

Maria Reis Habito
Embodying Compassion
Week Four: “The Power of Boundless Compassion”
November 26, 2018



I am Maria Reis Habito and I am a teacher here at the Maria Kannon Zen Center in Dallas. Today, I want to give my last talk in the series on bodhisattva Kuan Yin as inspiration and guidance for our practice. Specifically, I will focus on the one koan on bodhisattva Kuan Yin that is contained in the *Hekiganroku*, also known as the *Blue Cliff Record*. This koan is case number 89 entitled, “Ungan: The Whole Body Is Hand and Eye.” This koan illustrates bodhisattva Kuan Yin with one thousand hands and eyes, symbolizing her unbound compassion. This form of Kuan Yin is depicted in the *Great Compassion Sutra*.

In my last talk, I spoke about Kuan Yin (or *Avalokiteshvara*) of the *Heart Sutra*, whose gaze is unimpeded by any obstacles. Now imagine that multiplied by one thousand—one thousand arms and eyes, all of which are without any obstacles. All of these eyes can see where help is needed and reach out with one thousand arms to allay suffering. This is our true nature. This is what my Buddhist master Hsin Tao told me and what all the scriptures tell us. This Kuan Yin nature is your own true nature. How can we wake up to that nature? How can we practice it? How can we realize it?

Let us now come to the case in the *Hekiganroku*. Ungan asked Dogo—these are two Zen masters—“What use does the Great bodhisattva of Mercy make of all those hands and eyes?” Dogo said, “It’s like a man straightening out his pillow in the middle of the night.” Ungan said, “I have understood.” Dogo asked, “How do you understand it?” Ungan replied, “The whole body is hand and eye.” Dogo said, “You have had your say, but you have only given eight tenths of the truth.” Ungan said, “Then how would you put it?” Dogo said, “The *entire* body is hand and eye.”

As I said, Kuan Yin is the great bodhisattva of compassion. Following the practice that Kuan Yin is teaching us in the *Surangama Sutra* of listening to silence, or in the *Heart Sutra*, of practicing *prajnaparamita*—of breathing in and out and stopping our active mind, then we can really see emptiness—this unbound horizon of our true nature. But what does emptiness really imply?



If we go beyond the separations of I and thou, inside and outside, silence and noise, we come to a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of the universe. Nothing that exists in the universe is ever separate from anything else. It is all one existence. If we think about why we are here today, we can really understand that. The particles that are found in our bodies are also found in the stars—we are stardust. Our parents brought us into this world so we are connected with our grandparents, our siblings, our teachers who raised us, the people who brought food to our table, the people who grow that food. We are made of the rain that comes down from the heaven, the earth that nourishes us, the sun, the moon, and the stars.

So if we deeply look at our own existence, we see that we are a universe of interconnections. This is what Kuan Yin is symbolizing with her thousand eyes and arms. Nothing is ever separate. That realization of never being separate opens up those floodgates of compassion that are our true nature.

What does this bodhisattva use her many arms and eyes for? Dogo says it's like a person straightening out a pillow at night. When we are asleep at night, we have no self-awareness whatsoever—if the pillow is a little bit displaced, we reach out and put it into its place without thinking. This is really what we are learning in our practice. Without self-consciousness, our actions will be accurate and spontaneous, without hesitation, without obstructing our view, just like the person reaching out for the pillow at night.

To give an example, if we see a small child that is about to jump into the street or perhaps fall into a river, each of us would reach out and try to save that child without hesitation. With that, we know there is deep compassion and care for others embedded in us that is not stunted by our self-awareness or lack of attention. This is why our practice is always emphasizing that we pay attention to the present moment. If we are fully present, then we are no longer a hindrance to ourselves or others.



Moving on to the next part of the koan, Ungan said, “I have understood.” He adds, “The whole body is hand and eye.” Dogo offers his own understanding by saying, “The *entire* body is hand and eye.” This whole body—this whole interconnected universe—is compassion flowing out of emptiness. The eyes of awareness and the hands of compassion. Mountains, rivers, the great wide earth, the sun, the moon, and the stars—that is this whole body. This is nothing other than compassion.

This is something that Dogen realized when he had his enlightenment experience. Dogen is a famous Zen teacher of the 12th century in Japan. His enlightenment experience was realizing that his body and mind had completely dropped away. Then he said, “I clearly realized the mind is no other than the mountains and the rivers, the great wide earth, the sun, the moon, and the stars.” The entire body—you, me, the flowers, the stones, the cars, the houses, the people, and everything else that is contained in this universe is an expression of the same energy of luminosity and compassion.

Now, if we look at the world—the entire body—around us, this will be very difficult for us to understand because we see so much suffering. There are wars, there is poverty, there is illness, and we are destroying the environment. There are warnings about how much longer we can go on. How can we appreciate that all of this is a reality of compassion?

The Buddha explained to us why these things are the way they are. He said that we are all suffering to varying degrees because of three basic poisons—our own delusions—built on the notion that there is an *I*, *me*, and *mine* that is so different from everybody else. Based on this illusion, we try to protect ourselves. We become greedy, angry, and hateful. On a personal and societal level, this creates a lot of suffering in this world. How do we overcome this kind of suffering? How do we come back to this pure realization that we ourselves are no different from



this compassionate energy that is within us? How can we give voice to that compassion to help the suffering universe?

