

Dharma Talk by Eido Frances Carney  
Olympia Zen Center, November 18, 2009

### **On Compassion**

On such a blustery night, it is a great opportunity to sit Zazen with such a wind and to feel the mind waving, not out there, but really feel the wind as your mind. Waving so brilliantly. These tall big leaf maples really sway a great deal and they creak and talk and moan in this kind of wind. They are very talkative on a night like this!

This particular week, Karen Armstrong on TED.com has promoted and is sponsoring, a week on the subject of compassion. The Dalai Lama among others was also a part of this sponsorship. So this evening's gathering here in Olympia, this evening practice, is listed on the website as one of the events that is part of a worldwide participation of people talking on the subject of compassion. This also turned out to be a very good evening for it, because we had the Bodhisattva Ceremony, the recitation of the Precepts, and this fits very well with the discussion on compassion and the Charter For Compassion, written by Karen Armstrong, which you can also find on the TED.com website.

When I think of speaking about compassion, I look to Dogen Zenji first, our great teacher and founder, who has a chapter on Kannon the Bodhisattva of Compassion. You can see a statue of Kannon sitting right outside this zendo. This is the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, the one who is named at the beginning of the Heart Sutra which we just chanted, "Avalokiteshvara Bodhisatta when practicing deeply the Prajnya Paramita..." This is the one who hears the cries of suffering in the world, holds and listens to the cries of suffering, transforms suffering, and responds with the heart of compassion.

Dogen Zenji's chapter on compassion, on Kannon, is very difficult. I hesitate to enter it during the limited time of this talk as it deserves a longer explication. Dogen Zenji takes the positive way to say what compassion is, and then he moves into a negative, to say what it is not. Sometimes it's hard to distinguish, because Dogen Zenji speaks from a very elevated and Absolute standpoint. Sometimes when he's saying something you find yourself agreeing, and then he'll spin around on you and he'll say "No, no, no, if you were thinking what I just said, that's not it at all!"

From our limited view and understanding, I speak for myself, we might feel this experience in reading Dogen Zenji. He'll spin around and say "No, that's not it! That's a very common holding on it, but that's not it." So this chapter is very difficult, but I will read the opening piece and we might get a feeling for how it is and I can speak briefly to it.

It starts with two people speaking together. They are both Dharma Heirs of Yakusan Igen Daiocho who is in our lineage.

*Ungan Donjo once asked Dogo Enshi*

*"What use does the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion make of his ever so many hands and eyes?"*

He's speaking about the thousand armed Bodhisattva of Compassion. You might have seen the depiction of the Bodhisattva in statues, literally there are a thousand arms which point to all possibilities coming out of the body, and eyes all over them. So he's speaking about this.

*"What use does the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion make of his ever so many hands and eyes?"*

*Dogo replied "He is like someone in the night who reaches behind himself, his hand groping for his pillow."*

*Ungan remarked "I get it, I get it !"*

*Dogo asked " What did you get ?"*

*Ungan said "That his whole body is hands and eyes!"*

*Dogo replied "What you have said is very well put, still it only expresses 80 or 90% of the matter."*

*Ungan responded "Well, so much for the likes of me, how about you my elder brother in the Dharma, what do you make of it ?"*

*Dogo replied "That his whole being through and through is hands and eyes!"*

So, the question is: what use does the Bodhisattva make of his ever so many hands and eyes ?

First of all I want to comment on the pronoun "his." The Bodhisattva of compassion can be represented in a masculine or feminine representation. It first appeared as a masculine representation and then, as it came through China and Japan it acquired a feminine expression. The one we have on our altar is clearly a feminine statue that was given to me from the treasury of Entsuji, my home-temple, when I received Dharma Transmission. In the feminine context, it's the action of compassion and in the male context it is very typically the personification of compassion, or the embodiment of the quality. Whether it's a masculine or a feminine appearance doesn't matter so much since within either masculine or feminine is the complete balance of personification-action. The translator of this particular SHOBOGENZO chose to use the masculine pronoun because that was the original depiction of the Bodhisattva. We can also refer to the Bodhisattva as she.

So, *his ever so many hands and eyes*. *Ever so many*, refers to the uncountable, perhaps thousands and thousands. It demonstrates that they're uncountable, there could be another millions and billions, but a thousand is about as many as we need to depict the uncountable.

*He's like someone in the night who reaches behind himself, his hand groping for his pillow*. This is a very difficult one because Dogen Zenji points out that if we are to understand what that means we have to ask what is "groping," and what does "in the night" mean and what does the shape of the pillow or no shape of the pillow mean? Or is there a shape of the pillow? When Dogen Zenji is explicating something he will open every single word. He will unpack all of the words that are given in any koan like this.

*In the night*, (this is me talking, not Dogen Zenji), could refer to that which is indistinguishable from one another. When the lights go out, when all of the lights are out and we see nothing, everything is equal. So he could mean this. Or he could mean "in the night" in the sense of the Dark Night of the Soul. In the night when all is in darkness and we don't know, we cannot answer something, or we are in the night searching for the hand of the bodhisattva. Maybe you have woken up in the night, I certainly have, literally groping for my pillow. Your neck starts to ache, you feel for your pillow, and you wake up and you find your pillow, and you come back, and there is no thinking in any of this. There is just the reaching for the pillow, without having to turn on the light, we find it and we settle the neck and we're back to sleep again. This is a kind of an abstract meaning, that Dogen Zenji is getting at here. In this writing he does not answer this for us. He keeps asking the question, he keeps saying, "we have to understand what *In the night* means, we have to understand what *groping* means," he never comes to an answer for us, so we are left having to answer this for ourselves with the idea that ultimately we will realize the Bodhisattva.

