

“THE POWER OF KWAN YIN”
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CALL TO GATHER: *If we make our goal to live a life of compassion and unconditional love, then the world will indeed become a garden where all kinds of flowers can bloom and grow.*

~ Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

READING: “The Path¹” by Brian Burns

*If you are asking me...
This is the path.
The path is gentle
The path is kind
It is forgiveness
It is letting go
It really is peace
It really is love
The path is hopeful
The path is generous
The path is not harming
Anything!
The path can own no Gate
Because its heart is never closed.
The path is welcoming
The path is home.
If I should ever learn
Of a better path---
I'll let you know.
If you should hear
Of a better one
Tell me.
But for now
This is the path
And all the rest
And anything else
Is just a child's quarrel
Over trifles.*

SERMON:

It was almost exactly one year ago, as I was leaving the Lawrence University chapel following last year's celebration of Martin Luther King's life. There was a reception for the

¹ Brian Burns, *Kwan-Yin Heart* (Baltimore: Publish America, 2007), p. 7

gathered community following the service with snacks, so most folks were staying around for that. But I said my good-byes because, shortly before coming, I'd met with a family to help plan a memorial service and there were so many things said and described, I really wanted to get back to the office to write them down in greater detail, to ensure that my message would reflect well the tender love and sentiments they'd shared with me.

It was a frigid night with snow and ice on the ground. I wasn't being uncareful as I crossed the dark parking lot, but, obviously, neither was I guarding my steps cautiously enough because in an instant, I felt my left foot twist and my ankle curl in a way that no one's foot and ankle should ever twist and curl; and before I knew what had happened, I was sprawled on the ground with no hope of regaining my footing.

My purse had gone flying so there was no possibility of getting to my cell phone. I lifted my head but could see no one anywhere around. I was truly alone as I lay there wondering what the heck I was going to do in that moment. I knew it was a bad break and that I shouldn't try to move. And I was fairly certain someone would come along at some point soon. I just hoped that I'd be able to get their attention, and the thought did cross my mind that if someone had left before me, they might be sitting in a nearby car ready to back up. What would I do if I heard an engine start? How could I possibly make my presence known?

I laid there in agonizing pain and helplessness for a while.... And, then, I did the only thing I could do, I hearkened back to a spiritual practice I'd learned years ago in my readings on Buddhism. Buddhism, as you probably know, talks a lot about suffering – where it comes from, how to minimize it, how to use it (because, surely, surely, suffering is inevitable for us all).

One of the most helpful tools I've found when dealing with suffering is to realize how very common it is. My pain (whether physical, emotional, or spiritual) is not unique to me. It is part and parcel of my state of being human.

So, that evening, having no other tool readily available to me as I lay there in on the ice, I found myself mindfully thinking of all the *other* people in the world who might also be laying in some isolated spot, wounded and hurt. I thought of soldiers in a battlefield. I thought of people across the globe who with one misstep became the victim of a climbing accident. I thought of innocent children tragically caught by an underground land mine. I thought of teenagers who had been hit by drunk drivers. I thought of the elderly people who had fallen down stairs. I thought of other people also lying helpless somewhere on the ice. And for each one that came to my mind, I mentally said, "For all the people who are experiencing pain like this right now..." "For all the people..." "For all the people..." And, as I had learned, I breathed in their pain too, and breathed out my wishes for the relief of their suffering.

Certainly, in our vast world in that very moment, beyond any doubt, there were innumerable people experiencing pain like mine; many likely had far greater pain, in fact and many who (unlike me) had no assurance that they'd soon (or ever) be found. And you know what happened to my pain? With each "For all the people..." breath in and out I took, my tightened focus on my own anguish lessened and, as that happened, both my fear and my pain diminished. I was able to remain calm until my help did arrive.

