

A Window to Enlightenment

An Interview With Nicole Grace

by Sydney L. Murray

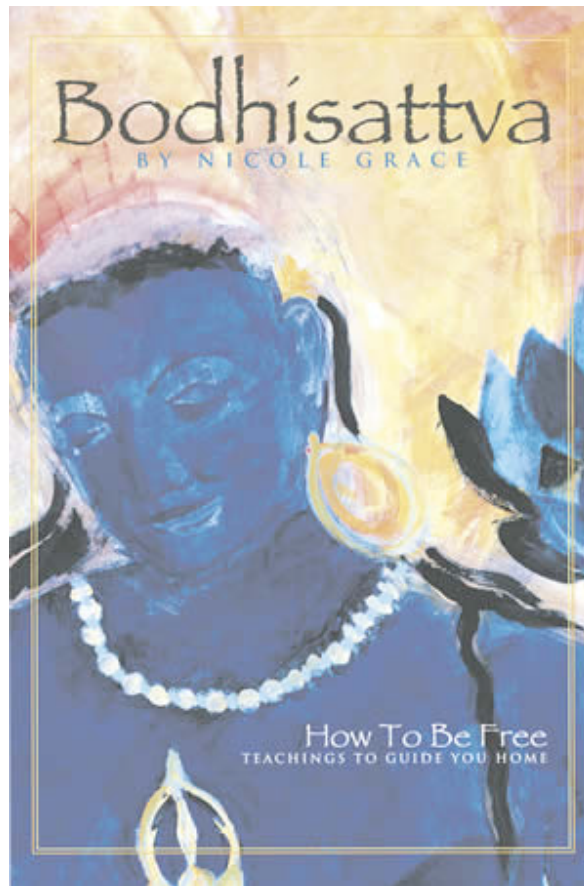
My greatest teachers have always been the most humble. The quest for knowledge seems more important than the possession of it. The joy in sharing and teaching has been my experience with Nicole Grace. She is a person that I believe is here to share with each one of us a way to live more presently, more fully, and with greater joy and peace. I recently had the opportunity to speak with her.

Vision Magazine: What do you hope to teach our world?

Nicole Grace: The most important message to convey is that enlightenment is available to everyone, not just to certain kinds of people who you've imagined have had a certain kind of life or privileges or upbringing. That enlightenment is all things and it lies in potential in all people.

VM: What would be a definition of enlightenment?

NG: It seems that there are many definitions of it and different understandings. My definition is a very traditional view. There is the enlightenment you can see manifested in a person. Then there is Enlightenment itself, which is referred to by many labels, such as eternity, infinity, the ocean, God. It's everything, it's all there is. To quote from the Bhagavad Gita, "Innermost element, everywhere, always...changeless, eternal, for ever and ever." It's quite beautiful.



Salvikalpa samadhi is a step on the pathway towards enlightenment, when referred to as manifest within a person. This is a very deep meditation, where you are plunged into an exquisite experience of love, of all encompassing consciousness, rings of light, being pulled by a magnet deeper into enlightened consciousness.

This purifies the awareness and the being. However, bliss itself can be a trap. That feeling of expansion and power can be a trap. As long as it is an experience, and there is someone experiencing it, it is not enlightenment; it's just really wonderful. If you are paying attention and willing to take a step beyond ego, there is yet further to go. Then there is...liberation...a grand epiphany. This is the cataclysmic awakening where in one moment—though when you have been through this, it is a timeless time—the soul chooses to no longer be an individual apart from the one consciousness.

It is a very profound choice, because in this one moment you finally decide that you will allow everything that you are, and that you have hoped for, to be annihilated; the great masterpiece that is you, will be gone. Then you are gone, and there is no 'you' anymore, [and] for a second, it is the most exquisite feeling. It is very difficult to talk about because you are not there. That is liberation. This is very similar to you walking in a dark forest during a storm, and [when] lightning flashes, suddenly everything is illuminated. You see all the trees, the bushes, the path. It's very clear. Then after the lightning is gone, it is dark again. With liberation it is very important not to walk around and say I'm enlightened now. It's not the same thing. You can still remain individuated from the one consciousness. You saw clearly for a moment, but then that moment was over. At this point you need to double your efforts, meditate hard, work very hard to stay humble.

