



My Vows

Love all beings? Love even one? Either way, your heart breaks open. Susan Piver ponders the choiceless choices.

SO FAR, I'VE MADE TWO VOWS that have changed my life. One was related to my Buddhist practice—to become a bodhisattva. The other was to become a wife.

A bodhisattva is a person who vows to help all beings reach enlightenment, no matter how many lifetimes it might take. This vow is obviously not made lightly; it comes after many hours of meditation practice and a formal commitment to Buddhism. Serious contemplation and study are required to get even a glimmer of the deeper meaning of this vow and its complexities. (For example, you vow to love everyone, even people you don't like.)

A wife's vow is also not made lightly. It comes after having found someone you really, really like to talk to and also to touch. It's made after serious contemplation of the likelihood you'll find anyone better, might otherwise grow old alone, and how cute you'd look in a bridal gown. A bodhisattva chooses to be of service. A bride picks out china patterns for dinner service.

It so happened that I prepared to take both these vows at around the same time. While bride-me was shopping for dresses, arguing with her parents, and falling prey to panic attacks, bodhisattva-me was studying the six transcendent actions and

contemplating the suffering of all sentient beings.

Both are vows to love (all beings in one case and a single being in the other) and it may seem that the bodhisattva vow is the really hard one. But after ten years, I can tell you that the real test of bigheartedness started with the latter proposition.

Marriage is the perfection of what love aimed at, ignorant of what it sought. —RALPH WALDO EMERSON

When my boyfriend asked me to marry him, I didn't exactly gush yes. I sort of tried to break up with him. He wanted to deepen our relationship and I just wasn't sure. Sure I loved Duncan, but my divorced girlfriends had loved their boyfriends too. Clearly love was no basis for marriage. Then what was? It had to be about more than wearing a silly dress, waving a wedding ring around, and being all, "Oh it's my day."

I told him I needed time to think it over and wanted to spend a month apart. I planned to search my soul, ponder the question deeply, and meditate *a lot*. I didn't really know if I was cut out for marriage. I prized my solitude tremendously, maybe above

everything. When I wanted to write, I wrote. When I wanted to meditate, I meditated. When I wanted to pretend to write and meditate, no one was around to bust me. I wasn't sure I wanted to give all this up.

Plus, right now we could easily ignore what drove each of us crazy about the other and, perhaps as a consequence, after five years we were still completely hot for each other. Privacy. Being able to get away from each other on our bad days. These were good things, no? Maybe maintaining some separation was the key to keeping the whole thing going.

By month's end I figured I'd either have come to some sort of brilliant conclusion about how it could all work out OR realized I simply wasn't built for marriage and we should break up. If the latter, I'd already have accumulated separation days, and maybe they could be back-dated to shorten the grieving period.

Taking the bodhisattva vow implies that instead of holding onto our individual territory and defending it tooth and nail, we become open to the world that we are living in. —CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA

During all this, I noticed that I was crying a lot. Everything was touching me and it was getting on my nerves: the hopeful look on a colleague's face when he was about to make a presentation; how sorry I felt for the people on the news; how beautiful Marvin Gaye's voice was when he sang "What's Going On." The insulation between me and the world around me was getting thinner and thinner. So I stepped up my meditation practice. I thought this would be the best way to maintain equilibrium during this emotional time. But the more I meditated, the more likely I was to be provoked to tears by the slightest display of fragility. This couldn't be the intended result. Instead of making me peaceful, meditating was freaking me out. What was I doing wrong?

I made an appointment with my meditation instructor to explore this question, but instead of giving me a strategy for toughening up, he suggested I take the bodhisattva vow. He explained that *bodhi* meant "awake" and *sattva* meant "being," so an awakened being is what you vow to become.

He told me that the vow was something a Buddhist might consider to deepen her practice after having been a meditator for some years. (Again with the deepening.) Sure, I thought, who wouldn't want to try to become enlightened? But there was a catch. "The vow is to attain enlightenment for all beings, not just for yourself. You vow to keep taking birth through endless

lifetimes and helping out until *all beings* are enlightened," he said. No exceptions.

You volunteer to take on the pain of all others. Wow, that's some

vow, I thought. But how, I asked him, would this help me stop crying all the time? It sounded like it would make everything worse. The tears are a good sign, he said. It's good preparation for the path of the bodhisattva. Okay, if you say so, I thought to myself.

