

Winter Retreat 2018: Cultivating the Five Super Powers of Avalokiteshvara
Dharma Post #5-A: Look of Compassion

Dear Thay,¹ dear brother Jerry, dear friends on the path,

Birthing Compassion

Lately it has felt as if there are five strong rivers of my life flowing through me. With ice caps melting in the mountains and winter rains pouring down, the rivers are running fast and fierce, and I am doing my best to stay afloat. Perhaps you have had this experience—feeling like there is too much to do with too little time—in the many rivers of your life.

This morning I woke up with the feeling that a balloon was expanding inside and beyond me, ready to burst. I curled up and brought my attention and my breath inside to the center of my body and rested there for a while. Getting up I walked ever so slowly step by soft step into the kitchen to prepare coffee for my morning meditation. Once settled in my meditation chair I noticed that my shoulders were tightened up so I encouraged them to relax and drop. Soon images of my past work lives arose in me—projects that had overwhelmed me, projects that I had given too much attention to, projects that failed, projects that went well, project, projects, projects. And, how others had treated me as I worked on those projects—truly a mixed bag. I witnessed my failings, my successes, and the myriad in-between. It was as if these experiences were being born in me—again, as my body and mind experientially relived a river of my past. I was able to look, to see, to question, to explore, to reflect. And then what arose in me was powerful compassion for all of it; kindness toward myself—the imperfect person who lived those experiences; and kindness toward others and how my work affected them.

Currently I am involved in a big, time-consuming project at work and sometimes have been waking up in the middle of the night with project details swimming in my head. Years ago this was the norm for me, but over time with practice I have been able to sleep well at night with few mid-night mental wakings—even when work feels intense. This current project is one of those rivers that sometimes feels like it is dragging me along in the torrent of its flooding waters. Then yesterday I was in a meeting with several managers as we discussed how to work with an employee who was having difficulties communicating with another department. As the human resources person I was focused on what was happening, and concrete options for moving forward—“just the facts, ma’am.” But the discussion that emerged was more nuanced, deeper, thoughtful, and...compassionate toward the suffering of that person. Every time these types of meetings happen I am taken aback. This is not the norm of my experience working in other organizations. The experience touched something deep inside of me. I have a sense that it brought up in me work experiences that needed healing, creating the fertile ground for my meditative experience this morning.

In the 40 Tenets of Plum Village Buddhism, Thay said that a person is a continuous and ever-changing stream of five aggregates. The stream is always flowing and it is in connection with, receives from and contributes to other streams of phenomena. Where compassion enters the stream it affects everything it touches. Compassion births compassion, and this is a miracle of our practice—that we can create trickles of compassion that enter the stream and touch others. But compassion begins with ourselves. We cultivate drops of compassion as we practice mindfulness, concentration and greater awareness. Insight arises like mist and compassion is born like rain. The raindrops gather together as they fall and create a flowing energy that affects all beings in the stream of phenomena.

Birthing compassion is not always easy. Sometimes the rain clouds are light and airy, but sometimes they are dark and ominous. In **Fragrant Palm Leaves**, Thay wrote about his experience of great storms in his life:

Our mind becomes a great battlefield on which the Five Aggregates—the form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness of our being—are strewn around like debris in a hurricane. Trees topple, branches snap, houses crash. These are our loneliest moments. Yet every time we survive such a storm, we grow a little. Without storms like these, I would not be who I am today. ...I am battered and torn apart, and I am also saved.

Like a giant wind turbine, powerful storms within us can generate energetic waves of compassion. I believe it is our faith in the healing power of compassion, our deep aspiration and our practice that helps us stay with and survive them. It's because Thay realized the understanding and compassion that can arise from such storms that he said he wanted to burn down his students' huts. We can't stay within the comfortable confines of our tiny hut and expect to grow in our practice—to grow our compassion. It takes courage and support to burn our huts down. But bit-by-bit we can do it. And sometimes, without warning, a powerful river comes through and washes our huts away. In these times we have to rely on our faith in compassion and our practice to help us swim. From these experiences, great and small, Great Compassion is born.

Merit

At the end of a practice session in our community we often chant the following: "may the merits of this practice benefit all beings and bring peace." I have never felt completely comfortable with this chant because there are times my meditation practice feels scattered and unfocused. What possibly could be the merits of sitting in meditation just as if I were sitting in a chair watching tv, or mindlessly doing the dishes? In the *Lotus Sutra* there are three chapters on merit. In **Peaceful Action, Open Heart**, Thay explained that merit (*punya* in Sanskrit) is rendered in Chinese with two characters. The first character means daily practice or work. The second character means virtuous conduct. So, according to Thay, merit is the spiritual energy that accumulates from a steady practice that helps us touch the ultimate dimension—emptiness, nirvana and happiness. Maybe our practice is not "perfect,"

but we get up each morning and realize we have a brand new day before us, or we meditate for a few minutes or more once or twice a day, or we practice walking meditation at work. A daily practice, along with studying, practicing and observing the Five or Fourteen Mindfulness trainings (which are the basis for virtuous conduct in our tradition) and deep teachings, generates the spiritual energy that can help us realize our bodhisattva ideal of relieving suffering in ourselves and others. It creates a fertile field of merit that can help us weather the storms of our life, and it naturally encourages insight and compassion to arise.

In a recent dharma talk published in the Mindfulness Bell,² Sister Jina talks about mental attention and how to incline our mind toward well-being. She said mental attention can be of two kinds: appropriate attention (*yoniso manaskara*) or inappropriate attention (*ayoniso manaskara*). “Appropriate attention is choosing an object of attention that leads to well-being: our own well-being, the well-being of others, the well-being of society, the world, and the well-being of Mother Earth.” Inappropriate attention is paying attention to an object that leads to ill-being in these things. Whether attention is appropriate or inappropriate depends on the object of our attention and *how we look into the object*. As we consciously cultivate appropriate attention, we are inclining actions of our body, speech and mind toward well-being. Practicing gathas³ and other daily mindfulness practices can incline our actions, more and more, toward well-being. This contributes to a vast field of merit.

