

Lama Rod Owens  
*Becoming A New Saint*  
April 1, 2024



Hi, my name is Lama Rod Owens. I use he/him pronouns, and I am currently living and teaching on the ancestral lands of the Creek, Cherokee and the Skokie people here on the land that is now called Atlanta, Georgia.

I am so thrilled to be sharing this space and this time with you. For those of you who do not know me, I am a Tibetan Buddhist Lama trained in the Kagyu School of Tibetan Buddhism.

I am the co-author of *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love and Liberation*. I'm the author of *Love and Rage: The Path of Liberation Through Anger*. I'm also the author of the new book, *The New Saints: From Broken Hearts to Spiritual Warriors*.

I want to talk a little bit about becoming a New Saint. In *The New Saints*, I explore the tradition of the bodhisattva, of the great Buddhist saint. I came to this topic during the quarantine in 2020, right after *Love and Rage* was published. I found myself really engaged with a lot of different people around social justice and movement work, particularly after the murder of George Floyd, where we saw a reigniting of the movement for Black lives.

My books have often been a response to something happening in the world. *Radical Dharma* was a response to the uprising in Ferguson, the beginning of Black Lives Matter, the killing of Michael Brown. *Love and Rage* was a response to the 2016 election of Donald Trump.

*The New Saints* was following the same trajectory where so much in the world was happening: the quarantine, Coronavirus, our response to the murder of George Floyd.

I kept asking myself, *what does it mean to do liberatory work now in the world?* Of course, I returned to the literature of the bodhisattva, which has so deeply influenced me as an activist.

The bodhisattva literature, the tradition, were really the teachings that invited me into my dharma practice as an activist in my 20s. So I went back to the bodhisattva literature, which for me is really clear and elegant, and straightforward.

But I also noticed that we can get distracted around the mythological language of the bodhisattva tradition. The bodhisattva literature sometimes posits the bodhisattva as a superhero, like a DC or Marvel superhero. Maybe we start thinking that the point of the bodhisattva is to develop powers and abilities. At the same time, I think we are also very clear that the work of the bodhisattva is the awakening of compassion and wisdom. But I think it's easy to get distracted by the mythological work of the bodhisattva.



### **Reinterpreting the Bodhisattva Tradition**

Reflecting on that, I wanted to reinterpret the bodhisattva tradition into language that I felt was accessible and relevant for different groups of people.

Some of these groups of people that I was really wanting to reinterpret that tradition for were young people. Gen Z, for instance, younger millennials. I wanted them to have access to this tradition in a way that maybe they couldn't get access to it. I wanted to talk to people like me, people of color or Black folks, queer folks, people really working to bring about a new future.

I was also talking to people who were really emerging in this awakened abolitionist movement. The abolitionist movement to disrupt the carceral state, the prison systems, the over-surveillance of targeted communities, and so forth.

I wanted all these folks to have access to this really wonderful, beautiful tradition. But I knew that I had to rethink what the bodhisattva was. This is where *The New Saint* started to emerge that said we all can be bodhisattvas.

### **The New Saint**

For the work that I wanted to do with the tradition, I started thinking about saints. I wanted to bring it back to a really profound word that I think carries a lot of energy for many of us: saints, and to become a new saint.

Not the saints of old, not just the great bodhisattvas and Buddhist history, but the great saints across many traditions, which I explore in the book as well. To say, yes this is one understanding of sainthood. But what does it mean to enter into a new sainthood?

In doing that, I decided to examine what the bodhisattva is actually doing. I came down to four qualities. These qualities introduce my understanding of what the new saint is.

The four qualities of the New Saint are: (first) to give a shit, (second) to figure out our work, (third) do that work, and (fourth) keep returning to do the work.

### **The First Quality of The New Saint: Giving a Shit, Awakened Care**

Moving back to the first point: giving a shit. That language is very evocative. Giving a shit. What I'm really trying to communicate is that we have to care. That caring, that expression of compassion, means that we recognize suffering and we vow to end that suffering. The suffering for ourselves, the suffering for those around us.



We disrupt and end the suffering for all beings, regardless of if we like them or not. We have to care. I wanted the audiences I was talking to really understand that. This is an age of deepening our care, first for ourselves and then for others around us. And that care has to be awakened care.

Awakened care is this coming together of not just compassion, but also joy, love, and clarity, which is what I call wisdom. Bringing all of these streams of ideas, practices, modalities, states of mind, together to awaken into this heightened care, for ourselves and for others around us. To not be afraid.

I think this awakened care is what helps us to cut through the fear that we have around really caring about the world. Many of us are afraid to deepen our care for the world, because we find it difficult to hold space for the violence, the trauma and the despair that so many of us are moving through.

Awakened care is something that protects us. It opens up space, it helps us to be with the things that scare us to death. It's the awakened care, the daring, courageous expression of the New Saint.

I will pay attention. I will show up. I will listen. I will watch. I will witness. I will hold all this without reacting but just hold it, just be present. To experience what feels possible and appropriate.

I think this is the most important aspect of these New Saints qualities. That we have to care. We have to allow our hearts to break as we hold space for the world. This is intense, profound emotional labor that I talked about quite a bit in my last book, *Love and Rage*.

### **The Second Quality of The New Saint: Figure Out Your Work**

Moving to the second point: we figure out our work. We figure out what it is we should be doing to disrupt suffering in the world. It's not enough just to care. After we start caring, after we start opening to the experiences of the world, then we say, *what is my role in reducing the suffering of the world?*

We also ask ourselves, *what is my role in reducing my suffering?* This is the kind of dual practice we're always having to engage in. This dual practice of being aware of my experience, and also putting my experience into community, or into conversation with the experience of the world or the collective.

