

A Gift of Dharma





Dedication

The blessings of love and respect we offer to all, in times past and present, who have opened the doors of wisdom, reuniting all beings with their intrinsic purity.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.

Dharma is the teaching,
the understanding,
the contents of
the enlightened mind,
it is the joy of intelligence
knowing itself.





Isn't it just the most miraculous
thing that awareness practice exists
and that we know how to do it?

-Cherí Huber



It is well understood in Zen that the Dharma, the teaching, is transmitted through direct experience.

"Those who see worldly life as an obstacle to Dharma see no Dharma in everyday actions. They have not yet discovered that there are no everyday actions outside of Dharma."

— Dogen

In simple, everyday moments in the Guide's presence—moments of compassion, kindness, laughter, participation, possibility, generosity, clarity, unconditional love—we have been transformed.

"Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words."

— St. Francis

It is a marvelous gift to have a teacher whose life models the Dharma and who communicates the teachings with unflinching

compassion, directness and humor.

"Quotes remind us that Life can be expressed in a myriad of ways. The essence of what we are all attempting to illustrate remains the same, but the way it is expressed offers a nuance, an angle, a facet of exploration that deepens and widens our comprehension."

— Cheri Huber

Over more than four decades, the Guide has created many homes for Practice. Each has embodied practice. Each has been an inextricable part of the Dharma that is offered.

"Nature—the trees, the birds, the flowers—does not have a conditioned mind. It simply reflects what we are without all of the interference from egocentricity. Nature is our Nature."

— Cheri Huber

On the occasion of Cheri Huber's 80th birthday, we honor the beauty of the Dharma that is expressed through The Guide. This book is a humble expression of gratitude for the teachings. It is an account of moments of transformation, accompanied by many inspirational quotes from Cheri and by images of places of Practice.

In the spirit of Zen, we invite you have your own, direct experience with the book, perhaps reading it slowly, pausing to record your experience of a quote or a practice vignette or what a photograph evokes. In this way, the Dharma continues. In this way, we do most deeply vow to train ourselves.

In gasshō,
A Sangha



What a joy to throw oneself into
something one loves with
wild abandon.

-Cheri Huber



Some 40 years ago, I met Cheri at a gathering where she spoke in someone's home, soon after she left the Monastery where she trained. I knew I wanted to hear more and began attending groups regularly. Eventually, Cheri and the group of us so drawn to this Dharma wanted to have our own space to meet.

We found a 100-year-old house in Mountain View that was perfect, to Cheri. To put it mildly, it was a fixer-upper. It stood on footings. In the back left corner, instead of a footing the house leaned against an old tree. The grass hadn't been mowed in years and was growing so tall that in some places it twined up the chimney and reached the roof; no part of it was shorter than five to six feet. The person who had occupied the house had 18 cats and some birds and who knows what else.

However, Cheri knew it was perfect for us. "Us" encompassed Cheri plus six or seven strong, eager participants.

As soon as it was ours, we started to work. All summer and into the fall we kept at it, hacking away at the massive growth of grass until it transformed into a lawn. On the inside we began tearing out the old, smelly sheet rock to find beneath lovely redwood walls; pulling up old, soiled rugs finding a hardwood floor; repairing what we could fix, replacing what we could not; and cleaning, cleaning and more cleaning, transforming this poor neglected structure into a beautiful Zen Center as we transformed ourselves into willing “can do” Practitioners of Zen.

It was a marvel to meditate in that beautiful, cared-for Zen Center and realize the great gift of the vision to be able to see the gem that had been hidden. I have seen this process happen over and over again, in this practice, in my practice.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.

If you continue to look, confusion will
give way to clarity.
And clarity is compassion.

-Cheri Huber



1991. A friend gave me a book, “The Key” by Cheri Huber. I remember reading that book and feeling such a sense of HOPE, even though I was trapped in a spiraling state of self-hate and anxiety.

My friend then invited me to a meditation group in Noe Valley. I sat in a cozy room with my friend, some other people, and the Guide, who had the kindest face I’d ever seen. Cheri was speaking a language I didn’t understand. (It was English, but nothing like I knew!)

With the biggest compassion, she said, “It is absolutely fine if you don’t understand anything we are saying. Let it wash over you. Your heart will take in anything it needs to know. You don’t have to do anything. You don’t have to work at anything. You can just keep looking.”

In a world of “go faster, be brighter, be smarter,” here was someone telling me it was okay to simply listen and be. She was telling me that I could trust something deeper than “figuring it out” with my head.

Though 30 years later, I think of that experience often. Any time I am in a new situation and conditioned mind tells me I need to figure something out, I can hear the Guide saying, "Relax. Let it wash over you. Your heart will take in what it needs to know."

I feel awash with compassion. I let go. I can simply be.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



The practice is finding compassion
no matter what.

-Cheri Huber



CENTER

One morning, in the early days of the Zen Center on Dana Street in Mountain View, I was scared and worried. I had not done something I had been asked to do (I don't remember what). How could I be so stupid, selfish, thoughtless, and inattentive? The Guide would be disappointed in me. Her busy day would be even busier because of my neglect. I was in for it. But there was nothing to do but tell her of my unforgivable mistake and take the dressing down I deserved.

We sat down at the kitchen table in front of the stove—the one brought back from near death by Sister Phil and that served us so well for so long at the Monastery—and, meekly, I confessed.

The Guide met my fear and worry and contrition with absolute equanimity and compassion. I don't recall her exact words but they were along the lines of, hey, no problemo, don't worry about it. I was shocked, and moved to tears.

This is my first memory of having self-hating voices be stunned into silence (and certainly not the last). The Guide wasn't forgiving me; there was nothing to forgive. She wasn't absolving me of my sins; I had done nothing wrong. In fact, it wasn't about me. It was the Guide being the Guide. That was 40 years ago and I can still feel the disbelief that anyone could be so kind.

In this unconditionally loving way,
I do most deeply vow to train myself.



Eventually you know from your own experience
what will sustain you, what you can turn to
under any circumstances, what will not fail you
no matter how tired or sick or confused or
depressed you become.
What will sustain you is your spiritual practice.

-Cheri Huber



MEDITATION
←

I remember Cheri talking about when she first started offering meditation soon after she left the Monastery where she trained. She said there were many days when she was the only one there. She would wait until the allotted time, then close and lock the door, putting out the sign that meditation was now in progress, and sit.

In the corner of the Meditation Hall in Murphys, by the door to the Archway, sat a Buddha, sitting in meditation with legs in Burmese position, eyes cast down at about a 45-degree angle, and hands in the cosmic mudra. Sitting just like we sit.

I often thought of Cheri in those early days when I would bow to the Buddha as I entered the Hall. He was always there, sitting, doing his own practice. Unwaveringly, steadily, and unconditionally. A model of constant devotion.

He wasn't doing anything other than his own practice, and in this way, was offering a model to us of what is possible. Can't do it for us. And showing the way for anyone who wanted to know the way.

This is how I feel like I have been guided on this path.

In this way of constant devotion, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



Being a human being is pretty much the same for all of us; the differences are far, far fewer than the similarities. What we think, what we fear, how our emotions arise - fundamentally, we are very much alike. We get caught up in differences in content because that is how we experience ourselves as separate.

- Cheri Huber



Early on in my retreat days at the Monastery, when there were only army tents, I was a terrified young practitioner trying oh-so-hard to do everything right.

