



All Cops Are Buddhas (ACAB): Stretching our Empathy and Defunding the Police

By Katie Loncke

In this article, Katie Loncke (they/them) writes about powerful realizations that emerged in the intersections of activism, Buddhist practice, and plant medicine. They explore how the intimacy of a friendship with a former cop brought more nuance and compassion to their stance on police abolition.

“Mercy means to surrender cloaking ourselves from ourselves and experiencing a shared vulnerability that we’ve likely never felt before.”

Dr. Larry Ward,
America’s Racial KarmaText

This is a story of inconvenient love. A story of unlikely friendship. Before we begin, I must warn you, dear friend, that you might find yourself deeply irritated or put off by this tale. If so, I imagine you might be in one of two camps.

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If you are a Classic ACAB type of friend, ACAB being the global English acronym for “All Cops Are Bastards,” you might groan at the prospect of yet another feel-good anecdote humanizing the police, when what we should be doing is challenging their role in institutionalized violence. Remember that terrible Kendall Jenner Pepsi commercial from 2017? The one that trivialized Black Lives Matter street demos by giving a saccharine peace offering to a docile-looking cop amidst a fake protest? Yuck. You might understandably roll your eyes and shake your head at the tale of a fellow prison abolitionist (yours truly) who opens their heart and expands their empathy by befriending a former police officer. You might dismiss this story for channeling mettā (lovingkindness) in the wrong direction: toward oppressors, rather than the oppressed.

I get it. And actually, if you feel this way, you are probably my kind of people.

If, on the other hand, you are a Hardcore Four Vows type of friend — knowing deep down that the innumerable beings of this world (cops or not) are to be met with kindness and interest; and that their inexhaustible states of suffering (toxic or not) are to be touched with patience and love — well, you might see the police, or those who would wage war, or those who would criminalize queerness, or transness, or abortion access — you might see all beings, however misguided, however actively or passively violent, as nevertheless automatically and irrefutably worthy of unconditional compassion. They, too, embody buddhanature: no more or less than you do. Full stop. So why waste time trying to prove or declare their worthiness? It’s already true. Just keep practicing, you might think. Mature your realization for yourself and focus on the good in people. Concentrate on what you can do to help, rather than ceaselessly critiquing the world’s harms. Victim mentality only delays awakening.

Yeah, I get this, too. You might also be my kind of people.

Well, either way, here goes. This is the truth of how it happened, for me. How the sturdy dam of my militant, unforgiving attitudes somehow broke open, pouring out a rewilded river of compassion that I didn't know was possible.

It was August 15, 2020, when Joyous* and I met on a Zoom call with half a dozen other strangers. A psychedelics integration circle for people of color. In case you're unfamiliar, psychedelics integration group is not where folks get together to drop acid, take magic mushrooms, or hold ayahuasca ceremonies. Rather, it's where they can find support integrating world-shaking insights or revelations from previous entheogenic experiences (whether blissful or harrowing), weaving them into the fabric of day-to-day life. If you've ever struggled, as I have, through a turbulent re-entry process after a silent meditation retreat, dismayed to find yourself quickly unraveling and reverting to "normal" life, you probably understand the purpose of these integration circles.

To keep it all the way real, from the moment Joyous and I met through our Zoom squares, I found her fine. Strikingly beautiful. I say this not to trivialize our connection, but to share my experience in greater wholeness. Attractions sometimes make a difference. My perception of her shining cocoa skin, cheeky smile, and lush, rounded flat top may have subliminally set the stage for my heart's thawing — though I didn't realize it at first. I had no idea who she was, or what she used to do for a living. All I knew initially is that she, like others in this circle, listened to me with palpable care, respect, and openness when my turn came to share.

I had a lot of grief and sadness to convey that day. In the streets and on the news that August, the whole world

seethed and roiled against George Floyd's murder by police. Black Lives Matter resurged into global consciousness with such force that, despite pandemic fears, many of us violated our own stay-at-home protocols in order to join marches, uprisings, mass outcry and public pressure. My personal heartbreak, as the child of a Black father, was compounded by a growing sense of despair and futility about the larger political efforts to defund and demilitarize police departments nationwide. Though I agreed with the aims of these efforts, our strategic prospects for long-term success looked bleak.

Three pessimistic thoughts in particular had me down.

