



AVALOKITESVARA BODHISATTVA AND THE ISSUE OF AVALOKITESVARA'S GENDER

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ABSTRACT :

The Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara is one of the prominent Bodhisattvas in the Mahayana Buddhist scriptures. He is a Bodhisattva who has a great influence on the practice of prayer. However, it is interesting that his appearance in Buddhist culture is different. There are many incarnations of him, especially including both male and female bodies. Depending on the culture of the countries from India to Tibet, China, Vietnam, each place has a different influence on Bodhisattva.

Introduction :

Among all the Bodhisattvas, Avalokitesvara is supreme and unique. He is widely worshipped in all the countries of northern Buddhism including Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea, and Japan.

The Avalokitesvara Bodhisattvas are common figures in Buddhist literature and art. A striking theme in popular literature is that of the concealed greatness of the bodhisattvas. In popular folklore bodhisattvas appear as something like savior deities, a role they acquired both through the evolution of earlier ideas and through fusion with already existing local gods. In numerous stories ordinary or even distinctly humble individuals are revealed to be great bodhisattvas who have assumed common forms to save others.

Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva is the embodiment of great compassion. He has vowed to free all sentient beings from suffering. He has had great powers and can help all sentient beings. His skillful means are limitless and he can appear in any form in all the six realms of existence to relieve the suffering of the sentient beings who live there. He vowed to rescue those who call on him when they are in suffering.

Ohn Daido Looi a Zen Master who founded Zen Mountain Monastery in New York said:

"Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva is the Hearer of the Cries of the World. And one of the characteristics of Avalokitesvara is that she manifests herself in accord with the circumstances. So she always presents herself in a form that's appropriate to what's going on. In the bowery, she manifests as a bum. Tonight, in bar-rooms across the country, she'll manifest as a drunk. Or as a motorist on the highway, or as a fireman, or a physician, etc., Always responding in accord with the circumstances, in a form appropriate to the circumstances."

In the Indian Art and Literature, all images and pictures of the bodhisattva have been depicted and exhibited in the posture of male. It may not be easy to find out a data in the Indian history of Avalokitesvara asking whether the Bodhisattva was pertaining to masculine or feminine gender. The long-term history of the Hindu tradition that did not offer permission to women to enter religious life may also be expected, in one way or the other, to support such an attitude, indeed. Hence, ideas holding that the transformation of Avalokitesvara from man into woman took place in India are to be treated as without foundation.

Avalokitesvara who is a male Bodhisattva in India was transformed into a goddess in a Chinese male oriented society. A preliminary statement can be made here, that civilization of Buddhism led to the creation of the Goddess of mercy with Chinese characteristics from a male deity with Indian characteristics. What brought about this change in the gender of this Bodhisattva and why? This transformation of a male deity in India into a female Goddess of mercy in a strongly patriarchal Chinese society both at the terrestrial and celestial levels has surprised many. Celestial because in The SukhavatiVyuh Sutra for any woman to gain entrance into the Paradise of Amitabha, she should shed her female form and assume a male form. For a female divinity to have grown in the terrestrial level in a male dominated society, and to have given rise to a cult is equally strange. It is not that there were no goddesses prior to the introduction of Buddhism in China.

The transformation does not appear to have come about suddenly. The male Bodhisattva was gradually given an ambiguous form so that people saw what they desired to see. The female anatomy was conspicuously absent, but from a graceful body structure one could feel the feminine element. At the same time the male characteristics of moustache and beard were also visible in the form of tendril like lines. The practical way of Chinese thought, the gender of Bodhisattva had step by step been changed after about five hundred years when the worship of Avalokitesvara was firmly rooted in to the Chinese soil.

THE AVALOKITESVARA BODHISATTVA: MALE OR FEMALE

Questions regarding gender equality in Buddhism have existed from the time of the Buddha himself. Accounts of the inclusion of women in Buddhist practice vary greatly, some promoting the ideal of gender equality or the inconsequence of gender, while others promote the idea that masculinity is necessary for enlightenment.

In the concept of the *Mahayana* order, when a person is free of all attachments and realizes the truth of existence, gender will be of no consequence; it does not exist in the first place. *Guan-yin* epitomizes this concept by incarnating as both male and female.

The artists of the T'ang dynasty usually represented *Avalokita* as a youth with a slight moustache and the evidence as to early female figures does not seem to me strong¹.

