often seen as a sign of weakness, Ksitigarbha shows us— by who he is and what he does— that humility is a sign of inner strength, self-acceptance, honesty and compassion. Ksitigarbha doesn't pretend that he is more than or other than who he truly is.

In his left hand Ksitigarbha holds a wish-fulfilling jewel to light up the darkness. In his right hand, a staff which he uses to alert insects and small animals of his approach—he doesn't want to accidentally harm them. He also uses the staff to force open the gates of hell. On his pilgrim's staff are six rings which symbolize Manjushri's six prajnaparamita teachings. These six rings also symbolize the Six Realms of Existence.

Although the six realms of existence is a Buddhist *mythological* classification system, it pretty well describes the different psychological and mental states of mind we find ourselves in. We experience most of the six realms daily...it is our thoughts, words and actions that send us to the Hell Realm, the Realm of Hungry Ghosts, the Animal Realm, the Human Realm, the Demi-God Realm and the Realm of the Gods. Because there is suffering in each realm, that is where we find Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha.

The six realms, like all phenomena, “bear the mark of Emptiness” (as Avalokiteshvara puts it): no realm is solid or permanent or independent.... but because it’s easier, we’ll look at them separately.

First, the Hell Realm.

The Buddha said, “When the average person makes an assertion to the effect that there is a place called Hell, it is a statement which is false and without basis. The word “Hell” is a term for painful sensations.”

The Hell Realm is one we enter into—actually, one we ourselves create— when our mind *struggles* against something real or imagined.

You find yourself in the Hell realm when you worry.

When you look for revenge.

When you’re anxious, agitated, annoyed.

When you think that the people you don’t agree with you are your enemies.

You are in the hell realm when you can’t give. Or forgive.

When you kill—living beings or their ideas, confidence, hopes.

You are in the hell realm when you take something that is not freely given,

when you use your sexual energy to harm yourself or others,

when you lie, gossip, exaggerate,

when you consume toxins.

The Hell Realm is characterized by anger and aggression. The only way you know how to deal with people or things that make you angry is to be aggressive. If friends try to comfort you or ease your pain, you drive them away with all their love and compassion and kindness.

You prefer the company of others who are as angry and aggressive as you.

These days many of us find ourselves in the Hell Realm because of politics. Those of us on the Left don’t interact much with folks on the Right and we don’t want to. We only watch PBS, listen to NPR and verbally attack the folks on the Right. And those of us on the Right don’t know many folks on the Left and we don’t want to. We only watch Fox News, listen to Rush Limbaugh and Laura Ingraham and verbally attack the folks on the Left. Because we don’t get to know each other personally, we see stereotypes instead of people and we are bewildered and angry about their ignorance. Hell Realm.

The Hungry Ghost Realm is characterized by restlessness, craving, strong desires, attachment and... frustration.

You dwell in the Hungry Ghost realm when you *grasp* for, are *greedy* for *more*—food, drink, sex, wealth, power, joy, friends, time—but you never feel satisfied.

More is never enough.

You are always looking *outside* yourself for the new thing to satisfy your cravings. New people. New places. New stuff.

Since you are consumed with getting more, you can't focus on anything else. Thay says, [“When you live in mindfulness miracles are everywhere,”](#) but you haven't seen any miracles, even though you stared at the dang white clouds and blue sky—*Thay's suggestion!*.

Addictions, obsessions, compulsions are all characteristics of a Hungry Ghost who lives in a state of endless unsatisfied desires.

If I just had more money I'd be happy. If I got married I'd be happy. If I got divorced I'd be happy. If I just had a newer car, fewer aches and pains, a bigger house, more freedom, more years to live, more support..... Hungry Ghost Realm

You put yourself in the Animal Realm when you avoid the unfamiliar: new ideas, people and places. You enjoy routine. You don't enjoy surprises. Or change.

You avoid discomfort, difficulty, even *little* inconveniences.

You are driven by impulse and instinct, prejudice and self-satisfaction.

You prey on—exploit— others.

You don't look beyond *seeking* comfort and *avoiding* pain.

You are uninformed and content to remain so.

Life for you is one-dimensional and survival oriented.

You are dominated by your desires.

You don't have the capacity to hear or practice the teachings although you do show some signs of natural compassion.

*Sometimes Sanghas get caught in the Animal Realm. We follow the same formula week after week. Even if the community doesn't grow deeper in the practice, or seem to have too much fun, following the routine is easy and comfortable and familiar so the Sangha doesn't try new offerings.
Animal Realm.*

The Human Realm is characterized by passion, desire, pride. And self-doubt.

Enlightenment is within your grasp but you don't open your eyes enough or have the courage or diligence to attain it.

