

Deep in The Mountains IV : Dharmakaya
Joan Sutherland
Vallecitos Mountain Refuge, New Mexico
July 5, 2013

Good eternity, bodhisattvas, walking here through the wind that blows from one end of the universe to the other, from before the beginning of time to after the end of time and right through this room.

This week we've been talking in a funny way about the trikaya, the three bodies. We began with the nirmanakaya through self and story—the nirmanakaya being the body or world of form and karma, the world of stuff. Then we talked about the sambhogakaya as the dream, the great dream of the world. Today I'm embarking on the fool's errand of talking about the dharmakaya, which is the vastness, the field of fields, the great mysterious. I thought it might be easier to talk about it in terms of its near analogue, which is our own bodhi, our own awakening.

As I talk about these bodies, these realms of perception and experience, I want to be clear that I'm not in any way suggesting that we replace one with another. The idea isn't to replace the nirmanakaya world of stuff with the dream world, and I'm not suggesting we replace either or both of those with the dharmakaya, the vast empty world, because all of them are equally real and equally present in everything and every moment. The idea is to keep opening ourselves to the three bodies and their various manifestations in our own lives and in the world around us, because the more that we can include all of them simultaneously the more real our perceptions are, the closer they are to the way things actually are. This isn't an exercise in replacement; this is an exercise in endless enlargement and addition ... and depthifying.

The revelation of the dharmakaya is an absolute thing. It doesn't come in pieces or parts, although we might have tastes of it for a brief moment or a long time before we experience the whole, but it is in itself one whole thing. Experiencing the dharmakaya is as though you had seen only yellow and red and all of a sudden you see blue. It's that utter and absolute a transformation in our way of perceiving the world.

The whole international Dharma Conglomerate Enterprise is based (or at least used to be based) on the belief that through practice we could have that experience of the dharmakaya. Even though our experience of it doesn't always happen in the context of practice—it can happen anywhere, any time in our lives—it is because of practice that it does happen. Sometimes it seems to occur spontaneously for people, but that's a karmic circumstance that has to do with previous practice in previous lives. So until someone figures out a magic way around that, there isn't really a way around that, I'm sorry to say. It must matter and be important that we go through the long and winding road of practice before we have this stunning and final revelation of the dharmakaya.

Each of us has our own karma, our own faculties, and our own way of experiencing the world, and so it has never made sense to me that there would be one rigid way that would apply to everybody for experiencing the dharmakaya. That's what makes our way so beautiful and so difficult : we are hand-crafting it for each person. We are discovering together each person's way of coming to the dharmakaya, and we're seeing it at least as much an art as a science. That is one of the reasons we are so important to each other.

There is an old Sanskrit word, *kalyānamitra*, which is a spiritual friend. We certainly are spiritual friends to each other. When we our hand-crafting our way toward awakening, each of us as individuals and us together as a group, those kinds of friendships are tremendously important. Those who have seen the dharmakaya can suggest that one course of action might be more efficacious than another in terms of getting there. The extent that we can stay together and continue to walk the way together is a good and a helpful thing.

It's common to have feelings of discouragement about whether you'll have an experience of dharmakaya, and feelings of doubt about whether it's possible. I want to suggest that when those feeling arise, it's kind of like the nirmanakaya telling you it wants to be your only bird. Ian Frazier tells a wonderful story about being up in the Dakotas and having a flock of crows follow him around. They finally say to him : "Hey, human, we want to be your only bird." That world of discouragement and doubt and worry and anxiety is like believing the crows when they say they can be your only

bird. All you have to do is not think about the eagles or the hummingbirds, and the crows will take care of you. So please think about eagles and hummingbirds and don't allow anyone to convince you they are your only bird, because I promise you that they are not.

And another thing: we live in a world where people become shamans in a weekend. We have this sense of instant fix, and lots of book titles to prove it. In contrast, here we're dealing in a tradition that, for better or worse, does think in terms of kalpas,¹ does think in terms of lifetimes. Whatever happens in this lifetime matters, it counts, because of this long arc of things. I know that it's hard, but I would encourage you to take heart from the generations and generations that this river of Dharma has already flowed through the world, and that it will continue to flow — and you along with it — for a long time to come.