I was given the seemingly simple task of getting ice out of the freezer to put in a bucket to have at the meal for ice water. (As anyone knows who has been to Murphys in the summer, it gets HOT and ice water is a supreme treat.) When I opened the freezer door, I was horrified. There was all sorts of ice in there, and I had no idea which to use. I can't remember why, but I shut the freezer door and did not complete the task.

Being a dedicated student, I brought this up in group, describing my experience of not being able to distinguish from all the ice and being so overwhelmed by the possibility of making the wrong choice, I just abandoned the task. I'm

sure the Guide said more than this, but I remember her saying, “Just risk it!”

While I knew this was not her intention, I left feeling a bit defeated, like I had not been a good student. We were simply talking about ice, after all.

Then the next day in group, the Guide started the discussion with, “I had the same experience with the ice!” This so delighted me I laughed out loud. I was not alone, and someone—the Guide no less—had the exact same experience. She even said to the monks, “We have got to do something about that ice!” In countless ways, the Guide is always demonstrating how we are all the same.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.

How you do anything
is how you do everything.

-Cheri Huber

In the early days at the Monastery, monks were essentially camping and life was not easy. The simplest tasks took an extraordinary amount of energy. The Monastery was off the grid and the Guide once said, “Oh you have no idea what goes on behind the scenes to keep the electricity going.”

At one retreat, we were having group in the Mediation Hut. The Guide looked up at the bare lightbulb in the ceiling and said to a monk, “We need to do something about that.” I was so struck by that level of caring, of noticing. I could barely get myself to the schedule on time and deal with all the elements, and here was the Guide attending to a seemingly small, unimportant detail. A simple, beautiful shade was crafted from paper and redwood for that humble bulb. It was a “small” thing and huge thing, demonstrating exquisite care.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.

Come back to the present,
take a deep breath, say “Yes” and say
“Thank you.”

-Cherí Huber



It's not Yes or No in the Monastery, it's Yes or Go!

I was privileged to live for many years at our Monastery. The learnings there were invaluable, priceless. A fundamental teaching from the Guide was/is staying in the moment, saying, "Yes to Life," then moving into each Now as it comes.

In building our Rammed Earth Monastery, what we needed now was to put down flooring. We had a vast area to cover; we hoped for Mexican pavers or any kind of pavers we could afford and found nothing. So, the Guide looked straight at me and said, "Well, since we can't find any pavers or tiles at a price we can afford, will you please learn how to make them?"

The Monastery taught us to say Yes and deal with what arose within. I took a deep breath and said "Yes." The teaching was/is to say "Yes" and let Life show the way, or not be able to remain at the Monastery. That's what the Practice is all about, Letting Life Lead.

I began looking in books and calling around to tile companies to see if they'd share their recipe for making tiles; they just laughed. Finally, I called a tile company asking for their recipe when an Angel disguised as a young man said, "I can do better than that. We have a whole yard full of $8\frac{1}{2}$ " x $8\frac{1}{2}$ " tiles, slightly marred. I'll sell them to you for seven dollars each and deliver them to your monastery." Thank you, Cheri. Thank you, Life!

A big hardy Yes and Thank you to Life, and we are on our way!

With deep gratitude, in saying Yes, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



It is the process that's the joy,
not the challenge or the
destination.

- Cheri Huber



The building code indicated the trenches for the foundations of the new Monastery building were to be “neat, clean and free of debris.” Several hundred linear feet of 12” wide by 12” deep trenches had been mindfully carved into dry and stable soil, sides straight and parallel, bottoms flat, corners square. It was clear we were well covered on the “neat” part of the program, but how about “clean and free of debris”? We were none too sure exactly what that looked like in the world of building codes and inspections. So out came brooms and brushes of all manner along with their companion dust pans as the trenches were cleaned and freed of debris—mostly modest piles of dust and the occasional flock of pea-sized clods of dirt.

The building inspector arrived soon after, took a quick look around and with a big grin handed us a signed green card saying he’d never seen footing trenches as immaculate as that. We were grinning too, both inside and out. We’d just spent the better part of the morning taking care of those trenches in the same way we would wish to be taken care of. As we’d been working, we’d been

the primary recipients of the kindness, generosity and gratitude directed towards the trenches—devotedly allowing that kindness, generosity and gratitude to clean and free ourselves of karmic debris. As a bonus, we'd just gotten the news we could move along with filling those trenches with concrete.

Following what the Guide has always modeled, it seems Practice isn't bound by conditioned notions of efficiency or convenience. We might even say the opposite is true; in the movement towards unconditional love, perhaps whatever compassion suggests is always efficient and convenient. Many a retreatant at the Monastery has spoken eloquently and passionately in group about a palpable sense of love and compassion embodied in places of Practice. Indeed so, from the foundation right on up.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.







There are two ways of being in the world that we consider in spiritual practice, and they are reflected in our attitudes toward work.

One is the expansive, present, interconnected, blissful, relaxed, comfortable, peaceful way of being.

The other is resistance...

Work offers an opportunity to practice being in the body and with the breath and making the work a dance.

-Cheri Huber



Work clothes on. Check the board for your Work Note. Show up. Pay attention. Just notice. Breathe in, breathe out. Watch what the voices are doing.

Feel the hands on the broom. On the rake. On the shovel. On the chainsaw. The Guide practices along with us. Works alongside us. We are all together, practicing. Ours is a practice of participation. We participate; it's how we practice.

Show up in rain, in heat, in storms. Just show up, and just notice. And when the bell rings, clean up, put away your tools, change out of work clothes, and go sit. Fully used up. Tired and happy. The true joy of a big outdoor work day at the Monastery.

"This is the true joy in life, being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one. To be thoroughly worn out before being thrown on the scrap heap; being a force of

nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy."

-George Bernard Shaw

What a gift beyond measure to be given by Life the chance to experience this true joy in life, to have had it modeled for us, in this lifetime.

In this way, with wholehearted participation, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



We come on a silent retreat and learn that it is not necessary to be constantly getting or giving compliments or affirming one another's existence. There is another way of being with people that is so deeply meaningful that almost everybody who experiences it wants more of it.

-Cheri Huber



I had the opportunity and privilege to visit the monastery dozens of times over the last two decades of practice. Over time, what amazed me was the consistency of the maintenance of the privileged environment.

At the beginning of each visit, there was an orientation that compassionately and clearly set forth the guidelines on how to maintain an environment that would benefit everyone's practice.

I understand it is rare to have such a practice—a practice where we maintain silence, we are not social; we are here to be together in a way that there is no room for ego. For me, it was an experience of unconditional love.

This modeling of the privileged environment was commonly demonstrated by the Guide, whether it be in retreat workshops, working meditation, or guidance appointments.

The Guide would often say, without the privileged environment there would be no practice, and to this day, some 20-odd years later from my first retreat, that is definitely my experience.

A deep bow of gratitude for the Guide who has always been that pillar of integrity of the Dharma.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



Everything changes.
Suffering is the result of clinging
in an attempt to resist change.

- Cheri Huber



Mindful Eating

Eating is a concrete way of expressing compassion for oneself. The life force is in the food. The life force is in the breath. Together they create and sustain us. To express gratitude for it all, we can be present, mindful, compassionate and accepting with each bite. Chewing is grateful acceptance, breathing while chewing, putting down utensils between bites, and making Cassava with each bite, are some ways of expressing gratitude for the food that sustains us, and the body that we dwell in.

