

Parliament of World Religions, Toronto, Canada Nov. 6, 2018

Workshop: Tara as Divine Feminine Contradiction to Ableism/Internalized Disability Oppression

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My background: My value and motivation is to affirm everyone's sacredness and divinity. I have had psoriasis, a chronic skin condition, since I was 9. I had an attack of psoriatic arthritis when I was 27, when my 6 month old daughter could crawl faster than I could walk. I had the experience of going to Stanford Dermatology clinic from ages 10 to 21 to be treated for the skin disorder. They didn't understand autoimmune disease back then and things would work, and then would stop working and in the end my skin got more and more volatile. Stanford was the research center for psoriasis and a teaching hospital. I was a medical specimen in a mostly male environment which resulted in me feeling disempowered with low self-esteem and self-confidence. I felt I was damaged goods and a failure. "Maybe if I had tried hard enough," and it was clearly important to my parents and doctors wouldn't have worked so hard to get rid of it. I continued in life with the skin condition and the attitude that there was clearly something wrong with me. This affected my relationships as did the discrimination I experienced in employment and public situations.

When I was 30 I discovered Disability Oppression Theory through a group called Re-Evaluation Counseling. When I was 43 I discovered the disability Independent Living civil rights movement and philosophy that views disability as a normal part of living and recognizes that all abilities are in a continuum. IL philosophy promotes equality, independence and community integration and views the economic, attitudes, policy and environmental barriers as the problem – not the disability, physical or mental difference – whether visible or invisible. We teach and use People First language that emphasizes the person, not the disability. We teach people about the long fight through our U.S. history for our civil rights through legislation, respect, opportunity and accessibility for individuals with disabilities and their families. We discuss the consequences of language and labels related to disability. We see people with disabilities as whole, regardless of their functional ability.

I understand that the experience of people with disabilities around the world is different based on culture, that particular Country's laws, economic situation, or how a community has been taught to view disability. I acknowledge that some countries have more resources than others. In the U.S. we have the Americans with Disabilities Act which guarantees equal access for us. Still, we constantly have to advocate to protect and enforce our legislated rights. There is a United Nations Treaty – the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities that is similar and many nations have ratified, but few enforce or implemented. However, we know from our work that whether you are in a developing country or an industrialized nation, people with disabilities report experiences of oppression and ableism.

Ableism

Ableism is an outside social force of attitudes, behaviors and policies and that devalue people living with functional limitations and views disability in simplistic black-and-white/ disabled or “normal” terms. In reality, abilities manifest on a continuum and are a normal part of being human. Either you live long enough to have one or you die first. This oppression results in: a cycle of economic poverty; limited physical and programmatic access to the community (architecture, transportation, employment and financial barriers); and a lack of self-esteem and self-confidence within women who are differently abled. Her self-esteem and self-confidence is diminished as she internalizes these negative, disempowering attitudes and labels as if they are truly who she is. The intersectionality of sexism, racism, homophobia further can add to her diminished self-concept.

Examples of negative labels and stereotypes: a burden; less capable; cursed; ignorant; dangerous; faking; lazy; sexless; not capable of learning or being self-determined; flawed; “What’s wrong with you?” etc. Thus, are less likely to take on leadership. This is NOT who we really are!

The result is segregated learning and living, low employment, and poverty. I attended the 2015 Parliament of World Religions in Salt Lake City in 2015 and was moved by how justice oriented it was and disturbed that although many oppressions were discussed, ableism was not. I made a personal commitment to propose a workshop to raise awareness. Using this practice helps us reclaim our power as women and develop our human potential. We need women’s voices and leadership now more than ever.

Tara is Wisdom, Compassion and Power!

The Great Mother Goddess is celebrated by many names and forms in different cultures throughout time as the Great Compassionate: Mother, She who Brings Forth Life: Kwan Yin (Goddess of Mercy and compassion in Japan; Guan Yin in China; in India as Parvati, Durga, Saraswati, Kali, Tibetans call her Tara, which means Star in Sanskrit.

The Tibetans have several stories about Tara, the key being that she was a diligent and generous practitioner who was about to reach enlightenment when her spiritual guide told her that every Buddha at the moment of their enlightenment assumed a task and a form in which to carry out their enlightened activity. It was recommended that she assume a masculine form because men have it so much easier. A woman works much harder than a man. It is said that Tara thought deeply about this proposal and then answered,

“There is no difference in the body of a man or a woman in its potential to manifest enlightened mind. There are many Buddhas manifest in the male form. I will appear in the body of a woman until the end of time. I will ferry all across the ocean of suffering and establish them in the understanding of their true nature.”