I mentioned that it might be a little easier to approach dharmakaya through its near analogue, which is our own bodhi. *Bodhi* is a Sanskrit and Pali word that means “to wake” or “awakening”. *Sattva*, as in bodhisattva, is a state of being, and therefore comes to mean the essence of a being. So a bodhisattva is someone whose essence of being is awakening. That's kind of nice, isn't it? And that's of course true of every being in the world; everything in the world has the essence of awakening. A bodhisattva is a person who has chosen to orient her life around the fact of the awakening of each and all of us, to make it conscious, and to make it the center of things. That bodhi *is* dharmakaya within us, so never fear : you already have it, it's already here, it's not somewhere else far away. You don't have to climb a very long ladder up a very long beanstalk to get to it. You have it inside your own consciousness; bodhi is that part of consciousness that is dharmakaya.

Notice that again we are talking about parts. We've talked about the self being made of parts all week long. Each of the trikaya is a part of our perception of things, and bodhi is already a part of our consciousness, so it's not about going out somewhere and getting something and bringing it home; it's about uncovering something that is already a part of our consciousness. One of the amazing and beautiful and full-of-

¹ A kalpa is an almost unimaginably long period of time

potential things about bodhi as well as dharmakaya is that it is a non-karmic realm. If what is in our consciousness gets between us and our very own bodhi, just take a moment — that very bodhi is your birthright already here. We are born with awakening; we grow with awakening.² That's what that means : that awakening is bodhi. Karmic stuff gets in the way and we can lose touch with that; we forget it. You still see that connection to bodhi in a child's eyes. You can also watch sometimes as it is dimmed. So if it's the karmic stuff that gets in the way, that obscures, then our practice becomes, I am sorry to say, about clearing away those obscurations and working with that karmic stuff. There is no way around it; you can short-circuit it for a while, you can make a leap into bodhi, but you always have to come back and do the work. Unless you just want to be a really awake jerk. [Laughs]

Connected to the part of us that does that karmic work of clearing the obscurations (the sitting, sitting, sitting, sitting, koan, koan, koan, koan walking, walking, walking, walking stuff) is our view of the bodhisattva vow as having something to do with clearing those karmic obscurations for others and for the world. It's about doing things to relieve the sufferings of others out of our own intense experience of our own suffering.

In his poem "The Broken Tower", Hart Crane has a beautiful and unintentional description of that. He says:

And so it was I entered the broken world
To trace the visionary company of love, its voice
An instant in the wind ...

That's our usual view of the bodhisattva vow, the bodhisattva task. There is another equally important part of that way, of that vow, that task. It has to do with the non-karmic nature of bodhi. If out of our own understanding of our suffering we are moved to help other beings to not feel suffering, then also out of our growing connection with bodhi, as we clear the obscurations away and begin to see it more directly, it begins to reflect more as a mirror, and we are more able to reflect that non-karmic-ness into the world as well. We can be a conduit for the non-karmic nature of

² A quote from Hakuin's "Praise Song for Enlightenment"

bodhi, which is the non-karmic nature of dharmakaya, into the karmic world. That's also a tremendously important part of the bodhisattva vow. We are enlarging the possibilities. We are bringing in what was, a moment before, inconceivable. We are allowing ourselves to be a place where nirmanakaya, the karmic world, and dharmakaya, the non-karmic world, can meet and mix. This is one of our offerings through the bodhisattva vow, to be that place. Not to repudiate nirmanakaya, not to repudiate the world of stuff and karma in favor of the empty world, the non-karmic world, but to allow them to come together and to mix so that possibilities that were not previously there suddenly are. What an amazing thing that is, what a remarkable privilege, to the extent that we can, to be able to do that.

Help with that comes from right inside of us, and that is another Sanskrit word, *bodhichitta*. Bodhichitta is the heart of awakening, and often we talk about it as the aspiration towards awakening; the bodhisattva vow is a vow to wake up, so one can help all beings wake up. This is also the way dharmakaya enters into our hearts and the way our hearts can reflect dharmakaya into the world. This creates in us, say the old scriptures, the great heart of love. That's what's it's called, the great heart of love.

