



English Chanting - The Great Compassion Repentance Service

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(Ben Xi's new name)

This past Sunday, the English Buddhist College had a very special Dharma Service. We chanted the Great Compassion Repentance Service mostly in English, with some Chinese and Sanskrit. Traditionally the whole service is chanted in Chinese, but naturally this makes it very difficult for western people to follow, much less understand and appreciate, so some time ago a translation into English was begun. Final polishing regarding the phrasing was done last year by Ven. Hui Feng, (whom some of you might remember before his ordination, as Ven. Hui Re's translator and meditation teacher for the Beginners Retreats as Ben Jung.) I attended and enjoyed the service very much and felt that it was important to let you know – the English speaking readers of this column, that work is being done here which is intended to facilitate the understanding of Chinese Buddhism for western countries.

The students had begun preparing for this weeks in advance, as not only are there all the details of arranging and setting up such a service, there is of course, the chanting itself. This requires lots of practice from all the participants, both the Dharma instrument players, the person who will lead the service and the people who will be assisting.

Before I describe the actual service, I feel that some background about

this service is needed. It is longer than the 3 other services done on a Sunday morning at Nan Hua Temple. Usually it is done on the 4th Sunday of every month, starting at 09h30 and going through to about 12h15. The first two-thirds approximately is the Great Compassion Repentance Service and the last third of the service is the Offering made at the shrine to Ksitigarba Bodhisattva.

I found the following beautiful description of the reason for this service on the Vancouver International Buddhist Progress Society's (IBPS) Website. It reads as follows:

“In our daily lives, when our clothes become dirty, we wash them with water. When our minds are polluted by greed, anger, and delusion, we become worried and troubled. In Buddhism, devotees practice repentance to cleanse their minds, and rid themselves of worries. There are different repentance ceremonies, with the Great Compassion Repentance Ceremony being one of the most popular. The Great Compassion Repentance Ceremony is based on the Great Compassion Dharani. The full name of the Great Compassion Dharani literally means, ‘thousand-arms and thousand-eyes’ Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva all embracing great compassion Dharani. The Dharani consists of eighty-four phrases. It is very popular in the Chinese culture, and widely recited among devotees. Some of the merits often associated with the Great Compassion Mantra are: rebirth into higher realms, meeting beneficial acquaintances, having competent facilities, bountiful food and wealth, gaining great respect, and the opportunity to learn Buddhist teachings. Moreover, those who recite this Gatha will not suffer death by starvation, disease, poison, flood, or fire. Water blessed with the Great Compassion Mantra is called the Great Compassion Water and is taken by devotees for its spiritually cleansing qualities. Buddhists believe that faith in Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva not only improves conditions of this life, but also for rebirth into the Western Pure land.

Other than gaining the above benefits, by participating in the ceremony, devotees also benefit from the strength of the compassionate vows of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva to find peace within themselves. They learn to treat others with respect and humility, bringing harmony to their families and society.”

The service was held in our Meditation Hall, which has both a shrine to Sakyamuni Buddha and a small shrine to Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva. It is very Japanese in style, with black, highly polished wooden floorboards and sliding doors that close the small side rooms off from the hall itself. On the day of the service two long rows of tables had been set up facing the shrine to Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva. The tables had deep pink satin cloths and at each place there was a chanting book on a stand with the traditional red satin embroidered cover over it. In front of this was a small silver plate with a flower and a sliver of sandalwood. This is the Offering used in the service. The flower represents purity and the sandalwood is an offering of incense to Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva.

In front of these tables were the tables for the nuns who would be playing the Dharma instruments during the service. From the left there were the cymbals, then the wooden fish. On the right hand side was the big gong, then the hand bell and a standing bell. On the far right was the bell and drum. In the centre aisle was the place for the leader of the service, called the Deacon Master. In a big service this may be

the Abbot/ Abbess of the Temple. For our service, my Dharma instrument teacher (refer my previous article on “My Teachers”), Venerable Ru Ing was our Deacon Master. As I have mentioned before, she has a beautiful sonorous voice both when speaking and when chanting and a finely honed knowledge of all the services. The service began with an anthem/hymn for the Praise of the Holy Water. In this hymn, we wish that “Good fortune and long life both be enhanced and extended, that offences be absolved and iniquities be exonerated.” Everyone then kneels and offers the flower and a sliver of sandalwood. It is important to realize that this offering is done to arise in one’s own mind a feeling of repentance and Bodhicitta. The small silver plate is held up and there are about 20 seconds in which to contemplate, before the service continues with a paen of homage to Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva. Prostrations or full bows are then made to various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, the four Guardians of the World and all the spirits and gods that are in our Samsaric existence. Vows, which are a very effective and powerful method of causing the creation of advantageous causes and conditions leading to one’s eventual emancipation from Samsara are made. Some for example are:

