

Kannon and the Ideal of Compassion

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Buddhist teaching is known throughout its history for its emphasis on Wisdom and Compassion. These two principles, values, or virtues are the basis of spiritual liberation in every tradition of Buddhism. Wisdom means to understand reality so that egoism is reduced or eliminated by understanding the true nature of our lives. Compassion is associated with Love in western tradition. However, it must be distinguished from the grasping, egoistic love that characterizes the popular Western view of romantic Eros-love. It is more Agape-self-giving love of Christian tradition. Compassion in Buddhism is, rather, like the self-giving love of a mother who loves and embraces her children equally, wanting them to avoid all suffering.

Kannon is often depicted in art with a leafy branch of the weeping willow tree, suggesting a trickle of teardrops as she encounters suffering in the world. She uses the branch to sprinkle the nectar of life on all beings. She is also clearly a Bodhisattva of this world, often represented as sitting on a rock in a more relaxed form. While no Buddhist text indicates her birth date, it is held on the Lunar second month, nineteenth day.

Compassion, central to Kannon, arises from Wisdom through the realization of interdependence of all beings and their essential identity in Emptiness beyond ego. It is non-dualistic, arising from a sense of oneness. Emptiness signifies that nothing has self-nature or absolute existence for itself. Everything is composite, existing through a variety of interdependent, interconnected causes and conditions. Emptiness, as a reality concept, is not mere nothingness, but inconceivable reality without marks, form, color or definition. When we probe existing things to their root we arrive at the mystery of why things exist. It is the age old philosophical question: "Why is there something and not nothing?" Emptiness is the potentiality out of which all things emerge to become whatever they are.

When we realize (make real) in our own experience our fundamental identity with all things in the great sea of beings through spiritual practice and contemplation, Compassion arises, just as with Gautama, seeing the ill, the aged and the dead, he identified with their plight. He knew that he also would experience those conditions, inspiring him to seek Enlightenment. We come to realize that we together with all others share a common destiny of Impermanence that carries us along in the flow of time in the stream of birth and death.

However, the principles of Wisdom, Compassion, Impermanence, Interdependence, are inconceivables. They are abstract terms, seemingly distant from everyday experience. They take distinct form in our minds in various symbols or metaphors, enabling us to negotiate our lives, make choices, express devotion and concern, and give meaning to life. Similarly, some people form concepts of God as a caring being, believed to incarnate in flesh and blood to share life with us, though he is inconceivable in himself. So also in Buddhism, Wisdom and Compassion take forms, establishing an ideal toward which we can direct and focus our deeds and actions.

The focus of this essay is Kannon (also Avalokitesvara [Sanskrit], Kuan-yin [Chinese]), the Bodhisattva [Buddha-to-be] of Compassion who is the chief symbol for Compassion in Mahayana Buddhism. In its original conception Kannon was male as was Sakyamuni Buddha. A Buddha-to-be stays in this world to help save others, though eventually becoming a Buddha. In the case of Kannon, he remains in form in this world to save all beings. His name is Kannon or Kanzeon which means "He who sees (experiences, perceives) the cries [of all suffering beings in the world.]" Though initially male, Kannon became a beautiful female in China, perhaps because the male-dominated Confucian tradition does

not readily express the tenderness of compassion. She gained a foothold in the hearts of the common people, peasants and fishermen and remains to this day.

In Chinese and Japanese Buddhist traditions there are some eighty texts which teach about Kannon. However, the most popular text is found in the twenty-fifth chapter of the Lotus Sutra. This chapter describes the ability of Kannon to help all people in any kind of distress, if they call upon her name. It has become an independent Sutra attracting many followers, often transcending sectarian lines. In the Pure Land tradition, Kannon [Compassion] and her counterpart Seishi [Wisdom] are embodiments of the nature or attributes of Amida ([Amitabha] Buddha. Amida Buddha is the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life, the Buddha who extends universal and unconditional Compassion and Wisdom in his offer of salvation for all beings. As the Infinite that embraces all being, as Reality itself, Amida and his attendants Kannon and Seishi, express the deep faith that the heart and essence of Reality is Compassion and Wisdom.

