

## The Experience of Compassion

Some years ago I had the opportunity of addressing a local Christian congregation which was studying other religions. I came away disappointed because I hadn't found a way to convey to these good people the depth of the love and compassion that plays such a prominent role in the Buddhist faith. In my experience, it's comparable to the love that many Christians feel is afforded through a personal relationship with Jesus.

I have found this love expressed several ways in Buddhism. One is through the emphasis on cultivating lovingkindness. Some traditions present this as an actual meditation; others teach it as an underlying attitude. One starts with loving oneself, then extends this kindness to those close to one, then gradually in a larger and larger circle to even hostile people, and eventually to the whole world.

In the Zen/Meditation tradition we aspire to become as compassionate as Avalokiteshvara, "She Who Hears and Responds to the Cries of the World" (Kwan Yin in Chinese). We enter wisdom through compassion. This manifestation or being is frequently depicted with a thousand hands and eyes to illustrate that she has ample vision

and assistance to offer. Much of Zen training, whether engaged in as a monastic or priestly vocation, as a temple resident or retreat guest, or as a lay practitioner, focuses on cultivating and manifesting this concern for others.

In Buddhist iconography one can see many different forms of Avalokiteshvara. This artwork reminds us of a teaching from the Buddhist scriptures that the Unborn (the Eternal, the Unconditioned, or call it/him/her what you like) loves humanity so profoundly that It will appear in whatever form is necessary to help beings. This is Compassion's fundamental vow. It knows no distinctions or boundaries. From such love develops all the different faith traditions of the world, each suited to the people among whom it arises.

In addition to finding compassion in the teachings and imagery, I have experienced an unconditional love and acceptance among the people who practice Buddhism. I can't say that Buddhists are perfect, but I have yet to meet a practitioner who does not aspire to universal compassion, love, and kindness.

In particular, for those in the Zen or Meditation tradition, we have the opportunity for a close relationship with our teacher. The love between master and disciple is an in-

timate bond forged through mutual trust and commitment, to each other, to the lineage, and to the practice. In its authentic form this relationship can lead one to the indescribable peace and joy which I believe all religions aspire to. This state is a refuge in the midst of all difficulty. It liberates us from the causes of suffering, called in Buddhism the three fires or poisons—greed, hate, and delusion. With that freedom also comes the responsibility to serve and help all beings with a kind and compassionate heart.

May everyone quickly find a Path to the Ultimate.

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