

# The Face of Compassion

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In Buddhism, the Unborn is not defined by particular attributes such as male or female, but is understood to manifest certain qualities, including compassion, love, and wisdom. These qualities are seen to take on whatever form is useful to provide help and point to one's ability to find these qualities within oneself. Traditionally, compassion has been represented in Buddhism as a Bodhisattva, or an aspect of the Unborn, in the form of Avalokiteswara, Kanzeon, or Kuan Yin. These are all names for the same Bodhisattva. Avalokiteswara is the Sanskrit word originally used to describe compassion in India, where Buddhism began. Compassion was depicted as a male figure in the iconography of that culture. When Buddhism spread to China, however, the Bodhisattva's image became more feminine and was called Kuan Yin. Japanese Buddhists continued to represent the Bodhisattva of compassion as a predominantly feminine figure called Kanzeon. In all of these languages, the name means "regarder of the cries of the world."

In our temple, we recite a scripture weekly to Avalokiteshwara, whom we often refer to as a female Bodhisattva; in the training monasteries affiliated with our temple, this scripture is recited daily. It is a prayer asking for help to ease the suffering of the world. This help is recognized as finding our own ability to emulate Kanzeon, or Avalokiteswara, within ourselves. Part of the scripture reads as follows:

To calls from every quarter He responds;  
Of oceanic depth His holy vows.  
A myriad Buddhas has He truly served  
For ages past beyond the thought of man  
And made for aye great vows of purity.  
When people hear His name and see His form,  
And think of Him not vainly in their hearts,  
All forms of ill, in all the worlds shall cease. ...  
When lightning flashes and the thunder rolls, —  
    when hailstones beat and rain in torrents pours,  
The power of Kanzeon, — if thought upon, — will quickly  
    clear the heavens of the storm.  
If, struck by cruel disaster's evil hand — or tortured by  
    interminable pain, — a being flees to Kanzeon's gentle arms  
He, being wise and full of mystic power, — will save him  
    from all worldly grief and care.  
With all miraculous powers well endowed  
And widely skilled in knowledge of all things,  
In all the world, in all the quarters,  
There is not a place where Kanzeon does not go.<sup>i</sup>

Over the years, as I have been training as a Buddhist, I have come to understand that Compassion does not always appear as we think it *should* ---- and yet it is always just what we *need*. I might not have begun Buddhist training if I had not been stranded on I-5 for 12 ½ hours in a snowstorm in 1979, for example! This was a very frightening event for me, because I suddenly lost my ability to control what happened to me. I know now that being stranded was an “act of compassion” because it helped me to recognize that I needed more than my own self-constructed belief system to find peace and an understanding of what life was really all about. I began meditating and learning more about Buddhism soon after that experience! And as I have continued my Buddhist practice, I keep learning more about the meaning of compassion, both toward myself and others. **It is so much bigger than I am!** I have learned to avoid judging and to feel true sympathy for the suffering of others. Learning about compassion has taught me to have less fear and therefore to be more open to new experiences and relationships. Trusting in Kanzeon is not a passive activity, of course, and is developed through living daily life with its ups and downs, and often we do not recognize the help we are given until we step back from a situation and see from a distance what really was going on.

I would like to end by including part of an offertory which is recited during a festival ceremony which our temple celebrates several times a year in honor of Avalokiteswara:

Avalokiteswara’s vows are wondrous beyond imagining. He responds immediately to heartfelt needs since He is drawn to sufferers by their cries as iron is drawn to a magnet. To give voice to the Dharma He manifests Himself just as a moon reflected in water. In innumerable lands and countries wherein falls His Water of the Spirit He brings the essential matter to a successful end. In particular, within this world of worldliness does He pour forth His benevolence. Time enough does not exist to fully praise His kindness so deep is its flowing. ...<sup>ii</sup>

*[This article was taken from a presentation at an Interfaith Ministries prayer and reflection service on April 11, 2004 in Eugene, Oregon. The theme for the program was “The Sacred Thread: Feminine Attributes of the Divine.”]*

<sup>i</sup> *The Scripture of Avalokiteshwara Bodhisattva*, in *The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, compiled by Rev. Master P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, © 1990. In our Order’s liturgy, when referring to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, the masculine pronoun is used to point to That which is beyond the opposites.

<sup>ii</sup> Unpublished liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives, to be published by Shasta Abbey Press, © 2004.