With this declaration of intent she entered the enlightened state.

Tara’s mantra: Om (All that is) Tare (Great Respected Mother), Tutare (Remover of All Fears) Ture (Bestower of Good Fortune) So Ha (And so it is, always expanding, never ending).

The elements of this practice are of value for establishing stability and self-confidence no matter what your spiritual beliefs or path: statement of purpose/ invoking sources of

support/ commitment/ purifications/ embodying, affirming and owning the divine feminine qualities.

Tara for women with disabilities: When I first saw a spiral mandala offering of the 21 Praises of Tara I immediately felt it was the best contradiction to internalized ableism for women with disabilities because the practitioner embodies the 21 praises or divine qualities as their own. I set out to learn the practice and to offer it to other women as a path to empowerment. The Green Tara practice I use comes from an ancient Tibetan prayer practice recited by traditional Tibetans. It has been interpreted by Prema Dasara, an American woman trained in East Indian dance and her friends into a gentle movement and mantra/song practice which I modify as needed to meet the participants with disabilities. Over time, under the guidance of her Tibetan teachers and approval of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, a non-profit organization, Tara Dhatu, has developed to hold this practices lineage with women practicing all over the world. There is the longer spiral mandala offering that comprises of 22 dancers, each embodying a different praise or quality of the bodhisattva Tara. There is a shorter practice, the Dance of the Qualities, which is what I facilitate and will guide you in today so that you can have the experience.

One does not need to be Tibetan or Buddhist to do this practice. It has basic elements of spiritual support that can be translated to any spiritual path or empowerment path. There is a decision for the time of this practice to leave our small sense of self behind, letting the ordinary world fall away, and calling on the Bodhisattva Tara to help us to realize our true divine nature in the form of the 21 qualities of Tara. We then sing through the 21 divine qualities using simple hand movements or mudras and footsteps as participants are able. Women are encouraged to modify to meet their ability and can simply participate as a meditation as one of our regulars who had quadriplegia as a result of polio often did. The important thing is to assume the countenance of the quality.

All “isms” including ableism are dangerous to the lives of people and in particular women with disabilities because they devalue us and then we learn to devalue ourselves. Therefore we are much more likely to be abused, not pursue life goals, not have satisfying healthy balanced relationships, not be active citizens or assume leadership and advocate for ourselves and others. The Dance of the 21 Qualities of Tara is an empowering tool. I have seen this practice change women with disabilities and improve their lives, as it has mine. My hope is that other women with disabilities will have the opportunity to learn this Tara practice, feel empowered and receive benefit so that they may be of benefit to others.



The Tibetan goddess Tara has a face personally represented by the colors white and green. A white Tara is peaceful and compassionate, and brings long life and power, while green Tara is determined and fierce in overcoming obstacles, and saves people from natural disasters.

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Resources

Disability:

Independent Living philosophy and resources including People First Language:
www.ncil.org and www.ability360.org

Information about the Americans with Disabilities Act and it's guidelines that guarantees equal access for people with disabilities: www.ada.gov

Job Accommodation Network that provides expertise if providing accommodations for people with a variety of disabilities: www.askjan.org

Ten Principles of Disability Rights at Mobility International USA www.miusa.org

Re-Evaluation Counseling:

https://www.rc.org/publication/theory/liberationpolicy/disability_Is

Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities:

www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/conventionontherightsofpeoplewithdisabilities.html or www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org or www.equalityhumanrights.com

Tara and Tara Dhatu

Dancing Tara: A Manual of Practice: by Prema Dasara, 2010. Information about Tara and the non-profit Tara Dhatu to learn more about the 21 Praises of Tara Mandala offering: www.taradhatu.org

From the Tara Dhatu website:

It is with the purpose of bringing benefit to beings in this world of chaos and confusion that the Mandala Dance of the Twenty-One Praises of Tara is offered.

It is in respect and gratitude to the Lineage holders of the various Tibetan Buddhist traditions who have maintained and embellished the ancient teaching of chanting the Praises of Tara.

It is in unity with the people of Tibet who universally call out to Tara, who chant Her Praises from childhood and who recognize in Her the Universal Mother and Protector.

It is in order to acknowledge the dignity and capability of women to accomplish the highest spiritual attainments.

That this Mandala Dance of the 21 Praises of Tara is offered.

May All Who See These Praises Danced Or Who Hear These Praises Sung Be Inspired To Attain The Highest Expression Of Humanity To Be Themselves The Embodiment Of Compassion And Wisdom.