Cassava

What I noticed when I attended a retreat was the simplicity of practice tools the Guide had in place for our waking up.

One of my memorable lessons was so simple.

As I swept the floor in the Monastery kitchen, the bell rang. I quickly pushed the debris into the middle of the floor in order to sweep it into a pan.

But a gentle hand stopped the broom. A monk handed me a message on a slip of paper: At the sound of the bell you must stop—everything. Urgency abated.

The insight dropped in that death could come at any moment.

Practice letting go. Prepare for impermanence; give up your broom.

In this way I do most deeply vow to train myself.



So, great gratitude for Sangha,
for those of us who practice together,
who reflect for us a good clear view
of who we are.

We are one another's
best spiritual opportunities.

-Cheri Huber

I once heard Cheri say she did not like it when someone stepped on her line in group. (That's why she introduced making Gasshō to be called on. An interaction with a participant could be honored and reach its organic conclusion.)

I felt so bad to realize I had done that and said so. Without missing a beat the Guide said, "Oh, we've all done that."

To this day, I am always touched when in a myriad of ways the Guide points out that we are all in this together, all practicing to go beyond egocentric karmic conditioning/self-hate.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



Urgency is a huge tool of egocentric
karmic conditioning/self-hate
and of suffering.

What if you just didn't respond?

-Cheri Huber



I remember getting to retreats and my head would be SPINNING. Conditioned mind wouldn't let me stop thinking about all the things to do that weren't getting done because I was sitting around for a week doing nothing.

I talked to the Guide about this in one evening group.

She said, "You know all of those urgent things to do that conditioning keeps yammering about? You know how that list is so long and it never gets shorter? Consider this: One day you will die and there will be that long, 'urgent' list of things to do that no one will ever do. And it won't matter at all. Life will go on. Everything will be just fine."

I've never been able to look at a to-do list in the same way. I thank goodness for that!

The Goodness that is the Guide, the Goodness that is
Dharma, the Goodness that is LIFE!

In this way, with no urgency, I do most deeply
vow to train myself.



When we're HERE
we are one voice and one heart
and we live in gratitude.

-Cheri Huber

We were having a planning meeting once; I can't recall the content. What I do remember is a person rambling on and on, with no focus or sense of what was needed.

Cheri just smiled and nodded. I found it odd because the rambling made absolutely no sense to me. (I was clearly identified: This was wrong!)

I don't remember exactly what Cheri said response, but she gently set aside whatever this person had proposed and went in another direction completely.

I was blown away by the support and love she demonstrated to this person.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



A heart that is
completely surrounded by love
cannot be harmed.

-Cherí Huber



I remember my first lesson in Unconditional Love. It was early on in my practice.



It happened during a rare snowstorm at the Monastery.

A bird flies into an open window.

A crumple of feathers, it lies shivering in the cold.

Will it live?
Will it recover and take flight?
Or is its life ebbing away?
We can't know.

But it is not alone.
A small figure, wrapped in many layers, sits with it, talking to it
softly, reassuringly.

Hours pass.
Snow begins to fall.
The light fades.
The wind picks up.
And still the Guide keeps vigil.

An unwavering, loving, cheerful, presence, keeping this tiny
bundle of feathers company as it struggles to breathe.

Did the bird feel it I wonder?
How could it not?
I did!

I can't remember whether this little bird lived or died.
But the scene of Love in action is forever etched in my heart.
Not simply as a memory but as a living experience of what is
consistently offered through this practice.

And when we are shown Unconditional Love, we can find it as
ourselves. Which I discovered many, many moons later.

Spring this time.
Thud!
A tiny bird hits a window.

I keep vigil for eight hours.
I did not know that I could be so moved.

In this way, in the way of Unconditional Love,
I do most deeply vow to train myself.



If you see a problem,
it's yours.
If you think somebody should do something,
remember that you are a somebody.

-Cherí Huber



Years ago we had some Peacestorming events, doing working meditation in collaboration with local communities.

One was in Los Angeles where we worked with residents of a housing unit to build shelves and other interior fittings for their home. During the days we were there we noticed a big, handsome German shepherd roaming around the neighborhood. He did not appear to have tags or a collar. He was skinny and unkempt. The residents said they had never seen anyone with him; so far as they knew, he was a street dog. Cheri asked around to see if there was a possible new home for him.

On the last day of our time there, when the dog was still around, Cheri noted, "It seems we are his new home." And besides that, she suspected he had monk potential. So the big boy rode home in the van with us, quietly, with his front

paws crossed – which we came to see was his signature pose. He was a good passenger.

Despite his life on the streets, he was gentle and friendly. The transition to monk took a while. The roaming lifestyle was hard to drop, (we received calls from various neighbors: “Is this your dog?”) and he whined whenever alone. For some time, a much-coveted working meditation task for the monks was sitting with Pace, stroking him, reassuring him that we weren’t going anywhere; he was home now. In time, he settled in, settled down, and became Pace (Pah’ chay, Italian for “peace.”), the big, gentle, dignified monk.

It was fun to remember our first encounters with that lovely being and to recall how Practice cares for All!

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.

It is important to seek Sangha, to sit together, to be silent together, to offer each other, through our presence, the encouragement to practice.

- Cheri Huber



It was the end of a retreat at Villa Angelica in Carmel. I fell into step with some Sangha who were packing up the kitchen, sweeping hallways, and doing other tasks to prepare to leave.

There was such big joy in working in silence to leave the place “better than it was when we found it.”

When the last task was done and the monks were getting ready to drive away, I remember Cheri saying: “I’m often asked what it takes to get into the ‘inner circle’ of our Sangha. People think there is some mystery or secret to it. You know what it is? Participation. People who participate belong. It is as simple as that. If you want to belong someplace, ask what you can do to help. Join in. Offer participation.”

I’m not sure if those were her exact words, but what I got was to participate is to belong.

This wisdom has stayed with me. I've shared it with many people. It pops up on my recordings ALL the time because I remind myself frequently that when I feel lonely or left out that I simply need to ask how I can help. That act of participation immediately puts me in a feeling of belonging.

I used to think that the magic was that it helped belong to whatever group I was participating within. I now know that the minute I say "How can help," it is an act of stepping away from lonely, fearful ego and into belonging to LIFE!

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



When we drop everything
and come back to the breath,
there are no problems,
no questions, no conflicts.
There is no difficulty
with anyone or anything.

-Cheri Huber



When I first came to practice decades ago I attended my first retreat in Carmel. Everything was new and there was a lot of mental chatter.

I remember sitting in the meditation hall as the Guide described the importance of challenging the validity of the voices in our head. Really? This was a confounding concept. There was also guidance not to disturb others by moving or making noise during meditation.

When I experienced significant leg pain during evening meditation and heard an internal voice, “I can’t stand this!” the Guide’s encouragement and guidance came through. I continued to sit still with the pain. It felt like “I” was going to die. But meditation ended and everything was fine. The beginning of freedom from identification with the voices was born.

The Guide's unwavering clarity, wisdom and compassion then, as in all the years since, has provided an invaluable guidepost for recognizing the "fantasies of authority" and doing whatever is necessary to end suffering.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself



Why are we taught to live in fear,
controlled by our terror of being out of control,
approaching life as inadequate children
rather than free adults?

