

Buddhism through Avalokiteśvara's Transformations

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“How sweetly mysterious is the transcendental sound of Avalokiteśvara. It is the primordial sound of the universe... It is the subdued murmur of the sea-tide setting inward. Its mysterious sound brings liberation and peace to all sentient beings who in their pain are calling out for help, and it brings a sense of serene stability to all those who are seeking Nirvana's boundless peace.”

– *Surangama Sutra* (Rinpoche 398)

Walk into a Buddhist *sangha* and you will most certainly hear the mantra, “*Om mani padme hum!*,” or “Oh Thou with the Jeweled Lotus!” This *mantra*, or *dharani*, is a six-syllable evocation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and is referred to as the “Mantra of Compassion” (398). Thich Nhat Hanh, a renowned Vietnamese Zen Buddhist teacher, describes the purpose of this bodhisattva in a simple and direct way, “In Buddhism we talk about a bodhisattva called Avalokiteśvara, the one who has the ability to listen and to understand the suffering of others. If we evoke his name, it is in order to listen” (Hanh 36)

The bodhisattva has many names that change according to where Buddhism is being practiced – Avalokiteśvara (Lord Who Gazes Down at the World) in India; Guanyin (Perceiver of Sounds)

or Guan-shih-yin (Perceiver of the World's Sound) in China; Lokeśvara (Lord of the World) in Vietnam, Java, and Cambodia; Lokanatha (Protector of the World) in Burma; Natha Deviyo in Sri Lanka; and Chenresi (One Who Sees with Eyes) in Tibet (Yu 1,3). This figure is arguably the most famous bodhisattva in the realm of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Avalokiteśvara speaks to the malleability of the Buddhist tradition and to its prowess of assimilation. Without compromising the religious tradition's core philosophy of loving-kindness, compassion, and altruism, Buddhism has had success moving from country to country, adding converts, and respecting cultural differences. Avalokiteśvara is a fantastic example of Buddhism's conservation of principles while still being able to change to fit into different cultural backgrounds. Avalokiteśvara's depiction and persona have changed with the bodhisattva's migration through Asia but the figure's key characteristics, such as loving-kindness and supreme compassion, have stayed very much intact. This paper is meant to elucidate the conservation of Buddhist principles through the lens of Avalokiteśvara's impact and to propose a meaningful conversation pertaining to the malleability of the Buddhist tradition

Avalokiteśvara is relatively well-known in the United States, mostly spurred by the feminist movement, the popularity of the Dalai Lama, and the immigration of Buddhism to the West. Many Chinese and Tibetan monks fled to Southeastern Asian countries and the United States when the Communist Party of China took over governance in 1939. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War in the late 1970s, the U.S. was inundated with immigrants from Vietnam,

Cambodia, and other countries in the region. These people brought Buddhist religious traditions (values, principles, icons, etc.) with them, thereby ushering Avalokiteśvara into America (1-2).

The influences and differences of interpretation surrounding this bodhisattva that have arisen as Buddhism has made its way into new places is a very interesting study. But before we advance in our study of Avalokiteśvara, we must first understand what the term bodhisattva means, what one must do to become a bodhisattva, and the purpose this concept serves to some Buddhism traditions.

The Bodhisattva

The term *bodhisattva* was first used to refer to the past lives of Siddhartha Gautama which led up to his ultimate incarnation of the Buddha and his *parinirvana* (final nirvana; the negation of *samsara*). This view originated in Theravada Buddhism, "The Way of the Elders," known as *Shrāvākayāna*, "Vehicle of the Disciples." Theravada offered the concept of the *arhat*, or "worthy one." An *arhat* is a disciple of the Buddha who has heard and understood the Dharma (the ethics and teaching of the Buddha) and subsequently perfected him or herself by following in the footsteps of the Buddha. Following the Buddha, the *arhat* attains enlightenment and is able to enter *parinirvana* upon death, never to return again to the realm of *samsara* (the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth). Theravada's *arhat* is seen as the original path to enlightenment, but a later development in Buddhism had an alternative to Arhatship (Mitchell 90-91,115).