The *Saddharma Pundarika Sutra* (Lotus Sutra)² is a primary source in *Mahayana* Buddhist Texts, the *Sutra* reveals several accounts of the complete disregard for the issue of gender as it pertains to Buddhist practice and the attainment of enlightenment. The concept of gender change for enlightenment's sake is seen in the chapter 12 *Devadatta*, in the tale of the Dragon King's daughter³. The Dragon King's daughter is notified that she cannot attain Buddhahood because of her gender. In response, she undergoes transformation into a male as she reaches enlightenment. Lucinda Joy Peach notes that though examples of gender images in the Lotus *Sutra* vary, the overall message is that "because all persons possess Buddha-nature, and not only those of a certain birth, gender, aptitude, and so forth, the possibility of full Enlightenment is available to all beings"⁴.

According to Chinese culture, the attributes of *Guan-yin*, for example mercy and compassion were considered exclusively feminine characteristics. This assigning of gender-specific characteristics to a more acceptable figure may be the simplest explanation for the change from the male *Avalokitesvara* to a female *Guan-yin*. Lee Irwin said that, perhaps this transformation is due to "a fundamental collective need constantly asserting itself for an active manifestation of the feminine, imbued with celestial potency"⁵.

According to Clark, another potential factor is the characterization of *Guan-yin* as the embodiment of wisdom and compassion. Compassion is particularly seen as embodied in the female gender⁶.

Gender is important in some Buddhist traditions. For example, in the Theravada tradition, the female are subordinated to the male. In Japan, monks have a higher status than women. However, in Taiwan, monks are not that predominant, and nuns are respected.

In India *Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva* was worshipped as a god but some of the images display the feminine traits in his character and 'endowed with a charm beyond the differentiation of sex, a youthful male form and feminine grace have been perfectly fused⁷. In Tibet no female form is found.

So, *Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva* is portrayed as bisexual, both male and female, uniting the opposites. In this androgyny he personifies the principle of emptiness: *Samsara* is *Nirvana*, *Nirvana* is *Samsara*: there are no exclusive categories. Today "bisexual" has also come to mean being both heterosexual and homosexual, uniting the opposites. When the Buddhists imported statues of *Avalokitesvara* to China, the Chinese who did not have a tradition of bisexual gods, understood the figure to be female. He/she became the "Goddess of Compassion" *Kuan Yin*.

AVALOKITESVARA THE BODHISATTVA OF GREAT COMPASSION

Compassion for others had always been regarded as a virtue in early *Buddhism*, but it had a somewhat subordinate place to wisdom. In *Mahayana Buddhism*, compassion received an equal emphasis with wisdom, perhaps because the *Mahayana* was more consciously universal and covered a wider sector of society.

According to A. K. Warder in his work assumed that the 'thought of enlightenment' as understood in *Mahayana Sutras* is restricted to the thought of becoming a *Buddha*, with all that that now implied, consequently it is a thought peculiar to the bodhisattva: when one has the 'thought of enlightenment' it means one has set out on the long way of the bodhisattva towards *Buddhahood*⁸.

In *Mahayana* the emphasis has been put on the altruistic inclinations and activities of the *Bodhisattva*. From the outset the Bodhisattva strives toward a plane where there are no differences between his ego and his neighbour's he identifies his ego absolutely and entirely, with that of others. He is extolled as making great efforts to save all suffering beings. He expressed his fervent joy through his good deeds to all beings; he prays to the *Buddhas*

¹ See Fenollosa, *Epoch of Chinese and Japanese Art*, Vol I. pp. 103-124; Johnston, *Buddhist China*, 275 Several Chinese deities appear to be of uncertain or varying sex. Thus Chun-ti is sometimes described as a deified Chinese General and sometimes identified with the Indian goddess Marici. Yu-ti, generally masculine, is sometimes feminine. See Doré, *Le*, Still more strangely the *Patriarch Asvaghosha* (Ma Ming) is represented by a female figure. On the other hand the monk Ta Shéng (c. 705 a.d.) is said to have been an incarnation of the female Kuan Yin.

² Burton Watson (trans), *Saddharma Pundarika Sutra, (The Lotus Sutra)*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

³ *Ibid*, p. 185-189.

⁴ Peach, Lucinda Joy, *Social Responsibility, Sex Change, and Salvation: Gender Justice in the Lotus Sutra*, Philosophy East and West, Vol. 52, No. 1. (Jan., 2002), p. 62.