Because fearful people are easily controlled.

A person who is without fear cannot be controlled.

-Cherí Huber

I was on retreat towards the end of 1999. During an evening group someone was talking about the Y2K disaster.

As always, Cheri was reflecting the process of suffering that was happening for the person around this issue. After a number of times of the fellow returning again and again to the content—“But, Cheri, it could take out the entire computer system of our banking institutions,”—Cheri asked, “Are you trying to scare me? I don’t do fear.” It was said in such a simple, matter-of-fact, just-passing-on-information kind of a way. I didn’t project irritation or anger, just a reminder that, in this Meditation Hall, in this Practice, our focus is ending suffering.

That phrase, “I don’t do fear,” has remained a beacon for me all these years later. It is possible to live a life beyond fear! And blessedly, I now often do.

In this way, beyond fear, I do most deeply vow to train myself.

We develop a habit of sitting still
as things arise and play themselves out
for whatever period of time,
and then go away.

In this way, we become acquainted
with whatever it is in ourselves that
is unaffected by circumstances—
because it is not separate from
circumstances.

- Cheri Huber



I'm taking part in an outdoor ceremony on retreat. I'm watching everyone at the altar and there's a large bumblebee checking out the flowers and buzzing around Cheri.

I'm terrified of bees but Cheri is super calm and doesn't show any response to the bee at all. I'm freaking out because I think it's going to sting her or someone. I'm standing there completely frozen, trying not to move, hoping and praying this bee will just leave, please. I can't run at this important moment. Then the bee flies over to me. I'm trying so hard not to move, but I move my hand up to my face and the bee hits my hand and flies away.

I don't feel anything at the time, but later I realize that it stung me. I learned that being stung wasn't all that bad, and since that day I haven't been nearly as afraid of bumblebees.

In fact, it's been a teaching that has stuck with me. There is often something buzzing around me, and I remember the calm Cheri modeled.

It reminds me that I may well get stung, but if I am, I'll be with that when it happens.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



Life is a tidal wave.
If you wait for things to calm down to start swimming,
you might not survive the wait.
Now is the time and
you are equal to the task.

-Cheri Huber

Through the years, Cheri has consistently shaken things up in practice.

I'm going along, comfortable in the usual routines, knowing where I am and what happens next. And then one day, wham!, Cheri throws a monkey wrench into the mix. I'm stunned. No, no, I don't want to do that. Why are we changing things? This is not a good idea. Cheri's gone round the bend.

But I/we go anyway, sometimes grouching and grumbling, sometimes intrigued and enthusiastic. Willingness is, after all, the key. Invariably and inevitably, a whole world of conditioning is revealed, along with the world that lies beyond resistance and fear—the world in which the Guide resides.

In this fearless way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.

In a guidance appointment you
do not have to be a personality,
you do not need to be cute, charming,
clever, bright, or anything else.

You can be exactly as you are
at the moment,
and that will be mirrored for you.

-Cheri Huber



I can still recall my first guidance appointment at my first ever retreat. I knew very little about Zen practice, even less about the difference between process and content, and had no clue as to how this thing called a guidance appointment was supposed to go. What do you talk about? What kind of responses do you get?

The group discussions at the retreat seemed to revolve around this notion of practicing presence or being at Center. The head was, of course, in a hopeless swoon trying to figure things out. Meanwhile, the heart was being invited into a much deeper conversation.

I had some simple beginning questions that seemed important to have answers for. Is this thing being talked about, this practicing presence or being at Center, is this something anyone can do at any time? In any location or any circumstance?

With curiosity and some trepidation, I headed off to ring that bell.

Looking back, I can see the words that answered my questions were along the lines of: Yes, yes, yes, yes and yes (often a few more yeses than questions...) and simultaneously, embodied in the way of being of the Guide, there was a second set of answers: You are welcome here, you are as much a part of Life as anything, everything is alright, you can relax and just be, Unconditional Love is who you are.

In this way I do most deeply vow to train myself.



You don't have to change anything.
Especially yourself. You are the most
perfect (and only) you ever produced.
Be content with that.

- Cheri Huber



Many, many years ago, at the Mountain View Zen Center, the Guide was facilitating me during group.

I was talking about something (can't remember what) and the Guide was discussing the process of awakening and how it's a process that transforms us over time, as we continue to practice. She used Mahatma Gandhi as an example that every day, he became more and more Mahatma Gandhi.

And then she said to me, "And you, [my name], you become more and more [my name] every day."

That interaction has enriched me deeply over the years. It reminds me that I am on a path of awakening, that the "curriculum" (my life circumstances) is uniquely tailored to me and my karma and my life, and that I am adequate to all of it (way beyond adequate!).

It reminds me of this quote: “How do you sculpt an elephant? Get the biggest granite block you can find and chip away everything that doesn't look like an elephant.”

And so, as long as I am willing and able, I follow this most blessed path that has been given to me, and I let Life “chip away” everything that is not me.

Thank goodness, and bless my lucky stars!

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



My job, as I see it, is to guide people
out of being stuck in their conditioning,
unable to see the way to the
wisdom, love and compassion
of their True Nature.
Since I am familiar with the path,
we can travel it together.

-Cheri Huber

Once when sitting on the kitchen porch at the Monastery having a guidance appointment with Cheri, I commented that I was happy I was not the person I was five years ago.

I was struck by the Guide's response, "Oh, me too. I'm happy I'm not the person I was five years ago."

It took me aback because I had not considered that the Guide could have that same experience. (Who knows? Maybe I thought she had "arrived" or something.)

It was nice to see that she, too, was walking the path. Of course, how could anyone guide others who was not walking the same path? It was refreshing to be reminded of that, and I was taken by this demonstration of humility.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.

The way it works is that being
in proximity to the practice,
as embodied in people
who are pursuing it full time,
helps you to recognize
the practice in yourself
and to deepen it in yourself.

-Cherí Huber



The first time I met Cheri in person was at a one-day workshop in Santa Cruz. After the talk, I went to speak to her and was almost stopped flat by her eyes. They were like swirling, intensely alive oceans and it seemed I was having my first direct experience of losing track of the physical boundaries of what I thought I was as two temporarily melded to one.

This was the first of many Practice experiences of being shown I was not what I thought I was. It would have been easy to believe Cheri was the extraordinary one and to agree I was separate from that magical Intelligence. But the Guide has never reinforced that belief. Instead, the guidance led me to see we are all that which is Extraordinary.

As ignorance of this truth would inevitably take hold, Cheri would, through a gentle silence, a masterful facilitation, or the proverbial 2x4, chip away at the ego shell.

Once in group, I heard her speak to the passion behind the dismantling of ego as “I’m fighting for that human!”

I practice to continue to honor the Authenticity which has been lovingly unveiled and to fight for that precious human.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



If we are lost in a conversation in
conditioned mind,
we miss the perfection
of this herenow.

-Cherí Huber

I spoke in guidance about being angry because I was the last person in the meal line and the monk in front of me served herself every last drop of the soup.

The Guide, amused, imagined what it would be like to take that monk's bowl and pour half of it into my bowl.

"But you would have to be so present!" she said, laughing with delight.

I could not have predicted she would say that. What an out-of-the-box response, and so very Zen. Talk about breaking all the rules. I aspire to being that present!