This is such an important lesson for me – one that life has given me plenty of opportunities to learn over and over again. Even when caught in the throes of horrible agony, if we can open our hearts to the suffering of others, if we can bring our awareness to the point of knowing that whatever we're enduring, we are only one of so many in a situation like this and are by no means unique; when we can open ourselves in heartfelt compassion for them too, it wondrously helps to diminish our own suffering. It's amazing how consistently and assuredly it works.

Please know that I don't share my parking lot meditation out of any absurd notion of personal saintliness. Rather, I share it because it is a recent and very real incident in which I was able to profoundly benefit from the power of compassion!

The Buddhist teacher, Pema Chodron, refers to this practice I described as *Tonglen*. She and other teachers encourage us to use it not just with physical suffering but with the things that cause us emotional suffering as well - our fears, our stresses, our griefs - all of those things that cause pain within us. As one example: if we notice ourselves feeling jealous over some honor or recognition someone else has received, instead of getting absorbed in our own resentful feelings or trying to argue ourselves out of those feelings, if we can pry our hearts open to think of all the people who are in that moment suffering behind irrational, jealous feelings and breathe in "For all the people who are experiencing this kind of emotional discomfort right now..." and then breathe out "may each one know their particular value in the world." "For all the people..." If you can say that and mean it, I'll wager that your state and feelings will shift.

Somehow, bringing that awareness to the forefront - that there are so many others experiencing very similar life angst, *whatever* it is we happen to be going through in the moment - and then mentally extending our comfort out toward them, somehow that act takes a degree of the potency out of it. Somehow it causes the great weight of it to dissipate. As Pema Chodron says, this Tonglen practice "dissolve[s] the tightness of our hearts."² It teaches our hearts about limitless love, which is the core of our faith, in fact; it echoes so very well with our Universalist belief that, no matter what, we are all in this together.

So what does all this have to do with the goddess depicted behind me and in these statues here? For me, Kwan Yin's image serves as the most powerful reminder of the impact of this spiritual practice in my life. I just love her image - especially this particular 10th Century depiction of her hanging near the piano³. Look at how she sits there so calm and centered! Look at the gentleness of her face and the delicate way her hands are at rest. She is so very poised and womanly, and yet, the way her knee is propped and her shoulders are squared, she exudes grounded strength with no hint of spiritual uncertainty. She seems so forthright, so marvelously clear.

I have held a fondness for Kwan Yin's story for about 8 years now. I was reading various books on both Buddhism and Taoism at that time. Rosie and I had been fortunate enough to go on a cruise to Alaska and one of the books I took along and enjoyed was Discovering Kwan Yin⁴. On one of our land excursions, we were browsing in an eclectic shop, and lo and behold, without our asking about it, the proprietor spontaneously showed us a beautiful white porcelain Kwan Yin piece; he was clearly very proud of the piece. Obviously, we had to buy her and here she is on the corner of the table here. Since then I've received a few more as gifts and purchased a few others. (My thanks to Margaret Alexander who loaned us some of hers for the table display today.) I like having the images setting around in various places at my office and in my home. Frequently, I wear a small Kwan Yin image on a necklace.

There's no magical power (in my mind) about these icons. Instead, for me, the magic comes through the gift of remembering they offer me; each one serves as a reminder for me that my greatest happiness comes through living out of a compassionate heart. And I know I need PLENTY of reminders, because I forget all the time. A thousand times a day, I forget. I need to be reminded in equal number.

There's lots of interesting details if you're moved to research Kwan Yin: how at one point centuries and centuries ago, she was depicted as a male form called Avalokiteshvara, a god

² See <http://www.shambhala.org/teachers/pema/tonglen1.php> for additional information from Pema Chodron.

