

## On Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Compassion

(*Kannon*)

**Translator’s Introduction:** The name Kannon is a shortened version of Kanzeon (Skt. Avalokiteshvara), ‘The One Who Heeds the Cries of the World’. This Bodhisattva goes under many names and has taken many forms in India, as well as in other East Asian Buddhist cultures. Originally, Avalokiteshvara was iconographically represented as being male, but after the figure came into China, it was often pictured as being female, although not exclusively so. From the standpoint of Buddhist iconography, the male aspect represents the personification of compassion, whereas the female aspect represents compassion in action. However, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are said to have the ability to shift between these two functions, depending on which seems to be the more spiritually helpful in a given situation. For a translator writing in English, this presents a problem of how to refer to Kannon: as He or as She. Since a choice has to be made, I have chosen to use masculine grammatical forms simply because, historically, this Bodhisattva is Indian in origin, where the figure is traditionally considered to be male and the name is grammatically masculine in gender.

The compassion that is represented by Kannon has no limitations in its functioning, as the dialogue between the two brother-monks, Ungan and Dōgo, expresses. It is like eyes that see everything and hands that offer help everywhere, even in the darkest of times. Some readers may find it difficult, on occasion, to follow what Dōgen is driving at in this discourse. To put it simply, when it comes to conveying what the innate compassion of one’s Buddha Nature is, it is difficult to express what is essentially beyond words to convey, and conventional ways of talking about the innate compassion of one’s Buddha Nature do not meet the mark. Therefore, even though Ungan and Dōgo successfully found a way of expressing what the compassion of Buddha Nature is like, the way that they put the matter goes beyond conventional ways of understanding what is said. At times Dōgen explains what they mean by using the *via positiva* (saying what something is like) and at other times he does this by using the *via negativa* (saying what something is not like).

Ungan Donjō once asked Dōgo Enchi,<sup>1</sup> “What use does the Bodhisattva\* of Great Compassion make of His ever so many hands and eyes?”

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1. Ungan and Dōgo were both Dharma heirs of Yakusan Igen.

\* See *Glossary*.

Dōgo replied, “He is like someone in the night who reaches behind himself, his hand groping for his pillow.”

Ungan remarked, “I get it, I get it!”

Dōgo asked, “What did you get?”

Ungan said, “That His whole body is hands and eyes.”

Dōgo replied, “What you have said is very well put. Still, it only expresses eighty or ninety percent of the Matter.”\*

Ungan responded, “Well, so much for the likes of me. How about you, my elder brother in the Dharma, what do you make of it?”

Dōgo replied, “That His whole being, through and through, is hands and eyes.”

In expressing what Kannon is, many voices have been heard before and after this incident, but none of them equal the words of Ungan and Dōgo. If you wish to explore through your training what Kannon is, you should thoroughly investigate what Ungan and Dōgo are saying here. The Bodhisattva of Great Compassion spoken of here is Kanzeon Bosatsu, ‘The Bodhisattva Who Heeds the Cries of the World’, who is also known as Kanjizai Bosatsu, ‘The Bodhisattva Who Observes All Things Free of Attachments’. Through our training, we study Him, or Her, as the father and mother of all Buddhas. So do not consider Him to be inferior to the Buddhas, thinking that He has not yet realized the Truth, for in the past He was the Tathagata known as ‘The Clarifier of the True Dharma’.

So, let us now take up, and thoroughly explore, the words spoken by Ungan, namely, “What use does the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion make of His ever so many hands and eyes?” There are Buddhist traditions that make a point of honoring Kannon, and there are Buddhist traditions that have not yet seen Kannon even in their dreams. The Kannon that existed for Ungan was in complete harmony with Dōgo’s Kannon. And this was not so just for one or two Kannon, but Ungan was likewise in harmony with hundreds of thousands of myriad Kannon. Only Ungan’s assembly allowed Kannon to truly be Kannon. And why is that? The difference between the Kannon of which Ungan spoke and the Kannon of which other Buddhas spoke is like the difference between being able to put It in words and not being able to put It in words. The Kannon of some Buddhas merely had twelve faces; this was not so for Ungan. The Kannon of some other Buddhas merely had a thousand hands and eyes; this was not so for Ungan. The Kannon of still other Buddhas had eighty-four thousand hands and eyes; this was not so for Ungan. How do I know this to be true? Because when Ungan speaks of the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion using His ever so many hands and eyes, his phrase ‘ever so many’ does not mean merely eighty-four thousand hands and eyes.