This next phase of spiritual practice is very beautiful, but there is the danger of actually becoming more egotistical than ever: you can believe that you, the individual, are God and that you have mastery over everyone and everything. This is a serious misunderstanding. In reality, you are God, and there is no individual.

Then, if you are very lucky and manage to stay humble, the lightning flashes again, and then again and then again. Maybe you remain in that clarity for a little longer each time.

With a great deal of discipline and self-control and humility and a certain amount of time, you can experience a profound evolution. Then the illumination in your mind never darkens again. It gets to the point where it is just light all the time. That is enlightenment. It is a process. The "lightning flash" happens more and more; it becomes more infused in your consciousness. It takes a great deal of humility to get to this point. I've encountered way too many people who have stopped their practice too soon. Practice never really stops! But when introspection stops, when humility is lost, your spiritual evolution ceases. You can tell everyone you are enlightened, but inside you are still suffering. So enlightenment to me is when the darkness has finally been burned away in the light.



VM: What compelled you to write your most recent book?

NG: I spend a lot of time in contemplation. I believe that life is the great teacher and that the greatest masters of enlightenment, what they really do is teach you to learn from life, from nature. So I will just be still and observe nature and even in a brief moment of this reflective practice, I can see a metaphor become illuminated; there is a realization, an epiphany of a truth. I was moved to start writing about these moments. It felt that it might contaminate them in a way to write too much, because then it becomes more of the writer and not so much of the epiphany itself. What I wanted to achieve was for someone else to read one of the verses and be drawn into having that epiphany for themselves. I also found it to be a really wonderful experience for myself, to distill the essence of those moments, and then write about them. So a day came where I felt there was a body of teachings that had been compiled, and that there were enough subjects covered for one book. Any more than that [and] it would be too much for people to take in.

VM: How do you think people can be more compassionate?

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NG: I think [the] number one way to reach compassion is through humility. Humility, to me, is probably the most important spiritual quality. You can get to a place of humility through gratitude. If you can, spend as much time as possible throughout the day feeling a sense of gratitude for everything. There is always something that you know is a gift. Just being alive, for one. So when you start to feel gratitude, this brings you very easily to humility. When you are humble, the essence of humility is really thinking not quite so much of yourself. All beings have something valuable to give. When you start to develop this kind of perspective on the world, then, when you encounter someone, instead of having a potentially conflicting meeting, you can suddenly see the world through their eyes. Then you are stepping into compassion naturally. Compassion is not seeing the world through your own eyes, but rather seeing the world directly through someone else's eyes. If you want to diffuse any kind of conflict, [ask], where is this person coming from? What is it that they need, what is their pain? Now you have humanized this other person. When you can feel someone else's pain, that's compassion. You can understand, be more patient, more tolerant.

VM: What comes to mind when you think of the word 'gratitude'?

NG: I think of the happiest state of mind that anyone can be in at any time, because gratitude has no limit. Gratitude has always brought me into a state of peace and contentment no matter what is going on. Really, feeling gratitude and being saved are the same thing. So if you are ever feeling a little lost or soul-sick, gratitude will take you home.

VM: People seem to be confused about Buddhism and non-attachment. Can you offer some of your teachings?

NG: First I should qualify, despite my background, when I speak of Buddhism I mean it more as a broad approach to spirituality. I consider myself a Buddhist mystic as opposed to a Buddhist in terms of the religion, which I don't practice. The Buddhist religion has a whole set of rituals, and structure around a very formal, organized practice. It is a lovely religion, but that is not what I teach. I teach a mystical approach to spirituality, which is essentially, how to have a direct experience of enlightenment. I also draw from Hinduism and Christian mysticism. So I wouldn't describe what I teach as just the Buddhist philosophy. Non-attachment simply means the absence of fear, because when you become attached to something, inherent in that attachment is a clinging, because you think that what you are attached to is going to go away. You think whatever it is, that love, that person, that object is going to be taken away, so you are grabbing [onto] it. This puts you in conflict with the beauty and ecstasy of union, the idea that there is nothing, so nothing can be taken away. You are part of this one consciousness. Being attached to something, there is this idea that you and this thing are apart, and all the duality that causes suffering, you have now brought to yourself. Non-attachment simply means to love with your whole heart without fear, without need. Because the minute you are needy, there is a sense that you are not being given everything you could possibly need. Of course, in eternal consciousness, we do have everything we need, everything that is necessary for us to achieve our purpose in this time. The idea that detachment means that you are cold and mean, is a misunderstanding. You can love more with your whole heart when you take fear away.