³ See http://www.zhaxizhuoma.net/IMAGES/BUDDHAS/KuanYin-Liao_Dynasty217.jpg

⁴ Sandy Boucher, *Discovering Kwan Yin, Buddhist Goddess of Compassion*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999)

of compassion in India. Some scholars trace his emergence back to the times when Buddhist and Hindu practices were melding in the third century BCE. The male god eventually took on the female form when migrating through Asia to the Tibetan and Chinese Buddhists and also the Taoists of China. Through her travels – both geographical and chronological – the goddess morphs and changes with name variations and differing images – sometimes sitting in a lotus blossom, sometimes holding a vase, sometimes extending a thousand arms, sometimes riding the sea, sometimes standing with a dragon...and countless other forms. It's said that no other Chinese deity has more incarnations than Kwan Yin. But, in every manifestation she always has that unshakably serene, gentle look on her face, and is always pouring out her heart in compassion toward the world.

Some linguists say that our word for compassion isn't really adequate for all that Kwan Yin represents. The original Sanskrit word which we translate as compassion, *karuna*, holds within it the word *ru* which refers to weeping. So the compassionate attribute of Kwan Yin here is not some distant bestowing of mercy, not just feeling sorry for others from up above. Rather, it is taking on the suffering of others with such intensity and identification that the suffering of others is felt as if it is her own.

Kwan Yin is one of the bodhisattvas. In the Buddhist tradition, Bodhisattvas are those who have attained enlightenment and (in accord with their reincarnation journey) could go on and escape the weight of this earth, but, instead, they voluntarily elect to stay behind to offer themselves as instruments of compassion and comfort for those who are still suffering in the world. The tradition holds that because of the limitless love they feel, they have opted not to go on until everyone gets to go.

So, how might we use this in our lives today (aside from icy parking lot mishaps)? What might Kwan Yin's story have to teach us?

For me, the utter groundedness and clarity of spirit that this mythical figure exemplifies is a beautiful goal to strive for in life. Like most of us, I wish I never got flustered or caught off guard. I wish I never said things I later regretted. What I know is that those things wouldn't happen if it were possible for me to constantly live out of an open heart. If we were to intentionally practice opening, reopening, and reopening our hearts; softening, softening, softening our hearts yet again; our lives would be experienced very differently.

Life throws at us so many fearful things, so many unpredictable and undesired things, incidents and events that flare our ego and nudge (or slam) our hearts closed. A compassionate heart is not bound by that kind of fear. Instead, living out of compassion invites us always to be more loving, less judgmental, more clear in our lives – and, in my mind, far happier!

Often when I am chatting with someone who is relating an interpersonal conflict or misunderstanding they're having with someone else – something that is making them unhappy - they end their lengthy explanation of the situation with, "So what should I do?"

If you know me, you know it is a rare thing for me to offer direct advice because, in general, I am convinced that each person knows much more about their situation than I; and I have absolute faith in the inner wisdom each person possesses. Instead of giving my opinion on what they should do, I try to help them uncover their own inner knowing about the concern. And, in that process I frequently find myself offering one tiny suggestion – not really advice, just a suggestion: I invite them to imagine how their problematic situation might be altered if they returned to the person – with an unequivocally open-heart – and spoke their truth about the situation, without accusation or charge. What might happen, I ask, if you went to them in the appropriate time and setting, and from a truly loving space said what you feel or wish for in the situation?

With my kids, I found myself boiling this suggestion down to four words that they have heard me offer them over and over again, "*Simply say what's true.*" It sounds too plain! Could

it possibly be that easy? Well, in many cases, it really does seem to work out best that way: *Simply say what's true.*

SIMPLY: Whatever it is, say it without charge or venom. Let it emerge from an open heart without too many words. Don't say it in a diatribe. Say it as clearly and coherently and succinctly as you can, with pure motives. Say it in unadorned clarity.

But do SAY it: We frequently spend days and days fretting about how to deal with a situation with a family member or in the workplace or with one of our friends. We mentally dissect the issue a thousand ways, wrestling and tussling back and forth. Not infrequently, we will talk and talk about it with others, rather than the person we have the issue with. So, even when it's difficult (especially when it's difficult) if we truly want a resolution, we have to simply SAY it to the person involved. We have to sort out our thoughts enough and find the optimal time ... and then lovingly SAY it.