Mahāyāna Buddhism challenged the notion that the path to Arhatship was best way to obtain enlightenment. Mahāyāna means “Great Vehicle.” Followers of this sect referred to Theravada and other earlier Buddhist sects as *Hinayāna*, or “Lesser Vehicle.” In calling these earlier schools by a derogatory name, the Mahāyāna Buddhists insisted that their school was superior. They understood themselves as the Buddhist ideal that the Buddha himself wanted, but when he was alive, he saw the community as too spiritually immature to handle any kind of spiritual transcendence except the path of Arhatship. Hinayāna, according to Mahāyāna teachings does not lead to full Buddhahood. They cite the Buddha as referring to himself in his past lives as a *bodhisattva* and how that path led him to full Buddhahood in his final lifetime. From this, they understood that anyone could achieve Buddhahood if they followed the path of the Buddha. In contrast to Mahāyāna, Theravada does not believe that anyone can achieve full Buddhahood except for the Buddha himself. Because of this distinction, Mahāyāna is also referred to as *Bodhisattvayāna*, or the “Bodhisattva Vehicle” (116,117).

Within the context of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the bodhisattva is on the same tier of spiritual enlightenment and understanding as the Buddha himself. Bodhisattva, a Sanskrit term, literally translates to “a being who is to become awakened” and is seen as the equivalent to Buddhahood. Bodhisattvas take a vow to never allow themselves to achieve *parinirvana* until all suffering sentient beings have been alleviated from the pain and strife that *samsara* entails. This vow leads them down the Bodhisattva Path that begins with the “arising of the thought of Awakening,” or *bodhicitta*. Donald Mitchell gives this explanation of the path:

In Mahāyāna, the Great Journey of the bodhisattva begins with hearing the Dharma of the Buddha and taking up the practice of the [Ten] Perfections. These virtues (giving, morality, patience, vigor, meditation, wisdom, [skillful means, vows, power, and omniscient knowledge]) were first advocated by in the *Tripitaka*, and Mahāyāna agrees with the [Hinayāna] tradition that one's motivation is what determines the real quality of one's life of virtue... the true aspiration that should motivate the practice of virtue is "the thought of, or aspiration for, Awakening" (*bodhicitta*)... after some time of merit-earning practice and with the aid of a teacher, the person on the [Bodhisattva Path] experiences the compassionate aspiration to attain Awakening *for the sake of all living beings*. This aspiration inspired by compassion then becomes the motivation of the entire bodhisattva journey (131-32).

This *bodhicitta* is the altruistic desire to keep reincarnating within *samsara* to assist suffering beings in the tribulations of worldly life. The followers of Mahāyāna see this as a stark contrast to the *arhat*, which they saw as a selfish use of the enlightening knowledge of the Dharma. In the Mahāyāna tradition's *Vimalakirti Sutra*, or "The Layperson's Sutra," Bodhisattva Vimalakirti explains that enlightenment is available to all beings, opposing the Theravada's understanding that only a person that gives their life to the sangha can attain enlightenment. Vimalakirti, who lived in a pure Buddha Realm, decided to leave his place in paradise in order to be born again on the Earth in order to expound the Dharma and free the suffering (*Vimalakirti Sutra* 132-33). The Buddha wants all living beings to receive the gift of complete enlightenment like he did himself. So why, Mahāyāna asked, should anyone escape into *nirvana* while other beings are left in *samsara* to suffer?

As a bodhisattva grows during his or her journey through the Bodhisattva Path, the accumulation of *bodhicitta* nurtures the growth of the bodhisattva's wisdom. This wisdom is achieved by understanding the non-duality of the self and the world. This non-duality comes from the realization of the dependent arising of all things; emptiness of own-being pervades every object and entity in the cosmos. This perfection of wisdom is called *prajñā-pāramita*. Because of this wisdom, the bodhisattva understands that they are no different from the beings he is helping, and seeing this non-duality, is able to give himself compassionately to his cause with absolutely no self-centered involvement (134-35).

Great compassion and unselfish desire are the key components of the Bodhisattva ideal. This advent in Buddhism made sure that nirvana, although it is the ultimate salvific goal, does not take precedence over the other suffering beings of the cosmos. With this in mind, we can now move on to Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of supreme compassion.

Avalokiteśvara's Beginnings

If a bodhisattva is advanced enough in his calling – having mastered meditation, the Six (or Ten) Perfections, and perfecting wisdom – he becomes an object of devotion and worship. Avalokiteśvara is a *Mahāsattva*, a "Great Being," who is seen as a "cosmic" or "celestial" bodhisattva and the perfect embodiment of compassion. He has been elevated to the status of Buddhahood because because of his unrivaled and excellent compassion, he was seen as the most popular bodhisattva in India (Yu 7).