VM: How can people get rid of the fear in their life?

NG: In the political arena there seems to be a lot more fear and intolerance. I think that has always been a part of human nature, and with enlightenment that gets removed from your mind. I think some of it has to do with the fact that the planet is reaching a level of population that is unsustainable. When there are fewer resources, people reach a state of fear that there will not be enough. So then the mind looks for the enemy who is taking what I want away from me. Humans also naturally gravitate toward community. There are many levels of community. There is the community of the planet Earth, community of country, of nationality, of religion, of gender... The more people you have, the more little communities you end up with. Then you get more intolerance and fear. The best way to get rid of fear is love. If you have a really beautiful meditation, nothing frightens you. If you have a beautiful moment, with [someone] who loves you, there is no fear. You don't need a person or circumstance to love. Real love is that which can never go away, which is found in each person, in your own heart and mind. Love something greater than yourself, love nature, which gives life. When you really are in a state of love—whatever it is that you love is more important to you than your own life—fear goes away.

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VM: If there was one thing you could think of, what would be the most significant event in your life?

NG: I'd have to say the first nirvana, the first time I went away, because I had wanted it for my entire life. I was a strange person. I really didn't want anything that other people wanted. I just wanted enlightenment. I wanted freedom and love forever and some day to have the privilege of helping someone else find that. There is a moment where you see the choice between enlightenment and satisfying desires in the world. There is a part of you that thinks, I couldn't even be worthy of that, even if I were to have the courage to take that next step to annihilation. But, when there was this choice presented, I took it. I was very lucky. After this, everything was different. I knew that this was the beginning of the path and not the end. At that moment, you do have an amazing perspective switch and the love that fills you, the completeness, the utter contentment that everything will be okay, is so profound, and this does not go away. It's a very humble and really beautiful moment.

VM: What would be a short description of mystical Buddhism teaching?

NG: It requires, generally, someone who has been there, who can come back and talk about it and get you there. Mysticism is the pursuit of, and finally having, a direct experience of divine consciousness. You can have this. There is nothing that anyone else has that you don't that will prevent you from finding this in yourself. It is simply a choice. It is meditation, contemplation, self-discovery—the expression and the experience of love, of loving as much as you can, as long as you can, every day, something greater than yourself. Each person is in direct service to his or her own higher consciousness, not to the teacher. No one is serving another. All are serving Eternity. Again, it's all about direct experience. Mysticism is dissolving into beauty.

VM: What do you believe is the most pressing issue for human kind?

NG: Fear. I think fear drives everything. The more people we can remove from the condition of fear, the better the world will be. Each one of us has something valuable to offer, because everyone has a heart and a window into the same view as everyone else, and that view is to enlightenment, to eternity. Anyone can open that window at any time and let the light in. How many people can we help? We can each do a little bit. Let a little more light in the world, and what I mean by that is to take away a little bit of fear. There doesn't need to be a label on spiritual practice. If you just strip away all the layers and just spend some quiet time everyday discovering yourself, there will be a little less suffering in your world tomorrow. I want to encourage everyone to believe that there is a way out and it is available now.

Nicole Grace is a Buddhist monk, mystic and teacher, and the award-winning author of *Bodhisattva: How to Be Free, Teachings to Guide You Home* (Mani Press 2010). Join us in Denver, CO and Sedona, AZ this month to meet the author and get a signed copy of *Bodhisattva*. For more information, visit www.bodhisattvabook.com or [facebook.com/bodhisattvabook](https://www.facebook.com/bodhisattvabook).

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