⁵ Irwin Lee, *Divinity and Salvation: The Great Goddesses of China*, Asian Folklore Studies. Vol. 49, No. 1, 1990, p. 59.

⁶ Clark, Anthony E. *Personal Communication*, June and July, 2007 and Lectures for the following classes: History 405 History of Han China, Spring 2007; History 306 History of East Asian Thought, Fall 2006; History 404 Modern China, Spring 2006; History 403 Chinese Civilization to 1500 A.D. Lectures conducted at The University of Alabama.

⁷ Heinrich Zimmer, *The art of Indian Asia*, 2 vols., New York, 1955, p. 183; in the Simhanada form of *Avalokitesvara*, the Bodhisattva is represented seated on a roaring lion—this animal mount is borrowed from the Hindu pantheon and Simhanada-*Avalokitesvara* has been provided with the lion of Durga which accords with the preponderance of feminine in his character.

⁸ A. K. Warder. *India Buddhism*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Reprint Delhi: 2008, pp. 340-341.

that they may light the lamp of religion for all beings who are in ignorance-he prays for the salvation of all beings and finally offers himself for all being.

Of these four *Bodhisattvas* were mention in the *Mahayana* scriptures that have been translated into Chinese, are *Avalokitesvara*, *Manjusri*, *Ksitiigarbha*, and *Samantabhadra*. *Avalokitesvara*-known in Chinese as *Kuan-yin* is the most widely worshipped and has come to be believed in by monks and laymen as the goddess of compassionate love who rescues mankind from present ills and lavishes good fortune upon the world⁹. *Avalokitesvara* motivated by pure compassion and love as a Goddess of Infinite Compassion is a *Bodhisattva* the personification of *Bodhicitta* and he wish to attain complete enlightenment for all beings. He is venerated as the ideal of *Karuna*, the activity of compassion in the world.

The Bodhisattva's vow is expressed ritually in a litany all *Mahayanists* are urged to repeat:

"However innumerable beings are,

I vow to save them;

However inexhaustible the passions are,

I vow to extinguish them;

However immeasurable the *Dharmas* are,

I vow to master them;

However incomparable the *Buddha* truth is,

I vow to attain it"¹⁰.

Bodhisattva *Avalokitesvara* is viewed as an archetype of compassion. She is largely used as an inspirational image and way of speaking about the power of compassion, and is not explained as a deity or a "real" personified force.

To communicate the emptiness of Absolute Truth, radical monism, and compassion as the means to salvation, the *Mahayanists* told the story of the Bodhisattva *Avalokitesvara*. The myth tells that the lovely, androgynous saint, *Avalokitesvara*, was on the verge of entering into *Nirvana*, thus leaving behind forever the world of *Samsara*. Just as his meditation was deepening and his insight into the transience of all phenomena growing, he was distracted by a great groaning, rising up all about him in the world. He came out of his trance and, looking around him, asked: What is this groaning I hear? All the birds and trees and grass and all sentient beings replied to him: *Avalokitesvara*, our lives are times of suffering and pain; we live in a delusion from which we cannot seem to escape. You are so beautiful and so kind. Your presence here among us has given us joy and a reason for living. We all love you so, and we are saddened by the prospect of your leaving us. And so we groan.

At that the young saint was filled with compassion and chose not to enter *Nirvana*, but to remain in the cycle of birth and death so that the others would not have to suffer. And he vowed to renounce *Nirvana* until all sentient beings were equally enlightened. He saw that it was better that one should suffer than that all should. And he took upon himself their suffering, so that he alone would wander the cycles of karma, far from the homeland¹¹.

In the Buddhist scriptures, we learn of the *Bodhisattva*, who attains the perfect state of *Nirvana*, the extinction of all desires and blemishes, but choose to return to *Samsara*, the world of suffering beings. He does not disappear into a heaven of his own making, but places himself in the service of others¹². And the mission of life turns out to be the service of others². The *Avalokitesvara* Bodhisattva returns because he is impelled by an innate overflow of compassion. The Buddhist scriptures tell us that our karma is our refuge: it is shaped both by our inheritance and by our own effort. Therefore, to shower compassion on one's fellow beings is to build a karmic bridge for them between *Samsara* and *Nirvana*¹³. Transferring his own merit to others effects this. As Suzuki puts it:

"Whatever rewards he (the *Bodhisattva*) may get for his self-enjoyment as the karma of his virtuous deeds, he would turn them over (*parivarna*) towards the uplifting of the suffering masses. And this self-sacrifice, this unselfish devotion to the welfare of his fellow-beings constitutes the essence of *Bodhisattvahood*"¹⁴.

