

A New Groove for a New Phase in American Buddhism:
An Exposition of the Caretaker Personality Presented by Frederick P. Lenz and the Construction
of the Activist Personality

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For Submission to the Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism
July 23rd, 2019

Invocation of Gratitude

Through the generosity of the Lenz Foundation, I am able to study the dharma. I invoke the spirit of abundance of wealth, health, and stealth to touch all those who read these words. May the spirit of victory and wisdom pervade the most solid spaces! May the compassionate heart of wisdom melt the most solid spaces! May our insights take shape in the form of caregiving – the living and the dying, the young and the old, the earth and the beings in it, and all in-between! May our intentions be good and our helping, skillful!

Preface

When I began the daily practice of chanting the Lakshmi mantra, “Om Shrim Maha Lakshmiye Namaha,” the intention was to concentrate my skills into a purpose. The question coming through the mantra was, “How can I most potently be of service to the world?” At the time I provided breathwork sessions to the small community of San Marcos, Texas. I was like the local witch who was consulted when all other remedies or perspectives didn’t work. It was around the 60th day of reciting this mantra that I found the divinity program at Naropa and the Lenz scholarship shortly thereafter. Now here I am, about three years from that discovery and both my inner and outer life look very different. I’m not teaching anymore, and seem to be in the world of concepts, where before I was in the world of magic. However, when faced with the task of writing a paper on an aspect of Lenz’s’ work, I remembered Lakshmi and searched for a topic within his talks, *The Lakshmi Series*.

As I enter my final year of graduate study, I’m circling back to service work with a clinical pastoral education unit in the Fall semester. Thus, I am highlighting Lenz’s work from *The Lakshmi Series* titled the Caretaker Personality. This personality is a skillful way to maintain post-meditation as we walk through the world.

Introduction

What is American Buddhism? Geographically speaking, it is the practice of Buddhism within the United States. But philosophically, historically, and socially, the concept of Buddhism in America requires a deeper question: What happens to a twenty-six hundred year old tradition when it is transplanted into a culture with an unreconciled history of colonization? I begin with this question because upon listening to Lenz, affectionately referred to as Rama, I hear a teacher who recognizes the impact of Buddhism within contemporary American society. He is aware of the nuances associated with connecting to “Source” while living in a high-tech society where the world moves very fast. To that seemingly opposite endeavor of inhabiting vast space and having a job, he offers practical solutions – namely, inhabiting the caretaker personality.¹

In addition to his recognition of contemporary American society, Lenz communicates the dharma using very plain language. As I listened to him speak, I heard the three refuges – *Buddha*, *Dharma*, and *Sangha*². I heard him unpack the complicated philosophy of *Buddha Nature*³. I heard him describe *Vajrayāna*⁴. However, he didn’t ever use Buddhist terms while describing Buddhist philosophy. This is also the future of American Buddhism – speaking plainly so as to be understood, so that a wider variety of people may be reached and consequently helped and supported. A common pitfall is to use wisdom as a way to separate teacher from student, realized from unrealized, older from younger. Plain language and a desire to connect is the future of American Buddhism.

¹ Frederick P. Lenz, *The Lakshmi Series: The Caretaker Personality* (The Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism, 1982).

² Often referred to as the three jewels. The Buddha represents the teacher, the Dharma represents the teachings and the Sangha represents the community.

³ Buddha Nature is the philosophical ideal emerging from the Yogācāra school, emphasizing a “pregnant emptiness” or emptiness from which luminosity arises. In his teachings, Lenz refers to this as “essence” or “luminosity,” or “fathomless essence,” which is our true nature.

⁴ Type of Buddhism that flourished in Tibet. It emphasizes using material reality and the senses as a path for realization.

Lenz provided support through meditation instruction and the dissemination of complicated philosophical ideas through a contemporary lens in order to benefit American Buddhism. Whereas his generation focused on navigating technology and its impact on the country, the new task of American Buddhism in the current age is learning to navigate, reconcile, and heal our ugly history of colonization and all that comes with it. How do we do so in the spirit of compassion and not repeat the harshness and violence of our ancestors? In this paper, I will look at the Lenz's teaching on the caretaker personality as a method for impacting the world with our whole essence. I will also look at potential connections between his teachings and Buddhist philosophical tenets. Finally, I will construct a new caretaker personality, the activist, as a tool for the next phase of development in American Buddhism where we are charged with the task of disrupting systems that harm the environment and all beings in it.