Chun-Fang Yu explains the origins of this bodhisattva as a

means competing with Hinduism as the two religions battled for prominence in India. She explains, “Developing alongside devotional Hinduism, Mahāyāna sutras such as the *Karandaavyuha Sutra*, composed during the fourth to seventh centuries, used cosmic symbolisms reminiscent of Shiva and Vishnu in describing Avalokiteśvara. The bodhisattva was venerated as supreme deity in his own right” (6). This excerpt from the *Longer Sukhavativyuha Sutra*, composed in the first or second century, in which Avalokiteśvara is mentioned as at the right hand of Amitabha Buddha, shows the bodhisattva as a being with the supreme qualities of a Buddha and as a being born in a celestial Buddha realm:

And all these rays having returned there again settle on the head of the lord; gods and men perceive the delight, because they have seen there this light of him. There rises the Buddha-son, glorious, he indeed the mighty Avalokiteśvara... The Bhagavat said: 'One of them, O Ananda, is the noble-minded Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara... And, O Ananda, these two were born there, having left this Buddha country here. And, O Ananda, those Bodhisattvas who have been born in that Buddha country are all endowed with the thirty-two marks of a great man, possessed of perfect members, skilled in meditation and wisdom, clever in all kinds of wisdom, having sharp organs, having well-restrained organs, having organs of sense capable of thorough knowledge, not mean, possessed of the five kinds of strength, of patience under censure, and of endless and boundless good qualities (*Sukhavativyuha Sutra* 12-13a, 34b-35).

Avalokiteśvara is indeed seen as a perfect being, without fault or vice. This undoubtedly helped this bodhisattva, and others like him, compete with deities of Hinduism who possessed generally the same characteristics.

Yu comments, "...literary and iconic data show the Avalokiteśvara appeared in north and northwest India no later than the second century CE and by the fifth century he was already widely worshipped there" (6). Although scholars are unsure of the precise date of Avalokiteśvara's introduction into the Mahāyāna literary tradition, there is evidence that the bodhisattva was presented within the time frame of 100-400 CE. Scholars came to this conclusion because Avalokiteśvara is mentioned in the *Longer Sukhāvativyūha Sutra*, the *Mahāvastu*, the *Karnadavyūha Sutra*, the *Druma-kinnara-rāja-pariprcchā Sutra*, the *Lotus Sutra*, and the *Heart Sutra*, which are all believed to be written before the year 300 CE. Another piece of evidence supporting this theory is the report of a Chinese pilgrim, named Fahsien, who journeyed to northern India around the year 400 CE. He reported that monks in the *sangha* were giving offerings to images of Avalokiteśvara (7-9).

At this time, images of Avalokiteśvara were much tamer than they would become as he moved through Asia. He was depicted in princely attire, with a lotus flower in his right hand, and a bottle of water in his left. The water bottle is an important item to note, because it symbolizes his intent for compassion; it is meant to convey that the bodhisattva will not stop until every thirsty person is nourished with water; likewise, he will not stray from his task until every person is alleviated from the fires of suffering. When he is depicted as holding a lotus, which symbolizes perfect wisdom, he is referred to by the moniker Padmapāni, or "Bearer of the Lotus." A depiction dated at 152 CE was found in Ahicchatra, located in Northern India, in which Avalokiteśvara was depicted in a Buddha triad, with the Buddha in the middle, Padmapāni on the left, and

Vajrapāni on the right. In these depictions, the Buddha is the symbol of both wisdom and compassion, and Avalokiteśvara is there to support the Buddha's compassion with his own. These depictions are attributed to be from early in the first millennia, but as the centuries went on, Avalokiteśvara's images changed to fit the cultures and places the bodhisattva was transported to (9-10).

Avalokiteśvara to Guanyin: A Gender Change in China

Avalokiteśvara, in India, Tibet, and all other Asian countries except China, is depicted as male or androgynous. In China, Avalokiteśvara is known as Guanyin. Chun-Fang Yu speaks to the popularity of Guanyin in China: "Everybody knows how to chant O-mi-t'o-fo [Amitābha], and every household worships Guanyin" (1). Yu says that just as Buddhism was transformed into Chinese Buddhism, the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara was transformed into Guanyin through the assimilation of the bodhisattva into Chinese culture.

The *Lotus Sutra* refers to Avalokiteśvara being able to take thirty-three different forms in order to help beings who are suffering. Only seven of these forms are feminine and the other forms are of Vedic and Hindu origin. But when the sutra was translated into China in 286 CE, the Vedic and Hindu references were erased and so were the predominately masculine forms of Avalokiteśvara. These masculine forms were converted to mostly feminine forms; this is seen as one of the causes for the gender swap and the transformation of the bodhisattva into Guanyin (47-8).