The popularity of *Avalokitesvara* is due to the personification of compassion and wisdom. While wisdom makes the *Bodhisattva* close to the human minds, compassion makes him (or her) close to the human hearts. All other deities possess these two qualities to a certain degree, but for

⁹ M.G. Chitkara, *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism: A World Faith So Says Bodhisattva*, Vol III, A.P.H Publishing Corporation, New Delhi: 1999, pp. xlii.

¹⁰ Here's a more contemporary statement of the vows and understanding of what the bodhisattva identity might mean to us modern Americans today:

"However countless sentient beings, I vow to save them.

However inexhaustible the resistance, I vow to relinquish it.

However many the doors of incarnation, I vow to enter them all.

However incomparable the highest perspective, I vow to attain it

The San Francisco-based Gay Buddhist Fellowship issued another "updated" version of the vows in their newsletter in 1998.

I vow to celebrate for all sentient beings.

I vow to enjoy my delusions in vivid and wonderful ways without being attached.

I vow to dance through the Dharma Gates I am presented with and fully experience them.

I vow to appreciate the fullness and emptiness of all my senses and be with them without attachment as Buddha taught. See Toby Johnson, *Techniques of The World Saviors: Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara*, from *The Myth of the Great Secret: An Appreciation of Joseph Campbell*, Celestial Arts, 1990.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² M.G. Chitkara, *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism: A World Faith Bodhisattva and Selflessness*, Vols XIV, A.P.H Publishing Corporation, New Delhi: 2002, pp. 414.

¹³ Badri Narayan, *The Tender Humanity of Animals*, The Times of India, January 4, 1998, p. 13.

¹⁴ Suzuki, *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism*. New York, Schocken Books, 1963, p. 282.

Avalokitesvara, being their perfect representation, it is easier for him (or her) to assimilate the attributes of other *Brahmanical* deities like *Brahma*, *Visnu* and *Siva* thus becoming the most powerful of all spiritual powers, the father and mother of all.

The actual basis of practice is the altruistic intention to become enlightened, the determination to leave cyclic existence being a preparation for that. The six *Paramita* (perfections) are the topics of training of *Bodhisattvas*.

The Sanskrit word *Paramita* means, “having reached the opposite shore”. In *Mahayana* “Greater Vehicle” *Buddhism*, any of the perfections, or transcendental virtues, practiced by *bodhisattvas* “*Buddhas-to-be*” in advanced stages of their path toward enlightenment. The six virtues are generosity (*dana-paramita*); morality (*sila-paramita*); perseverance (*ksanti-paramita*); vigour (*virya-paramita*); meditation, or concentration (*dhyana-paramita*); and wisdom (*prajna-paramita*). Some lists expand the virtues to ten by adding skill in the means of helping others (*upaya-paramitas*), profound resolution to produce enlightenment (*pranidhana-paramita*), perfection of the 10 powers (*balu-paramita*), and practice of transcendent knowledge (*jnana-paramita*). In *Buddhism*, the world of a deluded common mortal is compared to “this shore”, while that of a *Buddha*, the enlightened one is compared to “the other shore”. *Bodhisattva* practices are likened to the process of crossing from the shore of delusion to the shore of enlightenment¹⁵.

AVALOKITESVARA: MOTHER KUAN-YIN IN CHINA

In Chinese Buddhism, *Guan Yin*/ *Guan Yin*/ *Kuan Yin*/ *Kuan Yin* is synonymous with the *Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara*, the pinnacle of mercy, compassion, kindness and love.

The great compassion and miracles of *Avalokitesvara* are accounted in many Buddhist *Sutras*. For example, the *Avalokitesvara-Sutra* was incorporated into the widely popular *Saddharma Pundarika-Sutra*, (*Lotus Sutra*), in the 3rd century CE, though it continues to circulate as an independent work in China and is the main scripture of his cult worship there or Great Compassion *Dharma* of the Thousand handed and Thousand-eyed *Kuanyin*. And the Ritual of Great Compassion Repentance and the Domestication of the Thousand-handed and Thousand-eyed *Kuan-yin* became popular at some Temple in China.

