

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

We must look with an unwavering eye toward compassion

Ai Su Kimberly Hillebrand *Kaufman Interfaith Institute*

Note: We continue introducing you to some of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute staff who are working to expand the institute's programming. Ai Su Kimberly Hillebrand joined the Kaufman Interfaith Institute in October with more than 20 years of nonprofit work in development and program management, including experience building spiritually grounded communities within the workplace. She is an ordained Buddhist dharma teacher with a focus on metta (loving kindness) and Tibetan practices. Thanks to a collaboration with the Fetzer Institute, she is working to expand interfaith programming in the Kalamazoo area.

When people curious about Buddhism inquire about my faith tradition, I tend to begin an explanation with the Three Jewels — the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha.

Siddhartha Gautama was a human being of flesh and bone born more than 2,500 years ago. Even after he reached enlightenment underneath the Bodhi tree all those millennia ago and was called a Buddha, he was not a god. He was simply awake. He was a mortal who grew old, became ill and died at the age of 80.

If you visit a Buddhist temple or the home of a person who practices Buddhism, you will likely see a shrine with a wooden or metal Buddha statue as the focal point. This statue is not an icon that we worship. The form of the Buddha is a physical reminder of the importance of the Buddha's teachings (the dharma) in our tradition.

The sangha is the spiritual community of support along the path. Most times this takes the form of a temple community, but in this season of COVID-19 and the popularity of apps such as Zoom as global people-connectors, my sangha has certainly expanded in unexpected and wonderful ways.

Buddha means "awakened one." The Buddha who taught the dharma that I and millions of others follow today is not the only Buddha. There were Buddhas before him and there have been Buddhas after him. Anyone who can transcend suffering and find the path to peace as the Buddha did can awaken to the true nature of reality. We all have this innate Buddha Nature within us.

Meditation is integral to the Buddhist path. We train our minds to reject the opinions, beliefs, projections and prejudices that arise in us because of our interactions with society, individual histories and day-to-day experiences. Our aspiration is to liberate ourselves from these obstructions, so that our hearts are free to fiercely devote love and compassion to all living beings, without exception. And not simply cultivating love and compassion within ourselves, but transforming our inner insights into outward actions. I've always told my students that this is "where the rubber meets the road" in Buddhist practice.

In the school of Mahayana Buddhism, of which I'm a part, we fervently wish that all beings are free from their suffering. A bodhisattva (Sanskrit: one whose essence is enlightenment) is one who refuses to enter the highest realm of existence, nirvana, even though the person has become awakened, or a Buddha. These people sacrifice the culmination of diligent practice through potentially thousands of rebirths and choose to remain in our realm to help us achieve liberation from suffering.

During these long weeks of anguish and fear related to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is one bodhisattva who relates deeply to our times. Avalokiteshvara is the bodhisattva of compassion. In Sanskrit, his name means "the one who looks with an unwavering eye." With the movement of Buddhism across the centuries from India throughout Asia, Avalokiteshvara is also called by different names and is known as Chenrezig in Tibet. To Tibetans, and many who practice Tibetan Buddhism, His Holiness the Dalai Lama is the embodiment of Chenrezig, the Bodhisattva of Compassion in human form.

As the story goes, Chenrezig came upon his unique form

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Ai Su Kimberly Hillebrand is a Buddhist dharma teacher. She joined the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University in 2019.

in an interesting and instructive way. He decided that he could no longer bear the immense suffering that living beings were enduring in our realm. So he worked diligently, with his compassionate heart, to end all suffering. He thought that he had achieved his goal, but when he turned around to look at his work, everything had reverted to the way it was before. Suffering was ever-present. Chenrezig was so distraught by his failure to bring an end to suffering for all living beings that he shattered into 1,000 pieces.

Thankfully, another bodhisattva saved the day. Amitabha, the Buddha of Boundless Light, transformed Chenrezig's 1,000 shattered pieces into 1,000 arms, each with an eye in the center of the palm of the hand in order to see the suffering of living beings and to help illuminate all with the light of wisdom. Forty of the hands hold tools meant to save living beings.

We are experiencing unprecedented times. More than 200,000 people have died from COVID-19, with people of color affected disproportionately. Billions of people are quarantined. Millions have lost their jobs. People are going hungry. Parents are working remotely while at the same time home-schooling their children. Children worry about their elderly parents. We are physically, socially and emotionally isolated from each other, separated from our communities and our families and friends. We are grieving.

So what can we glean from the story of Chenrezig's coming into compassionate beingness, especially during this time when we feel our hearts could splinter into a thousand pieces from all the suffering we and others are enduring?

First, we each have special gifts and talents (tools) in our hands to help us be in service to others. Using these tools wisely without depleting our own spirit and causing us to break apart is key.

Second, when Chenrezig couldn't bear the suffering any longer, Amitabha showed up not with pity or judgment, but with compassionate action. We have the capability to hold each other up when times are tough.

And, lastly, without witnessing the suffering around us, how can our hands be of any real benefit? Compassionate action flows with eyes that truly see. It flows through kind words or smiles across a safe distance that we share with someone who is struggling. It flows through supporting a local business that is barely surviving. Compassionate action flows through a loving call or text to someone who is quarantined alone or a loaf of bread left on an unemployed neighbor's doorstep.

Look with an unwavering eye toward compassion, and we will survive these times together. Chenrezig's example beautifully illustrates that it is possible to break apart into a thousand pieces and come back stronger, and more than ever before, dedicated to the well-being of all living beings.



A volunteer hangs bags of food on a doorknob in Saginaw on March 30. He is part of a group that makes sure families are fed during the pandemic. MLive.com files



Signs are held from a vehicle as it drives around the Bay County Medical Care Facility in a "drive-by honking" in support of health care workers during the coronavirus outbreak on April 8 in Essexville. Kaytie Boomer, MLive.com