Chun-Fang Yu, in explaining some of the reasons for the feminization of Avalokiteśvara, relates to her reader the story of a princess named Miao-Shan. This princess was the third daughter of a king. When she was young, she was drawn to Buddhism and kept a vegetarian diet, read sutras during the day, and meditated at night. When she was at a marriageable age, she refused to marry, which made her father very angry because, lacking male offspring, he was looking for a suitable candidate to take his place on the throne by giving his crown to one of his sons-in-law. Miao-Shan's father punished her severely for her refusal and eventually exiled her to a nunnery. When she did not give up her religious affiliation, the king burned down the nunnery, killed five hundred nuns, and had Miao-Shan executed. Her soul was then allowed, by the grace of the gods, to travel the hell realms and preach to their residence. After this, she was allowed to reenter her body and achieved enlightenment. During this time, her father had become very ill. Miao-Shan heard of her father's condition and disguised herself as a mendicant and went to the king's bedside. She offered to give the king a medicine that would cure his ailment, but the medicine would require the eyes and hands of someone who never felt anger. She left the king's home and was met by his messengers when she willingly gave them her own eyes and hands. The king recovered and led a royal party to give thanks to his redeemer. When he arrived, he recognized the eyeless and handless bhikkhuni (female monk) as his third daughter. He was so upset that he and his entire royal family and entourage converted to Buddhism. Having served her purpose, she transformed into her true form as bodhisattva Guanyin, bearing one-thousand eyes and one-thousand arms. It is also interesting to note that the nineteenth day of the second month of the Chinese calendar

is Miao-Shan's birthday, which is now celebrated throughout the country as the birthday of Guanyin (293-95).

In most early sutras that are popular in China, Avalokiteśvara is not tied to a specific gender. The bodhisattva is referred to as generally genderless and the image that is most popular is the depiction of the bodhisattva with multiple arms and heads. In the *Surangama Sutra*, Avalokiteśvara describes itself:

When I first realized the hearing mind which was most profound, the Essence of Mind (Tathāgatagarbha) disengaged itself from hearing and could no longer be divided by seeing, hearing, feeling, and knowing, and so became one pure and clean all-pervading precious Bodhi. This is why I can take on different wonderful forms and master a countless number of esoteric mantras. I can appear with one, three, five, seven, nine eleven and up to 108, 1,000, 10,000, and 84,000 sovereign faces; with two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen, sixteen, eighteen, twenty, twenty-four and up to 108, 1,000, 10,000 and 84,000 arms making various gestures (*mudras*); and with two, three, four, nine up to 108, 1,000, 10,000, and 84,000 clean and pure precious eyes, either merciful or wrathful, and in a state either of still imperturbability or of absolute wis (*prajnaparamita*) to save and protect living beings so that they can enjoy the great freedom (47-8).

With the story of Miao-Shan, backed by the Chinese *Lotus Sutra* and Avalokiteśvara's speech in the *Surangama Sutra*, worshipers and believers in Avalokiteśvara have a rational narrative to support their belief, because of the bodhisattva's ability to take the form of almost anything, this cosmic power chose to incarnate in China as a female. This made Avalokiteśvara and Buddhism

particularly accessible to the Chinese because they already had a notion of a mercy goddess, and the bodhisattva fit squarely in place.

We see here that Avalokiteśvara's role as bodhisattva of compassion is foundational to its role in Buddhist practice, but with no references to gender whatsoever. This is because the bodhisattva is genderless and can take any form necessary to help assuage the suffering of living beings. The malleability of Buddhism as it moved through Asia is especially prevalent with the example of Guanyin.

The Narrative of Avalokiteśvara in Tibet

Tibetan Buddhists, or *Vajrayana* – “Lightening Vehicle” – refer to Avalokiteśvara as Chenresi, but that is not the only difference of interpretation that they hold about this bodhisattva. Not only is the bodhisattva worshipped as the patron deity of Tibet, but the Dalai Lama is believed to be an incarnation of Avalokiteśvara. The Dalai Lama is a figure of extreme compassion and peace-making and according to Tibetan Buddhists Avalokiteśvara lives among us.

