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"CALLING ON THE NAME OF AVALOKITESHVARA". [this text was first published  
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This text addresses some of the most fundamental and delicate religious  
issues.  
Therefore, it should be read, quoted and analysed in a mindful way.

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CALLING ON THE NAME OF AVALOKITESHVARA  
by John Tarrant Roshi  
Winter 1991

It is said that, even in hell, if you remember the name or if you call on  
the  
name of Avalokiteshvara, you will find freedom.

Avalokiteshvara, as I am sure you know, is the bodhisattva of compassion  
and  
insight, who appears in the Heart Sutra. This figure is known under many  
names.

It is our task as students of the Way to realise the insight of  
Avalokiteshvara  
for ourselves. This cannot of course be done just by imitating and  
following  
along. Fortunately, it can only be achieved by finding our own Way and  
our own  
practice. In our own uniqueness lies the great dharma. Keizan Jokin said,  
"However immensely diverse the mountains, rivers and lands and all forms  
and  
appearances may be, all of them are in the eye of the Buddha, and you too  
are  
standing in the eye of the Buddha." It is not simply that you are  
standing  
there: the eye has become you. The eye of the Buddha and the eye of  
Avalokiteshvara have become everyone's whole body, each of us standing  
tall.  
This enlightenment needs to be refreshed and rediscovered in each person  
and in  
each generation, in each individual of each generation and in each moment  
of  
each of our lives. There is a path into it and today I would like to talk  
a  
little about some of the guideposts on that path.

I have been very interested lately in the interaction between character and insight. Character was very much a concern in old China when the koan curriculum was being developed, and I think belongs with Zen. Yamada Roshi used to speak about Zen as the perfection of character and when I looked at myself and my friends who were longtime Zen students I found that hard to believe; but I think I begin to get some glimmerings of what he meant. He certainly did not mean an easy piety. And you may also remember that Yamada Roshi used to emphasise insight a great deal, and was known for his relentless pursuit of enlightenment when he was a student. Insight is the dazzling, clear, eternal awareness of the presence of Avalokiteshvara in each moment: the presence of all moments and all places in this moment and this place. So that is very simple, really. That one is solved, I guess; we know about insight.

Character is something else. Character is I think more related to time, and grows and develops with a sort of reptilian slowness. And insight cannot go bad on you: either you have insight or you do not. I guess you can lose insight through bad living or not maintaining your practice, but really insight is a fairly clear matter. The realm of character is different, though. Character does change; we can become more whole and occasionally we meet some people who become less whole. A flaw in their character gradually takes them over. I think of character as being primarily the willingness to be with, to read, to listen to, the flow of things that we often call the Tao, for short. It is the willingness not to separate from the current of life. And with this goes the ability to experience our own lives and the willingness to live our lives fully, without resisting our experience. This takes courage, equanimity, steadfastness, honesty. And I think it really helps if we are willing to be foolish a lot. There is always that noticing with a sense of wonder that is important and helpful in the character work.

An old Sung dynasty Chinese teacher said this: "If you want to investigate this path all the way, you must make the determination firm and unbending until you reach enlightenment." (That's the insight side of it.) "Afterwards it is left to nature whether you experience calamity or distress, gain or loss, and you should

not try unreasonably to escape them." I think this is very interesting and true. Character relates to our willingness to be small as well as grand. The flow of things carries us along, and fighting the flow does not help, as far as I've ever noticed. It is how we are with that, what attitude we have to being carried along, that is crucial. Do we have peace in our hearts, even when there is an external calamity, even when we are in the midst of struggle? In the midst of darkness can we find, can we touch, light? If we have no consciousness of the greatness within the small, then we have no enlightenment, no insight; then we do not know about the name of Avalokiteshvara. But Avalokiteshvara is also the other side, is also compassion, and if we have no awareness of our own smallness, if we resist and pull away from our smallness, the rumbling stomach, the aching knees, the sorrows and griefs, the joys and frivolities of zazen, if we try to pull too much away from those and fight with them and have a hostile attitude toward what comes up, then we are clinging too much to the insight side of things, too much to the dazzling clarity. We know then that one flower holds eternity, but we do not know that one aching knee also holds eternity, one destructive thought also holds eternity.

