

Maria Reis Habito
Embodying Compassion
Week One: “The Power of the Vow”
November 5, 2018



Hi, I am Maria Habito and I'm a Zen teacher at the Maria Kannon Zen Center in Dallas, Texas. I also have a group in South Bend. I will be giving a series of talks on the bodhisattva of compassion, also known as the bodhisattva Kuan Yin, as inspiration and guidance for our practice.

The Maria Kannon Zen Center is named after this bodhisattva. *Kannon* is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese name Kuan Yin. Kannon and Maria, or Mary in the Christian tradition, are both the symbols of boundless compassion. In these talks, we will ask: What does this bodhisattva of great compassion have to do with me and my life? How does Kuan Yin answer the question of, “Who am I and what is this life all about?” Those very questions are at the root of our spiritual search.

I encountered Kuan Yin for the first time when I was 19 years old and studying Chinese in Taiwan. I visited a Buddhist master, Master Hsin Tao, who was a hermit at the time in a small hermitage near a lake in Taiwan. I brought him flowers, and he placed them on the altar in front of a white figure that looked like a Madonna. Just like this one here, in the back of the room. It was the bodhisattva Kuan Yin. I asked him, “Master, who is that?” He looked at me and he said, “You know, that is you.” I was very perplexed. I asked, “What does this have to do with me? How can I be that figure?” He said, “This figure is showing your true self which is boundless and luminous, completely empty, and completely compassionate.”

Of course, I had no way of understanding that at the time. My teacher continued and told me that when he was 15 years old, he heard Kuan Yin's name, and it moved him so much that he decided to devote his life to the compassion of Kuan Yin and become a Buddhist monk. He showed me a tattoo on his arm and said, “I tattooed on my arm that I want to repay Kuan Yin's kindness by not stopping my practice until I reach enlightenment.” That was how he decided to become a Buddhist monk.



What does Kuan Yin stand for? The first part of the name—*Guan*—means *perceiving*. The full name, *Guanshiyin*, means perceiving the sounds of the world. So Kuan Yin is a compassionate figure that is listening to the sounds of the world. This figure is mentioned in Chapter 25 of the *Lotus Sutra*, “Universal Gate.” This chapter tells of Kuan Yin vowing not to rest until all beings are brought to enlightenment—until they are liberated from suffering, leaving it behind, and reach the other shore of joy and peace.

This vow will be the topic of today’s talk, *The Power of the Vow*. What does this vow have to do with our lives? In this chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, Kuan Yin says that as long as there is any being suffering—whether it's from illness, shipwreck, robbers, or any other situation you can imagine—all that is necessary is to intonate the name of Kuan Yin and this bodhisattva will come to your help.

Kuan Yin can take on 33 different forms to help people in different situations. If somebody needs to be saved by a monk, Kuan Yin will take the form of a monk. If one needs to be saved by a nun, Kuan Yin will take the form of a nun. Kuan Yin can appear as a woman, as a child, or in whatever form that the situation is calling for.

If somebody wholeheartedly utters her name, Kuan Yin will spring into action. What does that have to do with our lives? Our practice to look for our true self is an expression of our Kuan Yin nature. This nature, as my master explained to me, is completely empty, boundless, and luminous. If we can experience this boundlessness and emptiness, then our compassion will arise naturally. Kuan Yin is not *out there*—she is within our own true nature and is the reality of our own enlightened self. The question is, how do we return to this reality? How do we come home to this reality? How do we experience it?



In Zen practice, we speak about the three basic attitudes that are necessary to bring to our practice. The first is great trust, the second is great doubt, and the third is great determination. Buddhist scriptures emphasize that we cannot do anything without great trust. We have to trust in the experience of the Buddha and of the teachers that pass on this experience to us. We have to trust that this experience is good for our life and for our understanding of ourselves.

Most importantly, we have to trust in our enlightened self, in this reality of the self that the Buddha discovered in his enlightenment. As the *Lotus Sutra* says, all beings have buddhanature, without exception. That applies to us and to everybody else in this universe. This is what the Buddha realized in his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. But with that great trust, there has to be a great determination to do our practice in order to come to that realization.

My master made this vow: “I will not rest until I can repay Kuan Yin’s kindness.” In our case, it means to be determined to continue our practice even it becomes difficult, or boring, or even if we think we aren’t getting anywhere and wish to try something else. In those moments, it’s helpful to remember that great determination brought the Buddha to enlightenment.

After practicing for six years, one evening the Buddha said, “I am not going to rest or move away from my seat under the Bodhi tree until I reach enlightenment.” This was not easy—the story goes that the demon Mara tried to assail the Buddha with all of his beautiful daughters. He did so to tempt the Buddha to get up from his seat and bring him back to the world of delusions, sensual attractions, and all of the turmoil that comes with that. But because the Buddha had determination and made the vow to help all beings, he did not get up from his seat. Instead, he practiced with confidence and determination until he realized enlightenment.

As I said before, this trust and determination, this vow of Kuan Yin—of our true self—is already active in us as we do our practice. Perhaps we don’t know that yet, but there is always something

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that calls us back to our practice and reminds us not to abandon it completely. It's very important for us to listen to that, open up to it, and follow that intuition.

The third attitude I spoke about is great doubt. Great doubt does not mean to doubt the teachings of the Buddha. It means to be honest with ourselves and not say, “I've done enough practice, I have arrived and there is nothing else I need to do anymore.” This would be quite a misleading delusion. My first teacher was Yamada Koun Roshi of the Sanbo Zen tradition in Japan. He asked of us, especially of the Christian students, “Please, when you arrive in your Christian paradise, never give up your practice.” The vow, the endeavor, and the determination of the practice has to go on through our many lives. It is endless. Even if we arrive in the Pure Land, or a Paradise, or wherever we imagine as a state of complete peace and bliss, we have to practice. Thus, the practice is ongoing.

As I said in the beginning, the power of the vow of Kuan Yin—of this bodhisattva of compassion—is active in us. It's active in the world. We must realize that and then have the determination in our practice to go on at all times.

In my next talk, I will discuss another scripture and look at the practice that Kuan Yin used to come to the point of deep enlightenment, the power of listening to silence.