I. The Clothing of Personality

When I wake up in the morning, before leaving the house, I choose my clothing. I don't ever mistake the clothing as my real skin.⁵ The caretaker personality is a personality type that we can choose to put on as a conscious choice, like our clothing. However, this personality is not our true being. Lenz describes our inherent nature, or to continue the analogy, the naked skin, as "our real being [as] light. We are one continuous consciousness."⁶ Consequently, "when we're in the world we don't see that continuous consciousness in quite the same way that we do when we're in meditation. Rather, we see it in manifestation."⁷ He is speaking to our inherent nature as vast, luminous space. When we are in the world, we see that space manifested in "people, places,

⁵ Lenz, 19:50.

⁶ Ibid., :47.

⁷ Ibid., 1:30.

beings, and forms, [which are] supported by that continuous consciousness that is the soul of reality.”⁸

Lenz uses the metaphor of a boat on the ocean, “Just as a great fleet of boats, of ships floats upon the ocean, supported by it – so all of life floats upon an essence, a fathomless essence. All things arise from this essence, are sustained by it, and one day they dissolve back into it.”⁹ As our meditation practice progresses, here we find ourselves more aware of the malleability of what we thought of as fixed – our personality traits. The practice is a process of developing relationship with what he calls the fathomless essence, or Buddha Nature. “Your memories, emotions, thoughts, feelings, and concerns – are only a thin, thin shell, the outer perimeter of your being. But inside, your being is large, infinite, awareness, endless, fathomless perfection.”¹⁰

And yet, we exist in a dualistic world – a world of separation, “we’re in the world of women and men, we see all around us division, partiality.”¹¹ At this point, he speaks to meditation practitioners who have stripped themselves down, so to speak, to their essence. Think of a person walking around wearing layers of clothes, thinking of them as their skin. I’m reflecting back to the movie “A Christmas Story” when Ralphie’s little brother, constricted in motion by a voluminous snow suit, whines that he can’t put his arms down. Imagine a frozen personality trait, a puffy snow suit, surrounded by a scarf no less, slowly being removed over time down to the naked skin. In much the same way, meditation practice reveals our nakedness. But what next? How do we engage with the world when we realize that our essence is vast, luminous space? What clothes do we put on when we get to choose them consciously?

⁸ Lenz, 1:45.

⁹ Ibid., 2:32.

¹⁰ Ibid., 7:54.

¹¹ Ibid., 4:50.

Lenz precisely describes the post-meditation state, “your phone is ringing, and someone wants to talk to you and the bills are waiting to be paid, and the world is running away in its own ways, the newspaper is telling you of fresh disasters, your body is growing old, you’re tired.”¹² The reality of being in the world is one of text messages, twitter feeds relaying the latest act of violence, a stark awareness of impending death, and the painful experience of aging. How do we work in the world with an awareness of the two truths – the absolute truth of essence and the relative truth of working and paying bills, of relationship? Lenz suggests that we adopt the caretaker personality as a “way of choosing what you wear in terms of personality”¹³ He asserts that by intentionally choosing what personality to put on, that you are the architect of your own being.¹⁴ “That just as you can choose your clothes, so in advanced yoga and meditation you learn to choose your personalities. This occurs when you have the realization that the personality is not really your real self, but just like your clothing, a transitory experience.”¹⁵ Thus, this is the intentional expression that we can choose when we leave our home as a continuation of our experience of spaciousness and ultimate truth that we experience in meditation practice.

II. Caretaker Personalities

Lenz describes two main caretaker personalities: The Child and The Warrior. “The caretaker personality of the child is innocence. Just think of the idyllic qualities of the child: excitement, love, trust, humility, purity, joy.”¹⁶ This personality attire is best worn when alone or around close, trusted friends.¹⁷ When we walk through the world our attire matches the occasion. Likewise, our personality type should match the environment we inhabit. Lenz elaborates, “We

¹² Lenz, 12:29.

¹³ Ibid., 15:58.

¹⁴ Ibid., 19:13.

¹⁵ Ibid., 19:18.

¹⁶ Ibid., 22:38.

¹⁷ Ibid., 25:13.

wear different types of clothing. We try and wear clothing that is suitable to an occasion. If you go mountain climbing, you're not going to wear a three-piece designer suit."¹⁸ When we adopt the child caretaker personality, when we take on the innocence and wonder of the child, we are aware of our environment. It would be unreasonable to assume such a personality at a corporate board meeting, or to assume others act in a child-like way in sharp, edgy surroundings. The benefit of adopting such a personality is to reconnect to the play and joyfulness of a young child.