That heart is not a heart of love in the way that we usually understand it in nirmanakaya terms. It is a heart of love that is without compulsion and without attachment because it is a reflection of dharmakaya. It doesn't get all mixed up with our stuff, but in some ways reflects from dharmakaya to bodhi through our hearts. It is so deeply connected to our own aspiration : again, it's not something distant and far away that we have to travel a great distance for, it is the thing that brought every single person here, that heart of awakening, that desire for awakening. It connects with something greater than ourselves.

It can change the way we experience longing. Longing has come up this week, a few times, and it seems such an important thing. We tend to think of longing as the most deeply personal of things. What could be more intensely personal than my own deepest longing? It comes from someplace so far inside myself. Yet I want to suggest that there might be an aspect that isn't arising out of some deep part of ourselves : longing is an understanding, inchoate or incompletely formed, that there is something that has a claim on us. That something is the dharmakaya. Our longing is our

willingness to suffer the awareness that the dharmakaya has a claim on us and we don't know how to meet it yet. But we're willing to suffer that "not knowing how to meet" and to do the hard work of practice (sit, sit, sit, koan, koan, koan, walk, walk, walk), in order to be able to meet that claim happily. When we have that sense of it, we move from an understanding of the bodhisattva as someone who does good deeds—and I am not for a moment denigrating doing good deeds; doing good deeds is a great thing—but it enlarges the sense of the bodhisattva from someone who does good deeds, which is fairly centered in the self, fairly located in the individual person, to a sense of the bodhisattva as that place where dharmakaya is refracted and reflected into the world, through consciousness and into our hearts, like the moon reflecting in all the waters of the world, without any clouds obscuring it.

The promise of the tradition is that—even if it feels like a mystery to us, even if it feels like something we can't yet wrap ourselves around—if we're willing to do that, there is a power, there is a *something* that will come to sustain us as we do it. We don't have to generate it on our own, like good deeds; there is a great power, which is called buddha nature and all kinds of other things, that will support us and sustain us. In fact, it's the thing that keeps our bodhisattva vow real. Without that opening to being a conduit for dharmakaya into the karmic world, and without that sustenance and support that comes when we make that vow, we're in danger of falling into what the old texts call the realm of the philosophers and shravakas. That's the realm of people for whom the bodhisattva vow is largely intellectual. For philosophers it's theoretical, it's a really nice ideal. Shravakas are people who relate to it by following the rules. They think being a bodhisattva is following the list of rules we call vows and precepts. It is our willingness to see it as something larger than that, that opens us up to the full possibility of the vow.

When we do that, our practice (sit, sit, sit, koan, koan, koan, walk, walk, walk) isn't just supporting our vow, isn't just revealing dharmakaya to us so that we can open our vow up to dharmakaya, but it's working the other way, too. Our vow is supporting our practice. We have the support of buddha nature, we have the support of the universe—whatever we want to call it—we have the support and the sustenance of that because of the way we have opened ourselves up.

We would say in our tradition that there's a beautiful feedback loop between the precepts or the vows and the koans. Pretty soon you are not sure which is which, and what's doing what, but the whole thing becomes a single project of opening consciousness, opening the mind, and opening the heart to dharmakaya. Opening the mind, opening the heart to nirmanakaya, and allowing those things to mix so that new things can come into the world through us.

I'd like to close today on a personal note. I know that this is chewy stuff, and I thought maybe if I talked about something really nitty-gritty that might help with it. Or it might completely obscure the whole thing, I don't know. [Laughs] I've been thinking a lot about the bodhisattva vow these days and of a profound dissatisfaction in my own understanding of it, because of my life, because of wanting to push it somewhere else to something else, wanting to open it up to something else. This is a very preliminary report of that effort, because it has only just begun, but it is the wave I am riding into my retreat time.

People have been so kind and said to me, so many times in so many different ways, "Please take care of yourself." When someone says that, I absolutely feel the warmth of that, and I receive that warmth. That's what it is for me—a moment of warmth and kindness from another person, for which I am very grateful. And at the same time, I have almost no idea what that means. "Take care of yourself." Out of those four words, I don't understand three of them. So that's interesting, you know? It's the source of my interesting dissatisfaction and curiosity about the bodhisattva vow.