In the work “*Kuan Yin - The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*” of Chun-fang Yu¹⁶ given some points about the Great compassion *Dhamma* of *Avalokitesvara* (*Kuan Yin*), as follows:

The *Sūtra* says:

“If a monk, nun, layman, laywoman, young man, or young girl wants to keep and recite the *Dharma* you must give rise to the heart of compassion toward all sentient beings and make the following vows after me:

Namah Avalokitesvara of Great Compassion, may I quickly learn everything about the *Dharma*.

Namah Avalokitesvara of Great Compassion, may I speedily obtain the eye of wisdom.

Namah Avalokitesvara of Great Compassion, may I quickly save all sentient beings.

Namah Avalokitesvara of Great Compassion, may I speedily obtain skill- in-means.

Namah Avalokitesvara of Great Compassion, may I quickly sail on the *Prajñā* boat.

Namah Avalokitesvara of Great Compassion, may I speedily cross over the ocean of suffering.

Namah Avalokitesvara of Great Compassion, may I quickly obtain the way of discipline and meditation.

Namah Avalokitesvara of Great Compassion, may I speedily ascend the *Nirvana* mountain.

Namah Avalokitesvara of Great Compassion, may I quickly enter the house of non-action.

Namah Avalokitesvara of Great Compassion, may I speedily achieve the *Dharma*-[^] ody.

If I lace a mountain of knives, may it naturally crumble; if I face a roaring fire, may it naturally bum out; if I face hell, may it naturally disappear; if I face a hungry ghost, may it naturally be satiated; if I face an *asura*, may its evil heart naturally become tame; and if I face an animal, may it naturally obtain great wisdom.

This is followed by another *Sutra* passage in which *Avalokitesvara* declares to the Buddha: “If anyone recites the *Dharani*, should he fall into the three evil realm of rebirth, or not being bom into one of the *Buddha* lands, or not attaining unlimited *Samadhi* and eloquence, or not getting all his wishes and desires in the present life, I will not achieve complete, perfect enlightenment. If one does not obtain all that one wishes for in the present life, the *Dharani* is not called the Great Compassionate Heart *Dharani*.” This is then followed by collective chanting of the *Dharani*, repeated twenty-one times¹⁷.

Such belief can be traced back to the Sung and earlier. Since the *Ch'ing*, the chanting of the Great Compassion *Dharani*, together with that of the *Heart Sutra*, has been a part of the morning and evening services of Chinese temples.

The Great Compassion *Dharma* is undoubtedly one of the most effective mediums promoting the cult of *Kuan-yin*. The popularity of this *Dharani*, as well as the *Sutra* from which it comes, is also evidenced by their ubiquitous presence in pamphlets published by the faithful and donated to temples for free circulation.

Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva is with thousand hands and eyes on the palms of each hand. The thousand eyes allow the bodhisattva to see the sufferings of sentient beings, and the thousand hands allow her to reach out to help them.

¹⁵ M.G. Chitkara, *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism: A World Faith Bodhisattva and Selflessness*, Vols XIV, A.P.H Publishing Corporation, New Delhi: 2002, pp. 414.

¹⁶ Chun-fang Yu, *Kuan-yin- The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*, Columbia University Press Published, New York: 1893.

¹⁷ Chun-fang Yu, *Kuan-yin- The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*, Columbia University Press Published, New York: 1893, p. 265-266.

The god *Avalokitesvara - Bodhisattva* of infinite compassion and mercy is the personification of perfect compassion and determination. His vow is to save all sentient beings before entering the bliss of *Buddhahood*. Actually, anyone can be like *Kuan Yin*. You may say that you don't have a thousand eyes or a thousand arms or that you lack skillful means, but it is your compassion that can transform you into a *Kuan Yin*. With your eyes and hands, you can help others. With your compassion, you can bring peace and tranquility to this world¹⁸.

Conclusion :

We can affirm that in Mahayana Buddhist scriptures, the appearance of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas becomes diverse with many different incarnations. This clearly reflects the difference in the concept of the Buddha's body appearing to save all living beings through the development periods of Buddhism. Through the transformation of different images of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, from the male body in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism, Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara is built with the symbol of a woman with compassion like a mother loving her child.

It can be said that in Mahayana Buddhism, Buddhists are ready to accept the transformation of incarnations, Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara becomes a symbol of great compassion, always protecting and saving suffering beings.

His manifestation in male or female gender is no longer important, but mainly the mystery, compassion, charity, always close to helping suffering beings. The image of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara incarnated as a kind mother has deeply engraved and greatly influenced the thoughts of Buddhists in China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam...

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¹⁸ <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/kuanyin-txt.htm>