



Everyday Dharma: Seven Weeks to Finding the Buddha in You

By Lama Willa Miller

Excerpt taken from the Introduction

One isn't necessarily born with courage, but one is born with potential. —Maya Angelou

“Buddhas—are they made or born?”

I was sitting at the feet of a Buddhist lama in a Tibetan refugee camp with my little list of handwritten questions. I might have written at the top, “Riddles to Stump the Lamas.” I carried this list around with me from robed priest to robed priest in my early days as the skeptical college seeker, imagining that eventually my questions about the meaning of life would resolve themselves through contact with great Eastern thinkers.

“Made . . . and born,” the lama replied. I wondered if this wise master was playfully withholding an explanation—or did he mean it? “How can a buddha be made and born at the same time?” “From the point of view of who we really are, buddhas are born. But from the point of view of a spiritual path, buddhas are made.”

I was nineteen and living in a tiny refugee camp nestled in the northern Himalayan range in Nepal. It was worlds away from the groomed lawns and genteel classrooms of Vassar, where the rest of my friends were attending lectures on art history and reading Kant. At the moment, that world left behind seemed weirdly alien to me, and the mud-floored one-room adobe hut where I slept on cotton batting and cooked on a camp stove felt like home. This was the classroom I wanted to be in. I wondered if I had been born on the wrong continent.

The lama, my source of spiritual wisdom at that time, lived quietly in a tiny monk’s cell overlooking the courtyard of the village monastery. I can still see his wrinkled face, lined like folded raw silk, and his long gray beard against the backdrop of the square of blue Himalayan sky that was his window.

What was the lama trying to tell me? Later, I learned that *Buddha* means “one who is awake” and refers to a person whose wisdom and compassion has fully blossomed or awakened—a person of a very high order, a sage. However, paradoxically, buddha lives in every one of us, as the *potential* to wake up to wisdom and compassion. We are all born with an inner sage. That is why, on the one hand, we are born buddhas, but—on the other hand—we still need to *become* buddhas: we still need to wake up to the wisdom and compassion sleeping in our deepest being. That moment in the refugee camp was a wake-up call for me, so to speak. It was the first time I had an inkling that while I might have many small missions in life—to finish school, to spend time with my friends, to travel—there was one big mission that should not be missed: to wake up to inner wisdom and compassion. Even if that took a long time, it was a goal worth holding onto.

The bridge of *becoming*, the bridge between pure potential and its actualization, is not built in a day, at least not for most of us. It is built gradually, over the years, through everyday spiritual practice. It is built by consciously observing your mind and actions and then doing the physical, psychological, and spiritual work to move closer to your wisdom-nature. It is built on experimentation and experience. I believe that waking up is not a quick fix; it is a process—and a fluid process at that.

The word *dharma* comes from the Sanskrit root *dhr*, which means “to uphold.” The word in Hindu and Buddhist texts has many meanings, from “phenomena” to “highest truth.” One of its meanings is simply “duty,” in the sense of an obligation to yourself or to your community, an obligation to uphold the common good. This gets closer to how I will be using the term *dharma* in this book—to mean spiritual practice. Dharma is what you do, what you practice, every day to make your mind, and your world, a better place to live. To practice dharma means to create

and sustain a commitment to becoming more awake and aware, to becoming wiser and more loving, and to discovering one's wisdom-nature. But dharma is more than commitment. It is action: it is the action you take to unearth your inner buddha (or Jesus or Mary or Shiva or fill-in-your-blank) and to become wiser and more compassionate. If wisdom were a destination, dharma—played out in our thoughts and actions—is the path leading there. Dharma is the art of living a wise and compassionate life.

The Compassionate Sage

For many people, the words *wisdom* and *sage* evoke images of stoic detachment, or—perhaps more flatteringly—a sense of knowledge garnered through experience, or an unflappable calm. I wonder what it is about our culture that has evolved a language for sagacious perfection that is so “in the head.” In Buddhist understanding, perfect wisdom is rooted in the heart, in love and compassion. In Buddhist texts, the same word is used for “heart” and “mind.” The seat of love *is* the seat of knowledge. And, conversely, where there is real wisdom, there must be love.

So the path of dharma is a path with a heart—the Buddhist notion of dharma is warm to the core. In Buddhist sources, a person who follows such a love-wisdom path is called a *bodhisattva*. The word *bodhisattva* literally means “awakening one.” A bodhisattva is a person who is on a quest to wake up, or stimulate, his or her love and wisdom. Buddhist texts are full of stories of bodhisattvas. Sometimes they are savethe-world types who make extraordinary sacrifices on behalf of others. Sometimes they are quiet recluses whose small acts of kindness extend even to animals, insects, and birds. Sometimes they are teachers. Sometimes they are children. Sometimes they are animals. Whatever the circumstances may be, such bodhisattvas are spiritual heroes.

In this book, I have settled on the term *sage* to translate *bodhisattva*. It may not be literal, but it captures the essence of a being who exists to develop wisdom, who lives to wake up. The word *sage* comes from the Latin word *sapius*, meaning “taste” or “experience.” The compassionate bodhisattva, the sage envisioned in this book, is a taster and an experiencer. What does that mean? To be a sage is to value experience as the primary path to wisdom, rather than valuing the acquisition of knowledge solely from the outside. If we wish to develop wisdom, we must learn from experience, long to taste the truth directly, and not be satisfied with hearsay. We must embrace the world of the senses rather than running from it, using sight, sound, touch, taste, and feeling as doors to wisdom. The path of the sage is a path of developing inner senses as well, a keen ability to taste—to know and assess—with the mind and the heart. We sharpen our inner senses through meditation and contemplation. Everyday dharma, therefore, is a path of outer and inner tasting. It is both an empirical path and an intuitive path. Dharma is a path of inner and outer experience.