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



As a teacher, it is my job to know,
when you do not,
that you are equal to the journey,
that you can do it, that you possess everything
you need to get where you want to go.
The way you can know that is that you project
all those qualities onto the teacher,
and it is the teacher's job
to mirror them back to you.

- Cheri Huber



After I listened to one of Cheri's books for the first time, I was so excited about it that I had to find out where she was and if I could go there. The book mentioned retreats and workshops and included a phone number. I called and was surprised when Cheri answered the phone.

She was welcoming and wanted to know everything about me. I asked a lot of questions too. My main question was about safety. I had not spent a lot of time in nature or camping so I asked Cheri if the Monastery property was safe. I remember her seeming sort of surprised by the question, and she said the property was fenced in and there was nothing to be afraid of. She said it was very safe.

Being raised as a Southern Baptist, I was scared to go to a Buddhist retreat anyway, and with it being so far from "civilization," I was really worried.

She convinced me to come to the next workshop that she was leading. I signed up, went to the workshop 23 years ago, and I haven't turned back since.

What struck me was how directly caring she was for me and that has never changed.

In this way of care, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



I have lost my favorite teacup.
I have two choices.
I can have lost my teacup and be miserable.
I can have lost my teacup and be all right.
In either case, the teacup is broken.

-Cheri Huber

What I grew to appreciate on my visits to the Monastery was the safe container the Guide created. Everything was acceptable and accepted.

On my first visit, I stood in the washing-up line rinsing my cup. My hand moves to place it in the dish rack, but something catches my attention. My hand continued moving as I looked in another direction. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch in slow-motion horror as the cup plummets to the floor, erupting into ceramic shards of shame. I'm two years old again, and have done something bad. I'm flooded with tears and grief. A monk appears at my side reassuring me: It's ok, we have more cups, don't worry. Unconditional acceptance and lovingkindness mended my heart on many levels.

Unconditional acceptance, loving kindness and nothing wrong:
In this way I do most deeply vow to train myself.

Life is glorious.
Almost no one experiences life.
We experience conditioned mind
and think that's life.

-Cherí Huber



I gather my bag and coat from the shoe rack at the end of the day. Dishes are done, the dining room is clean, and the dishwasher has been given to the plants, leaving me slightly tired and very satisfied.

It's a long day of summer so it's not dark. I listen for the frogs in the courtyard. I take a breath and smile with contentment as I notice relaxation in my body. I love walking with my recorder which reminds me not to be in conversation with stories.



Tonight, I choose to be with the silence. It wasn't always like this. For most of the first 2 weeks I have been here as a visiting monk (and for most of my life), the stories in my head were strong.

I can hear the Guide's voice gently reminding me not to believe those stories but rather, to choose presence over and over again. When I first heard her say this, I didn't know what she meant.

Tonight, I step down onto the path. It curves and leads me into the trees. To my left are the outdoor showers which have been the setting for many a glorious shower and many educational work meditation practices. I notice the pathways to them have been recently raked. How nice. Thank you. Choose presence.

I watch my feet touching the dirt path, aware that many small plants and critters use this path. I've seen the path green and full of flowers, and gray, dusty and dry. The ants seem ok with either.

I continue as the path curves back and enters a clearing. I do stop to wonder which of the many California oak species these

companions might be. Thank you. Choose presence.

As I approach the meadow, I can see the sun's rays low in the sky where the sun will set over the ridge. The stillness is deep. I have learned that I am a part of it, not a recipient of it. Here are my oak best friends... the ones that share my reawakening that there is nothing wrong. And then the row I call the dancing oaks. A large, stout one, and other more delicate ones.... I imagine them wearing chitenges and waving their arms back and forth to the music. Thank you. Choose presence.

On the other side of the path are the hermitages that have held me through many days and nights. I see the little handbells at the start of their entrance paths and the spots that solar flashlights are propped on to recharge during the day. One of these hermitages is my shelter. I turn onto the

path, quietly step to the door, slip off my outdoor shoes and into my slippers.

Home, support, refuge, the knowing that kindness is what is here when everything else falls away. I am learning what she meant. Thank you.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



There isn't anything wrong.
You can't make a mistake.
There is no better place to be than here.
There is nothing better to do than this.

- Cheri Huber

There were many opportunities to set up dish stations in the dining hall during retreat seasons. One afternoon I was setting up the dish drainer and the dish towel to accompany it. I was engaged in a familiar attitude of just getting the job done so that I could move on to the next thing to check off the list. I had folded the dish towel in a neat manner as I attended to getting it “right.”

Cheri appeared at my right elbow. She gently and quietly folded one of the dish towels. As she laid it over the dish drainer she said, “We fold the towel for the towel.”

Tears spring to my eyes as the attention rests in this moment of teaching. It has become a koan to live by.

In this way I do most deeply vow to train myself.



Our deepest heart's desire,
our Authentic Nature,
is drawing us home.
What you are looking for
is doing the looking.

The guidance you seek is guiding you.

- Cheri Huber



It is always, unwaveringly, what it is.

It is here to assist us to wake up and end suffering. It never forgets what it is doing.

It is not confused about the difference between the illusion of a separate ego self, and the authentic human being. It will offer you information, it will post you a note, to assist you to see where you are. To assist you to see when you are not Here. To assist you to see when you are identified with what is not you.

Principles and structures hold up a mirror for you to see when attention has left Here and gone to conditioned mind, and to assist you to be Here:

We don't make decisions based in urgency.

We don't solve problems we don't have.

We don't estimate how long it is going to take to do something,
because we don't know....

It is steadfastly and unwaveringly on the side of the authentic
human being. It is Unconditional Love.

It is Dharma. It is the Guide Embodied.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train
myself.



Clarity is a lot like love.
We can't force it,
we can't demand it or require it,
we just have to be present
and open to receive it.

-Cherí Huber

What initially drew me to practice was having an experience in group with Cheri where it was clear how clear the guidance and communication was.

I was heavily engaged with conditioning during this time, and what dropped in was, I don't understand this at all and what I'd like is a process for inviting that clarity. I was in a workshop and what was so and what I shared was that I didn't understand anything being shared. The guidance was to let it all wash over me, there was nothing to know.

Now, many years later, whenever I sense that I'm in the process of figuring it out, I turn the attention to the breath, rest in "I don't know," and allow that to be enough, rather than attempt to "use" awareness to figure it out.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



Let our only wish be to awaken;
and let our every thought,
action and word
serve only that wish.

-Cherí Huber



VIA
FELPI KEMVONI

Following our Guide in the Footsteps of Francis of Assisi

In the early 1200's, Francis of Assisi walked the length and breadth of the Rieti Valley in central Italy. Barefoot and wearing a ragged tunic, he carried a message of peace and good ("pace e bene") to all the people and creatures he met.

Inspired by her love of Italy, especially Assisi, and the spirit of Francis, Cheri led a group of 21 enthusiastic folks from Sangha on retreat in Italy, *Following in the Footsteps of Francis of Assisi*, and it was magical. We walked the 70 miles of the Cammino di Francesco, which winds around and through the valley and links the little towns, monasteries, and wild, high caves where Francis preached and prayed.

We had set out to follow in the footsteps of Francis and what we found were our own footsteps. Footsteps set down upon the valley in the same spirit that Francis set down his.

