

## **Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara**

**Materials:** Statues of Avalokita and Guadalupe

**Song:** Return to Love~ Brian Kimmel

**Homage to Thich Nhat Hanh~** Gale Spear

We pay respect and offer gratitude to our beloved teacher who has taught us so much.

You have taught us to see the miracles of life that are here everyday.

You've taught us to love the Sangha of birds who are part of those miracles, and the Sangha of humans as well.

Through you, we have learned to be at ease; to recognize all the conditions of happiness already present for us.

We've learned to transform suffering, to use our breath and walking meditation to regain wholeness.

You have taught us that there is only the present moment.

You have taught us that we follow in the footsteps a rich lineage of noble teachers.

We know that you are always there in our mindful breathing and in our peaceful steps.

We pay homage to you, beloved teacher, Thich Nhat Hahn.

**Dharma Talk~**Terry Cortés-Vega

We've met Manjushri, the forever young, genius Bodhisattva of Great Understanding who teaches six ways to bring prajnaparamita wisdom into our lives.

Since in Mahayana Buddhism compassion is equally as important as wisdom, now we're going to get to know Avalokiteshvara, the "Bodhisattva of Great Compassion" sometimes called "The One Who Hears the Cries of the World."

This bodhisattva of infinite compassion and mercy is probably the most well known and beloved of all the bodhisattvas. Tibetan Buddhists believe that each Dalai Lama is a reincarnation of Avalokiteshvara.

In the beginning Avalokiteshvara was portrayed as a male. The story is that he vowed not to rest until he had freed all beings from suffering. He also vowed, "Should I ever become disheartened in saving sentient beings, may my head shatter into a thousand pieces." Which

seems a little extreme to us... but it was a symbol of his fervent compassion and determination.

Well. He worked day and night, listening deeply with an open heart to the cries of the world, listening without judging, without interrupting, without giving advice; listening with the intention to truly understand—and after his heroic efforts, he sat down for a little—I would say well deserved— rest.

I imagine that he smiled thinking his job was done once and for all. Everyone was freed from suffering.

Before we see what happened next, I need to explain what “hell” is in Buddhism. Hell is not a place you go to when you’ve been bad. Hell—as taught by the Buddha—is the suffering you experience here, in this life. Hell is anger and revenge and impatience and discrimination and worry and so on and on.

This little Zen story describes hell as well as heaven:

A soldier came to a Japanese Zen Master, and asked: "Is there really a heaven and a hell?"

"Who are you?" ask the Master.

"I am a samurai," the warrior replied.

"You, a soldier!" exclaimed the Master. "What kind of ruler would have you as his guard? Your face looks like that of a beggar."

The soldier became angry and began to draw his sword, but the Master continued: "So you have a sword! But your weapon is probably much too dull to cut off my head."

As the warrior drew his sword the Master remarked: "Here you open the gates of hell!"

At these words the samurai, understanding the Master's teaching, sheathed his sword and bowed.

"Here you open the gates of heaven," said the Master.

OK now let's pick up Avalokiteshvara's story.

So, Avalokita, glancing down into the hells below—hells he had emptied by listening with deep compassion—he saw that countless beings were flooding back into their suffering! He was overwhelmed with disbelief, hopelessness and despair.

Maybe you've had that overwhelming feeling yourself.

Avalokita was so devastated by his failure to fix everyone that, true to his vow, his head burst into a 1000 pieces.

Maybe you've had a headache like that too.

At this point, you and I might give up. But Avalokiteshvara didn't; he called for help. His old teacher, Amitabha Buddha came running, gathered up the shattered pieces of his head and reassembled them into 11 heads—so Avalokita could be more aware of the suffering of the world—and four, or up to a thousand arms, (depending on which story you believe.) The many arms made it easier for the Bodhisattva to help more beings.

In some of the many hands his teacher placed tools to help Avalokita with his work: a jewel (symbolizing compassion), a mala (symbolizing meditation) and a lotus flower (symbolizing wisdom).

Or in some stories we hear that his teacher placed an eye in the palm of each hand, for Avalokita to better see the suffering of the world.

Bodhisattva legends like this one are powerful spiritual metaphors. As we walk the Bodhisattva path—the path of taking good care of ourselves so we can take good care of others—we're bound to be discouraged now and then because our wisdom and compassion are not yet perfect. We're bound to be frustrated sometimes because we're not always able to help ourselves or others.

That's when we need to call for help, like Avalokiteshvara did. That is hard—it feels weak for some of us. But our teachers and our Sanghas and our friends—and others, AA, NA, counselors, therapists, doctors—are there to help us put ourselves back together, inspire us to renew our vows and encourage us to strengthen our practice. Some of us may, at times, need more intensive help—and, like the Bodhisattva, we should ask for it. Avalokita shows us that asking for help is a sign of wisdom and strength, not weakness.