And, if we want to be most effective, what we say has to be our heart's genuine TRUTH; and this may be the trickiest part of all this. Sometimes we have so many feelings entwined around a situation that it's very difficult to peel them back and arrive at the core. But if we can do that, it does have a profound impact. It is amazing how often this minimalist act – SIMPLY SAYING WHAT'S TRUE - can change the energy of whatever is going on between you and another person.

Here's an example: Some time ago, a parent came to see me over concerns for his teenage daughter: the friends she was hanging out with didn't meet his standards. Her grades weren't yet slipping, but he felt fairly sure they would soon because she wasn't attending to her class work like she used to. She seemed less communicative and more disapproving of her parents. He struggled internally because he wanted to clamp down and tell her she couldn't hang out with those kids any more but, on the other hand, he knew she was essentially a good kid and that he could probably trust her. And he knew if he did clamp down, she'd likely rebel. On top of that, he wasn't sure how his wife would feel. She sometimes supported his parenting instincts and sometimes not. (I'm sure you all have a pretty good picture of the sort of conversation he and I were sharing.)

So we explored together, what might happen if he were to "simply say what's true" to his daughter and wife? It took a while because at first, he thought his truth was that he didn't like her friends. But as we explored the layers, he found his underlying truth was that he was afraid.

- He was afraid because he feared his daughter was going to be unduly influenced by these other kids and that she might make wrong decisions that would have far-reaching consequences in her life.
- He struggled with his own inner conflicts because he knew she was growing up and he wasn't clear on his role in her life anymore.
- At the same time, his truth was also that he felt great love and pride for his daughter and was devoted to trying his best to ensure that she had the uninhibited opportunities in her life.
- Beyond that, he also had high respect for all that she had accomplished thus far.

So, when he was able to spend enough time to uncover the essence of it, he was able to return to his daughter and share from his deepest truth, in a simple and open-hearted way, not a controlling and angry way. The impact of that kind of communication with his daughter, as you can imagine, was quite powerful.

It's such an easy life tool, once you can get down to your core truth. For me, this is one of the reasons why the Buddhists' mindfulness teachings are so very important. It's easy to become sidetracked about what's really going on in our lives, to get caught up in what others think or our insecurities or in our own confusion about our appropriate role in a situation. But if we remain mindful of living out of an open heart, we can return again and again to that place of

tender compassion, that Kwan Yin space. I do firmly believe that there lies our greatest happiness as it is the place of our purest and deepest relationships with others.

So, among so much more, Kwan Yin's spirit invites us toward these spiritual practices: The first is Tonglen - embracing our Kwan Yin nature and responding compassionately to whatever suffering we might be experiencing, spreading that same compassion out into the world; knowing deeply that whatever we're going through, there are assuredly and certainly innumerable others also suffering with the very same sensations at that very moment. When we can say, with sincere meaning, "For all the people who are feeling as I do right now," and wish for them to be comforted and whole, it creates the softened heart-space out of which we can respond to life's challenges with grounded wisdom and clarity.

And, then, if the situation is one where communication with another might be needed, if we can spend time discerning exactly what **is** our truest heart's truth about the situation? Not the ego-centered controlling truth but our uncovered core's truth, and if we can express that from our loving center, the other person may or may not respond in kind. But, we all know we have a far better chance of reaching them from that place than from a place that is reactionary, dramatic, and struggling for power.

To me, Kwan Yin's stance toward the world is something I aspire to and am inspired by. Her image bids us to embrace the part of our own natures where we are grounded and clear – not buffeted by whatever comes our way – mindfully embracing the events of our lives as ever-present invitations:

to open our hearts ever, ever wider

to find the ability again and again, to *simply say what's true*

to respond to our own life-pain knowing that we are one of millions suffering in that way

to wake up each and every day and make the heartfelt commitment to love the world
anew.

Amen.