Some people do rather well in a temporary kind of way by clinging to the insight side of things, almost as a refuge from developing character. I think as Zen students we are always veering towards one side or the other of any dichotomy we can name, so this is not a great shame. But I see this in Zen, I have known this in myself. My own teacher and the teacher of many of you, Robert Aitken Roshi, was telling me about a former student of his, who worked hard at his koan work but never really had a very good touch with it; it felt like he had never got down below his neck. He wanted to teach, but Aitken Roshi wouldn't let him, so he went around, visited many teachers, and finally found one who told him he could teach. Now he travels and teaches small communities. Aitken Roshi told me how he was talking with another rather crusty old Japanese teacher whose wife runs a sushi bar and who is very fond of jazz and who lives in Berkeley. This crusty Japanese teacher was saying he heard this fellow giving a teisho, and

Aitken Roshi said, "Well, how was it?" and the teacher said "One chopstick!" (A restaurant metaphor.) This is not really so much to be harsh with this person; it is to use this person as a representative of a state of mind that we can all have, where we cling to our meditation experiences and neglect the other side of our lives, neglect to look in at all, neglect to know our own hearts.

So we have to be patient with ourselves. No matter where we are in our training this is an absolute necessity. Over and over again we think we need to be somewhere else, whether we are at the beginning of our training, or far along, or teaching, or wherever. And we must find the truth right here, right now; we must find our joy here, now. I have even known people come to me in dokusan and say, "Well, I am waiting for sesshin to get over with so I can do some peaceful meditation, without all these bells ringing." How seductive it is, the thought of tomorrow . . . We must find our understanding here. You know I moved to California from Hawaii some years ago now, and people ask me where I came from and I say Hawaii and they say, "Oh, it must have been wonderful to live in Hawaii," and I say "Well, I thought California was wonderful." And then I come out to Australia I come to Perth and people say "Where do you live?" and I say "In California," and they say "It must be wonderful to live in California," and I say "Well, I think Perth is pretty nice": you know how it is. We must find it here; it is always here; this is where the grass is green.

Another side of the character work is, I think, to trust mystery, to trust the not-knowing within ourselves, not only as a subjective state but as an objective feature of the Way, as something that is really intrinsic to the Way. It is a sense of trusting in what is mysterious, what is not known and not limited by knowing. What we know always in some way shuts out the rest of the world. It is always that ten percent that is dazzlingly clear. There is a story of a fellow who was searching around for his keys in the weeds under a lamppost. Somebody else came along and helped him search for an hour or more. Finally this person said, "We've gone over all this ground--are you sure you lost them here?" And he said, "No, I didn't lose them here actually, I lost them over there, but there's

more light here." That is our knowing; that is what we know. If we are open to the darkness, it is very rich, it is fecund; and that is on the character side of things.

Also it happens that we get into a kind of revolt, particularly in the koan work because it is so fraught with success and failure, and good and bad, and acceptance versus struggle, and all that stuff. We get into a revolt about it, and the koan either seems far away or it seems like an impossibly difficult, tense way of working in zazen. People get sick in the stomach and throw up, or come in and yell at me -- all sorts of things go on. But the task from the point of view of character here is to find a way to do the koan, to unite with the koan, no matter what; not to cling to a particular idea of how to do it. If your particular idea of how you are doing it is not working, then try something else. If you were trying to fix a leaking tap in the sink you would try something else if one way didn't work. I think to use that kind of common sense in meditation is also important, not to be too literal-minded.

Sometimes technique too is divided into the character and insight sides: the shikan-taza -- which is the great acceptance, the great sky mind, the consciousness that spreads over the whole universe like the rising sun -- and the sharpness of the koan way. However, I think at bottom there is not a lot of difference in the ways we meditate and there need not be a lot. If you emphasise the peacefulness of zazen, sooner or later you will have to take up the sharpness, take that extra step; if you emphasise greatly the insight side and the sharpness, sooner or later you will have to come to an acceptance and a peacefulness. Always, whenever we have a dualism, in the end zazen unites them; even character and insight are this way.

Meditators have many things come up, but one thing that is very characteristic is fear. Fear takes many forms. It can be extraverted and take the form of anger and resistance against things in the outer world, against things in the meditation, which is some fear of going deeper. Or it can be quite clear that we are just plain scared, and fantasies of fear run in our heads and we have nightmares on night two, or we are afraid of pain. I think a large part of the character work is just to become tolerant of this. If it is true that we need to

experience our own lives, we need to notice what is happening, we need to notice that we are having a feeling or a thought. Often we don't: we are just subject to it, for days sometimes. The first thing is to notice it, then the next thing is not to take it too seriously, to have a kind of ease and space around it, an equanimity with what comes up, a generosity of mind; so that if fear comes up we also have the attitude of "Thank you for everything; I have nothing to complain of." And THEN scream! And then after that say, "Thank you for everything; I have nothing to complain of: I just screamed."

