

## Transcript OQ #405: Bearing Witness

Once upon a timeless moment,  
Avaloketesvara -  
a great being, whose Sanskrit name means,  
Bearing Witness -  
tries with all his might to empty the world of sorrow,

Avaloketesvara -  
as his name implies -  
regards the world with such watchful and loving attention -  
that he never blinks an eye.  
The beauty of life takes his breath away,  
while  
the conflict, war, and despair,  
that seem to weave themselves thru sentient existence,  
evoke in him an intense longing to respond.

Avaloketesvara uses every means possible to lift beings from darkness,  
And they find solace in his grace.  
After eons of ceaseless, careful effort on behalf of others,  
he finally succeeds in his mission and empties the world of sorrow.  
But this lasts only for an instant.  
Heartbroken, Avaloketesvara watches on as suffering returns,  
filling the space in its wake.

Avaloketesvara toils through this process again and again,  
but to no avail.  
Although he can temporarily assuage suffering,  
he cannot prevent it from arising.  
Recognizing the never-ending nature of his task;  
our protagonist is consumed by despair so profound,  
that his body, literally, shatters to pieces.

With concern for the fate of our hero, we might wonder:  
“Where has he gone?”  
“Will he return?”  
But in less time than it takes to ask these very questions,  
Avaloketesvara re-affirms his task with even greater resolve:  
“If beings are limitless, their suffering must be limitless” he declares, “So I will have to expand  
myself limitlessly to respond to them all.”

Full of power,  
Avaloketesvara re-emerges resplendent with new physical attributes:

1,000 arms, and, on each hand, an unflinching eye.

It seems a broken heart has no limits.  
And if guided by a genuinely altruistic intention,  
that heart assumes an ever-expanding capacity to bear witness,  
to both beauty and struggle,  
along with an increased ability to serve beings.

I invite you to contemplate this story carefully,  
because something similar could happen to you.

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Welcome to Open Question: a call to inner brilliance  
Our theme for this season: The Self: Walking the Middle Way path  
I'm Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel  
This is OQ 405: Bearing Witness

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We might imagine that Avaloketesvara's story has a beginning, middle and end,  
and that it took place at a moment in linear history.

Perhaps.

But I'm inclined to view this story as happening then...now...continuously...  
After all, Avaloketesvara's task will never reach completion.  
If beings are limitless and their suffering is limitless,  
how could it possibly come to an end?  
Having made a commitment to soothe the suffering of infinite beings,  
Avaloketesvara serves with fierce purpose in the heart of this sentient conundrum:  
the dwelling place of bodhisattvas.

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If this story strikes a chord in your heart,  
then seize it as your personal opportunity to live with such daring.  
Avaloketesvara unites the wisdom and methods that any one of us can also apply toward  
creating healthy interdependence in conditioned reality.

Life is 'conditioned,'  
which implies that we are not in total command;  
that we will never be completely privy to what happens next;

that we only ever see a little piece of things.  
If we can bear the truth of life as open-dimensional,  
we will dwell in a healthy, trustworthy state of awe.

And

because we, ourselves, are part of this conditionality  
- this great nature of inter-being -  
everything we do matters.

This understanding brings confidence  
as we consider the weight of two choices:  
Will I foster grace?  
OR  
will I allow unexamined impulses to drag me down?  
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During this season on OQ podcast,  
we have explored two aspects of knowable experience,  
the two truths.

Through the practice of looking and not finding,  
we learned to appreciate that life resists definition,  
and cannot be known in a determinate way;  
that all things are free or empty of self-nature.  
This is the absolute truth.  
And

Through examining the nature of dependent arising,  
we have clearly observed how all things find relative meaning, efficacy and function only in their  
respective contexts.  
This is the relative truth.

Because we have explored this at length in previous episodes,  
I won't elaborate now,  
other than to remind you that  
bringing the relative and absolute truths into union -  
is what it means to walk the Middle Way path:  
the way of the bodhisattva.  
Avalo's story shows us how that looks.

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I want to be clear: Avaloketesvara is no doormat.  
He is as savvy as they come,

but not in a cynical way that would diminish the authenticity and purity of his altruism.

He knows that the ultimate wellbeing of self and other are inextricably linked.

Through the cultivation of prajna or accurate discernment,

he understands the inter-being of self and other,

as all bodhisattvas do.

Through the liberating practice of looking and not finding,

he has come to see that Self and other are not 1/nor are they 2;

they are not the same/nor are they separate.

This liberates him from dualistic, extreme thinking.

In short, Avaloketesvara is well aware that wellbeing doesn't happen in a vacuum -

which informs his commitment to pursue service as a means of healing -

the mutual healing of both self and other.

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If Self and other inter-are,

what then is the role of Self in this equation?