You are aware of and able to work with the 5 mindfulness trainings but you're enraged that you can't actually follow them completely. You think it is ridiculous that someone devised a list of trainings that you can't *master!*

In the Human Realm you experience a mixture of pain and pleasure. Ease and effort. You can be kind and compassionate but you can also be judgmental, fearful, angry, impatient.

Human Realm.

In the Demi-god realm you feel strong, powerful—and superior. You don't have patience for those you consider to be your inferiors. It's like you are an eagle, flying high above and looking down on others.

You make sure that people know that you meditate better and longer and more often than they.

You have more spiritual books, though you have not *read* all of them.

You consider yourself to be a superior mindfulness practitioner....better than any other mindfulness practitioner.

You whine about... the store being out of organic strawberries, your microwave that takes a whole minute to heat your water, your phone that's not the latest version.

You are *very* competitive which brings out your jealousy, envy, and fear.

You have a full life, but you covet the pleasures of those in the God Realm. You feel about them the way animals feel about humans. You think you aren't getting your fair share; you feel victimized.

You struggle to *appear* more god-like.

Those who dwell in the Demigod Realm are like monkeys who have trained themselves to become humans. There is an ancient story about how some monkeys were so successful that they were asked to perform in plays. People would clap and whistle at their amazing human-like performances. One day someone threw peanuts onto the stage and the monkeys quickly scampered after them shoving the nuts into their mouths. Their *apparent* transformation had been superficial.

Like the monkeys who trained themselves to be humans, you outwardly display wisdom and faith and justice and loyalty to the teachings; but you only *look* like— talk-the-talk of— a good spiritual practitioner.

Until recently I did not like to exercise but since I knew it was good for me, I started walking with my friend; I put a pedometer app on my phone that recorded my steps. When I got 5,000 steps, green confetti exploded on the app. I was so happy to get my green confetti every day. In fact, on days when I didn't get my 5,000 steps, in order to get my green confetti, I would pace around the house until I got 'em. I eventually accumulated 116 days of green confetti! I mean 5000 steps.

One day my friend and I drove to a park where we planned to walk eight miles. When we got there, I realized that I didn't have my phone. I couldn't record my steps; I couldn't get my green confetti.

—Demi-god Realm—

BTW I have spent some time reflecting on my green confetti experience and I realized that with the help of my friends and my app and some time I had developed a good habit of walking—and I learned to like it!—but now if I missed a day I wouldn't have to pace the house for my green confetti! I could now walk without my phone. I am Free!

The Highest Realm is called the Realm of the Gods, because its inhabitants are quite powerful— though they are not immortal or omnipotent and they aren't creators or judges. In the Realm of the Gods you remove yourself from the confusion and messiness of life and focus on your own happiness.

You are *obsessed* with pleasure, including meditative bliss.

You are so comfortable that you have no real interest in a spiritual practice; whatever investigation of the teachings you do is motivated by the desire to hang out in this “heavenly realm.”

Your privilege blinds you to the suffering of others; you have neither wisdom nor compassion for them.

You are addicted to pleasure, are self-absorbed and are filled with pride.

In addition to ourselves, we might be able to think of some movie stars and famous athletes and maybe even a few politicians who are examples of folks who dwell in the Heavenly Realm of the Gods.

Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha teaches that if we understand and put into practice the prajnaparamita teachings of Manjushri, Avalokiteshvara's prajnaparamita compassion

teachings and Samatanhadra's concrete practices of prajnaparamita—-we can free ourselves from the Six Realms of Existence.

But freeing *ourselves* is just the beginning. As Bodhisattvas-in-Training, we look for ways to help Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha keep his vow to save all beings, including the difficult ones.

The Dalai Lama said, [“Although I am a Buddhist monk, I am skeptical that prayers alone will achieve world peace. We need instead to be enthusiastic and self-confident in taking *action*.”](#) And Thay says, [“We take action not because the Buddha said so but because our heart recognizes a deep truth and we feel we *must* devote all our energy to the action.”](#)

Inspired and guided by the lives and teachings of the bodhisattvas and embracing the bodhisattvas within, our hearts naturally yearn to be of benefit to others. So we pack our bags—with our own experiences and doubts and confidence and love and determination; with understanding and compassion—and we go where there is suffering.

Like Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha, we look for ways to bring light, hope and relief to beings who suffer—people in refugee and detention camps and jails; to migrants caught between borders; to people in hospitals, nursing homes, hospice centers; to homeless and hopeless people. We go to help people who are suffering from poverty, hunger and poor health; to work for safety in our schools, churches, workplaces and other public places and to help people who are suffering at home.

We look for ways to bring freedom and ease to animals....and forests.... and the air, the soil, bodies of water. Like Ksitigarbha, Bodhisattva Earth Store, we vow to help liberate our Earth and all beings who call her Mother.