I think this equanimity then allows us that necessary foolishness which is essential for all learning and which is spoken about by many great teachers when they have emphasised the value of the mind of the child -- that open, clear sight.

A woman told me a story recently that I thought very typical of the process of the Way for some of us. This was a deep vision she had had, many years before she told it. It had ruled her life ever since, and was only just starting to transform, which is how she came to remember it and so to tell it to me. This is the vision:

There was a desolate, post-holocaust city, a science fiction city, ruined and devastated after a war. On the outskirts of the city, in a desert, was a young prince, standing up. In some way this young prince was the woman. All the young prince had was one of those ornaments in which, when you turn them upside down, it snows. She thought this a strange vision to have: a ruined city, and a young prince standing with this ornament. In the vision, the prince looked at the devastation in the city, and he could not bear the suffering. And he looked at his little ornament with its snow scene and pines and its mountains, and he thought, "What a stupid thing this is; it is just a mechanical thing. There is no hope." He threw it down, and it shattered.

When she told me this my body shook a little. There was such despair in that gesture of throwing down the one beautiful thing. What I thought about her state

of mind was that at the time of the vision there was nothing for her to hold on to, nothing at all, and that somehow she needed to go further into the pain, to experience more fully the darkness, and that for her throwing away this ornament was the movement even further into the darkness, into the suffering. I think there are times in zazen when we just have to accept that we do this. We fight with the zazen so much: we just have to bear it and endure any way we can, and we go into the difficult times. Quite often I have known people to leave a retreat at such times, but then come back; and sometimes good people leave and come back. I think it is very important to stay if you can. But even Hakuin, one of the great teachers of the Japanese lineage, gave up zazen for a while. He had a great fight with his zazen and lost. He decided his life was miserable and he would get what few pleasures he could by carousing and reading poetry. And eventually, as is the way of things, the zazen seduced him and led him back. He could not quite leave it alone: he had not resolved his koan and brought him back.

But there is another possibility which just began to occur to this woman, which is why I think the memory of the vision came back. This possibility is that all is not lost. When we see the suffering in the world, there is still a treasure in our own awareness, and that treasure relates to our attention. There was an opportunity in that little ornament, with its trees and its snow scene, which was to understand that it was the source, the talismanic source. It is the koan. And out of the koan the whole city is rebuilt or recreated, the entire world restored, pristine and beautiful, over and over again. So the great universe, with its joy and sorrow, peace and light, returns, even after suffering, in spite of the vastness of human suffering. Sometimes we can only get to this restoration by going through the darkness, and character is the willingness to hold in the darkness and to be held in the darkness. Some people have told me that in the hard times in zazen they call upon everybody who is wise that they have ever known to sit with them, and somehow that holds them. And that can be very helpful, can't it? Other people have had just spontaneously old teachers

come to them while they are sitting and hold them. I have had this experience myself, of an old teacher whom I had always wished to meet and who died before I met him, coming and walking behind me while I was sitting at night.

So character relates to the willingness to use any means and to be inventive when it comes time for holding. When I think of the word "holding" I think of arms and the maternal quality that develops in us in zazen, that very steady, deep quality, where all sorts of things come and go, and we have an equanimity with them. This is the enduring wisdom of being able to stay with it. And then not to take the darkness too literally. "I am sad; I am in pain; I am tired; I am bored; I am distracted": yes, fortunately! This is the great life. And then of course we find that it is a little harder to distinguish between sorrow and joy. This too will change; this is not the whole thing. Because I am happy does not mean I will always be happy because I have had a great experience does not mean that I should cling to that great experience. Even in hell you remember the name of Avalokiteshvara: that is this awareness.

Avalokiteshvara has many names in the Buddhist tradition alone (and three sexes as far as I can tell -- masculine, feminine, and androgynous): Chenresig; Tara, who is a manifestation and comes in various colours -- for example, white and green; Kuan-yin, who also comes in various colours, and comes with or without an infant, and in various sexes; Kanjizai, Kanzeon, Kannon; perhaps Mary and Isis; and on and on. Many forms.