People often get confused about the nature of Self in Buddhism -

and whether it exists or not.

Simultaneously, as practitioners, we struggle with the momentum of our Self or ego.

We unnecessarily vilify and reject it.

But rather than treating this elusive, complicated, ego aggressively,

why not employ it as an asset?

The great 10th C Buddhist master,

Serlingpa,

offered a way to re-purpose the ego for the profit of genuine wellbeing,

using the following idea:

“What of all this aggression toward the ego?”

He asks.

“Why not make use of it - invite it into service?”

Why not make the ego as big as possible,

in order to include all beings,

and make them the recipients of the love and care we usually reserve only for our Self?”

As you can see, this approach re-directs the momentum of our self-centered tendencies,

by interrupting ego's agenda.

Here at Serlingpa's suggestion,

we encounter the re-occurring theme of expanding the Self limitlessly to include others,

so central to Avaloketesvara's story.

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When not clearly-directed,  
the ego will dictate our narratives.  
It's aim: to preserve and cherish itself,  
which,  
if you think about it,  
runs counter to the process of healing.  
When challenged by circumstances,  
You might identify some familiar tendencies:  
Do you ever find yourself, for instance:  
a. trying to fix a situation?  
b. falling into despair when you can't?  
OR  
c. withdrawing from challenges into a state of willful ignorance?

All of these strategies reflect an inclination to hide from or escape,  
the rich, vibrant energy of experience.

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Broadly speaking,  
we think of fixing things,  
as restoring them to how they were before they broke  
or  
how we want them to be.

Yes, we can temporarily fix a leaky faucet  
or  
make amends through apology.  
But in a bigger way,  
we will probably hit a wall if we consider the world  
- and individuals -  
as something to fix.

After all, we live and move about in the dynamic and unpredictable nature of  
contingent relationships,  
and life will continuously remind us of that.  
So when we disregard the nuance and complexity of things,  
and helicopter in to a situation to save the day,  
we are forced to hold tightly to a sense of rightness,  
rather than directly responding to what is happening.

Please don't misunderstand this all to mean we are doomed  
Or

have no influence in improving or altering the direction our lives take. In this context “fixing” implies that something is broken, and that notion doesn’t align with the nature of conditioned reality. We are looking for an approach that does.

2. In our examination of trying to fix unfixable things, we will continue to experience failure, which often leads to hopelessness. It is a noble aspiration to want to bring the world to peaceful equilibrium - to free all beings of suffering. But, as our beloved hero Avaloketesvara recognizes and demonstrates, we are not in total command. We have to work with conditions and circumstances, within the nature of inter-being. That’s just how it is.

The bodhisattva path does not promise a utopian outcome - a static state of peace - Instead it presents a path of transformation and healing that acknowledges all aspects of human existence - the full spectrum of sentient experience, with accurate empathy... In other words, empathy that is in accord with the way things are.

3. Lastly, our tendency to withdraw from life, is yet another way to shield ourselves from a world we perceive as challenging, unfair and disappointing. Unfortunately, in shielding ourselves from life, it is almost like not living at all.

We don’t see this quality of willful ignorance in Avaloketesvara’s story. He doesn’t defend a personal state of peace. He focuses on the wellbeing of others, By intentionally placing himself in the heart of the sentient conundrum, he never - even for a moment - departs from the courageous process of constant growth and transformation.

The approaches of fixing, hopelessness and avoidance do not create genuine HEALING RELATIONSHIPS

They don’t bring our actions together with our intentions for ultimate wellbeing. Carefully examine them in contemplation, so that your own clarity will guide you toward an extraordinary path of healing.

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In the Tibetan language,  
Avaloketesvara is called - Chenrezig -  
When we break down the Tibetan syllables,  
we get more information.  
chen - is the respectful term for eyes.  
re - implies continuity  
and  
zig - means open.

So Chenrezig means: eyes that remain continuously open - attentive.  
For this reason,  
I have loosely translated both names - Avaloketesvara and Chenrezig - as bearing witness.

The image of Avaloketesvara's open eyes,  
serves as a powerful metaphor for the practice of bearing witness.  
Can we bear the poignancy and complexity of life without getting overwhelmed?  
Can we bear that life is not too complicated, painful or beautiful for us?

Yes, even beauty can be hard to bear.  
We fall in love,  
and suddenly find ourselves curiously present for the experience.  
But it doesn't take long before  
we can't seem to bear the depth of it,  
and find ourselves trying to either possess or flee.  
When we can't bear witness to the nuance and sophistication of the open mind,  
we invariably run to dualistic thinking.  
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The term "to bear" or tolerate is related to patience in the Middle Way tradition.  
Here in the context of our story,  
to bear witness doesn't mean "to grin and bear it" -  
in the way we tolerate the coffee at the office,  
or  
put up with our neighbor's drumming.  
To 'bear' here implies an acceptance or allowance for something to occur.