Beginning in the 12th century Avalokiteshvara was no longer pictured as a male, but had both male and female features. We're told this symbolized the bodhisattva's ability to transcend dualities but there might also have been cultural reasons for the Bodhisattva's gender ambiguity. For example, in medieval Japan Avalokiteshvara was depicted as a female with a thin black mustache and a little goatee... like the ruling shoguns and warlords.

Somewhere in the 12th and 13th centuries Avalokiteshvara took the female form of a mother-goddess. She gracefully stands, holding in one hand, a vase of water that represents the dew of compassion and in the other hand, a willow branch or a lotus flower used to sprinkle the healing water on those who suffer.

I think it is interesting that this is also about the time in Europe that the *Virgin Mary* started being worshipped as a mother-goddess.

Avalokiteshvara—Kwan Yin in China, Kannon in Japan, Quan Am in Vietnam—is venerated around the world as the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion.

Compassion is our ability to recognize and have concern for the suffering of others which is only possible if we first recognize and have concern for our own pain.. Working with suffering—ours and others’— isn’t easy so, because we don’t want to hurt, without even realizing it, we build up walls to protect ourselves—walls made of old stories and habits, made of prejudice, fear, arrogance, opinions, pride.

Compassion is like a *crack* in these walls that we erect. It’s how the light gets in. We train ourselves in finding this opening by nurturing our capacity to rejoice, let go, love, cry, be generous.

We always have this choice:

We can let the circumstances of our life harden us so that we become more afraid— or we can let compassion help us let go of our self-centeredness, humble us when we’re arrogant, soften us when we’re unkind, slow us down when we’re mindless.

To cultivate our compassion what we’d like to do is use practices that don’t cause us discomfort, but at the same time heal us. We’d like to control the uncontrollable, hoping to be comfortable and safe. But training in prajnaparamita compassion doesn’t work that way. Instead we must open our heart—and also our ears, our eyes, our mind,—to our own suffering and the suffering of others.

With prajnaparamita compassion we help others help themselves; we do not rescue—trying to fix another stokes the ego of one and keeps the other helpless. And besides that, fixing someone else is impossible.

Prajnaparamita compassion is not doormat compassion which is undignified, lacks grace and is disrespectful. It is not indulgent—even after a hard day, it is not *compassion* to eat a second piece of chocolate cake. It is not an enabling compassion—though when we offer

compassion, we often have to look deeply to tell the difference between true compassion and enabling.

Prajnaparamita compassion is not all “luv-and-light.”

If we do not work intelligently, people will become addicted to our help in the same way they become addicted to alcohol or sleeping pills or sugar. By trying to get more and more help they will become more and more help-less. So because of people’s natural tendency toward indulgence, sometimes our compassion needs to be quite sharp, even stinging.

It is also important to not take compassion too seriously. To be truly compassionate we need to maintain our sense of humor and joy.

The Buddha said that Avalokiteshvara is in each of us; that openness and warmth and concern are our True Home.

We find Avalokiteshvara’s teachings on compassion in many sutras but she is most connected to the Heart Sutra and the Lotus Sutra.

We’ll look briefly at the Heart Sutra where Avalokita teaches the “heart” of prajnaparamita.

Thich Nhat Hanh re-named the Heart Sutra to help us understand that the “heart” of the Heart Sutra is “The Insight that Brings us to the Other Shore”—Avalokita’s insight into the very essence of prajnaparamita—the perfect understanding of the true nature of reality that puts an end to suffering.

Even after our teacher re-translated the Heart sutra, it is not an easy read for a logical mind; its wisdom is confusing and.... annoying with all its talk about emptiness that doesn’t mean void and all its “no’s” and its “nots” and its “*nothings* to hold on to.”

But...I’m thinking that if the sutra were set out neatly and logically, leaving no loose ends, we probably would not keep searching for its deeper meanings.

The sutra begins when Sariputra—one of the Buddha’s first disciples—asks Avalokiteshvara two very good questions, questions we might ask:

“How do I apply the prajnaparamita to all the thoughts and words and actions in my life?  
What is the key to training myself in this prajnaparamita practice?”

Avalokiteshvara answered him briefly in a sutra that contains the most famous of Buddhist paradoxes.

I'm using our teacher's newest translation of the Heart Sutra.

Avalokiteshvara said, "[Listen Sariputra, this Body itself is Emptiness.](#)

Why did she say that?

Maybe Avalokita knew that Sariputra believed, as we do, that because this body appears to be a solid, unchanging, separate entity he needed—like we need—to learn the truth of emptiness, the heart of prajnaparamita.

So what does it mean: "[This body itself is Emptiness](#)"?

