

# Zen Bow Article:

## Random Acts of Kindness

*(This is a series of brief pieces, each by a different writer, on encounters with bodhisattvas in everyday life.)*

There's a bodhisattva in my office. Really, there is.

Whenever my officemate or I send a document to our computer printer, it first produces a sheet of paper with some tiny hearts on it - usually one, two or four, but one Monday morning we got as many as twelve. "How sweet," I said. "It missed us over the weekend." My officemate groaned and called tech support.

The printer has become something we bicker over mildly.

"Yes, I know the problem is caused by some electronic glitch," I say, "but isn't it interesting that it should print out hearts instead of some neutral symbol like pound signs? It's like that bank in Clearwater, Florida, that had an image of the Virgin Mary appear on its windows. Chemical discoloration was what the bank officials said, but even so, it was odd that the chemicals formed an image like a Byzantine icon instead of some random pattern. I think the printer is trying to tell us it cares."

"It's wasting paper," says my officemate. He gets a new printer cable, and he erases the printer header and reloads it. He calls tech support again.

Some people have no sensitivity.

Then one day I have a car accident, and I'm not hurt, but the company car is, to the tune of \$4000. And it's all my fault.

My officemate calls the garage, calls the insurance company, calls the bank we lease the car from. He never says the obvious, "You should have been driving more carefully." Instead he makes quite startling pronouncements like, "A problem that can be solved by writing a check is not a truly serious problem," and "It's only money."

"Thank you," I say, but he doesn't hear me because he's on the phone to tech support about our printer.

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The moment I entered, there was something strange about the crowded men's room in Concourse B of Chicago's O'Hare Airport. Bach organ music was being piped in, giving the cold, functional space a rather spiritual dimension. In the midst of the coming and going, a blind Japanese man with a white cane stood by a washbasin. Having just washed his hands, he simply reached into space, and in perfect response someone on his right passed him a paper towel. Having dried his hands, he turned his body, with the slightest hesitation, to the left, and another person picked up his travel bag from the floor and handed it to him. These movements had a transfixing, ballet-like precision; for a few brief moments a room of complete strangers were working together in harmony. Then the Japanese man gave a general "Thank you," and exited into the stream of arriving and departing travelers.

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Jun and his wife Sarah operate an Iranian grocery store in the Edgewater section of Chicago. Clark Street is not a place that the safe and sensible want to be during the wrong hours. The store is a cash-only operation: no tab, no credit, no checks. The risk of a scam is high.

Late one Sunday evening in winter, just as they were closing the store, a woman came in to ask for a phone. Her car was being towed and she had to call for cash. No one answered the number she dialed, and she broke into tears. In from the dark street came the tow truck operator to inform her that if she didn't give him \$100 cash this minute he would tow her car to the City Pound (where as a matter of course it might well be stripped and vandalized before she paid the \$250 ransom to get it out).

The woman was clearly poor, had no cash, and was at her wits' end when she turned to the two Iranian store owners and wordlessly begged to be rescued. Jun reached into the cash drawer without hesitation, pulled out the \$100, and paid the tow. While the woman gave the driver directions to her house, Jun closed the drawer and held open the door for us to leave. He never asked for the woman's name or address. On the street she asked him what he wanted in payment. Jun said, "Just send me a check."

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A few years ago, I was away from the Zen Center, spending time with my elderly father. One day I caught sight of a middle-aged woman walking down our driveway with a clipboard. It was obvious that she was conducting some

kind of survey, and I quickly retreated to my room, leaving my father to answer the front door.

About twenty minutes later, after the woman had left, I found my father in our living-room, holding a thick sheaf of papers. He had undertaken, in the course of the next three weeks, to fill out a detailed radio survey, hour by hour noting down what programs he listened to and on what stations.

"Dad," I said, with a touch of bewilderment, "why are you doing this? It's not that you have a lot of free time, and you normally listen to the radio only for the news and the cricket matches." "Well," he replied, "that woman has a thankless job. And it made her so happy that someone actually sat down with her and agreed to be part of the survey."

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One November, on a trip from Rochester to Maine, I stopped to visit my former college roommate, who was training at Dai Bosatsu, in the Catskills. I don't know what that part of the Catskills looks like these days, but in 1978 Dai Bosatsu was as in-the-middle-of-*nowhere* as I'd ever been.

I had a very pleasant visit with my former roommate, and was impressed by Dai Bosatsu. Everyone was extremely friendly, although a little wild-eyed and intense. I wasn't allowed to spend the night, but they did invite me to stay for dinner.

It was past ten, very dark, and very snowy when they drove me back down the steep hill to where I had parked. I brushed off my car and headed back to "the real world." The road had been confusing in the daylight; in the darkness, I missed the turn that would have taken me back to the highway. I drove on for some time before I realized that I'd made a mistake, then, looking for a place to turn around, made a left onto what looked like the next side road. It led past a farm, went suddenly up a steep hill and abruptly ended. Trying to back down the road, I slid off into a ditch, and heard a very unpleasant noise coming from underneath my car. It was country-dark, country-quiet, and snowing hard. Panicked, I got out of the car, and headed for the lights of the farmhouse.