What we need to do again and again is come back to this practice of prajnaparamita—of seeing the emptiness in everything that exists. From that blooms the freedom to *just be* like Dogo said. The freedom to be like a person who adjusts a pillow in the middle of the night. A person who feeds a child that is hungry. A person who is trying to save trees. A person who is trying to do something about poverty. That is the activity of the true self, of the bodhisattva. This whole body is hands and eyes.

I had the great fortune of being invited to Ladakh twice by a wonderful organization called the Mahabodhi Center. This organization takes care of children and gives them an education. They are also involved in environmental work and teach meditation courses. When I was in Ladakh the last time, about two years ago, I went on a tour. At one of the stops, we arrived at a place that had a statue of the bodhisattva of great compassion with one thousand eyes and arms. The statue was huge and sat on top of a mountain. Seeing this statue made me think of the attitude and the lives of the Buddhist people of Ladakh—there are Muslims and Buddhists—but the Buddhist people specifically are still raised with the understanding that the basis of existence is compassion.

[12:14] As the Dalai Lama always also emphasizes, Tibetans had similar experience; perhaps not now, but when they grew up in Tibet and it was still a Buddhist country. There is even a scripture about Kuan Yin that says the whole universe was created from this Bodhisattva of Great Compassion. I don't want to go into the details, but it's just to explain that the idea that our true self, of luminosity, and of compassion is the nature of the universe, is obvious for some cultures, for the Buddhist culture. The symbols or the figures tell us that.



If you have a look at this huge universal Avalokiteshvara that I saw in Ladakh, or even if you are just spending some time in Ladakh and you meet the people there and you see the prayer wheels, and you see the prayer flags, it's compassion that is filling the air. The luminosity, of course, the light is so that the luminosity of the mountains, of the river, of the trees when it's summer, of everything has a special light. This is really the light of our true nature. As amazing as it seems to be.

I would like to encourage you to really do your practice in a way that you can come to that realm of boundlessness, of “unimpeded-ness”, of these thousand arms and eyes—the eyes that see everything as none other than yourself, and that reach out to the suffering of others without any self-consciousness. Now, this is perhaps not something that we hear in our culture, in everything that we listen to right now with our political divisions, with all the problems that are going on in the world. Since we are in this world of suffering, we have to be very intentional about our practice and not let the suffering overwhelm us. But follow the guidance of our teachers, follow the guidance of our tradition, and find this place of practice where we can really unload ourselves of all these difficulties that we encounter in daily lives and all these happy thoughts we may have about the world. Not to make them a burden on ourselves, but to really let them rest in silence. Let them rest in the concentration on our breath so that we uncover some of this true joyful, pure self that our nature is and has been from the beginning.

In our tradition, we finish every sit with the bodhisattva vows. I would like to recite them here at the conclusion of my talks, because this is something that is really helps as a guidepost in our own practice. This is not a practice just for ourselves so that we feel better that we have some nice experiences. But it's deeply geared, that is deeply towards being altruistic and helping all of those around us who also need this encouragement and this feeling that they are not out there alone. This is expressed in our bodhisattva vows that we recite at our center. They are as follows:



“Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to free them.” Now, keep in mind sentient beings are numberless. I vow to free them. It may sound very overwhelming but keep in mind that they have that same true nature that you have. They are already saved as they are and yet, it needs to be actualized.

“Delusions are inexhaustible. I vow to end them.” These many delusions that we have, how could we vow to end them if deep down there was not this dimension, this boundless infinite dimension of the unborn where everything, every delusion, is already ended. Our practice is just to always patiently come back, return home to that dimension.

“The dharma gates are boundless. I vow to open them.” That is the third vow. The dharma gates—this is what I talked about is practicing prajnaparamita. All the different practices of realizing the wisdom of emptiness. Whatever we can do, whether it's starting from reading the scriptures and then actually going and doing our meditation. Or then from our meditation, to go out and reach out to those who need our help and do our daily work in a mindful attitude. All those are dharma gates. Or listening to the bird is a dharma gate. Listening to the sounds of the waves is a dharma gate. The Buddha lifting up the flower, which I spoke about in my last talk, that is also a dharma gate. Everything that we become aware of in our life can be a dharma gate to really lead us to this infinite dimension that is not ever separate.

“The enlightened way is unsurpassable. I vow to embody it.” This is the last vow. The enlightened way is unsurpassable. I vow to embody it. I had spoken in my first talk about the vow of Bodhisattva Kuan Yin to really save all beings, bring them to this realization that makes them free from suffering. Bring them to that realization that they're already that what they are looking for. That their gaze can be completely unimpeded. That there is no boundary whatsoever in our true nature. I vow to embody it. How do I embody it? By faithfully doing my practice. By

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paying attention. And by really giving voice to this boundless love, compassion, concern for others, for ourselves that is already our true nature.

I want to finish my series of dharma talks to really encourage you to do your practice—whatever you are doing already. If you would like to come visit us in Dallas and do a retreat here, or even if you want to come to our monastery in Taiwan and do a longer retreat there, please contact me and be in touch. I will try to help you with whatever I can. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to give some reflections on Bodhisattva Kuan Yin as an inspiration and guidance for our practice. Again, I'm Maria Reis Habito, a Zen teacher at the Maria Kannon Zen Center here in Dallas. Thank you.