With Cheri as guide we walked, we meditated, we prayed, we laughed, we ate delicious Italian cooking, and we felt the love all around us.

We walked with a spirit of loving kindness, acceptance, peace, and joy. We found this spirit in the Nature around us, in the people that we met, in each other and in our own hearts.

In this way I do most deeply vow to train myself.



On retreats I always become aware
of how precious people are,
how dear, how innocent.
Their behaviors in the world
may not give any sign of that,
but to spend just a moment with somebody
when their heart is open,
you see that there is only goodness there.
Often that happens when they are telling
you something they consider
awful about themselves.
But in the act of revealing that,
they reveal their inherent goodness.

-Cheri Huber

On our unforgettable walking trip on the Assisi trail, I had many “practice stumbles,” unskillful behaviors that make me cringe to this day. I was one of those “practice opportunities” for the Guide and my fellow retreatants.

Many years prior, Cheri had mentioned the unfortunate position she found herself in (not her words) of being the person who had to point out these things to people.

Despite this, she never wavered from her responsibility of playing that role, and always, always with the utmost compassion, let us know when we had strayed.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



With each moment, no matter what's going on,
the practice is to find the willingness,
the courage, the faith, the compassion
simply to come back to the present,
come back to this heart,
come back to this person—
not to give up just because it's difficult.

- Cheri Huber



It rained. Working Meditation was cancelled. I had an afternoon with nothing scheduled. There was nothing to do? The deep pull towards “doing” kept me in a state of distraction and identification the whole afternoon.

In reflecting on this in a process text with the Guide, she sent the following response: “Well, Nelson Mandela ran in place in his prison cell for 27 years to maintain his fitness and manage the energy. And, of course it’s possible to do deep dives into practice activities so that the time and energy gets used for deepening practice. Yes, ego wants to turn it into ‘if I can’t have that or do that I have to distract to dissipate,’ but putting an end to that belief would be a worthy goal. Yes? Gasshō”

WOW. I felt this immediate “punch to the gut” physical reaction. I stared at the text, read it and re-read it, and then sat down, allowing the physical sensation to run its course, until the attention could focus on what the Guide was encouraging:

the opportunity to put an end to a belief.

The following day, I woke up with an insight. Using a familiar practice tool, I began to write down everything conditioning was saying throughout the day. “Conditioning really wants me to...” or “Conditioning thinks I should...” I just kept writing and writing and not falling for it, often laughing at how absurd or silly conditioning was! It was possibly the most profound direct disidentification I have ever experienced, a true moment by moment experience of seeing what I wasn’t (egocentric karmic conditioning/self-hate) and what was possible: to be one with the conscious compassionate awareness of Life, the Intelligence That Animates.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



Awareness allows us to disidentify from ego,
to step back into a wider perspective
and be present in the moment
in which we're living, making
authentic communication possible.

-Cheri Huber

What has always stuck with me is Cheri's unwavering compass, which points to communicating exactly what is so.

Early on, when conditioning protested loudly as exact communication challenged it (i.e., "The paths to the outhouses are no longer clear; it's interesting that no one cleared them or communicated that."), Life always responded with, wow, that is so, and how refreshing to have that communicated so clearly. Here's a place to look in my own practice.

The idea of communication as a method of conveying information, whether verbally or through a note, has always stuck with me. Now, whenever conditioning responds to a "note," I am brought back to redirect the attention to what information is being communicated.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



Often, when we're working very hard
to see what's going on,
laughter is an indication
that we've stepped back far enough
to get a broader perspective.
It's not so much that what
we're seeing is funny,
it's that the relief of suddenly
being freed from our attachment
causes us to laugh spontaneously.

-Cheri Huber



"Laughter and awakening are very close relatives.
When the discriminating mind is suddely shattered,
it is shattered in a cosmic laugh."

-Albert Low

How do you put into words the experience of the role laughter
plays in the Dharma we receive in this practice?

The deep, full laughter of laughing in group

A laughing that is not against anything or anyone

A laughing that does not come out of belittling or demeaning

Ego-dissolving laughing

Humility laughing

Unselfconscious laughing

True Nature laughing

Authenticity laughing

Laughing at the absurdity of ego

Laughing not caring how you look

Laughing resting into: no one is looking at you,

in the Privileged Environment

It is timeless laughter. It is process laughter,
not content laughter.

The laughter of disidentification

The laughter of Thank You, Life, that was a good move!

The laughter of realizing how perfectly everything is unfolding
for our awakening

Throwing the head back laughing

Falling into laughing and being held in the
laughing of Life.

Perhaps we can't describe it; perhaps the best
thing to do is just to go right there now and let
out a huge, grateful laugh.

In this way, I do most joyfully vow to train
myself!



The best reason to eliminate self-hate
is that it gets in the way
of being able to do spiritual practice.
It gets in the way
of finding that place of deep compassion
within ourselves that is
the largest part of spiritual practice.
The secret is to disidentify
from the conditioning
and start to see ourselves
as someone we love.

- Cheri Huber



In one of the first retreats I attended, I talked in group about a work challenge I was experiencing, and there was laughter from the group as I related the issue. I checked in about this in a later group. The voices had me feeling embarrassed, telling me I had shared something so stupid as to be laughable. I can still remember, as if I'm sitting right in the Meditation Hall now—the beautifully tended flowers in the vase, the rammed earth walls, the Kwan Yin figurine and the bells by the Guide's cushion that often featured in animated explanations of practice concepts, the sound of the frogs in the courtyard—the deep compassion and support in the Guide's response.

There was a kind and spot-on explanation of how that laughter from other participants was recognition, an understanding of the shared places in which we all struggle, an expression of "Oh, yes, I know that place too!" The feeling of being seen, respected and supported by the Guide and Sangha through that interaction was a level of presence I don't think I had ever

experienced anywhere. It felt like a modeling that has informed my sense of what's possible when I step out of self-hate, when the Mentor sees me: My concerns are valid, will be heard and respected in presence and compassion, and no ego will be allowed. Wow!

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



Every carrot we chop in the kitchen
is a new miracle
when we give it full attention.

-Cheri Huber



The Guide missed nothing.

You could attend to everything, or think you had, and the Guide would arrive and note that the broom leaning against the redwood post was making a mark on the wood. For me, at least, I had to work through a lot of irritation before receiving the profound teaching of Love.

Contrary to ego's framing, the Guide was not criticizing me, in fact it had NOTHING to do with me. The Guide was loving the redwood post.

Once I got that, training exploded to an opportunity to attend all day long. It became a process of Love, a process of caring for All. A process of stewarding: stewarding the kitchen gray water out into buckets on the back porch, stewarding that water out to the trees and plants at the end of the day, stewarding the energy generated by

the interaction between the sun and the solar panels, stewarding the solar panels, stewarding the vegetables in the garden, stewarding the drainage ditches on the roads to get them ready for the rains, stewarding the rainwater into the storage tanks and stewarding the stored water when it was needed in the summer, stewarding the windowsills and window frames by cleaning them and oiling them each year, stewarding the baby squirrel fallen from its nest. All of this stewarding happening within, and as, a practice of stewarding the attention. None of it “mine”, none of it “ours,” and all of it our responsibility to steward.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



The quality of your life
is determined
by the focus of your attention.