How much less did he limit it to some particular number, like twelve or thirty-two or thirty-three! ‘Ever so many’ is synonymous with ‘beyond count’. The phrase ‘ever so many’ is not limited as to what sort or how many. Since it is not limited to any sort or amount, you should not limit it, not even by calculating it to be an unbounded, limitless amount. You need to explore through your training that the underlying meaning of the phrase ‘ever so many’ is just like this, for it has already gone beyond the bounds of the immeasurable and the unbounded.

Now, in taking up Ungan’s phrase ‘His ever so many hands and eyes’, Dōgo did not say that it did not reveal the Matter, so it must have contained the underlying principle. Ungan and Dōgo were in complete harmony with each other and stood shoulder-to-shoulder, having already trained together under Yakusan for forty years. During that time, they had discussed accounts from both the past and the present, rooting out what was not correct and verifying what was correct. Because they had trained together in this manner, when on this day they stated ‘His ever so many hands and eyes’, Ungan was making a statement and Dōgo was verifying it. Keep in mind that ‘His ever so many hands and eyes’ was being discussed by both of these Old Buddhas alike. Both Ungan and Dōgo are clearly in accord concerning ‘His ever so many hands and eyes’, so Ungan now asks Dōgo what use Kannon makes of them. Do not consider his question to be the same as the types of questions raised by academic teachers of Scriptures and scholarly writers of commentaries, or by the ‘thrice wise and ten times saintly’.\* This question has elicited a spiritual affirmation: it has elicited ‘hands and eyes’. Now, there may well be Old Buddhas, as well as more recent Buddhas, who have realized Buddhahood through the force of Ungan’s having said, “What use does He make of His ever so many hands and eyes?” Ungan could also have said, “What does He accomplish by making use of His ever so many hands and eyes?” And he could also have expressed the Matter as “What is it that He does?” or “What does He put into motion?” or “What is He expressing?”

Dōgo replied, “He is like someone in the night who reaches behind himself, his hand groping for his pillow.”

To express the underlying principle, Dōgo gives as an example someone who is groping behind himself for a pillow in the middle of the night. ‘Groping for’ means ‘searching for’. ‘In the night’ is a way of saying ‘being in the dark’, just as we might speak of ‘seeing a mountain in the light of day’. That is, ‘using one’s hands and eyes’ is like someone in the night reaching behind himself, his hand groping for a pillow. We need to investigate ‘using one’s hands and eyes’ on this basis. And we need to examine ‘in the night’ from the perspective of ‘in the light of day’, as

well as from the perspective of when it is nighttime, and we need to examine it from the perspective of a time that is neither day nor night.<sup>2</sup> When people grope for a pillow, even though they do not understand it as something resembling Kannon's using His hands and eyes, we do not and cannot escape from the principle that it is just like that.

Can it be that the 'someone' who is 'like someone who' is just a word in a simile? And further, is this 'someone' an ordinary, everyday person or might it be someone who is no ordinary, everyday person? If we study it as being an ordinary, everyday Buddhist, then there is something we need to investigate in 'groping for a pillow'. Even a pillow has some shape or design that needs our inquiry. And 'the night' might not simply be 'the night' which ordinary people and those in lofty positions mean by 'day and night'. You need to realize that what is being said is not about getting hold of the pillow, or about finding the pillow, or about pushing the pillow away. If we investigate what underlies Dōgo's saying, "in the night, reaching behind himself, his hand groping for a pillow," we need to see, and not disregard, the eyes that show you the night. A hand that is groping for a pillow has not yet touched its edge. If reaching behind with the hand is essential, then is there something essential that needs to be reached with the eyes? We need to clarify what 'the night' means. Would it refer to the realm of hands and eyes? Is it in possession of human hands and eyes? Or is it just hands and eyes alone, flashing like bolts of lightning? Is it one or two instances of hands and eyes being right from head to tail? If we examine the matter in this way, then the use of ever so many hands is present. But who is the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion? It is as if all that is heard is 'the Bodhisattva of Hands and Eyes'. If that is so, then we should ask, "What does the Bodhisattva of Hands and Eyes use ever so many Bodhisattvas of Great Compassion for?"

You need to realize that even though hands and eyes do not stand against each other, they are making use of That Which Is, and That Which Is is making use of them. When That Which Is expresses Itself in this way, even though the whole of Its 'hands and eyes' are never hidden from us, we must not look for a time when It expresses Itself as 'the whole of Its hands and eyes'. Even though there are Its hands and eyes that are never hidden from us, and even though these hands and eyes do exist, they are not our self, nor are they mountains and oceans, nor are they the countenance of the sun or the countenance of the moon, nor are they "Your very mind is Buddha."