The 19th century wandering yogi, Patrul Rinpoche, who refused to set down roots,  
wrote in his famous treatise - the Words of My Perfect Teacher -  
that the highest form of patience is the ability to bear the nature of emptiness,  
without making it a 'thing'.

Meditation provides the opportunity to examine how we relate to our experience.  
Do we put a lid on it?  
Brace against it?  
Do we get distracted in the momentum of it?

In meditation, we get to watch how this all plays out,  
which constitutes part of the beauty of the training.  
How do we work with the activity of mind?  
This becomes a central question for the meditator.

Bearing witness is not a grey or neutral zone.  
It's not a passive act.  
In fact, it's a powerful act of non-compliance against the habit of reification,  
which impedes clear seeing.  
Bearing witness grants us access to genuine creativity, love and insight.  
it puts us in healthy relationship with our world  
- with our experience -  
and protects us from extreme thinking.

Bearing witness is also called absolute bodhicitta.  
And it is within this atmosphere of mind that we create grace.

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In Avaloketesvara's story,  
we see him falter,  
and  
fall into despair.  
We see his heroism and resolve.  
But we may wonder  
"How does he find the courage, means and determination  
to sustain the practice of responding to limitless beings?"  
In our ordinary lives we all know how messy and complex working with others can be!

The healing tradition of the bodhisattva,  
guides us through a single, basic instruction:  
to NEVER exclude a single being from the realm of our love and care.  
And for that, we will have to work with our biases.  
Let's call this the practice of boundless equanimity.

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In equanimity we do not force ourselves to see everyone in a positive or neutral light  
We don't push discernment aside.



We also don't dismiss the fact that people are often driven by selfish impulses.  
And it is probably even safe to assume that there are those who have committed themselves to hatred with, perhaps, the same intensity that Avaloketesvara has committed himself to love.  
Recall Avaloketesvara's savvy,  
we don't have to be naive or deceive ourselves in any way when practice equanimity.

But,

because self and other are inextricably linked,  
our own anger, selfishness and fear will always return to burn us.  
If we don't heal our relationships -  
including even the relationships that take place only in our minds -  
the world will arise as our enemy.

so we commit  
to include even those we perceive as against us,  
within the realm of our care  
This shift in attitude becomes the agent of our expansion and healing.

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We generally don't have a problem extending kindness to those we feel close to.  
And for majority of the beings  
toward whom we will never meet,  
we remain neutral.  
But from those individuals  
we don't like;  
who don't align with our values;  
who have gone as far as acting out in harmful ways,  
we often withdraw our care.

With those people,  
we can move toward healing by doing a practice in the safety of our imagination.  
We might begin by envisioning them outside the context we usually regard them in,  
and allow them the vulnerability of their humanness.

For instance,  
place something you don't like on the side of the road, stranded in the middle of nowhere.  
Then, as we approach them in our car,  
We will have to consider:  
Could I just leave them there?  
Does their need change whether I like them or not?  
Could something positive happen?  
What would happen if a moment of warmth were to arise?

Would I foster or reject that warmth?

We really have to want to clean up our mind to do this practice.  
conviction comes from the wisdom in the reasoning.  
So if you notice resistance to the practice,  
which is common,  
ask yourself if that impulse serves the ego or beings?

When we follow a life of service  
things often come together in the most surprising and extraordinary ways.  
The wisdom, creativity and ability that emerge from the practice of equanimity,  
are beyond the grasp of an ordinary, dualistic outlook.

Becoming familiar with this process,  
you will feel a sense of ease,  
you will experience less fear,  
You will influence others in positive ways.  
You will find yourself creating grace.

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Avaloketesvara remains forever in process:  
His ceaseless heartbreak accommodates boundless beings;  
Although his body shatters and reconstitutes itself again and again;  
He remains free of the insecurities that result from cherishing and protecting a Self.

The enormity of his undertaking is free of the extremes of dualistic thinking.  
For Avaloketesvara,  
bearing witness and responding are united in a state of  
non-dual creativity, insight and love.

Avaloketesvara continues to stretch: then...now...and continuously  
informing us,  
with such perfection,  
what it means to live in the heart of the human conundrum,  
This is the abode of the Bodhisattva.

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Please join me on Saturday, December 16, from 10am Mountain Time for my next OQ LIVE CONVERSATION with Venerable Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche and Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel, "Cultivating Healthy Interdependence."

During this intimate and precious time with my root teacher I will ask about Bodhicitta, healthy interdependence, and karmic debt, which refer to the often unexplainable, sticky relationships we find ourselves caught in.

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Open Question podcast is a production of the Middle Way Initiative,  
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