My dharma sister Peggy’s Order of Interbeing name is True Recollection of Merit. I believe this is an appropriate and beautiful name for her. She is steady and committed in her practice, and a constant source of support for her family and her sanghas. Through her example I can see the nature of merit more clearly, and her embodiment of merit encourages me in my practice. Thus the spiritual energy of merit enters the stream of phenomena and encourages merit in others.

May the merits of this practice... Last winter I had an opportunity to participate in a retreat at the European Institute of Applied Buddhism (EIAB) in Waldbrol Germany. The EIAB building began as a hospital for people who were mentally or physically handicapped. During 1938-39 the Nazis removed these people to another place so they could use the building as a hotel. Regarding the patients who were removed from this hospital, most were sterilized, and after they were removed the T4 Program⁴ was implemented. Many were sent to gas chambers if they could not perform physical labor. Even after the T4 Program was halted due to public outcry, the Nazis continued to secretly kill the handicapped through starvation, poisoning and extreme weather conditions.

Sister Ingrid said that when the monastics first arrived at this potential location for the EIAB, the energy of the place was very dark and heavy. She hoped Thay would not select it as the location of the EIAB. But Thay said the energy could be transformed through the energy of mindfulness. Sister said she could feel the energy lighten every time Thay led a retreat there. And again when Thay’s calligraphy exhibit arrived. Stuffed hearts arrived from all over the world to honor the patients who died at the hand of the Nazis, and the energy continued to lighten.⁵ The monks,

nuns and practitioners at the EIAB center regularly conduct ceremonies to help ease the suffering of those handicapped people who suffered and died at the hand of the Nazis. Due to the energy generated by these practices, Sister Ingrid said she does not feel the dark energy any longer.

Our mindfulness practice, moment by moment, whether we are at home, in a practice center, or on a retreat, generates the energy to heal suffering and dark energy. Studying the teachings puts us into the river of merit that we share with our spiritual ancestors. Experiencing the fruits of our study and practice allows us to realize our bodhisattva ideal.

Deep Aspiration, Great Compassion

If you turn your attention inward and ask about your deepest aspiration, what arises? If you allow the question to work itself within you over time, you may find surprising answers. Such a question can put us in touch with our true nature which is working and manifesting, not only in the phenomenal dimension of every day life, but also, in the wordless, objectless, limitless dimension of the ultimate.

In the Universal Door chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*,⁶ the bodhisattva Inexhaustible Mind asks the Buddha why the bodhisattva was give the name Avalokiteshvara. This is the Buddha's reply:

Because actions founded on her deep aspiration
can respond to the needs of any being in any circumstance.

Aspirations as wide as the oceans
were made for countless lifetimes.
She has attended to billions of Buddhas,
her great aspiration purified by mindfulness.

Whoever calls her name or sees her image,
if their mind be perfectly collected and pure,
they will be able to overcome
the sufferings of all the worlds.

We nourish our deep aspiration through mindfulness of the present moment. Whatever arises, whatever presents itself, we are here for it. We have an insight, and suddenly we know what to do. Actions born from our aspiration and practice open the Gateway to Everywhere,⁷ and we find ourselves carried in the stream of Great Compassion that is embodied by Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva and the teachings of the *Lotus Sutra*. Avalokita must have survived great storms for many lifetimes on her path to realizing Great Compassion, and the *Lotus Sutra* gently points the way for us to follow her. This is not a lofty path. On the contrary, though powerful, it is very ordinary. It is when we are present to this precious moment, naked as it is, that we can realize and experience our true home in the stream of Great Compassion...

This morning's dawn
and I am here:
a cup of steaming tea
a green lawn
your sudden image
from long ago Your hands
or the wind beckoning

The shining of the tree's new bud:

Flower leaf and pebble
all recite
the Sutra of the Lotus

¹ “Thay” is the affectionate term Thich Nhat Hanh’s student call him. The term means teacher.

² The Mindfulness Bell, Issue 77, Winter/Spring 2018, “Who Is the Boss?” by Sister Chan Dieu Nghiem (Sister Jina)

³ According to Plum Village mindfulness practices: “Gathas are short verses that help us practice mindfulness in our daily activities. A gatha can open and deepen our experience of simple acts which we often take for granted. When we focus our mind on a gatha, we return to ourselves and become more aware of each action. When the gatha ends, we continue our activity with heightened awareness. As we turn on the water faucet we can look deeply and see how precious the water is. We remember not to waste a single drop because there are so many people in the world who don’t even have enough to drink. While brushing our teeth we can make a vow to use loving speech.”

⁴ T4 Program, also called T4 Euthanasia **Program**, Nazi German effort—framed as a euthanasia program—to kill incurably ill, physically or mentally disabled, emotionally distraught, and elderly people. Adolf Hitler initiated this program in 1939, and, while it was officially discontinued in 1941, killings continued covertly until the military defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945.

⁵ Several years ago, a nun got the idea to make hearts for each of the handicapped persons who died. They asked for 700 but over 1300 handmade hearts came from all over the world.

⁶ This version can be found in **Chanting From the Heart**, Thich Nhat Hanh.

⁷ Another translation from the *Lotus Sutra* equivalent to “Universal Door.”

⁸ A zen poem by Thich Nhat Hanh, perhaps written when he was still living in Vietnam. It can be found in **Lo Dinh Presents Zen Poems of Nhat Hanh**, 1976, Unicorn Press.