One, the police who love their jobs tend to identify deeply with their roles. So, it seems daunting, to say the least, to persuade the majority to quit their career and do something else. I've seen firsthand the great sense of purpose (and even pleasure) many officers seem to derive from their work: risk-taking, problem-solving, handling hi-tech weapons, wielding extreme authority, and executing high-level teamwork that they and their families genuinely experience as heroic. Although 2020 did ultimately see a record exodus from police departments nationwide, with thousands leaving their jobs, it remains to be seen whether this temporary dip will bounce back to even higher police staffing and funding levels in the future.

Two, even police who don't love their jobs can get caught up in the adrenaline rush, stuck in hard loops of dangerous trauma response. I've had my face bloodied by the baton of an officer attempting to "keep the peace" — even though I was unarmed, empty palms up, and posing no threat to her. Of course, unfortunately, others suffer far worse from police reactivity. (Resmaa Menakem has helpfully illuminated this structural, historical, and inherently racialized problem of police trauma in his best-selling book, *My Grandmother's Hands*.)

Finally, I sensed that even if we did succeed in shrinking Police and Sheriff Department budgets, redirecting those resources to unarmed social support, the long game would be far from over. What is more dangerous than a laid-off, embittered ex-cop? If you've paid some attention to the question of police violence, you might be familiar with a certain direct pipeline, common in many regions, from law enforcement to militias, paramilitaries, and vigilante activities.

So, what do any of these worries about shrinking police departments have to do with my Buddhist practice?

Buddhadharma has taught me that it's not the pain and disappointment of life, but how we respond, that leads us to more suffering or more compassion. Although these doubts about police, racism, and public safety weighed heavy on me mentally, years of dharma practice also afforded me enough spaciousness to speak from a deeper, steadier place. Practice had strengthened my heart enough, released enough trauma in the body, to relax into a both-and experience of groundlessness and conviction. The conviction is about committing to showing up in truth and love, as best I can. The groundlessness, the not-knowing, is about accepting the way things really are. To arrive in the moment not armed with analysis, strategy, or even attempted persuasion. Allowing mercy, as Dr. Larry Ward says, to help me be bravely vulnerable, and "surrender cloaking myself from myself." Stop being a tough, gritty abolitionist and let my political fears fracture into a simpler human grief.

So, to the circle, I said not one word about my political activist background. Only this:

I am feeling so sad about the violence of police, and of patriarchy. I wish it would stop, and I have no idea how that can happen.

Sometimes, when we make some room, dharma does the rest.

In this moment of simple, vulnerable expression — an offering of honest, unexaggerated pain — Joyous kindly met me with her own disclosure. She, a Black, queer, cisgender woman from the Midwest, had in fact served as a police officer for eight years, starting in her twenties. She, a former cop, acknowledged me and honored my pain, with not an ounce of defensiveness. Only friendliness.

In what mischievous, mysterious ways this Universe meets us!

As Joyous and I took the conversation beyond the circle, keeping in touch across the country, she told me stories of her time in uniform. Stories that both deepened my empathy for police in general and strengthened my belief that the criminal justice system itself cannot be reformed.

“I will always consider police my family, even though I have tried hard not to,” she said. “I can’t walk away from my brothers and sisters. Before I felt accepted in the black community, I felt accepted in the police community. ... I wanted to be a cop since I was a kid.”

On the force, Joyous tried to combine tenderness and integrity. “I cared about people so much,” she told me. “If I put someone in handcuffs in the cold, and I couldn’t put them in my car, I would hold their hands in my gloved hands so they stayed warm. I had the privilege of being a cop under the direction of a black Mayor, the first black police chief, and the first black President.”

And yet, despite her enormous passion for the job, Joyous was ultimately worn down by a culture of endemic corruption, systemic flaws, and untreated trauma on the force.

“As a first responder you witness and participate in trauma for a living. I was given some tools to absorb the trauma: jokes with my co-workers, alcohol, or I could call the Employee Assistance Program. ... At my best I took up running, got into meditation and had a life outside of work. At my worst I drank as soon as I got home, even after the night shift, and had no time to work out because I was making so much extra money working off-duty. Instead of facing myself, I was a workaholic.”

At one point, Joyous faced a hard decision about whether or not to report misconduct on the job by her own policing partner. When she did, rather than being commended, she faced bureaucratic inertia and ostracization. Ultimately, when she left the force, she gained a larger perspective on the spiritual ailments underpinning the institution as a whole.

“Sometimes [as an officer] you can relieve suffering. Sometimes you are the cause of suffering. Sometimes you realize the system doesn’t protect those that need it most ... A lot of us suffer from the illusion of separation. And our current political, economic, housing, education, and criminal justice systems reflect that illusion.”