I vow to soon obtain the eye of wisdom
 I vow to quickly emancipate all beings
 I vow to cross the sea of suffering soon
 I vow to quickly abide in the shelter of the unconditioned

Some of the benefits to be obtained from these vows are:
 If I encounter a mountain of knives, the knives shall break
 If I encounter boiling water, the water shall dry up
 If I encounter the hells, the hells shall vanish and dissipate
 If I encounter animals, they shall attain great wisdom

The Deacon Master then recites Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva’s pledges to the Buddha. While Venerable Ru Ing was doing this gentle, soft music played in the background, and the combination of her deep melodious voice and the music, created a very special moment for all of us. Chanting of the Dharani of Great Compassion followed. This is a very powerful mantra, which I had only heard in Chinese before. However, this time we chanted it in the original Sanskrit, while slowly and meditatively walking around the tables. The Dharani is as follows:
 Namō Ratnatrayaya Namō Ariya Jyana Sangara Virochana
 yuhala che ya Tathagataya Arahate Samyasambuddhaya
 Namō Sarva Tathagatēphe Arahatephe Samyasambuddhephe
 Namō Ariya Avalokitesvara Bodhisattvaya
 Mahasatvya Mahakarunikaya Tadyatha Om thara
 thara thiri thiri turu turu ite veit chale cha lye prachare prachare
 kusume kusuma walehe eli mili chiti chva hala Mapanaya Sva ha !

When we had returned to our places we knelt and repented, acknowledging that within us, “...in our own natures, (we have) all knowledge, miraculous power and perfect wisdom and are equal to the Buddhas and sentient beings. Because of ignorance since infinite past, our nature is enveloped and confused by events, thoughts are entangled in knots. Although phenomena are equal, we conceptualize self and others. Desire and views are the root and the body is the vehicle of discrimination.” So well expressed, I feel. I for one, certainly have terrible knots in my mind sometimes!

After the repentance a final prayer is made to Avalokitesvara

Bodhisattva, which we all read together with the Deacon Master. It was a fitting end to a beautiful service that left me feeling balanced and whole and able to see my obstructions and confusions just that much more clearly.

I sincerely hope that one day we will be able to do this English version of the Great Compassion Repentance Service at Nan Hua Temple, so that all who come can know the great helpfulness to be found in Buddhist teachings. After all that's why I kept coming back in the beginning! Below is an extract from the final prayer. May you all have peace and contentment in your lives and be able to overcome all obstructions.

Great Compassionate Avalokitesvara,
 I pray to you to guide me with your great vows.
 I pray to you to awaken me with your compassionate undertaking.
 May I possess your fearless and complete enlightenment:
 If I confront malicious people, may their malice be reformed.
 If I confront violent people, may their violence be pacified.
 If I confront those of evil and different views, may they be enlightened.
 If I confront the ignorant, may they be granted great wisdom.
 Great Compassionate Avalokitesvara.
 I pray to you to envelope me with your compassionate cloud.
 I would like to realize your spirit of benefiting and relieving all beings.
 To identify the needs of all beings through compassionate eyes.
 To listen to the sufferings of all beings with attentive ears.
 To comfort the frustrations and anxieties of all beings with soothing words.
 To heal the wounds of all beings with gentle hands.
 Great Compassionate Avalokitesvara.
 I pray to you to illuminate us with your light of wisdom.
 I will assist all beings through joyous giving.
 I will awaken and guide the stubborn and obstinate through cooperative respect.
 I will provide people with expediency through benevolent care.
 I will provide people with happiness through words of loving-kindness.
 Great Compassionate Avalokitesvara.
 I would like to adopt your deliverance and non-hindrance as my model.
 From this day forth:
 I will distance myself from perverted and delusive thoughts, and contemplate on freedom amongst humanity.
 I will distance myself from discrimination and speculation, and contemplate on freedom amidst my surroundings.
 I will distance myself from attachment and entanglement, and contemplate on freedom within circumstances.
 I will distance myself from the five worldly desires, and contemplate on freedom of heart and mind.
 Great Compassionate Avalokitesvara,
 please accept my sincerest prayer.
 Great Compassionate Avalokitesvara,
 please accept my sincerest prayer.