One aspect of the way we think about it, at least in contemporary western culture, is that there is a difficulty with it—we're walking the knife-edge between bodhisattva vow and self-care. That's the negotiation we're in. How do I do the bodhisattva deal and yet take care of myself?

I've come to be profoundly dissatisfied with that as the knife's edge, for a lot of reasons. One is that I don't understand what self-care is, but that's another story. But really, it seems to set up an opposition or at least a tension between bodhisattva vow and self-care, like it's a duality, and we have to figure out a way to manage the duality. But I don't think that's the duality, I don't think that's the difficulty.

I am beginning to wonder if bringing in this idea of the bodhisattva as facing the nirmanakaya karmic world (the world in which action can be draining, difficult, takes a lot of energy, creates wounds, all that stuff we know as part of a world with a lot of elbows and sharp edges and uncertain ground) is on one side, maybe what's on the other side is a sense of the bodhisattva facing the dharmakaya, that world that doesn't have those karmic interesting elements and instead has this sustenance, this support.

There's a Daoist saying : "Honor the power of the Way, accept everyone." I used to think that meant to honor the power of the Way by accepting everyone. But now I'm beginning to think it might be two simultaneous things : "Honor the power of the Way *and* accept everyone." So that's the knife-edge : how do you hold the tension between those two things?

What does it mean to honor the power of the Way? Nine times out of ten, it's going to mean if someone is thirsty you give them a cup of water. That doesn't change. But one time out of ten it might mean something else. It might mean the power of the Way would cause us to choose not responding to the immediate need or request because there is a sense of a larger picture. There's the most beautiful privilege of responsibility to the dharmakaya, as well as responsibility to the circumstances in the karmic world. And that's the tension : how to discern that, how to stay alive to the needs of both and not fall, either on the side of the dharmakaya—too much in emptiness, too far removed from people who are thirsty and need a cup of water—and also not to fall too far into the ocean of samsara, where we can drown without some kind of ballast for ourselves. This is a knife-edge I understand better than "take care of yourself," or it's a way I understand it, maybe a more accurate thing to say. It's a way I understand "take care of yourself" that is different from "go get yourself a pedicure". It makes a truer kind of sense.

I don't have a resolution to this, I don't have a thunderous lovely conclusion to this, because as I say, it's the question that carries me out. But I am really interested in it. And I am wondering if you are interested in it, too. I would most welcome any comments or questions you might have. Thank you.

Q1: I have never really seen the bodhisattva as being in opposition to taking care of yourself because I always thought the bodhisattva arose from that feeling of interdependence — that we are created by our surroundings, and we create our surroundings. So the way you take care of yourself is the way you take care of everything around you. And that takes care of you in itself : “I build a good world and the world builds me.” And as you said, I think the difficulty is having a vision big enough to see how those things connect; how that bigger role comes in, and that’s the dharmakaya brought in.

JS: I don’t mean to be snide about self-care, because self-care is obviously an extremely important thing and it’s not just pedicures, it’s a lot of really good stuff like eating well and sleeping and all that, which I get abstractly.

Q2: I was thinking last night during one of our long walking meditations about Psyche’s journey. Robert Johnson has a book on that. I did something the other day where I invoked that fourth task, and what you said seems to fit into that. The fourth task is when you say, “No”. You pass a beggar who wants bread and you say No, and you keep saying No in different forms because you are doing self-care.

JS: I love that Psyche story, and I have taught it a bunch because I think it is so powerful. I think in what we are talking about, that’s a compensatory moment; a moment where we pull ourselves back from too much automatic Yes, and then I think there is something after that that is an absolutely essential moment. Something else happens then, where it is neither Yes nor No, it’s something else entirely.

Q3: Joan, I am curious about the lunar countercurrent you talked about yesterday. Is it only a hallmark of the sambhogakaya or does it actually have some connection to the dharmakaya?

JS: When we think of dharmakaya we tend to think of a light that contains both light and dark; it’s a nondual light. I am really interested in what it’s like when the

dharmakaya is a nondual dark that contains both light and dark. That's a way in which the lunar countercurrent really goes everywhere, including our senses of the largest things.

