

Some Notes Regarding Kanzeon

Rev. Valeria

A question I have come across is, *"I understand that Buddhism recommends compassion, but I'm having some trouble when compassion is represented by a kind and seemingly miraculous being" (Kanzeon, also called KwanYin, QuanYin, Avalokitesvara, the Universal Gateway Bodhisattva and the Hearer of the Cries of the World).*

This will not be a complete answer, but I hope that it is of some help. Lately I have been listening to stories from people from all walks of life, and considering them in light of the Dharma. The one I am summarizing here comes from "a New York City cop for twenty years." When he speaks, he gives a vivid, detailed impression of what that was like. The story begins as he was sitting, retired, on a city park bench. A stranger approaches him, claiming to know him.

"Remember me?"

"No."

"Remember, the hot dogs?!"

This brings back the memory of a day years past, when the policeman caught the man in the act of selling drugs, and went through a gritty process of catching and booking him. During the various stages of the arrest and trip to jail, it became clear that the man was incredibly hungry: in the first office, the policeman brought the man a bag of potato chips and a drink. The man smashed the chips, poured them down his throat, and washed them down with the soda pop. Then in the car on the way to jail, the policeman himself was still hungry and stopped to pick up a hot dog from a vendor. Just as he is just about to bite into the delicious hot dog, he saw the handcuffed prisoner watching him intently.

"You hungry?"

"Yes!"

The prisoner eats a number of hot dogs, and when he is done, he puts his hands behind his back to have the handcuffs re-linked. Once the prisoner is in the jail, the policeman leans in close and whispers something to the effect of,

"Don't worry. It'll work out!"

"Thank you!" the prisoner whispers back. The policeman whispered because he did not want to be seen as a liberal and the prisoner did not want the other prisoners to think he was an informant!

I see this as an example of training and the truth appearing in daily life. The prisoner is dealt the consequences of his actions, a difficult but valuable teaching, while the policeman both helps deliver the consequences and pays attention, empathizes, transcends self and other, good and bad. The consequences are compassion and the policeman manifests compassion (in the tough arrest, in the gifts that ease hunger, and in his kind words), and the result is transformation. Some would call the policeman a bodhisattva for that moment, a manifestation of Kanzeon. And yet it's very clear that he's also just a normal joe, no saint.

Another thing this story points out to me is that sometimes the most effective communication is done via images. This transformative interaction was forgotten by the policeman, even when he saw the ex-prisoner. It was called to mind with just the words, “Remember the hot dogs?!” Imagery, or terms that evoke hearing, seeing, touching, smelling, tasting—the sense-based experience—can go straight to the heart, whereas intellectual constructs often bypass the matter. It wouldn't have worked for the man to have said something abstract like “Remember how compassionate you were to me on such and such a date?” One concrete image called up the whole story.

The Dharma does not always arrive in words. Wherever I lived, I would usually have a statue of Kanzeon. To me, they were evocative of what we have within ourselves, and I enjoyed them freely, without assuming they pictured an individual being. Each time I moved, I would give away many of my belongings, and over the years, a friend of mine ended up with several Kanzeon and Buddha statues. This person is not Buddhist, but she has kept these statues a long time, saying, “I just like the way it makes me feel when I look at them.” Sometimes, without words or even concepts, an image can open a perspective, like opening a window.

For me, the image of Kanzeon points toward the unnameable. As with the examples listed in the Kanzeon scripture, when I have been in a mess, predicament or unfortunate situation, I have found that turning my focus toward compassion changes everything. Even more so, when I have been close to death, convinced that death is imminent, all concerns are cut straight down to the essential, my intellect vanishes, and I have no choice but to let go, and there I meet what I really believe in. I find it indescribable. That is the way it has happened for me.

But of course, I wouldn't expect people to understand it if I were to say that Kanzeon is “what you really believe in”! Hence the wonderful images.

Mustard Seed Story—Starbucks Version

Michele Feist

At the big name coffee shop at the grocery store there is a barista. She has worked there for quite a while, some of the customers call her by name. She's a bit older, and has a rather kind face, though you can see that life has touched her. She is consistently courteous and patient even when the lineups are long. When I was there this morning she asked each customer if they had a good holiday season. It was a bit busy so the answers were of the "oh yeah, fine" variety. On my turn, as I waited I asked her if she had a good holiday. She met my eyes, and we smiled at each other for a heartbeat or two. Then she kind of laughed and said "oh yeah, fine. But I am glad it's over."

In a small coffee shop one eavesdrops without meaning to. A few customers after me, as I sat and drank my americano, an obviously regular guy came in, he was one of the ones who knew her name. The barista asked him about his holiday season as well. He clearly just needed to talk - was at that stage of the game where one just needs to say it out loud. I heard a bit of it, how "she was on the floor for two days...she won't be coming home they say..." and tellingly: "it's all I can think about right now."

Just another rainy day at the coffee shop. So - try to find a household where grief has not been felt, where sorrow has not landed, where being human is not a mix of joy and pain. Kind of gives one perspective.