*What is my work?* We figure out what our front line is. We talk about front line work in *Radical Dharma* if you'd like to reference that. What does it mean to go to my front line? What is my work to do?

If you are white-identified, for instance, I think your work is to dismantle, to disrupt white supremacy as this construct, as this philosophy, as this identity location. To start figuring out who you are beyond the whiteness. Or to go back and figure out who you were before whiteness emerged as this expression of violence and subjugation of Black and brown communities and people.



My work as a cisgender male is to go to my front line to disrupt the system of patriarchy which has taken deep root in my body, in my mind. That's been a big part of my work.

What is your work? If your work seems easy, then it's probably not your work. Not only that, some of us are doing other people's work as well.

This second expression of the New Saint is about getting clear about what it is I should be doing to disrupt suffering for myself, and for others. And really paying attention to what seems difficult, hard, or even what seems impossible. If something seems impossible, more than likely that's where you should be heading.

This is what the New Saint is called to do. In general, this is what the bodhisattva is called to do. We have to go to where the work is. We have to do the work. We have to do what's hard. Of course the bodhisattva is working to awaken, to gain enlightenment on behalf of all beings.

To do that we have to work. As we're deepening our own realization, at the same time, we begin to benefit others around us. But we can't get there unless we're doing the work that we need to do to get awakened, to get free from systems, from philosophies, from paradigms of violence.

### **The Third Quality of The New Saint: Do Your Work**

After you figure out your work, third, you do your work. You *do* your work. The second and third points seem very similar, but I want to emphasize *doing*. It's easy to say, *my work is to dismantle, to disrupt white supremacy*. But that doesn't mean you're gonna do anything.

When we move into this third quality of doing, that means we are in action. As we talk about compassion as well, compassion is only realized through action. We have to take everything from the concept or the theory into application.

This is what I'm doing. This is what I'm doing. You would ask yourself, *what is it that I'm doing right now?*

### **The Fourth Quality of The New Saint: Do Your Work**

When you start the work, you want to keep returning to do the work, which is the fourth expression of the New Saint. We keep returning.

The bodhisattva keeps coming back. The bodhisattva keeps emanating back into *samsara* to be of benefit until we achieve complete enlightenment and expand into our Buddhahood. And even as Buddhas we keep returning. So when we figure out our work, we do our work and we keep doing it.

Lama Rod Owens  
*Becoming A New Saint*  
April 1, 2024



Sometimes yes, you have to take a break. This is what I call care, particularly self-care. It's not that we should necessarily become martyrs in the work. We have to figure out how to be sustainable in the work. That means that sometimes we take a break.

Sometimes that breaking is what we can call self-care. We do that in order to experience restoration that helps us to return to the work. This isn't about giving up, nor is it about self-indulgence. This is a huge concern for many of us.

When we are engaged in self-indulgence, it means that we are taking a break from the work with no intention of returning. As a matter of fact, we get attached and fixated to the pleasure that we may experience from the care that we receive, which makes it really difficult for us to choose the work again. That's self-indulgence. We start self-identifying with that pleasure.

When I think about self-care, I often think about Audre Lorde, the great Black feminist writer, scholar and thinker who talked about self-care as a kind of survival. She talks about it as political warfare. To survive, to be sustainable is this act of political warfare because systems of violence like patriarchy, racism, are designed to annihilate, to eliminate, to “other” people from who they really are.

To disrupt those systems we survive and we experience sustainability by accessing and tuning into these profound acts of care. Care for ourselves, and care for others. Because these systems deplete us, and in order to get freed from suffering, in order to return to our enlightened nature, we have to be resourced, not depleted. Awakening is about fullness, it's about expansion.

The root of that is profound libratory love. Love is what begins to heal us, to bring us back together into wholeness. Then from that wholeness, we expand into our true nature again. We remember who we are, as the *Satipatthana Sutta* points out, we remember who we are through being resourced and replenished. Being under-resourced is just a deepening experience of suffering, and we're trying to transcend suffering to remember who we are.

### **The Evolution of The Dharma**

These are the four expressions of the New Saint as inspired by the bodhisattva tradition. I wanted these points to be really clear and direct.

Of course, I wrote this also for Buddhists, for those of us who engage deeply, and practice. But my real motivation, my true intention was to create a text and a way of thinking about the bodhisattva tradition that could invite new folks into the tradition, into practice and to meditation. People who would probably never consider Buddhism or dharma as a legitimate path for them.

Lama Rod Owens  
*Becoming A New Saint*  
April 1, 2024



This is extremely important in terms of the development and the expression of the dharma. As dharma develops and spreads particularly in the West and more particularly here, in the United States, dharma will change, as dharma has always historically changed.

It has to take on the flavor and the characteristics of the people who are practicing. I think the United States is such a unique experiment because there are so many cultures and so much history. Also so much violence right here, and all of these things will begin to shape the expression of dharma.

Maybe it will give rise to in a couple of hundreds of years, it will give rise to a uniquely American dharma. That's something that's really exciting for me, because that is again, one of the most powerful kind of actions of dharma: to change. To take on the characteristics of the community that are practicing the teachings.

Thank you so much for sharing this time and space with me. I want to dedicate the merit of this time that anything that we've awakened for the benefit of all beings, that this is expressed and released so that all beings may be freed from all systems of violence and harm, that all beings may be freed from suffering and that we all remember our innate buddhanature as quickly as possible.

Thank you all so much for your time.