Here is where the radical transformation of Avalokiteśvara's depiction takes place. In Tibetan Buddhism, the bodhisattva is not portrayed as a four-limbed deity, but an almost inhuman god. Sogyal Rinpoche gives us the image of this bodhisattva, saying, “Compassion is not true compassion unless it is active. Avalokiteśvara, the Buddha of Compassion, is often represented in Tibetan iconography as having a thousand eyes... and a thousand arms” (Rinpoche 191).

Tibetans tell a story about how Avalokiteśvara beheld the Tibetan people and through an overwhelming sense of compassion chose to select them as his personal people. As he came to this conclusion, he said to Amitabha Buddha, "If I should ever become discouraged at the difficulty of my task, may my body be torn to shreds and my head split in ten pieces!"

With this in mind, he chose to reincarnate in Tibet, lifetime after lifetime, in order to prevent the wars, anger, and strife that was permeating the society. After centuries, nothing improved, and he began to have doubts about his purpose in Tibet. From his grief, he sheds two tears and these tears become White Tara and Green Tara. The two Taras comfort him through his trials as he keeps reincarnating to make life better for the people of Tibet. Their comfort lets him persist for a few hundred more lifetimes, but he soon becomes altogether discouraged. His discouragement leads to the fruition his vow to Amitabha Buddha. His head and his body is torn into a thousand pieces and his head is shredded into ten shards. When Amitabha hears his groans of pain he arrives, and with a wave of his hand, the thousand pieces of his body become one thousand arms and each arm possesses an all-seeing eye, while the ten shards of his head become ten heads. From this myth came the famous Tibetan prayer:

*With the thousand arms of the thousand wheel-turning emperors,
And the thousand eyes of the thousand buddhas of this good eon,
You who manifest whatsoever necessary to educate whomsoever--
I salute you, noble Avalokiteśvara! (Thurman 24-5)*

This story explains the origin of Avalokiteśvara as the Dalai Lama and also the images of the bodhisattva that were created when Buddhism travelled to Tibet. This leads us back to what Sogyal Rinpoche said about compassion – it is useless unless it is active. Rinpoche concludes with this explanation of the purpose and symbolism of this myth, saying, "...[Avalokiteśvara has] a thousand eyes that see the pain in all corners of the universe, and a thousand arms to reach out to all corners of the universe to extend his help" (Rinpoche 191).

Conclusion

In the preface of her in-depth study of Avalokiteśvara, and his Chinese rendition Guanyin, Chun-Fang Yu gives us an account of her own experience with this bodhisattva goddess. At the end of World War II, Yu and her family were waiting to get on a boat to go back to their home when her grandmother claimed to see a vision of Guanyin in the middle of the Yangtze River motioning for them to not board the boat. Accompanied with this vision, Yu's grandmother also felt an extreme sense of anxiety. Her grandmother had been a life-long devotee of Guanyin and insisted that her and her family not take refuge on the boat. Her daughter, who was highly educated, told her it was suspicion and super-natural nonsense, but the grandmother persisted until her family gave in. They watched the boat dock to pick up passengers and embark to its next destination. As grandmother felt her anxiety lessen, the family watched as the boat enter the main current of the river and explode before their eyes. The ship had hit mines that had been planted there during the war and from the explosion that followed the ship sank and all the passengers perished (IX-X). This incident forever shook Chu-Fang

Yu, sparking a thirty year study of Guanyin and eventually ended up shaping her book titled *Guanyin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara*.

The bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara was used in this paper as a tool to understand the malleable yet uncompromising nature of the Buddhist principles of compassion and loving-kindness. Although this paper could have been written without the mention of this bodhisattva, it was beneficial to use this entity as a lens through which to gain more understanding of not only the beliefs and practices of the Buddhists who hold Avalokiteśvara in high regard, but to better understand these people and better understand how even though Buddhism has changed shape through its migrations it has not compromised its core values.

With this brief study, we have seen how different Buddhist cultures view Avalokiteśvara. This bodhisattva has had a major impact on Buddhism and its spread across the world. He, and in China, she, has invoked a devotion that is inspiring, to say the least. With Avalokiteśvara's whole persona being focused on uncompromising compassion for all, it is no surprise that this bodhisattva is sometimes likened to the Jesus Christ of Buddhism.

In a fitting statement, Sogyal Rinpoche says, to give this study a proper conclusion,

The Dalai Lama is, I believe, nothing less than the face of the Buddha of compassion turned toward an endangered humanity, the incarnation of Avalokiteśvara not only for Tibet and not only for Buddhists, but for the whole world – in need, as never before,

of healing compassion and of his example of total dedication to peace (Rinpoche 105).

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