

Raghavan Iyer excerpt, "The Pledge of Kwan-Yin: Spiritual Vows and Social Responsibility",

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## THE PLEDGE OF KWAN YIN

### SPIRITUAL VOWS & SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

*Never will I seek nor receive private, individual salvation; never will I enter into final peace alone; but forever and everywhere will I live and strive for the redemption of every creature throughout the world from the bonds of conditioned existence.*

KWAN-YIN

Unconditional affirmation of the Kwan-Yin pledge can only come from the unconditional core of the human being. Words are uttered in time, and usually delimit meaning. They express thought, but they also obscure thought. To be able to use words in a manner that reaches beyond limits is to recognize prior to the utterance and to realize after the utterance that one is participating only on the plane of that which has a beginning and an end, though in emulation and celebration of that which is beginningless and endless. Every word and each day is like an incarnation. Silence and deep sleep convey an awareness of duration that cannot be inserted into ordinary time, but indicate the return to a primal sense of being where one is neither conditioned by nor identified with external events, memories, anticipations, likes and dislikes, hopes and fears, possibilities and limitations. Common speech and ordinary wakefulness, for most individuals, are but clouded mirrors dimly reflecting the resonance and radiance of spiritual wakefulness. Any sacred pledge may be uttered by a human being with a wavering mind and a fickle heart, but it can also be authentically affirmed in the name of the larger Self that is far beyond the utterance and the formulation, yet immanent in both.

This is the time-honoured basis of religious rites, as well as the original source of civil laws. Emile Durkheim explained how early in the evolution of societies human beings learnt to transfer the potency of religious oaths to secular restraints and thereby established a high degree of reliability in human relationships. Mohandas

Gandhi spoke of the sun, the planets and the mighty Himalayas as expressing the ultimate reliability of the universe, and taught that when human beings bind themselves by the power of a vow, they seek to become wholly reliable. If reliability essentially connotes a consistent standard of unqualified and unconditional success, then in taking a vow one is necessarily seeing beyond one's limitations. If one is wise one allows for the probability of failure and the possibility of forgetfulness, but somewhere deep in oneself one still wants to be measured and tested by that vow. Thereby a vow which is unconditional, which releases the spiritual will, calibrates one's highest self-respect and is vitally relevant to the mystery of self-transformation.

The Kwan-Yin pledge is a Bodhisattvic vow taken on behalf of all living beings. It is closely connected with the *bodhichitta*, wisdom-seeking mind, the seed of enlightenment. The idea that an unenlightened human being can effectively generate a seed of enlightenment is the central assumption behind the compassionate teaching of Mahatmas and Bodhisattvas, of the Buddhas and Christs. A drop of water is suggestive of an ocean; a flashing spark or single flame is analogous to an ocean of light; the minuscule mirrors the large. Herein lies the hidden strength of the Kwan- Yin pledge. What may seem small from the standpoint of the personal self, when it is genuinely offered on behalf of the limitless universe of living beings and of all humanity past, present, and future can truly negate the finality of finitude, the ultimacy of what seems urgent, the immensity of what appears immediate. The human mind ceaselessly creates false valuations, giving ephemera an excessive sense of reality, to uphold itself in a world of flux. To negate this tendency in advance and to assign reality only to the whole requires a profound mental courage. It requires, while one is alive, a recognition of the connection between the moment of birth and the moment of death, of the intimate relationship between the pain of one human being and the sorrow of all humanity. But it also involves a recognition that greater beings than oneself have taken precisely such a vow, have affirmed this pledge again and again. Therefore, one can invite oneself, however frail, however feeble, into the family of those who are the self-chosen, unacknowledged but unvanquished friends of the human race . . .

Timeliness does not occur all at once. Timeliness, like all wisdom, must be the ripe fruit of time-bound experiments and time-bound errors. Because these are

time-bound, they are evanescent; they are not enduring. In the same way in which one stumbled and learnt to walk or mumbled the multiplication tables, one may rediscover something about grace in movement or the deep logic of elementary numbers. So also one may rediscover the higher stage, the fuller meaning, the larger significance for the whole of one's life of the pledge one took. Suppose a person truly resolves to injure no human being and wishes to release love in every direction. If one is deeply attracted by this affirmation, what does it matter if there is something imperfect and inconclusive in one's repeated efforts to embody it? Mature individuals, who have done this again and again, know that soon after one has made such an affirmation, one is going to be tested. One has invited the Light of the Logos to shine upon the dark corners of one's being. Through heightened awareness one sees unconscious elements in one's nature which one did not even imagine were apt to give offence, but are now discerned as obscurations of one's deepest feelings, one's finest nature, one's truest, profoundest sense of brotherhood. These discoveries are significant, but the hardest lesson at all times is the paramount necessity of patience and persistence. This is a pledge in favour of selfless service, and it cannot ever be premature. It will always be timely, though compelling timeliness can only come when there is serene insight, supported by the strength of personal invulnerability . . .

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By Raghavan Iyer