Avalokita is describing the direct relationship of the experience with the body. It means that your body is literally emptiness; it is not solid—and 21st century scientists agree. They say that your body is mostly space and energy. Our dharma brother John Daniweitz has told us about research that says that if all of the solid matter of all of the billions of human beings were brought together it would be about the size of a sugar cube.

So this body is not solid.

And ... "this body itself is emptiness" also means that it is empty of a separate self; it cannot exist alone. It can only coexist. Our body depends on, is connected to...it IS everything that exists, existed or will exist.

You and I each appear to be a one-of-a-kind, autonomous individual. But according to the Buddha, believing that you are a unique, separate, ever lasting soul—which is taught in different ways by other religions—is the source of your suffering.

So this body is not solid and it is not separate.

Also, even though we cling to the wrong perception that it is constant and unchanging "this body itself is emptiness" because it is continually being born, growing, fading away, and dying.

So....this body is empty of a solid, separate, permanent self.

So Avalokiteshvara says, "[This body itself is Emptiness](#)" and then she says, "[Emptiness itself is this Body.](#)" And, "[The same is true of Feelings, Perceptions, Other Mental Formations and Consciousness.](#)"

The body is just one of the 5 elements that make up a human being. The other four elements which she just mentioned— are Consciousness, Feelings, Perceptions, other Mental Formations (like attention, determination, insight).

These elements *also* are not solid, are always changing and are dependent on, connected to each other.

Let's see if our experience agrees. Consider feelings. Are your feelings solid? Can you see, touch, smell, taste or hear a feeling?

And....Don't your feelings come and go and come again? Aren't they impermanent?

And...When you're angry or joyful, doesn't the feeling manifest in your thoughts and perceptions and in your body? Our feelings do not exist in isolation.

So our experience tells us that feelings are not solid, not permanent and not separate from the other four elements.

The same is true of our perceptions. Our other mental formations. And consciousness. Like the body, they are all non-solid, impermanent, non-separate self entities.

Avalokiteshvara goes on:

“Listen Sariputra—now she's gonna reveal The Big News— *all phenomena bear the mark of Emptiness.*”

Avalokita then uses a bunch of no's as examples of how Emptiness is the true nature of all phenomena: no birth, death, being, non-being, no ....well no thing is solid, permanent or separate. Then she lists

what is “*not*” separate. The 6 sense organs—eyes, ears and so on—are not separate entities. Ill being, the cause of ill-being are not separate entities. ....and so on.

Bottom line: *nothing* is solid, *nothing* is unchanging, there is *nothing* that is independent; everything is interconnected.

Therefore, because everything is One and anyway always changing, there is no thing to struggle to get, to grasp for, to cling to—not even....according to Avalokiteshvara..... the Buddha's teachings. There is no need for our excuses or judgments, no need to label something as good or bad, —no need for labels at all!—we see that all things are just as they are.

Things are as bad and as good as they seem. There's no need to add or take away anything.

When we truly understand the truth of emptiness, we connect directly to all phenomena without involving our six senses, and without the interference of judgments, prejudices or any concept, notion, or belief. We have direct deep connection with tears, flowers,

disappointments, the homeless, cold, anxiety, fleas, chocolate; direct connection with hate and anger and fear and love and hope. And joy. And ease.

When our mind is free of the belief in separateness, it stops struggling against uncertainty and ambiguity. When we understand that there is no ultimate answer or stopping place, our fear dissolves.

By interacting directly with our One world in a relaxed, wholehearted, open-minded, open-hearted way, we can stop struggling.

Emptiness, then, is the simple direct unfiltered connection with people, animals, plants, minerals; with all experiences, situations, and relationships, with all thoughts and feelings.

Avalokita then says [“Whoever can see this no longer needs anything to attain.”](#)

If you understand this teaching, she says, you can [“overcome all fear, destroy all wrong perceptions.... and realize Perfect Nirvana.”](#)

Well. The Heart Sutra is not an easy read for a logical mind. But instead of freaking about emptiness and all the “no’s,” “not’s,” “nothings”—we could say that the Heart Sutra is an invitation for us to let go and relax. We could even replace all the “no’s” and “not’s” and “nothing’s” in the sutra with our own personal concerns: “my anger is not solid, not permanent and does not stand alone.” My friends are not solid, unchanging and separate.” We could make the Heart Sutra into our own heart meditation on what those things— friendships, anger and so on— really are.

We’re told that many of the students listening to Avalokiteshvara were so shocked by the teaching that they just tuned her out. Maybe you did the same.

Some of her listeners thought, [“This is crazy, let’s go”](#) and they left.

We’re told that others had heart attacks and died on the spot.

Maybe her students, like us, didn’t like to have their basic assumptions challenged.

Avalokiteshvara wrapped up her short but profound “emptiness in a nutshell” dharma talk with just a five word mantra that itself contains the entire teaching:

*Gate, gate paragate parasamgate bodhisvaha.*

*Gate:* Let’s go to the other shore. Let’s Go!