Perhaps that is what he's after, that in the end everything is the Bodhisattva of Compassion. In the end that is it completely, and of course in the end there is *His all being*

*through and through are hands and eyes.* That in the nature of compassion we *are* the nature of compassion, through and through as the bodhisattva appears in and through us.

Many people are using the word compassion these days. And it's not so easy a word to actually describe, or to say what compassion is. I'm sure we've all had experiences of compassion in our lives, and it isn't always this sweet, loving, tender thing, that we are often told that it should be. An act of compassion can seem as something severe. I have to say, in my own life, those who have in a sense rendered the sword who have cut through my own blindness, were people I have so deeply valued in my life. How hard it was for them to cut through like that, and how problematic I must have been to push them to that point where they had to be so straight with me. In a deep act of compassion they said, "You need to listen! This is It" Maybe you don't know and don't listen immediately, you keep going with ego as you were before or maybe even more so because they addressed you so strongly, then later in your life you realize the gift they gave you, so you let go of what you are holding, and you bow very deeply to those who gave you that kindness.

We're all called to do this for one another. I'm sure if you are a physician, I'm sure you have to walk into the room sometimes and you'll have to say what people don't want to hear. The patient is saying, "Save me, save me, doctor!" and you have to say to them in a straightforward way, "Look, your best bet is to get your life together, assemble all of the papers that you need, get it together, because from a scientific standpoint, this is it. It's nearly over." And this is a merciful action, this is a compassionate rendering at that moment. Maybe not what somebody wants to hear, but yet they are the words of compassion. It would be quite unkind to pretend otherwise. Sometimes we have children and we have to discipline our children in all kinds of ways that they do not understand. We know, we know what it means, and yet they cannot see. Often we are not able to see what true compassion is and yet we know we have to guide someone in a direction. We cannot hear the words of compassion because we ourselves are suffering. Compassion of course is deeply related to suffering.

Compassion is realized in the context of suffering. Sometimes if our holding on to a personal sense is so strong, then we are continually feeding our personal sense with our own suffering. And we cannot step out of the way to allow the heart of compassion to open, which is within us and without us, meaning inside-outside, no-interior, no-exterior. Sometimes we are just used to suffering, we simply cannot see the construct of what we have made. This merciful practice, this whole practice given to us by Dogen Zenji is itself the whole Body of Compassion, because it gives us the Way to sit in silence and to allow ourselves to see how we work, how the mind works, how we generate our own suffering. Our practice helps us to see directly how we create suffering in ourselves. When we are able to sit in silence, just let go a little bit, a little bit, something can open, and we become aware of the person sitting next to us, and we say "Oh! I have been so selfish! Here I have been thinking that I am the only one suffering and it is this person next to me who is truly suffering." And the heart of compassion opens wide, and we see through ourselves. We can let go of the sense of personal holding that it's Me, Me, Me!

Buddha's teachings are the Bodhisattva's Precepts that we recited tonight. Within this is the Four Noble Truths, and Buddha doesn't say "O, I am suffering!" He says "Life is suffering! There is suffering in life." It's not just me. The discovery of this is a whole life's work! Just the first Noble Truth. This is a life's work to really realize the construct we have made in our own selves around suffering and to release ourselves from that. We never have to go beyond the Four Noble Truths in Buddha's teachings, we never have to get fancy around any other books. The Four Noble Truths will give a full life's work, and this is the whole gift of compassion that the Buddha gives to us. He shows us the whole

structure of suffering and he says we can go past that. That's what's so wonderful about the Buddha as he says, "Here is the problem (First Noble Truth). This is what makes the problem (Second Noble Truth). There is a way past it (Third Noble Truth). Here is The Way, The Eightfold Path (Fourth Noble Truth)." Buddhism is so hopeful, it is so wonderful a way to go, but it's not easy, not easy, and it takes work, and it takes the willingness to stand in the very center of our own suffering, that we think we have, to not move ourselves out of it until we see through it. For many reasons this is why Zen practice is called, "The Final Practice!" Really, not because we're going to die, but because we have to be *willing* to die. We have to be willing to sit on that cushion as if we were going to die, because that's what it might feel like when we push through that personal suffering. What dies is the personal suffering, not this life. We enter life, we enter true healthy life when we take ourselves into this gift of compassion. Actually we're here in it. We are here in the very middle of it. You came, you sat Zazen tonight, you did it. We do it again and again.

But, this basic seeing through, must be accomplished if we are to begin to be happy. I think we know, that this word happiness has also become quite trite in our society but when we talk about it in a Buddhist context we mean something very deep and rich, that makes life really worth doing, makes it worth hanging out for, makes it worth having long life.

So we need to step beyond our small self, our personal notions. In doing so, that's when the quiet tiptoeing of the bodhisattva enters, and throws light into our own hearts. I mean literally throws light into us when we just are opened with the heart of compassion. That stepping back has to happen, that willingness to step back and shine the light back onto and into ourselves.

I feel so bad about you having to be out in this dark night, this blowing dangerous night out there, even when the wind sounds wonderful. You will all get home safely. I always worry about the trees and some of you have a long way to go. Thank you.