Each of us, as Bodhisattvas-in-Training, as students of Bodhisattva Ksitigarabha, can do—must do—something for others.

Some of us will decide to spend more time and effort training ourselves in the practices of understanding, compassion, openness, inclusivity and generosity so that our lives can be of benefit to our family and friends and society.

Some of us will find ways to bring the teachings to our place of work.

Some of us will write letters to our President or to people in Congress, to the NRA or to companies that are harming living beings or contributing to the suffering of our earth.

Some of us will make donations to or help raise money for organizations that help people, animals, plants or minerals.

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Some of us will volunteer for political campaigns that share the values of the Bodhisattvas.

Some of us will walk dogs at the Humane Society.

Some will help plant trees or clean the parks.

Some will work to educate people about ways to help conserve scarce resources.

Some of us will inspire others by using social media to send messages of love, understanding, kindness and equanimity.

Those of us who are activists will organize peaceful demonstrations or other actions of peace.

Some of us will offer music or poetry, beautiful works of art or inspiring stories.

Others of us will organize and/or attend compassionate meditations, days of mindfulness, retreats, and other Sangha gatherings.

Martha Postlewaite, in her poem, "Clearing," offers advice for how to get started in our Ksitigarbha practice. She says,

*"Do not try to save
the whole world
or do anything grandiose.
Instead, create
a clearing
in the dense forest
of your life and wait there
patiently,
until the song
that is your life
falls into your own cupped hands
and you recognize and greet it.
Only then will you know
how to give yourself
to this world
so worthy of rescue."*

I offer you two stories of friends that demonstrate that the Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha is alive and well in their lives~

The first comes from Cheri Maples. She was a police officer when she attended a 3 week retreat with Thay in Plum Village. She later became a Dharma Teacher and sadly, was in a horrible bike/car accident and, in 2017, died.

I was on a domestic violence call. There was this guy and he was kind of holding a little girl hostage, not wanting to give her back to Mom; they were exchanging custody. No violence had taken place, but both Mom and the little girl were very scared and intimidated. Ordinarily I would have said, 'That's it,' slapped the handcuffs on him, taken him to jail. But I had just come out of this retreat and something stopped me. So I got the guy to give me the little girl, took care of her, got her and her mom set, told them just to leave—- and I went back to the guy. I just talked to him from my heart and within five minutes, I mean, I've got this big gun belt on. I'm about 5'3". Right? And this guy's like 6'6". And he's bawling, you know. I'm holding this guy with this big gun belt on and everything and he was just in incredible pain. That's when I realized that we deal with misplaced anger because people are in incredible pain.

So I ran into him three days later at the store. This guy comes, he sees me off-duty, he picks me up, gives me this big bear hug and said, 'You saved my life that night. Thank you.' When you have experiences like that, you start to realize, it's about softening my heart. When you're a cop and you do this work, you need to find a way to be able to maintain both the compassionate bodhisattva within you and the fierce bodhisattva and know when each is called for and how to combine the two. And once you start down this path, it's *possible* to learn that. When you practice looking at people with the eyes of compassion, that kind of practice will become your habit. We are capable of looking at people in such a way that we can see the suffering, the difficulties. And if you can see, then compassion will *naturally* flow from your heart. It's for your sake, and it is for their sake also.

This next is from my friend Larry Ward, also a Dharma teacher

When my mother passed away, I was on vacation with my wife and some friends in Costa Rica in a small village. It took three days to get to Cleveland where she was, and by that time she was already buried. My father was so overwhelmed with grief that after the burial, he went home and shut the door and wouldn't let any of the children in the house. So over six months' time, I sent him flowers and love letters. I would go visit, and I'd sit outside the house and bring my flowers and put them on the porch.

Finally he opened the door, which was to me opening the door to himself. I'm certain that without the practice, that is not how I would have responded to the experience, of quote, "rejection" unquote. If I'd have been operating out of the mindset of my youth, I would've just said, you know, forget you.

Instead, I was able to understand what was happening to my father. I could see and feel his suffering, his tremendous heartbreak. I knew that he didn't have any training in dealing with emotion. When my mother passed away, he had no skills, no capacity to handle the huge ocean of grief he found himself in. So my practice was to communicate to him that I was there for him, that I supported him and that I loved him, but also my practice was to hold compassion for myself and my family so that we could all go through our grieving process peacefully and at our own pace.

Let's sing a practice song that is a Ksitigarbha prayer. then follow with an Earth Touching for Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha

Song: "Loving Kindness" ~ Brian Kimmel

Touching the Earth~ Antonio Brunner

[BELL]

Please rise.

Invoking the Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha, I bow deeply with gratitude.