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2. That is, 'being in the dark' and 'seeing something in the light of day' are metaphors, and do not refer to a temporal night and day.

Ungan's words, "I get it, I get it!" are not saying, "I understand Dōgo's words." It is an "I get It, I get It!" in relation to his having made a statement about the hands and eyes that That Which Is makes use of, which will be Its making free use of the here and now, and Its having free entry into this present day.

Although Dōgo's expression, "What did you get?" is another way of his saying, "I've gotten It," it is one which does not stand against Ungan's "I get It." Even so, Dōgo had his own way of putting "What did you get," a way that means "I've got It and you've got It." Would this not be equivalent to "Our eyes get It and our hands get It?" Is it referring to an understanding that has emerged or to an understanding that has not yet emerged? While the understanding implied by "I get it" is synonymous with the 'I', you need to consider that there is a 'you' in "What did you get?"

What has come forth as a result of Ungan's statement, "His whole body is hands and eyes," is a plethora of Kannon's who, in speaking of 'someone in the night reaching behind himself, his hand groping for his pillow', are exploring it by stating that one's whole body is nothing but hands and eyes. These Kannon's indeed are Kannon's, even though They have not yet been able to put it into Their own words. When Ungan said, "His whole body is hands and eyes," he was not saying that hands and eyes are the Dharma Body which exists everywhere. Even though everywhere is the whole universe, the hands and eyes of our body at this instant will not be the Everywhere that is everywhere. Even though the hands and eyes of our body can perform the meritorious actions of the Everywhere, they cannot be the hands and eyes that leave the marketplace with stolen goods. The meritorious activities of hands and eyes will be beyond the sort of seeing, behaving, and expressing that judges rightness. These hands and eyes are already described as being 'ever so many', so they are beyond a thousand, beyond ten thousand, beyond eighty-four thousand, and beyond the immeasurable and the unbounded. Not only is it like the whole body being hands and eyes, it is also like giving voice to the Dharma in order to rescue sentient beings, and like letting loose the Light throughout the nations. Therefore, you should explore through your training that it must be, as Ungan put it, that your whole body is hands and eyes. So, even though he says to use your whole body as hands and eyes, and even though he says to change your demeanor, now being active, now resting, do not let yourself be disturbed by this.

Dōgo replied, "What you have said is very well put. Still, it only expresses eighty or ninety percent of the Matter."

The main point of what Dōgo said here is that Ungan's expression is very well put. 'Putting it very well' means that what one says hits the mark and that it clarifies the Matter, with nothing left unexpressed. When what has not been expressed before is now finally expressed so that nothing remains that has not been expressed, it will still only be expressing eighty or ninety percent of the Matter.

Even if your exploration of the intent behind what Ungan said were one hundred percent, if you are still unable to put It in words, then you have not thoroughly explored the Matter. And even if Ungan's way of putting It was eighty or ninety percent of the Matter, it was still his expression of It, which might be eighty or ninety percent on the mark or one hundred percent on the mark. At that very moment in time, Ungan might have stated the Matter through hundreds of thousands of myriad expressions, but his abilities were so wondrous that he offered only a bit of his abilities and expressed a bare eighty or ninety percent of the Matter. For instance, even if he had had hundreds of thousands of myriad abilities to bring forth the whole universe, what he actually said would surpass his leaving the Matter unsaid. At the same time, were he to take up just one of his abilities, it would not be an ordinary, worldly-wise ability. The meaning of this eighty or ninety percent is like this. Even so, when people hear the statement by an Ancestor of the Buddha that someone has expressed eighty or ninety percent of the Matter, they understand it to mean that it is only eighty or ninety percent because it does not come up to an expression that would be a hundred percent of the Matter. If the Buddha Dharma were like this, It would not have reached us today. You need to explore through your training that the so-called 'eighty or ninety percent' is an eighty or ninety percent of 'hundreds of thousands', as if we were speaking of 'ever so many'. Dōgo had already stated 'eighty or ninety percent of It' and he certainly knew that It must not be confined to a literal eighty or ninety percent. We need to explore through our training that this is the way that the Ancestors of the Buddha speak.