I am always doing that which I cannot do, in order that I may learn how to do it. —PABLO PICASSO

I spent a month weighing the pros and cons of getting married, figuring that at some point one would outweigh the other. One problem with my strategy: the more I thought it all over, the more I realized that I totally, completely loved Duncan and there was nothing I could do about it. No matter how heavy the con side of the list got with perfectly acceptable reasons not to marry (familiarity kills desire...all my private time will disappear... I can't poop when anyone else is in the house), they couldn't trump the one solitary thing on the pro side: I loved him. (OK, and there would be tax advantages.) I didn't even know *why* I loved him so much. I mean, he's great and cute and funny and all that, but nothing could account for the pleasure I got from his breath on my shoulder as we fell asleep or how upsetting I found it when anyone was mean to him.

When we got back together after our month apart, I told him how much I loved him and gave him a carefully thought-out list of caveats: I'd never be a conventional wife. I'd require time and space to meditate every day. Please don't talk to me when I'm in the bathroom. And so on. In the midst of my big presentation, he reached into his backpack and retrieved a small package. Oh no, I thought, does he think that giving me a ring will wash away all doubts and common sense?

But there was no ring. Instead, he handed me a little heart-shaped box. Inside was a backyard bird feather and a smooth white stone. "This is us," he said. "I'm the rock and you're the feather. Fly all you want. That's just who you are. I'll make our situation stable. That's who I am." I was flabbergasted. What? He saw me this clearly and still wanted to marry me? The gravity of my rules and conditions shifted as suddenly as a flock of birds in the sky. I burst into tears. I had no idea there could be a person as wonderful as him. At this point there was no choice. Yes, I said. Yes, yes, yes. Please marry me and I will marry you.



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So we began to plan our wedding. I placed the sweet box with the rock and the feather by my bed so I could look at it anytime I wanted. Whenever we would have a fight or my doubts would return, I could lift the top and peek inside. Oh yes, I would remind myself, everything is OK. We love each other so much.

Some of the world's greatest meditators have cried a lot. — SAKYONG MIPHAM

Also during this month, I was studying in preparation for the bodhisattva vow ceremony. I read about how great saints and scholars defined compassion and how they kept it going even under the most difficult circumstances. I learned that compassion is the sole basis for peace, and that personal happiness can only come from making the needs of others primary. I once read that the Dalai Lama spends three hours every morning rousing compassion. How did he then go out into the world without sobbing all the time? I had no idea. But just as with marrying Duncan, after thinking it over I realized that I had to do it. There was simply no choice. Do you say no when the one you love offers to love you back for the rest of his life? Do you say no when your meditation teacher asks if you want to try to become enlightened for the benefit of others? “Actually, I think I’d rather remain in a self-absorbed fantasy” didn’t seem like a good answer to either of them. So I said yes. OK, yes, yes, yes. I’ll try.

Within a few months, I took the bodhisattva vow with about ten other students. We had been told to bring something to place on the altar as an offering during the ceremony. It didn’t have to be the most meaningful thing in our life, but it should be something that mattered. I thought about offering a ring that I rarely wore, or books that had been very meaningful to me, or even my favorite dress. (Look, I really loved that dress.) None of them seemed right. There was only one thing that would cost me to be without: the box with the rock and the feather. I tried to talk myself out of it. “He said it didn’t have to be our most valued possession.” “That would hurt Duncan.” “Surely I could hold on to this...”

I didn’t know if I was making a generous gesture or a martyr-y one when I offered the box during the vow ceremony. But I did it anyway.

The very next morning, I woke up in a panic. I was bereft. I wanted that box back. I had never possessed anything so

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precious. But it was gone and nothing, nothing, nothing could bring it back. Even if I could find it and return it to my bedside table, it would now only be a sad reminder of how selfish I was, not how beloved. I was stuck. I saw just how unlikely a candidate for bodhisattva-hood I was. I couldn’t even graciously give up a cardboard box for the benefit of others, to say nothing of my “personal space” for my boyfriend. Could I change my mind about these vows or was it too late?

Too late. I had already gotten my first lesson. You can’t give to get. Opening yourself to another isn’t as simple as acting nice or giving up what you value even though you really, really don’t want to. It’s actually heartbreaking. I knew I had no idea how to be a bodhisattva—or a wife, for that matter. Nor could I pretend these were stupid ideas and go back to living the way I had before. Anything I gained for myself alone would be a reminder of my lack of loving-kindness. I couldn’t be bodhisattva Susan but I couldn’t be regular Susan either. Bastards! I was trapped. So, of course, I burst into tears.

Instead of making it safe, love—whether for all beings or for one—actually breaks your heart. Being loved is uncomfortable and the more I love, the more uncomfortable it is. In the end, I’m still not quite sure what I’ve vowed to do either as a wife or a bodhisattva, except to break my own heart, over and over And see what happens next. ♦