Q4: I am wondering whether there is a sense of pregnancy, not a sense of pulling away and something ending, but more of an actual pregnancy. It will lead to the baby of a new and different way of being a bodhisattva, or a new and different way of being a sangha and of learning. Because we don't know what it will be, there are steps that we make that are unusual. At the moment we have developed a way of practicing : there are teachings, there are rules, there is the known that we can follow that will get us someplace. I am wondering if this is more of a pregnant moment we are in. It feels like jumping off a cliff, and I'm sort of inside of myself, experimenting with that. We don't know yet how we can jump. Because we are human, if we jumped off a cliff we would hurt ourselves, but something is asking us to, so I don't know if we need to grow wings, or if we're being inspired to get creative.

JS: I think maybe trusting that the wind will come up to buoy your journey down. That's the thing from the world that comes down to sustain us when we are willing to jump. That happens in the Psyche story, she happens to jumps off a cliff, and a wind comes up and drops her gently down.

Q5: I am really grateful for your different perception on the bodhisattva vow, because I resisted it a lot. A friend even said a few months ago at a dharma talk that she thinks maybe she should take them back, or shouldn't have taken them, and I feel the same way. The bodhichitta always felt like rules, and I can't do that. It is so much easier the way you said it, it takes the work out of it. I don't want to do good deeds for good deed's sake, but this has its own value. It's doing the work too. And like you said, it's calling for me, and it's not calling for me without the skills but it's providing it. It feels really supportive. And makes the vows feel truer to me. They are deeper and more doable. Happily.

JS: I think one of the themes of this retreat has been different ways of stepping out of a very constricted sense of self, and discovering that there's a freedom in that, and what you are describing is freer. If we think that bodhisattva activity is something we're participating in with the whole world rather than something we are making happen ourselves, that's a very different feeling, and that's just a larger sense of self.

Q6: I think that every koan you give to us seems to be synchronistically just what we need. How is that happening? If it is because of the practice, because of Manjushri being Manjushri, Joan Sutherland being Joan Sutherland, then there is that leaning into sambhogakaya where it's flooding in and everything therefore aligns, and then the territory is very different. What we are working with is very different, and what we bring into it doesn't become so black or white, but laced with light. It's laced with darkness, it's laced with black sequins. It gets much wider and bigger. I am really interested in that place. And also in accepting that if that buddha seed is in anybody and everything, every being, buddha nature pervades everything, then are we at certain levels at rightness with it? And when we sit in the presence of a teacher, you bring the sambhogakaya right into the room like which...is that kind of where it's at?

JS: Well, it's a beautiful description of where *you* are at. But I do think the sambhogakaya is a really important part of this.

Q6: Right, because we are not in Kansas any more.

Q7: It seems like the sambhogakaya can carry a message about how to do the deed. That sometimes through practice we get a much sharper discernment, so that when we hear the message, from whatever level it is coming from, it informs us to make the beautiful mistake. That's how I understand it.

JS: Yes.

Q7: I feel also that maybe it is much more common, that everybody runs around having sambhogakaya experiences all the time, any time there's one thing transformed into another. Any time there's kind of a magical resemblance. Any time you feel a tree branch moving and you can feel it in your arm, or something like that. Any of those things that we experience all the time. Even in the way you learn a new dance step, and you are dancing to a music you know—that's a sambhogakaya thing—where you're out of the nirmanakaya or out of the realm of "I got to be me". A lot of experiences like that kind of loosen those boundaries up, I think.

JS: Absolutely.

Q8: About the dharmakaya aspect : it feels like the greatest gift, the greatest bodhisattva act, is to have that dharmakaya reflected back to oneself and to be so in touch with that in one's self as to have the capacity to manifest that in the sambhogakaya and the nirmanakaya. In that sense, self-care doesn't make sense because as someone practices it's like it endlessly benefits others.

Q8: Living from the dharmakaya is like living in the mirror, so usually when you carry a bag in nirmanakaya it is really heavy, but if you look in the mirror the bag isn't heavy, it is lifted. Just light as a feather, but it's not choosing dharmakaya over cause and effect, it is the exact mirror image.

JS: It is also true at exactly the same time. And so the thing becomes to have those be simultaneous experiences, even mirror image at first and then simultaneous.