When I pounded on the door, the farmer's wife pulled the curtain aside, and looked suspiciously out at me. After all, it was late in the evening, and I was sure they didn't get many visitors regardless of the time of day! Would they still help me if I told them that I'd just come from that Zen place up the road? How else could I explain what the heck I was doing out here? I must have looked pathetic and scared, because when she opened the door and listened to my woes, the farmer's wife immediately sent her husband out to help me.

The farmer got out his tractor and pulled my car back onto the road. Looking under the car, he told me that I'd managed to rip the muffler off its moorings. He trudged back to the house, and returned with a coat-hanger, which he used to re-attach the muffler. I tried to give him some money for helping me, but he wouldn't take it.

The farmer gave me solid directions. I started up my car and, trailing good-bye waves and profuse thanks from my open window, I headed back. When I finally reached Rt. 17 and "civilization," I practically wept with gratitude for that farmer, who was willing to get cold, wet, and miserable, pulling a stranger out of a snowy ditch in the middle of the night.

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It was a hot summer day, just over a year ago. I was hunched over my bike, riding on a path that followed the Schuylkill River, my eyes glued to a spot a couple of feet in front of the tire, oblivious to everything around me. My gaze seldom rising from the pavement, I passed rumors of people: roller-bladers, a guy at the water fountain, joggers. I was conscious only of the heat, the sweat, and the dark thoughts haunting me. My marriage had dissolved abruptly and with finality about a month earlier and I was left to sort it all out. All the old fears and insecurities had come back with a vengeance.

Suddenly, a bike pulled up next to me and I recognized the person riding as the guy I had passed at the water fountain. He started talking to me, and despite my deep desire to be left alone, he kept talking. My eyes occasionally lifted from the pavement and, in spite of myself, I was becoming engaged in the conversation. We rode in silence for a while, and then he looked at the river. He nodded towards it and the day. "Makes you happy to be alive, doesn't it?" he said. I looked at him, and for a moment I honestly had no idea what he was talking about. Then I looked past him and saw the river and the trees and felt the warm summer air as if for the first time. From a place I had forgotten, a small smile came. "Yeah," I finally said. "It sure does."

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In 1970, my wife was pregnant with our first child. We were living in an old farmhouse in backwoods Pennsylvania about forty-five minutes south of Binghamton. We were in town - I think my wife had a dentist appointment - and while she was busy I drove off in our old VW bus to take care of some errands.

A few blocks away I chanced on a gas station. Two older gentleman in worn overalls were in attendance. They also, as it happened, sold used cars. While I gassed up we talked. I mentioned the upcoming birth. They looked curiously at me and at the VW, an old, unpadded, uninsulated, rattling, bare metal box

of a van. "You have a child coming?" they mused. "Well, take a look at this GMC truck." I looked. It was blue and solid and gleaming. Everything about it, from the massive emergency brake to the rows of thickly padded, removable, bench-type seats said, 'Industrial Strength.'

"Take a drive," they said. I drove away. And had visions of plowing with ease up the hill to the old farmhouse in winter snows - a daring, bouncing, pedal-to-the-metal feat in our old bus - visions of nomadic family security.

"How much?" I asked when I returned flushed with truck-power and hope. They named what seemed a ridiculously low sum plus the wretched old bus. We shook hands and struck a bargain. Then I picked up my wife, spilled the good news, and headed happily home.

I drove back the next day, check in my pocket. About five blocks from the gas station there was a loud Bang! from the engine in the rear. The VW staggered as if shot, then kept on rolling, but now in a halting, shuddering, groaning, wheezing, sort of way. We limped up to the pump, and I hit the brake and mercifully killed the engine, which gave a final drawn-out gasp and died. Then, except for the ticking of overheated metal, there was only silence, an awful silence, as I sat on the peeling seat waiting for the billowing smoke to clear. From the haze of my dropped out, 1970-mind, rose a helpless refrain: "Up the creek, up the creek without a paddle. No new truck; now not even the old van, cash low, and the baby coming."

The two elderly gents had watched my stricken approach. Now they stepped forward. "Well," they said, "you brought the bus. Do you have the check?" "Yes. Yes, I do. You'll still take it?" I asked, incredulous. "A deal's a deal," they answered. "You don't want any more money?" I asked in a daze. "Nope," said the Bodhisattvas. I pulled the crumpled check from my pocket, signed it and handed it to them. We finished up the paperwork and shook hands all around.

I drove off in that heavenly blue (blue the color of Bhaisyajaguru, the Buddha of Healing), GMC truck, which not long after drove serenely down twisting mountain roads in a heavy fog in the middle of the night so that our son could be born with one push in the local hospital of Susquehanna, PA.

Eight weeks after that we moved to Rochester, loading all our possessions into our big blue truck, which gave many years of solid service after that. In fact, it ran and ran and ran, as if it possessed a good stout willing heart under its huge blue hood, and not the mere mechanical assemblage of engine at all. It ran as if blessed.

So, homage to all Car Bodhisattvas! They appear as if from nowhere, extending oil cans, cold drinks, warranties, lug wrenches, gasoline, lock de-icers, cell phones, Three-in-One Oil, jumper cables, screwdrivers, pliers, anti-freeze, shovels and jacks in their one thousand helping hands. And when they depart it is not our helplessness, rage, frustration, weariness, or anxiety that remain, but the incense of a vast, free-wheeling generosity. When beings are stuck and tires no longer turn true, they selflessly arise to spin the Dharma Wheel. Namó Bodhisattva! Vrooom!