In more conventional environments, such as the work environment, the second caretaker personality is more appropriate – the warrior personality. Lenz describes the warrior as embodying the values of “courage, valor, self-giving, sacrifice, dedication, kindness to others, protecting those who are weak. The warrior does these things. In a trashed out world, the warrior shines in armor.”¹⁹ He uses the image of King Arthur and his knights, with a code of honor to protect and care for the community.²⁰ The *bodhisattva* ideal relates to his vision of the warrior. Bodhisattvas are enlightened beings who vow to return back to earth until all beings are free. They reside in the muck of the world while maintaining enlightened qualities, reminding beings of their awakened nature through presence.

Lenz also talks about the value of daily meditation, “the warrior is always practicing and training. Even though there may not be a battle for another year, the warrior is always staying in training.”²¹ The training he is referring to here is meditation. Though we live in a world that often doesn't value prayer, practice, and intention, the practitioner looks at practice as preparation for a test in which they do not know the subject or the testing conditions. It is preparing for the big test, death, as well as the mini-deaths that occur throughout our lives.

¹⁸ Lenz, 15:12.

¹⁹ Ibid., 35:50.

²⁰ Ibid., 25:40.

²¹ Ibid., 37:02.

Losing our job, starting a new job, arguing with our loved ones, realizing we were wrong, apologizing, losing a loved one. All of these activities occur on a whim, shockingly reminding us of the impermanence of life: our meditation practice is the training for these surprises. The warrior personality not only trains for their own personal battles, they train in order to help and support others who may not know how to train.

There are three more, advanced caretaker personalities: the witness, the seer, and the sage. The witness is “witness of eternity. All [they] can do is observe and witness.”²² This caretaker personality is passive and “realize[s] the infinite is acting through you, that you are an instrument of eternity.”²³ I imagine this personality is best suited for silent meditation retreats or sitting on a park bench. The benefit of this personality is relaxation, relaxing into the moment without having to be the “actor or doer.”²⁴

The other caretaker personality is the seer who is, “concerned with conditions, the nature of change, why change occurs. Look at the causative conditions of all things.”²⁵ This personality contemplates the interdependent nature of reality, why situations arise, and how they fall away. They are also engaging in an advanced practice, similar to the Dzogchen practice of seeing all appearances as emptiness in which, “we look at our world and remind ourselves that it is an illusion, just like a dream or a rainbow. This world is not ultimately real. The beings inhabit it do not truly exist.”²⁶ This is another example of Lenz fusing esoteric teaching into plain language, saying, “feel that you are a dream. That you don’t really exist at all, but that you are a dream. As you walk through life, everyone and everything you see is part of that dream. Enjoy the dream.

²² Lenz, 43:20.

²³ Ibid., 43:40.

²⁴ Ibid., 44:13.

²⁵ Ibid., 45:13.

²⁶ Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, *Mind Beyond Death* (Boston & London: Snow Lion, 2007), 68.

And remember that what you really are is not simply the dream, but the dreamer.”²⁷ Again, like the warrior trains for unexpected change and ultimately death, the seer also trains using a different method from the warrior.

The sage emerges as the last caretaker personality who “feel[s] [they] are the embodiment of wisdom and humility. There is nothing [they] want for [themselves].” [They] only wish to be of more service to others.”²⁸ This personality brings up images of Mother Theresa who looked upon her acts of service as not only benefitting the world but as benefitting her own being through her acts. This caretaker personality embodies the Buddhist teaching of *bodhicitta*, or the compassionate heart. Moving through the world with the intention of *bodhicitta*, cuts through the dualistic idea that I am helping someone else for their benefit. Rather, the idea of *bodhicitta* is that I am benefitted by another’s freedom – through their relief, we are all relieved because we are all connected on an ultimate level. The benefit of the sage is the spirit of generosity and community.

III. A New Caretaker Personality: The Activist

Though the previously described caretaker personalities sufficed for the generation in which they arose, we are now in a new phase of American Buddhism and a new personality is required – the activist. The activist caretaker personality uses their voice to address systems of oppression that halt human and spiritual development. The activist personality is needed as an unearthing tool for ugly truths and advocates for those who are excluded from society. At the heart of the activist personality is practice – going into solitude to regain clarity, *bodhicitta*, and connection to Buddha Nature. They have discernment of where to place their energy and when. Timing and strategic thinking is important for the activist personality as are the qualities of

²⁷ Lenz, 45:55.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 47:25.

subtlety and patience. The activist personality is skillful and infiltrates systems to bring about big changes. They integrate the personalities of the child, the warrior, the witness, the seer, and the sage in order to keep people on their toes, leaving others unsure of what they are going to say or how they are going to behave. The activist is an artist, fashioning moments of their lives into events that wake people up.