An old-time Zen student, a woman, in California, who has sat for many years, and is a very senior person, told me this wonderful story from Gregory Bateson. One time he gave a talk at Green Gulch Zen Centre, and spoke of a young boy who had psychotic episodes. The boy was schizophrenic and the whole world would close in on him and become terrifying. He would think that people were invading his mind with their thoughts, and trying to programme him through what was on the television, and telling him things to do. So he would spend time in the in-patient ward, and receive medication, and gradually his mind would clear, and they would release him, and he would go home, and get worse, and he would come back to the in-patient ward: there was this cycle. One time he was going home

for Thanksgiving dinner, and he really wanted to do better this time, and he talked to his psychotherapist about how to do better. So he went home and he was having dinner, when he noticed that the peas were too green, and the turkey looked just too much like a turkey, because it was thoroughly poisoned, and he knew by the way people were looking at him that they were all wondering whether he was going to catch on to this or whether he was going to eat the turkey. And then he noticed that his mind was doing this. For the first time he noticed that his mind was doing this: he remembered the name of Avalokiteshvara in the midst of hell. He thought, "Oh, my mind is seeing the peas as too green!" and he burst out in ecstatic laughter -- and they carried him away. But still, he understood; he remembered the name. "Thank you for everything; I have nothing to complain of." And it did not matter if the people around him did not understand, because for the first time he remembered the name of Avalokiteshvara.

So if you remember the name of Avalokiteshvara, calamity or joy may visit you: that is not the point. You can see how remembering the name of Avalokiteshvara actually involves a union of character and insight. It was an insight to notice that he was noticing that the peas were too green. And then to have equanimity even when he was carted away, that is character. Even when you're carted away, you shouldn't go psychotic again; you need to hold through that time.

Character involves a willingness not to be grand all the time and not to be perfect. In this boy's case, suddenly he still had the role of being psychotic; it was thrust upon him even though he did not have the inner experience. Ceremony is quite a good teacher for me in this way. One of my friends who is a senior Zen student and is often tanto in his particular group is really terrible at ceremonies and has been a wonderful teacher for me. I'm not very good but I can fake it, and he can't even fake it. He stands up to hand me the incense, and he breaks it; so then he's really careful the next time and he doesn't break it, but he trips on his robe and he falls into me, and I fall into the altar, and the incense gets knocked over. And things are like this, things are demonic. Just as for some people their feelings are demonic, for him things are demonic,

and they don't stay still. When he walks into the dojo the incense pot has moved overnight. He has been a great teacher for me to be at ease with that part of myself, so that I can just go and do the ceremony as best I can. Often the incense falls over, but there is a kind of relief in that. It is good sometimes to be small. Then I really learn too from those of my friends who are much better at doing the ceremonies than I am. Perhaps they need to learn some other things; ceremony is not a problem for them. We perhaps symbolise this willingness to be small, to be nondescript, by the black, the raggedness. The inner raggedness is so characteristic of zazen, when we begin to attend and the mind just won't take any notice of our intention to attend. There is nothing much we can do with it; we must just trust the mystery of this unfocused, raggedy mind, this moth-eaten mind. Something plain and commonplace and very ordinary. So it is good not to be afraid of our smallness.

Another longtime Zen student who is a marvellous artist told me a story that bears on character. She was on the metro in Paris, and a man who was very, very drunk got on. He was a young burly man who had no shirt and had tattoos all over his arms. He lurched on to the car and came past my friend and stood between two women on either side of the aisle. One of the women was strikingly beautiful, and he leaned over this woman and began to abuse her. My friend, who is Asian and petite, became afraid and began to do the prudent thing and edged back towards the door of the car. And then she saw the woman sitting across the aisle from the beautiful woman reach up and take the man's hand. Her hand just floated up. As if out of the emptiness of the universe her hand floated up and took his hand, and he burst into tears, and softened immediately. That woman remembered the name of Avalokiteshvara; she was open to it. My friend said she felt she had missed something; she felt a little ashamed of her prudence at that moment. I think we can all recognise when we have done something like this. Of course, sometimes edging towards the exit is the right thing to do. But still, there was something even better than the right thing to do, which was to remember the name of Avalokiteshvara.

When we are willing to be open, and rather small and ignorant, the great joy

comes of its own, and in a sense it is none of our business anyway. It is just our business to walk the Way and to remember the name of Avalokiteshvara. The temptation of being all-wise is not really very interesting once we give in to it. Sanghas of course have a rhythm where they get really good at something, and then that creates its own tightness and difficulty, so there is some upheaval and they get awful at things for a while but they are rather exciting and new; and then there is an opening and a gradual rise until we get good at something, and then we fall apart again. It is the same in our individual practice Equanimity in the midst of the coming and going is really so important. It is the fruit of the Way, but it is also the discipline we need in order to experience the fruit of the Way. To be rather serene and just keep walking.