Here, Classic ACAB friend and Hardcore Four Vows friend, I wonder if we might find some common ground. Perhaps we can agree on Joyous’ wish to awaken from the illusion of separation.

For my Classic ACAB homies, a challenge here when it comes to police might be finding enough safety for

ourselves, and healing of our own trauma, to then bravely soften toward the actual experiences of people in uniform — despite the real anguish and injustice that the uniform may represent for us. As someone who moves through the world in an increasingly white-passing, wealth-and-health privileged, cisgender-passing body, it is easier for me to find basic safety from police violence. So, if you're someone more likely to be targeted, but you still want to expand your empathy, it might help to seek guidance from teachers who share some of your experience, while also embodying a commitment to racial justice. Just to name a few: I find Dr. Larry Ward's recent book, *America's Racial Karma*, a wonderful Buddhist resource for this subject in particular. Sebene Selassie's spiritual autobiography, *You Belong*, is also excellent. The Embodiment Institute, founded by Prentis Hemphill, is doing outstanding work in Black-trans-led, somatic trauma healing. And one of my favorite Asian American Buddhist authors on the subject of police violence and abolition, healthcare worker JM Wong, organizes internationally from their home base in Seattle, WA, with a focus on decarceration and sex worker self-determination.

For my Four Vows friends and bodhisattva beloveds, the challenge of awakening from the illusion of separation might look very different. It might look more like accepting the painful, distressing emotions that are part of life, rather than trying to distance ourselves from political discomfort, hiding out in what Joanna Macy calls "premature equanimity." What if enacting compassion toward police, as a group and as individuals, includes recognizing how their jobs often harm and traumatize them, too? We need more than tepid, abstract affirmations of the buddhanature of all beings. Empathy also means re-grounding, again and again, in the harsh, practical realities of avowing all our ancient twisted karma — including the collective, social karma of anti-Black racism, patriarchy, settler-colonialism, and policing as a practice itself.

I believe collective healing and awakening are possible, and also that they cannot be rushed or forced. Even post-enlightenment, social scars might not immediately resolve and disappear. We will likely still need to compost and transform the ruins of present-day injustices. One of my favorite Buddhist tales to illustrate this is the story of Angulimala.

Angulimala was a serial killer who lived at the time of the Buddha. He would collect the fingers of his victims, wearing them in a garland around his neck, aiming to collect 1,000. One day, in search of his thousandth victim, Angulimala saw the Buddha in his monastic robes, walking along a quiet, lonely path. Perfect, Angulimala thought, and started quietly sneaking up behind.

But as he approached the Buddha to murder him, something strange happened. The Buddha in his slow, tranquil gait always remained the same distance ahead. No matter how fast Angulimala walked, ran, or full-tilt sprinted, until his face turned purple and puffy, the sanguine Buddha still remained safely out of reach.

This gentle miracle shocked and stunned Angulimala, opening his heart with awe. Stopping in the road, he requested then and there to become the Buddha's student. The Buddha agreed, seeing Angulimala's sincerity. Angulimala took the monastic vows, shaved his head, donned the robes, and eventually, after some years, became an enlightened arahant himself. His story shows the powerful possibility of turning one's life around.

Importantly, however, the story doesn't end there. Even after Angulimala became enlightened, when he would travel with the other monks to solicit villagers for daily meals (as monastics did back then, and some still do today),

townspeople would recognize him — the killer of their sons, daughters, grandparents, cousins, loved ones! Furious, they threw stones at him, and he would scramble away, bleeding. The Buddha simply said, Bear it. These were the consequences of Angulimala's previous actions. Despite his genuine transformation, many people remained understandably upset. Healing and forgiveness are not always instantaneous. Often, they take time.

This is a story that holds potential medicine for all of us. No matter what harms we've caused, intentionally or unintentionally, we all need reminders that we can choose differently. That healing and mercy are possible.

All cops are buddhas, as are all victims and survivors of state violence.

And, friend, if there's anything I've missed, overlooked, or gotten way wrong, please feel free to let me know. I'm here for the conversation. katie.loncke@gmail.com

May all beings be safe, protected, connected, fulfilled, joyous, and free.

*Joyous' name has been changed to protect her identity. She and I still meet once a week on Zoom, when we can, with another spiritual buddy. I'm wishing you, dear reader, similarly surprising, enlivening friendships on your path.