Kannon, like Amida and other salvation figures in Mahayana Buddhism, is not a historical person in our usual secular sense. However, they have a reality as value, ideal and natural aspiration of the human heart. When we hear of the suffering of those near and dear to us, in our powerlessness, we seek to change the course of their destiny through prayer and devotion, thus giving birth to Amida, Kannon, Seishi in the depths of our hearts and the hope that the universe will respond with Compassion. The Reality of Compassion represented in Amida, Kannon and Seishi becomes our reality, making us more compassionate in our relationships and understanding of others. Niwano Nikkyo, founder of the Rissho-kosei-kai movement in Japan, indicates that such Bodhisattvas should not be viewed as gods on whom we rely for help coming from outside us and giving special favor. Rather, they are models to inspire a way of living. (http://www.kosei-shuppan.co.jp/english/text/mag/2008/08_456_2.html)

In order to express this ideal, Kannon has taken many forms in Japan and is probably the most venerated of Buddhist divinities. There is the Thousand-armed Kannon representing the all-sufficiency of the Buddha-to-be to rescue and respond to every need. She is very personal. There is the eleven-headed Kannon, representing eleven aspects of the Bodhisattva, and her ability to manifest in any form, and the Horse-head Kannon as protector of animals. In the famous Kyoto Sanjusangendo (a hall divided into 33 bays), there are a thousand and one images of Kannon. The famed Kiyomizudera in Kyoto enshrines several figures of Kannon. A popular one is the Koyasu-no-to Kannon which promises easy childbirth. The famed Asakusa Sensoji in Tokyo is also devoted to Kannon. She is also the object of pilgrimage in groups of thirty three temples in Shikoku, Chichibu and Bando regions. Thirty three is the number of transformations the Buddha can take for the salvation of beings. All these expressions of Kannon can be interpreted as calls for us individually to manifest the qualities of the Bodhisattva in our own lives, using our talents and abilities to serve others. Also Kannon's engagement with the world provides a good image or symbol for contemporary Engaged Buddhism, a movement concerned for the welfare of people in the areas of human relations, peace and justice, environment and economic conditions.

Although Pure Land Buddhists are devoted primarily to Amida Buddha for their salvation, Kannon (and Seishi) are not ignored. In the case of Shin Buddhism, Shinran (1173-1262) had a vision in the Rokkakudo temple in Kyoto dedicated to Kannon. In his vision, he received a message that led him to his teacher Honen who opened a new direction in Pure Land Buddhism, embracing the common people. According to one tradition, Shinran received a vision in the Rokkakudo in which Kannon promised to become his wife and, as his helpmate-wife, propagate Buddhism in Japan. In his wife Eshinni's letter to her daughter, she recounts her vision of Shinran as a manifestation of Kannon. Shinran was devoted to Prince Shotoku (7th century) who is noted for establishing Buddhism in Japan on a firm basis. The veneration of Shotoku who was a layperson developed over centuries,

particularly in the Tendai sect. Shinran himself wrote numerous poems concerning Shotoku and regarded him as a manifestation of Kannon in Japan.

It should not be forgotten that the most active contemporary expression of Kannon is the Dalai Lama (Ocean of Wisdom) who is believed in Tibetan Buddhism to be the fourteenth embodiment of Kannon (Avalokitesvara, Chenrezig in Tibetan), the Bodhisattva of Compassion, in the historical world (beginning in the late 16th century). True to the symbolism, the Dalai Lama has worked for peace and justice, not only for his own people, but for all people through his speeches and notably in his writings.

In Hawaii Kannon is specifically present in the Koon-yum temple by Foster garden in Honolulu. She is the object of worship in the Hawaii Chinese Buddhist Society temple at the foot of Nuuanu Avenue near School Street. The Soto Mission on Nuuanu Avenue has Kannon as its object of worship. The Palolo Kannon Temple, associated with the Tendai sect, is devoted to Kannon. The Tendai Mission in Nuuanu area on Jack Lane has a thousand-armed Kannon standing by the temple. Kannon images (Kuan-yin) are often found in homes and gardens as reminders that Compassion/Love is the highest spiritual ideal, working for the welfare of all beings.

"The Dharma-body of Kuan-yin
Is neither male nor female.
Even the body is not the body,
What attributes can there be? . . .
Let it be known to all Buddhists:
Do not cling to form.
The bodhisattva is you:
Not the picture or the image."

(From a Chinese Poem)