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The Bodhisattva of Compassion ▶

by [Professor Allan Marett](#)

When I told a friend that I was writing a play about Hiroshima, her response was, "Why write yet another work about Hiroshima. What about other atrocities like the Nanjing Massacre or the Burma Railway?" I could see her point. War gives rise to many terrible things, and many people other than the Japanese at Hiroshima and Nagasaki suffered, very often at the hands of the Japanese themselves.

There has been no more deeply reflective testimony to this than Richard Flanagan's recent Man Booker Prize-winning novel, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. But I do not see that my writing about Hiroshima takes anything away from our engaging with these other terrible events. Hiroshima is the city, the event, the site of deep suffering, with which, for whatever reasons, I have been drawn. My relationship with Hiroshima, like Flanagan's relationship with the Burma Railway (his father was a prisoner of war in a Japanese camp) arises from the circumstances of my life. What I would really like to say to my friend is that my play actually points beyond Hiroshima to all acts of violence and inhumanity, just as Flanagan's novel points beyond the Burma Railway.

Where did this relationship with Hiroshima start for me? Well, as a child growing up in the wake of WW2, those images of mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki were among the earliest that I remember. As a child I, like many others living under the cloud of immanent doom, was terrified that the world was about to be destroyed through nuclear warfare—and despite nuclear weapons not having been used since 1945, I still fear what these dreadful weapons might do in the future. At the tender age of 16, my youngest brother, Graeme, sailed on one of the vessels that went to Mururoa to protest against the French nuclear testing being carried out there. My father, Jack, was, as a consequence, dragged into a world of political activism far removed from his native Methodist conservatism (though many other Methodists became peace activists at that time, at least in NZ, and many were jailed). Graeme was the on-board radio operator of the *Fri*; Dad was his onshore contact. Dad used to say that one of the hardest moments of his life was seeing his boy sail away on that small boat, to an unknown fate.

But there is also something else unique about Hiroshima. After 6 August 1945 everything changed. A new type of weapon had been used for the first time on human beings. As these weapons became ever more powerful and ubiquitous, humankind realised that for the first time ever, it had the potential to destroy itself and the planet in a twinkling of an eye—portents, perhaps, for the more slowly unfolding threat of climate change that is so much in the forefront of our thinking now.

More recently, perhaps because I was already grappling with this play, Hiroshima summoned me. In 2013, while walking down the Pacific coast of Shikoku, the smallest of the four main Japanese islands, as a Henro pilgrim, I (like the pilgrim (*waki*) in the play) was overcome with an increasingly heavy and incomprehensible weight of grief. In particular, each contact with the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Kannon, images of whom proliferate along the pilgrim path, seemed to simultaneously prise open my heart and increase my weight of grief. One morning I woke to find myself weeping uncontrollably. Tears stream seemingly unstopably from my eyes and down my cheeks alarming my wife, Linda, and confounding me. For a long time I couldn't identify their source. Finally a word began to form in my mind: "Hiroshima." Though my tears I finally spoke the word, "Hiroshima", and said, "we have to go there."

And so, like the pilgrim in *Oppenheimer*, Linda and I donned our pilgrim clothes—the broad hat of sedge and the white coat that signifies that the pilgrim has died to the world. We took up our trusty staffs, which represent the 9th century founder of Shingon Buddhism, Kobo Daishi walking with us, and caught the ferry from Matsuyama to Hiroshima, crossing the inland sea. And as we did, I, like the pilgrim in *Oppenheimer*, realised that we were following the path of the *Enola Gay*, on its way to deliver death and destruction to the people of Hiroshima in the early morning of 6 August 1945. We disembarked at the port, and in the rising heat of the day, walked up the river Ota to the Peace Park, aware, heavy footstep after heavy footstep, that "they too came this way."

When we reached the eastern corner of the park, we came upon a beautiful image of Kannon/Kanzeon, put there to commemorate the death of the 6000 children who had been conscripted to Hiroshima to work in the munitions factories. Could there be a more poignant way to arrive in Hiroshima? Everything after that, including our performance of our pilgrim rituals facing the peace flame, paled into insignificance. I find the Peace Park a rather sterile place: in its attempts to become all things to all people, it seems to have lost all spiritual and poetic resonance. At the children's Kannon, however, we chanted, once again through our tears, the *Emmei Jikku Kannon-gyo*, the ten-lined invocation of the arising of Compassion: Mornings my thought is Kanzeon, evenings my thought is Kanzeon, thought after thought arises in mind, thought after thought is not separate from

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ABOUT THE BLOG

The Oppenheimer Noh Project focuses on the creation and performance of a new English-language Noh play, *Oppenheimer*, in the Music Workshop Theatre at 6.00pm on Wednesday 30 September and Thursday 1 October 2015.

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mind.

We then caught the tram up to Hiroshima station. As I took my seat, I heard someone call "Henro-san, henro-san" (Pilgrim, Pilgrim). A small, elderly Japanese woman came and took her seat beside me. She told me that she had herself completed the 1200 kilometre pilgrimage five times, but was now too old to do it. We talked about Fudo Myo-o the great unmoving Wisdom King who sits unmoving in the midst of flames in order to liberate people from impediments to enlightenment—images of whom, like those of Kannon, proliferate along the pilgrim path. We had both been deeply moved by a particular image of Fudo that sits behind the temple, Iwayaji. Bright crimson and enormous, he seems more sympathetic to human foibles than angry at them (more of him later). "But this is the most important one for me," she said, drawing an image of Kannon from her wallet. I showed her the Kannon that hung around my neck. We smiled and bowed. And then she was gone. Later that night I suddenly awoke and sat up. "That old woman was no other than the Bodhisattva of Compassion herself," said a voice in my head.

Comments



Allan, the level of mindfulness practice you have developed and your compassion has allowed an emptiness and space from within you to hear the cries of desperation and suffering of many. No minor feat.. I'm touched.

Even before this play Oppenheimer is performed it has reached to many hearts and minds...may it continue.

I feel deeply grateful and honoured to participate in your play.

Yoke Chin

Posted by: Yoke Chin | [August 7, 2015 01:57 PM](#)



Thank you for an incredibly moving and beautiful account of your pilgrimage. I am looking forward to seeing the Noh play.

Posted by: Joseph Toltz | [August 30, 2015 07:08 AM](#)

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