-Cheri Huber



For several weeks one year at the Monastery, we had a daily bell ringing training workshop. In the Monastery schedule, we rang the wake-up bell seven times at 7am, and rang the bell three times at 7.15am to signal fifteen minutes before the 7.30am sit, the first sit of the day.

Each day, a different monk was responsible for ringing the early bells. The Guide would report each day on whether the bells could be heard up the hill.

Why did it matter that the Monastery bells were heard?

Because it's not what, but how!

For several days in a row, the bells I rang could not be heard up the hill. Many of the bells that other monks rang could be heard. I wrote to the Guide: We know it's possible for those bells to be audible so I will keep on practicing until I make that shot! Gasshō

"That's the spirit," responded the Guide.

I realized that being in that attitude of Heart and Mind – that we know it is possible for those bells to be heard, and so I will keep on practicing until they are – was living where I wanted to live. Was “making the shot”, regardless of the outcome of the bells. What was being modeled by Practice was the fundamental teaching of: just don't quit. Constant devotion, with all attention Here, on this step, not on the “outcome.”

And one day, all seven of the 7am bells I rang could be heard.

In this way of practice, I deeply vow to train myself.



We are equal to our lives.

-Cherí Huber



While in Assisi, Italy, on a private meditation retreat and looking into establishing a Peace Center, Cheri met a Franciscan friar from Zambia. Brother John invited Cheri to his home country to consider assisting with vulnerable children. She said yes. A few of us had the good fortune to accompany Cheri on that journey. We fell in love with the community of Kantolomba, near Ndola, Zambia.

Once we realized we were going to be involved with this community, that we were going to start a project there, I stated what seemed obvious, "It seems we can start by researching how one does a development project." The Guide's response, "Let's not. Let's have our own experience."

That guidance confounded, frustrated, even infuriated ego. I mean, we're Buddhists, we offer retreats and workshops on Awareness Practice; what do we know about creating a project to assist children in Zambia?!

With no “expertise,” and endless Love and Presence, nearly two decades later that project thrives. I am deeply grateful that we were facilitated to find out that we could, indeed, through our own experience, facilitate a development project.

I have seen the Guide providing the mirror of adequacy again and again. Someone is sure “I can’t do it,” and nonetheless is facilitated to learn to drive a tractor, to run a chainsaw, to facilitate a retreat, to cook for dozens, to build a hermitage, to write a book, to end suffering!

In this way of adequacy, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



It does not seem to me that we are here to fix the world.
It is only an assumption that another world is possible;
we have no experience of it ever being
any different from the way it is.
To my mind, that is the best argument
for concentrating on the change we know is possible,
which is the change that happens to people when they
take on a project
for their own spiritual practice
as a way of personal transformation.

-Cheri Huber



Less than a year into the project in Zambia, I am witness to a profound teaching of love.

Going against all her conditioning, Josephine, a 20 year old widow, with little English, HIV positive, and a child dying of AIDs, steps out of the crowd and asks the Guide for help.

Cheri's answer, as it has always been when anyone has the courage and willingness to ask for assistance, was "Of course. What can we do?"

"You can't just help one person," objected the well-to-do Zambian who had accompanied us to Kantolomba that day.

"Certainly, we can," said the Guide. "She is the one who asked!" I so related to the objection. There are many others; how would that be fair?

What I see now is how that is a process of looking to conditioned mind. “But... What might not work about this...”

What I witnessed in the Guide was looking to the moment— Life asked. Life responded. Life trusts that Life will lead. And Life does.

And help, we did! Not just Josephine, but her whole community.

The Guide responded with love to “one person” coming forward, and through that facilitated an expansion of the project that may well never have happened without that Yes.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



The desire to deal with a problem
does not have to be connected
to feeling upset about it.
That is an important awareness
in spiritual practice.

- Cheri Huber



Early on in Living Compassion's work in Zambia, I was on a walk with two young women living in the Living Compassion home in Ndola. Typical of teens, they spoke passionately and uncensored. One of the things they said was that they suspected resources purchased for the food program were being sold by the stewards of the home, implying shady dealings.

Hearing this, I could feel cells in the body come alive with righteous indignation. How could they! This is wrong, something needs to be done!

With enthusiasm, I communicated what had been said with the Guide and monks. There was curiosity, a few questions, and no sign of distress.

A few mornings later, a meeting was held with each member of the Living Compassion household. I stood waiting in a nearby room, filled with dread of the unknown. The meeting came and went, with no sign of anything wrong from the Guide.

I don't know what was said in that room, but I project the meeting was held like our group discussions, with people encouraged to express what is so for them.

Afterwards, changes were implemented, Theresa became the head of the Living Compassion house, and things unfolded like a meandering, clear, calm river.

Countless times I have been reminded of this scenario. When it feels like things are falling apart, I pause and recall the calm, centered energy of the Guide. Nothing Wrong. Communicate. Invite and receive all perspectives. Allow to drop in Compassionate Awareness. What Now Life?

In this way, There Is Nothing Wrong, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



The exciting news is that when you no longer
believe your conditioned responses,
you are free to do or not to do anything.
Suddenly, you have options.
The whole world of possibilities
is open to you.

- Cheri Huber



Sangha gathered at the Golden Gate Bridge Walk.

At one point there was an invitation to participate in a "fun-raising" group with the Guide for the annual Bridge Walk campaign. I responded to the invitation with some sort of polite "Thank you, but I'm too busy for this right now." The reply I received back was a kind, clear response that pointed out that as someone who had indicated a desire to jump into practice with both feet, looking to a conditioned "too busy" response might not be the way to go.

That reply was extraordinary, a wakeup call that cut through my sleepwalking. Until that point, that sort of knee jerk response was completely routine and unexamined in my life. "Oh, that would be nice but I can't. Too busy. Can't afford it. Don't feel like it right now." Here, suddenly, my polite and completely-acceptable-by-societal-standards reply was being called out for what it was: conditioned mind keeping me from choosing what truly mattered most to the heart.

When, years later, I heard the expression "Practice holds our hearts for us...", I realized that was what happened in that exchange. I was given the opportunity to pay attention and look more closely, clearly shown the forks in the road, one leading away, the other to the authentic desire of the heart.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



When we become for ourselves
the Mentor we always wished we had,
everything in life becomes
an exciting adventure.

-Cheri Huber



Practice and Cheri! Three words arise: possibilities, adventure, and exploration.

At one very low point in my life, I could not imagine attending a Sangha event because I felt in a place where all doors were closed and couldn't picture what I would do there. Cheri said, "Oh, I can imagine all kinds of possibilities for you." I couldn't, but trusting what she said, I went. She was right. There were indeed ways that arose to participate and contribute. It was a revelation. No room has all the doors closed.

In guidance, when I talked about a difficult time turning out to be an adventure, Cheri said, "I hope you will bring that attitude to everything in your life." It has become a mantra, whatever the circumstances.

That teaching has been a big, big gift of Practice—that everything is simply an adventure, an exploration. We're

always just wherever we are, taking the next step, seeing what arises there, then taking the next step. Amid the cacophony of ego commentary, that's the silver thread: this is just an exploration. And being an explorer is a whole lot more fun than being batted around by conditioning's conviction that no venture is really safe or worth it.

Working through an experience in Group, building a stone-by-stone wall at the Monastery, chopping vegetables in the kitchen, facilitating, being facilitated, sitting, having the heart blown open by what is unfolding in Kantolomba, scrubbing a bathroom, planning a foreign trip – it's all an exploration. Practice creates a whole different life for us. And Cheri stands at the door, welcoming us in to all that room.