Jasmine Syedullah, Buddhist practitioner and activist, describes how her practice awakened the awareness that she had molded her personality in order to fit within a white-dominant culture, “The problem with becoming myself was that, no matter how nice I had learned to be, no matter how smart or accommodating, sitting with myself meant I was becoming more myself, more Black. As soon as I started getting good at being human I was increasingly perceived as a threat.”²⁹ Overlaying Lenz’s personality ideal onto Syedullah’s statement, we see the activist personality emerging. Her sitting practice brought awareness to the reality of the false personality created as a survival mechanism, and connecting with the implications of “Blackness” in the context of an American, anti-black society. Syedullah exemplifies the activist personality in that she names invisible truths so that we may both see her and ourselves more clearly. The obstacle of the activist is constant activation. Therefore, rest, daily sitting, and regular bouts of solitude are necessary for this personality “clothing.”

My two years studying at Naropa has been about realizing the beauty, grace, and power in wearing the activist-caretaker cloth. I grew up with the luxury of ignoring the reality of racial division in the U.S. My white grandparents, who were my primary caretakers, regarded race as a taboo subject. When asked questions about race, they gave simplified answers far from a personal understanding of my own identity or the systemic factors informing my personal

²⁹ Angel Kyodo Williams, Rod Owens, Jasmine Syedullah, *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation* (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2016), 18.

experiences. I lived my adult life in very much the same way, ignorant that not having to think about race was an embodiment of what is referred to as “white privilege.” I walked the earth with this faux white privilege, disassociated from my own blackness, blind to the impact of blackness within the context of American society.

There were several stages in the process of understanding the impact of my body as racialized and gendered. The first turning teachings around no-self forced me to look at the African American expression of my biracial identity. Of course I always knew that I had brown skin, but knowing my brown skin and feeling it are two different categories. One is intellectual, superficial and the other, experiential. I felt the impact of my identity from an external perspective. I felt how the systemic ideal that a woman with brown skin is not as powerful, intelligent, worthy, or even as human compared to others impacted my own constructed identity, i.e. what I thought of myself outside of the conceptual ideals of race. I felt like Caliban from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, who was called a monster so often by others, he thought himself as one and eventually became one. I grieved the subtle adoption of systemic ideation that I wasn’t worthy, powerful, or intelligent. Along with the tears of exclusion came a big open space for compassion.

The final stage, one which I am still aspiring to inhabit, is that of balancing the immediate revelations of racial acts of violence, that are often subtle, and building relationships to inspire change over time. At this stage, I’m asking myself “how can I maintain relationship for the highest potential of understanding for both me and the other?” It is actually quite easy to name injustice in the moment, cutting through to what is actually happening. It is easy to blast someone, holding a mirror up to their ignorance and moving on while they remain on fire. It is much more difficult to see injustice, even in its ugly attempts to marginalize and discredit, and

maintain relationship. In that holding, in that space of being misunderstood because of my identity, in that staying there with a heart of compassion is the beauty, grace, and power of the activist caretaker personality. The sometimes excruciating challenge is to stay engaged, rooted in both our shared humanity and discernment of what is right – not falling into the complacency of self-preservation or normalizing violent environments. In my heart, I feel like a mix of Mr. Rogers and Angela Davis. The activist caretaker personality adopts the character of both the jarring and the sweet with the shared goal of human justice.

Conclusion

The point that Lenz is making through his caretaker personality model is that we are wearing personalities whether we are aware of it or not. He suggests that we consciously choose which personality to wear and when, so that we construct the way that we show up in our relative reality. In our current time, American Buddhism reflects the same challenges that society experiences; the reconciliation of historical violence upon indigenous cultures, women, African-Americans, people of color, the LGBTQ+ community, and immigrants. Such reconciliation requires recognition of the relative reality that we inhabit within Buddhist communities and that maintaining systems as they are does not fulfill the bodhisattva ideal of freeing all beings. Rather, it privileges spiritual realization, limiting access to the few residing at the top of the social pyramid.

When Lenz describes the warrior personality, he says, “[the warrior] use[s] her or his life as a way of attaining liberation.”³⁰ This is the goal and practice of Vajrayana Buddhism, to use the content of our lives as fuel for liberation. Judith Simmer-Brown notes that “This means that when intensity arises, we resist the temptation to reject it; instead, we open to it and allow it to

³⁰ Lenz, 35:03.

scorch us, waking us up further and further.³¹ Through this practice, we develop sacred outlook, the concept that everything is a symbol or a pathway toward liberation. Through the donning of the activist personality, we ride the infinite wave of Buddha Nature and further free Buddhism, with all of its philosophical and practical offerings, making it available and accessible to all.

³¹ Judith Simmer-Brown, *Dakini's Warm Breath: The Feminine Principle in Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 2002), 135.

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