

Juniper

The Hero

In mythology and folklore, the hero's journey is a metaphor for an individual's quest for inner realization. The quest typically begins with a call to action—an event, circumstance, or inner propulsion that draws one to the threshold of a journey. Because what is before us is a break with the ordinary, we may encounter challenges as we draw closer to the threshold.

Crossing the threshold is only a beginning, however. To progress the hero invariably needs a special power or force, often provided by a guide who appears at just the right time. Then comes the work, an extensive period of training that challenges, tests, and shapes the hero. The battles may seem to be with external foes, but the real struggle is within. After enough battles are won comes the symbolic return, a reengagement with the world. The return does not so much mark the end of the journey as it does a new phase, a continuation, only now with a transformed outlook, perspective, and strength.

Buddhist training is a means to undertake this journey. It contains all the elements: a threshold, empowerment, training, and reengagement. On the Buddhist path, there is perhaps no better expression of the hero's journey than the bodhisattva, the spiritual warrior driven to self-transformation for the betterment of the world. The ideal of the bodhisattva is immortalized in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, the ancient text by the famous Indian Buddhist sage, Shantideva. In it, Shantideva composed a pledge, as beautiful and hopeful today as it was when it was written fifteen hundred years ago. It reminds us that each one of us is the hero, and it links us with generations of enlightened heroes who have come before us:

Just as those before me have embraced the spirit of awakening
And trained in the ways that unfold it,
So will I too for the sake of others embrace that very same spirit
And step by step unfold my mind's potential.

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