The dharma then is rather full of happy errors. If we are willing to be small and walk along, we will find that the dharma really does take care of us: we are guided, we have the right accident at the right time, things like that. We find that we fall into the error of pushing too hard, and then we stop, fatigue stops us, and we think that this is an awful thing, but it relaxes a little, and then suddenly the mind becomes quite clear. So do not despise or be snobbish about any state of mind that arises. When we are blocked we must trust that we are blocked; that is where we are. We must trust that this too is where Avalokiteshvara name has magical power. We must find a way through it or around it; become one with it or suffer it; climb over it, be squashed flat by it. We must have some relationship with it. And as long as we are in a relationship with it, Avalokiteshvara is there. And what is more interesting anyway than walking the Tao; what is more precious than the opportunity to walk the Tao? There is more value in the difficult blocks, more courage and more serenity. It is easy to be courageous when we can see the clear path ahead. The only use of courage really is when there is mist all around and we must take that next step not knowing where the next beyond that will lead. When Shakyamuni stopped his ascetic practices he took some nourishment given to him by a woman, so the feminine sense of being as well as the great sense of doing was allowed in and he became more whole. Then he looked up and the accident of the morning

star occurred. Have you thought: what if Venus were not in the evening sky at that time? No Shakyamuni, no Buddhism. We must trust that some other accident would have opened his heart and mind.

I have been interested for some years now in the "I Ching", which is not formally a Buddhist book but a wise and interesting one, and I think a Zen book, concerned with integration of character and insight. It is an oracle, the hexagram of the oracle is made up of six lines: two units of meaning, called trigrams, of three lines each. The hexagram for peace has the trigram for earth above the trigram for heaven. Very interesting. When heaven is above earth, you have stagnation, standstill, because there is the tendency for the world of insight, the world of heaven, to go off into its purity and clarity, and the world of earth to stagnate into the obtuseness and lumpishness of matter. There is separation, there is no creative interchange and flux. But the hexagram for peace, or "tai", has the intermingling, where heaven is actually below earth and there is an intermingling of the worlds of character and insight. The great clarity of zazen is simultaneous with the distraction, the memory from childhood, the pain in the knees; and so we no longer say, "I wish the pain would stop so I can do some meditation." This too is meditation; this is the great life.

We do not chase perfection. When heaven is below earth is when the young prince discovers that this toy is the source of all things and joy. The play, and the spirit of the child: you just turn it upside down and every time it snows. Just like Avalokiteshvara: every time you call, there she is, calling.

So it is important to stay with the joy of the smallness and the joy of the mystery. Another old Sung dynasty teacher said, "The one who preserves the Way through old age to death in the mountains and valleys is not as good as the one who practices the Way with a group of people in a community." It is good to have the smallness and the obnoxiousness, we might say, of sangha; dealing with the dailiness, dealing with those petty difficulties that always arise when we have to live with others. If we have the equanimity and the insight here, how much richer and deeper it is. Practising together.

A Sung dynasty teacher called Kuan-lin looked unhappy and worried. One of his many, many students came to him and said, "What's going on? You look a little disturbed." Kuan-lin said "Well, I haven't found anyone yet to be the accountant." The student wanted to help, and recommended the assistant superintendent. The teacher said, "Yes, he's pretty good, but not quite right, I think. He's a little rough, and I'm afraid petty people might resent him and intrigue against him and say he didn't deserve it." So the student said "How about the attendant? He's honest and prudent." Kuan-lin said, "Yes, he's prudent, but it might not be good for his training. The supervisor is pretty good, and I'm still thinking about it." Later the students asked another teacher, "Why did Kuan-lin, who was a great teacher, worry about these small and petty things?" The other teacher said, "Those who are really concerned about the Way have really made this fundamental. The ancient sages are like this. We must be concerned with everything in the dharma; we must let our compassion run to everything in the universe."

In sesshin you manifest the compassion of the dharma; you call on the name of Avalokiteshvara just by the sincerity of your zazen. That sincerity is sufficient. Each moment we come back to the freshness, and it really does not matter what the moment before was, how stale it felt, or how weary, or how far away from the name of Avalokiteshvara. We must have that willingness to call on it at this moment and realise that when we do call on it, this moment fills eternity. There is nothing else in the universe. These hills and the birds and the great wind in the trees: all are the calling of Avalokiteshvara. And then we create the conditions by which the moon rises. We do not make it happen; the moon rises of its own without the help of human hands. All we need to do is call on the name of Avalokiteshvara over and over again.

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