In this way of possibility, exploration and adventure, I do most deeply vow to train myself.

There is nothing more important
than compassion.

Nothing.

There is nothing that needs to be done,
nothing that needs to be improved,
not if the price we must pay is to leave
compassion.

-Cherí Huber



We had this wonderful multi-media retreat some years back. One morning, a beautiful song about joy was played at the end of meditation. One woman missed that sit and thus did not hear the song. “Good,” I heard a voice in my head say, “serves her right. The rest of us got ourselves up in time to get to meditation. This is Zen!”

Later that morning, Cheri opened group with, “I understand not everyone got to hear the song after meditation this morning. Let’s play it again.”

The song was played.

Ego was outraged.

The heart opened in recognition of compassion in action.

I will never forget this teaching. It has assisted me to choose compassion over egocentric karmic conditioning/self-hate on the countless occasions when self-hate wants to punish “me” or “someone else.”

In this way, with deep compassion, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



Being kind to yourself
lets you be kinder
to others—
and that just might be the finest gift
you can give to the world.

-Cherí Huber



Early on in my practice, we were having group at the home of a woman in Sangha. Someone made mention of something, the content of which I cannot recall, and a group participant commented, “Well, that doesn’t matter.”

Cheri, in an exquisite teaching moment, gently and compassionately said, “It matters to her.”

What struck me, and made such an impression that I remember it to this day, was that it was said in a way that honored everyone. It did not make the person commenting wrong, it honored the person to whom it mattered, and it was a teaching for all of us.

It was a moment of gentle clarity and presence that asked that we honor all perspectives.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



We do what we do for the joy of doing,
not because we're going to get
a reward when it's over.

-Cherí Huber

On a retreat rafting the Colorado River, the end of our trip was at Phantom Ranch, the lowest part of the canyon, where we needed to hike out (7.5 miles I think). Our river guides stressed the importance of packing ample food and water so we would not suffer from dehydration or exhaustion.

Duly provisioned as instructed, we made our way along the steep trail and ran into a fellow, not part of our group, who was not doing at all well physically. He was experiencing the symptoms the river guides had warned us about.

True to character, Cheri was one of the last people back: She walked with him every step of the way, taking it as slow as he needed. What compassion and care she demonstrated.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



Anything that happens could be
experienced in millions of ways.
What happens is not important.
How we react to what happens is
very important.

-Cheri Huber



Recently, the young dog I live with secretly got a hold of my practice rosary and chewed the bead representing Sangha. The bead survived but now has teeth marks and a small section chewed out. "I" immediately regretted the passing of the pure roundness of its old form and felt wary of this new bumpy one. This state blissfully passed quickly, replaced by a what-to-do-now line of thinking: sand it? leave it rough? ask for a new bead? Thankfully it dropped in to write in to practice for guidance.

The response: "We checked with Cheri and to wear it as it is would be absolutely fine, since it is now a Venerable Bead (we hope you get the reference!)."

The recitation for the Sangha bead says,

Sangha is the Holy Order of spiritual ancestors, monks, priests, and all those who follow and practice this path.

Now the roughness of the Sangha bead is a reminder to include my venerable pup with all the "venerable beads" (and Bedes*)



that came before. Every living creature coming together in each moment.

In this way, I do deeply vow to train myself.

*St. Bede, born c. 673, was said to be known as "The Venerable Bede" because of his holiness and intellectual brilliance. We think our rosaries



Baby Cheri assisting to make "Mama Cheri's" beads venerable.

Simply meet each experience of life,
inside and out,
body, feelings and mind,
with all the love and acceptance
you can muster.

-Cheri Huber



A few years into my practice I received an email from the Guestmaster, inquiring if I would be willing to speak at a fundraiser that was scheduled in San Francisco. I was aware of my body filling with familiar sensations of dread. My usual response in a situation like this would have been to decline, but I had had a previous experience of something very similar in practice and recognized the pattern!

This time I said Yes.

At the event, shortly before it was time to appear, I found myself in a bathroom stall shaking with emotion. Walking out into the hall, with a tear stained face, I saw the Guide. I told her what was happening and my fear of standing in front of the crowd and not being able to speak.

She said, "And if that happens, you will be surrounded by compassion and unconditional love."

Standing on stage, knees and voice shaking, I opened my mouth. Words did come. I do not remember what was said and I'll never forget the opportunity gifted by the Guide: the opportunity to go beyond the barriers of egocentric karmic conditioning/self-hate and reunite with Life's Love on the other side.

In this way of saying Yes! to Life, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



Once we touch into our essential nature,
we simply lose all desire
to do harmful things to others.

-Cherí Huber

I've heard Cheri say many times, laughing, "There's nothing more pathetic than a Buddhist with ants."

At one point the Monastery Meditation Hall became a thoroughfare for ants. They created a rather wide lane of traffic right down the middle of the Hall. We simply stepped over them as we made our way to a place to sit, and eventually they moved on. But when they arrived in the Kitchen, we had to get creative to keep them out of the food. The solution was straightforward, storing things in tubs with lids. When serving food, we resorted to "moats" for sweet things. We placed bowls of fruit inside a plate of water so the ants could not reach the fruit. With these ants, and all creatures, there was always the utmost care taken not to do harm. Cheri always modeled for us that every critter was welcome and important.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



Please do not do yourself the disservice
of assuming there is something to do
that is more important than being
right here, right now,
present, aware, attentive, accepting.

-Cherí Huber



Originally at the Monastery, each hermitage had a copy of Cheri's first book, *The Key and the Name of the Key Is Willingness*.

My favorite part of that book was, and still is, the last page: "(Continued on page 1.)"

I took that guidance to heart. I would read it every night when on retreat, and then start again on page 1 and read it again because a lot of it was Greek to me. I didn't grasp much but knew what was being pointed at was really important.

What I didn't realize at the time was how beautifully that last page demonstrated one of the key teachings of Zen: beginning again at one.

That is a basic instruction in meditation for counting the breath. If we get to 10, or if we lose our place, we begin again at 1. Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind.

This is just one of countless examples of how the teachings are so beautifully and organically woven into all that this practice, Guided by Cheri, offers.

In this way, I do most deeply vow to train myself.



The time has come.
You have to face it that there isn't
anything wrong with you,
there is nothing you need to change or improve,
you simply must cease to allow
the voices to control you.

The time has come to take your life out of the hands
—the clutching, grasping hands—
of egocentric karmic conditioning/self-hate
and return your life to essential nature.

-Cheri Huber

Gratitude abounds.

This gift of Dharma we have received is one we can only hope to repay by training to be what has been so generously, unwaveringly, compassionately modeled for us.

And so, we continue.

We practice.

We train.

We say Yes.

We say Thank you.

We practice Now, in this perfect moment.

In gasshō



Teacher, student both are no more,
Mystery of mysteries!
Who is there to receive this truth?
Who is there to give it?

With one blow the vast sky is suddenly shattered.
Holy, profane, both are gone without trace.
In the pathless, all paths come to an end.
Brightly shines the moon; softly the wind rustles
In the courtyard of the temple.
The water of all the rivers flows into the great sea.

-The Oxherding Pictures

"(Continued on page 1)" -Cherí Huber, The Key