*Gate:* Let’s leave this shore of discomfort and go to to the other shore, to the shore of wisdom, compassion, freedom, bliss. Happiness.

*Paragate:* Let’s hold hands and all of us go there together.

*Parasamgate*: We can't leave anyone behind— even those who are difficult: the mosquitoes, sticker burrs, poisoned rivers, hateful people— we can't leave them behind because we're all connected. We're all One. If they don't go, we don't go...So let's all go to the other shore together!

*Bodhisvaha*: Hallelujah! Amen!

Let me hear an Amen!

When the great bodhisattva had finished her talk, the Buddha, who had been listening said, "Good, good! You expressed it perfectly, Avalokiteshvara!" And those in the audience who had not tuned out or walked out or died from heart attacks rejoiced.

Thata is the parjnparamita teaching of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion. Our work is to cherish and nurture her perfect compassion that lives within us.

Our teacher has taught a very simple and beautiful two word chant that helps us honor Avalokiteshvara and embody her teachings on compassion.

First we chant "*Namo*" (which a word of offering honor and respect) then we chant her name this way: Va-Lo-Ki-tesh-va-rei-yah

Some folks think that the chant is magical, like asking something outside ourselves to come and save us.

Some see the chant as devotional.

But our teacher says that [when we listen or chant in the spirit of Zen, trusting in our own ability to be awakened and realizing for ourselves the insight, the chant will set us free.](#)

Thay continues: ["If you have some pain or sorrow or fear in your heart, it's time for you to open your heart and allow the collective energy of mindfulness and compassion to penetrate and help embrace that block of pain like a drop of water surrendering into the river. As we chant together in mindfulness, take refuge in the Sangha and allow the collective energy of the Sangha to embrace you so that the healing can take place easily.](#)

[If you have someone in your family or a friend who suffers in this moment, who cannot be here, you can very well send this energy to that person by thinking of them and calling their name silently. In that way this energy will be channeled to that person.](#)

[So let us sit together in a relaxed way, focus our attention on our in-breath, our out-breath and stay in this zone of collective mindfulness generated by our breathing and our chanting."](#)

Please join in when you are ready.

**Chant:** “Avalokita” ~ Brian Kimmel

Sit a few moments.

That is the prajnaparamita teaching of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion. Our work is to cherish and nurture her perfect compassion that lives within us.

**Touching the Earth**~ Antonio Brunner

[BELL]

Please rise.

Invoking the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, I bow deeply or Touch the Earth with gratitude,

[BELL]

I release the suffering that I've created...

all of my clinging, labeling and grasping...

all of my disbelief, hopelessness and despair...

all of my overwhelm, headaches, and pain....

all of my self-indulgence, enabling, and vain attempts to fix everyone and everything.

I release all of my suffering and the causes of my suffering....

and I open my heart now to receive from Mother Earth her healing energy.

Dear Mother, with your energy, please help me transform my suffering and become a Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara.

Here and now, I fully recognize and own the seeds of the Bodhisattva Avalokita within me.

I vow to help these seeds grow by diligently watering them every day with lightness, diligence and joy.

I am ready to claim my innate ability to know how to listen in order to understand, and to become increasingly skillful at it.

I call upon my ability to pay attention with intentional open heartedness...  
to listen without prejudice, judging or reacting...  
to listen attentively and hear what is being said...

to listen also to what is being left unsaid...

to listen with perfected wise compassion...

I know that by listening I am already alleviating a great deal of pain and suffering in myself and in the other person.

I vow to be fully present so that

I can deeply listen to myself and others with straightforward compassion.

I call upon myself to take proper care of myself every day so that I can help others help themselves. I know that when I model proper self-care, I am already helping others help themselves.

I call upon my Sangha and the teachers inside me and outside of me to challenge me to see all my compartmentalized sides, and help me to integrate them so I may be able to show up fully... as all of me... in every present moment.

I am an inter-dependent being who is continually being born, continually growing, continually fading away, and continually dying. It is Interbeing that makes it possible for me to be able to transform and be in touch with my inner- Bodhisattva Avalokita.

I trust in the True Nature of all beings, myself included, and in our collective ability to become awakened together.

I give myself permission to every day dare to go beyond...

to go beyond the shore of my discomfort...

to go beyond and to welcome more cracks in the walls that I build,

to welcome light to come in...

to move toward freedom exactly where I already am...

to cross the river of disappointments to the shore of full awareness...

and to dwell in the present moment with wise understanding and love.

[BELL]

Please rise and then be seated for a few moments of silent reflection.

\_( )\_ May the fruit of our study of the life and teachings of the Bodhisattvas, including the Bodhisattva Avlokitesvara benefit us— which of course includes our teacher and all beings.