[BELL]

I release the suffering that I've created for myself in all 6 realms...

all of my real or imagined ideas I struggle with that put me in my own hell...

all of the times that I've made my suffering bigger with my thoughts...

all of my worry, revenge, anxiety, agitation and annoyance...

all of my stinginess, greed and killing of beings, killing of ideas and killing hopes....

all of my aggression, restlessness, craving, and pride...

all of my avoidance, discomfort....

all of my drives, impulses and instincts...

all of my self-satisfaction, passion, and self-doubt...

all of my superiority, inferiority and equality.

Dear Mother, with your energy, please help me to transform my suffering and become a Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha so that I, in turn, may be able to hold you and everyone else.

Here and now, I vow to water the seeds of Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha in me so they may grow into strong manifestations of love, understanding, action and preservation.

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I aspire to learn to be present where there is darkness, suffering, oppression, and despair...
To bring light, hope, relief, and liberation to myself and others.

I aspire to establish contact with anyone, including myself, who cannot find a way out of suffering, especially when I or they are crying for help.

I aspire to no longer contribute to creating more hells on Earth, and to help transform the hells and other five realms that exist in all of us.

I will practice to realize the qualities of perseverance and stability, so that, like the Earth, we can always be supportive and faithful to those in need.

I call upon the depths of my strength to remove myself from the confusion and messiness and to focus on all the wonderful conditions that already exist within me and outside me.

I emanate True Love from deep within myself to exemplify vastness, stillness, patience, deepness, equanimity and generosity.

I visualize being like Mother Earth, making countless things grow, freeing *all* people who suffer, including all animals, plants and minerals.

I promise to show myself first and then others how to lighten up, to totally remove our burdens, and to step on solid ground.

I aspire to offer humility through inner strength, self-acceptance, honesty and compassion.
May I recognize when I pretend to be more or less than another, and return to my natural Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha qualities.

May I manifest as much wisdom, love and understanding as I can generate in my thoughts, and words and actions for the benefit of all beings.

I am my most earthly, humble and grounded

I am my most universal, spacious, and inclusive.

I am my most authentic open-hearted and authentic.

I am free now.

Come, let us all be free.

[BELL]

Please rise and then be seated for a few moments of silent reflection.

[BELL]

Recognizing the Bodhisattva *Manjushri within* you and practicing his enthusiastic wisdom means manifesting with joy as much understanding as you can generate in your thoughts, and words and actions.

Embracing the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara *within* you means having the courage to practice concern and compassion and love— for yourself and for all beings.

Being the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra means not just studying, reading, and talking about the teachings of the Buddha, but giving the teachings *life* in your interactions with friends and family and co-workers and strangers and enemies.

Acknowledging that Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha is alive in you means being humble; means not giving up on anyone; means being present for whatever arises: incredible pain and anger and fear.... overwhelming grief and tremendous heartbreak....as well as big bear hugs and opening up to joy and love.

It means giving up some of the ideas of who you think you are —cop, rejected son—and just BE.

In order to keep alive the Bodhisattvas Manjushri, Avalokiteshvara, Samantabhadra and Ksitigarbha, I invite you to vow to make one new change in your life. Focus on *Living* one new practice taught by the lives and teachings of the Bodhisattvas. Which one?

Youthful enthusiasm. Like Manjushri, do you want to be more playful, lighthearted?

Understanding. Do you want to become more tolerant, patient and Inclusive? Less judgmental, critical, negative?

Compassion. Like Avalokiteshvara do you want to expand your compassion to those who you now find difficult to love? Do you want to understand more deeply the teachings on interbeing, interconnectedness with all beings?

Like Samantabhadra, do you want to focus on

Learning to better protect the physical and/or emotional lives of others? Learning to transform your anger?

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Would you like to become more generous with your time, attention, abilities, stuff? Less stingy and self-absorbed?

Do you want to cultivate more kindness, compassion, joy and inclusiveness—the four elements of true love?

Do you want to better use your words to inspire confidence, joy and hope in yourself and others?

Healthy consumption. Do you want to give up some unhealthy habits of consumption? Find more simple, nourishing ways to be happy?

Humility. Like Ksitigarbha, do you want to strengthen your ability to be less self-absorbed and arrogant? Help those who are difficult or inconvenient to help?

I once heard a journalist ask Willie Nelson how he came up with his songs. He said, “I wake up in the middle of the night with the song in my head.”

“Oh” the interviewer said, “ So you keep a pad by your bed and write it down?”

“Nah!” Willie replied. “If it’s a good song, I’ll remember it in the morning.”

So please choose one of the teachings of the Bodhisattvas to take home as a souvenir and ... see what practice you wake up with in the morning.

() May the fruit of our study and practice of the lives and teachings of the Bodhisattvas benefit ourselves which includes our teacher and all beings.