

Avalokiteshvara In All Forms

Priory Member*

June 2010

In 1985 I was pregnant with my third daughter. I was working two jobs, raising a family, and my husband was getting his degree. To illustrate my stress level, I did an art therapy drawing of myself very pregnant, with spinning wheels for feet, a briefcase in one hand, a diaper bag in the other, a teenager sun-bathing, a toddler taking a nap, and a husband buried in homework, and I was shooting out the door. I know I was not the only one on wheels, but it felt that way.

In January 1986 I went to my first Al-Anon meeting. I couldn't not go. The need was so strong, that I took my 7-day-old nursing infant with me. I was warmly welcomed, cigarettes were put out, and a window was opened. By July I was spending more time practicing the 12 steps of Al-Anon, and less time with Buddhist practice.

I went back to work in a profession that requires a great deal of paperwork. I attempted to keep up, but by July I was two months behind, hadn't done any whatsoever. Procrastination is like a ghost, it haunts you 24/7. I was very stressed, haunted.

My husband suggested I visit my friend in Eugene for a relaxed get-away. He had been sober since January, so I agreed to go for a weekend and leave the kids with him. As each day put me closer to the weekend, what I called a "premonition" got stronger. I had the idea I would die on the highway, but taking the trip seemed like the thing to do. By the time we all waved goodbye, I had the thought that this was the last time I would see my family.

On the drive I thought I would chant the 12-step Serenity Prayer. I didn't necessarily think it would save my life (although I hoped it would), but I knew it would be a good thing to do no matter what happened. I had never heard it sung or chanted, but this was how I combined my Buddhist and Al-Anon practices. I used a type of melody I knew from the music of our Order.

*God, grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

I'd been driving and chanting this one prayer for about 90 minutes, when I heard a voice to my left saying, "Check your brakes." Never had I thought about problems with brakes. I had thought about head-on collisions and other types of accidents, but not failed brakes. I tapped the brakes, and I had none! I was on a gradual uphill incline, so I was safe. There was a dirt

road, and I was able to pull off the highway. Right in front of me, through the trees, was a towering sign, "Mechanic."

My Bodhisattva of auto repair did not have the necessary parts, so I was going to wait at a nearby café for my friend in Eugene to deliver them to us.

I got to know the waitress in the four hours I was in the café. I learned that I was just a few miles from the summit, that my mechanic was "the best mechanic on the mountain, the ONLY mechanic on the mountain." I enjoyed a nice meal, good coffee, kindness, and the space/time to get ALL of that paperwork done. During those days of preparation for the trip, I had wavered on whether or not to take my briefcase. My husband told me not to, to use the weekend just to relax. I agreed with that, but the last thing I did on the way out was to grab my briefcase, because "You never know."

My husband drank that weekend, and I was granted the courage to finally let my closest friends and my in-laws know what was going on. I needed their help. That made a separation possible, which led to my husband returning to AA and getting a good sponsor. He subsequently enjoyed eight years of sobriety.

Some of the help came in the form of thoughts or impulses – to take my briefcase, to chant a "non-Buddhist" prayer. One of the "internal" forms of help was an audible voice that saved my life and possibly others. Help also came in the form of timing, just before reaching the Willamette summit, right in front of the only mechanic on the mountain. Some of the help came from friends and relatives, a skilled mechanic, a kind waitress. A great deal of help came from AA and Al-Anon.

During the last years of my marriage, I was living in a place so remote, there was not even an Al-Anon group. As my situation got more difficult, I began my return to daily Buddhist practice. Help came in the form of the internet where I listened to hours of dharma talks posted on the Shasta Abbey website. I spent more time in Eugene, attending some Al-Anon meetings, but quickly came to a decision to focus on only one practice. That does not diminish my understanding that when I needed it, compassion came in the form of another spiritual practice.

Last year I happened to be present for the Avalokiteshvara Ceremony, I experienced it not as a ceremony. Each unique depiction of compassion gave me a deep sense that help comes when it is needed, in whatever form is needed. Each bow came from that place. Al-Anon has a slogan, "Expect a miracle." I think that expresses the same truth that Kanzeon is the hearing and responding to the cries of the world, in whatever form is needed.

I moved to Eugene in December 2009. Help has since come in the form of a town, a neighborhood, a house full of bright sunlight (even on cloudy days!), close family who live here, proximity to a long-time cherished friend, the Eugene Priory and sangha, and of course countless other forms. Occasionally I go back to pack up more of my belongings and check on an empty

house. Each time I pass that spot on Highway 58, I glance sideways to see that the old mechanic shop is still there, although the trees are much taller. Sometimes I chant “Homage to the Relics of the Buddha,” and the other times I play recorded scripture as my gratitude offering.

During the time I described, my husband had lost interest in Buddhist practice and was very involved in AA. The gift I received in Al-Anon was a practice very consistent with remaining a Buddhist. The steps include letting go of personal wants and fears, offering them to “a power greater than ourselves; fearless moral inventory (looking at things as they truly are); amends (*sange*—contrition, conversion & reparation where possible); in both traditions is the equality of women; and there is no excommunication. Everyone is valued and loved equally. Each person finds his and her own way, and guidance is honest while gentle.

Although I have chosen to focus on only one practice, Al-Anon was there for me when I was isolated and in despair, and it allowed me to remain a Buddhist.

May all beings benefit.

*In keeping with the spiritual traditions of both AA (Alcoholic Anonymous) and Al-Anon (Families & Friends of Alcoholics), this writing is offered in the spirit of anonymity.



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