Q9 : I feel like a person who's chasing a butterfly, like I just about have it and then ... I do feel a tension, and I am curious about it. I feel the shift in my allegiance to the lunar countercurrent, and the invocation of that is, for me, the essence of all this practice means, what my vow is. That shift for me is no longer managing, no longer forcing, no longer scenario-planning, no longer in the world. It actually feels more like me than I've ever felt; so in terms of self-care, it is the most nurturing thing I've ever

experienced. It's come together in a way where I can feel the voice come up like a kind of surge from someplace else. Not predictable, not timely always, not when I want it necessarily, but when it needs to be there, it comes. To be in that much mystery and not knowing and turning in that direction, can feel like turning away from the world, even though I am more aware and more alive to it than I feel I've ever been.

I need a lot more time to listen. So what do I tell people while I am listening in solitude? What do I say to people I love: that's the tension I am feeling, as well as feeling unskilled. The surge can come out feeling like a sword, and that terrifies me, that much power, so I pull away. I think that my question is, "What's the practice of how to dance with that? I am not sure how to express this time or where I am at to people that I love. And I am afraid of people feeling like I am not there, or that I am pulling away.

JS: In this practice we go through many cycles of deconstruction. At the bottom of a cycle of deconstruction, we are not doing everything we used to do, or everything that made sense to us doesn't make sense anymore. It can feel like we're a newborn colt trying to stand up for the first time — sort of gangly and uncoordinated — and that's just a part of the way it is. We are genuinely deconstructing old habits and ways of doing things, beliefs and convictions, certainties and all of that. We are going to go through a series of colt-like moments when we are trying to stand up again. I'm wondering if there is a way for you, without too much information, somehow conveying some of that to people you love.

Q10 : Regarding being in partnership with someone where we are both getting up on those legs : if something is spoken that comes right from that place that reveals it, then there's an "Ahh, you're tending that place that I want to tend." That's beautiful and there's a gift being exchanged. It's not just "You're taking away something."

JS: When you are talking with people who aren't also in the practice it might take a few times to figure out the way to do that and you might not get it right the first time. I would encourage you to believe that the people who love you really love you and that

they'll stay with it, while you figure out how to say what it is that is happening. Just keep trying until you seem to find the right way to do it, or the way that seems most helpful to them.

Q10: I am very, very excited and very curious what the expression is going to take.

Q11: I found myself trying to explain this to someone recently and I realized that it wasn't the words, it was the place that they're spoken from that I wanted to shift. It was a tremendous relief to realize just that much. It's hard to speak from that trembling place; it has to go so slow, because otherwise I will tumble into habit. I have to tremble and feel the wall, and not have a clue, and I don't do that with a lot of people. But also, I have so little ability to do the broader world. It really feels more painful than it used to. It hurts now. In that place of the shift, or the potential for the shift, if in that fear I stop, it burns right here, and so mostly what I do is I end up touching people.

JS : That might be the truest thing.

Q12: And also, you know it is love, so when you touch, and they feel the love, there is no word needed. When you want to say something to somebody, and then the love comes out, they understand that you love them. That's really all anybody wants to hear anyways, ever.

Q10: Well, that's the trusting, the sorting out, not knowing ahead of time. Not having the whole package figured out, which is great, which is very helpful. But trusting that you will sort it out together is the most beautiful manifestation of what it is that we are living.

JS: Tomorrow I think we'll have an open discussion so you can bring any questions, the things that are most important or precious to you, or the things you are most burning to talk about. I want to close this conversation by saying that, because of the urgency of the world of karma and form, it can sometimes feel to us as though

we're betraying something or being disloyal to something if we consider the possibility of dharmakaya; like we are leaving the tough stuff in the dust, and we are escaping somewhere else.

That's why I keep saying it is not substituting one for the other. That is a deep spiritual pathology, to substitute dharmakaya for nirmanakaya, but it is being more realistic to include it, because it is real. It is true. It is already here. Even in our crankiest nirmanakaya moments, dharmakaya is still present, and so all we are doing is moving into reality when we include it. We are betraying nothing. We are opening up more possibilities. Please consider that there is no betrayal or escape here. There is actually a very risky move, and I think some of the things you've all said speak to the risk of including it. But it's a beautiful risk, and it's a generous risk.