When Ungan said, "So much for the likes of me. How about you, my elder brother in the Dharma, what do you make of it?" he said "so much for the likes of me" because he wanted Dōgo to put into words what he called 'only expressing eighty or ninety percent of the Matter.' Although this is his 'not leaving any traces behind', it is also 'his arms being long and his sleeves being short'.<sup>3</sup> "While I have

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3. Another way of expressing this is that, although his words leave no karmic wake (not leaving any traces behind), his intention in asking the question is obvious (his arms sticking out from his sleeves).

not yet exhausted the ways of saying what I have just said, I leave the matter as it is” is not what his expression “So much for the likes of me” means.

Dōgo said, “His whole being, through and through, is hands and eyes.”

These words of his are not saying that hands and eyes, as independent entities, are what one’s whole being is through and through. What he is saying is that one’s whole being, through and through, is hands and eyes. As a consequence, he is not saying that one’s body is what hands and eyes are. Since ‘with His ever so many hands and eyes’ means ‘using His hands and using His eyes’,<sup>4</sup> His hands and eyes are, of necessity, the whole of Him being hands and eyes, through and through. In asking, “What does He do with His ever so many bodies and minds?” there will be the response, “His whole being, through and through, is whatever He is doing.” What is more, it is not the case that Ungan’s expression, ‘whole body,’ is not quite complete whereas Dōgo’s expression, ‘whole being, through and through,’ is thoroughly complete. Ungan’s ‘whole body’ and Dōgo’s ‘whole being, through and through’ are not open to any discussion of their comparative value, and the ‘ever so many hands and eyes’ that was stated by each of them is an expression of That Which Is.

Thus, the Kannon of whom our old Master Shakyamuni spoke only had a thousand hands and eyes, or twelve faces, or thirty-three bodies or eighty-four thousand bodies. The Kannon of Ungan and Dōgo had ever so many hands and eyes and is beyond any talk about quantities. When you explore through your training the Kannon of Ungan and Dōgo, which has ever so many hands and eyes, then you, together with all Buddhas, will realize eighty or ninety percent of Kannon’s meditative state.

*Given on the twenty-sixth day of the fourth lunar month in the third year of the Ninji era (May 27, 1242).*

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4. The Chinese character, read as *yō* in Japanese, when functioning as a preposition means ‘with’, and when functioning as a verb, means ‘to use’.



Now, since the Buddha Dharma has come from the West, many Ancestors of the Buddha have spoken about Kannon, but they have not equaled Ungan and Dōgo, and for that reason, I spoke only about this Kannon of theirs. As Yōka Genkaku said in his poem, “The Song That Attests to the Way”:

*Not stuck on seeing just one single thing: this we call  
being a Tathagata;  
Such a one can be called a Kanjizai, one who regards all  
things just as they are.*

This is evidence that even though the Tathagata and Kannon manifest in Their particular bodily forms, They are not separate beings.

And there was also an exchange between Mayoku and Rinzai concerning the true Hands and Eyes.<sup>5</sup> These are just a couple of cases among ever so many. There is Ummon’s statement, “There are the Kannon who, upon seeing the forms of things, clarify Their minds, or who, upon hearing the sounds of things, awaken to the Way.” What sights and sounds are not encompassed within Kanzeon Bodhisattva’s seeing and hearing? And in Hyakujō’s words, “There is His gateway for entering into the Truth.” Among the assembly in the *Shurangama Scripture*, there are the Kannon who have fully realized the Way. And among the assembly in the *Lotus Scripture*, there is the Kannon who manifests everywhere. All these Kannon are identical with the Buddhas and They are identical with the great earth with its mountains and rivers. Yet, at the same time, They are but one or two of the ever so many hands and eyes.

*Copied by me on the tenth day of midsummer in the third year of the Ninji era (June 9, 1242).*

*Ejō*

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5. This exchange is recounted in the Translator’s Addendum immediately following this discourse.





**Translator's Addendum from  
Book 3, Kōan 44 of Dōgen's Chinese *Shinji Shōbōgenzō***

Once while Mayoku Hōtetsu was training in Rinzai's community, he asked Rinzai, "Which is the true Eye of the Compassionate One with a Thousand Hands and Eyes?"

Rinzai replied, "Which is the true Eye of the Compassionate One with a Thousand Hands and Eyes? Well, quick, you tell me! Speak right up!"

Thereupon, Mayoku pulled Rinzai down off his chief monk's seat in the Meditation Hall and sat himself down in Rinzai's place.

Rinzai got up off the floor and said, "Well, how do you do!" Mayoku was about to respond, when Rinzai suddenly gave out a Zen shout, pulled Mayoku off the chief monk's seat, and sat back down on it.

Mayoku got up off the floor and [since he had been bested] left the hall.