

An Introduction to Kuan Yin: Goddess of Compassion and Mercy

Some Thoughts About the Origin of Kuan-yin

“The introduction of Buddhism into China was carried out by Central Asian, particularly Parthian, and Indian missionary monks who, following the Silk Road used by caravan traders, arrived in China during the second half of the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.—220 C. E.).” (from p. 15, in “Kuan Yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara” by Chun-fang Yu)

“The energies of early missionaries and their Chinese collaborators were concentrated on the translation of Buddhist scriptures. Depending on the personal backgrounds and interests of the translators, the sutras chosen for translation could be from early Buddhist or Mahayana traditions.” (from p. 16, in “Kuan Yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara” by Chun-fang Yu)

“Avalokiteśvara is a bodhisattva who embodies the compassion of all Buddhas. He is one of the more widely revered bodhisattvas in mainstream Mahayana Buddhism.” (from Avalokiteśvara entry in Wikipedia, see 1st paragraph)

“According to Mahayana doctrine, Avalokiteśvara is the bodhisattva who has made a great vow to listen to the prayers of all sentient beings in times of difficulty, and to postpone his own Buddhahood until he has assisted every being on Earth in achieving nirvana. Mahayana sutras associated with Avalokiteśvara include the Heart Sutra (as disciple of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni) and the Lotus Sutra, particularly the 25th chapter, which is sometimes referred to as the *Avalokiteśvara Sutra*.” (from Avalokiteśvara entry in Wikipedia, in “Origin” section)

“... master translator Kumarajiva (ca. 401-413)... together with his assistants, produced the definitive translations of most of the important Mahayana Sutras.” (p. 17, in “Kuan Yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara” by Chun-fang Yu)

“It is interesting to note that Kumarajiva knew that the bodhisattva (Avalokitesvara) was also called (in Chinese) Kuan-tzu-tsai (Master Perceiver), but used the other name (Kuan-shh-nien) (Perceiver of the World’s Thoughts) in his translation instead.” (p. 39, in “Kuan Yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara” by Chun-fang Yu)

The “Universal Gateway” Chapter of the Lotus Sutra

“Anyone who visits a temple in Taiwan, Hong Kong, or even Mainland China can find posters, pamphlets, brochures, and books—on the side tables or stacked on bookshelves along the walls of the main hall. They are printed by lay devotees and are placed there for visitors to browse through or take home for later reading. Among the pious literature distributed for free in this fashion, there are many canonical or indigenous scriptures... Among canonical works... the ‘Universal Gateway’ chapter of the Lotus Sutra is by far the favorite....” (from p. 151, in “Kuan Yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara” by Chun-fang Yu)

Here is an excerpt from the "Universal Gateway" chapter (Chapter 25) of the Lotus Sutra (trans. Burton Watson, at http://lotus.nichirenshu.org/lotus/sutra/english/watson/lsw_chap25.htm , beginning about one third of the way into the chapter)

Bodhisattva Inexhaustible Intent said to the Buddha, "World-Honored One, Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds-- how does he come and go in this saha world? How does he preach the Law for the sake of living beings? How does the power of expedient means apply in this case?"

The Buddha said to Bodhisattva Inexhaustible Intent: "Good man, if there are living beings in the land who need someone in the body of a Buddha in order to be saved, Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds immediately manifests himself in a Buddha body and preaches the Law for them.

If they need someone in a pratyekabuddha's body in order to be saved, immediately he manifests a pratyekabuddha's body and preaches the Law to them.

If they need a voice-hearer to be saved, immediately he becomes a voice-hearer and preaches the Law for them.

If they need King Brahma to be saved, immediately he becomes King Brahma and preaches the Law for them.

If they need the lord Shakra to be saved, immediately he becomes the lord Shakra and preaches the Law for them.

If they need the heavenly being Freedom to be saved, immediately he becomes the heavenly being Freedom and preaches the Law for them.

If they need a great general of heaven to be saved, immediately he becomes a great general of heaven and preaches the Law for them.

If they need Vaishravana to be saved, immediately he becomes Vaishravana and preaches the Law for them.

If they need a petty king to be saved, immediately he becomes a petty king and preaches the law for them.

If they need a rich man to be saved, immediately he becomes a rich man and preaches the Law for them.

If they need a householder to be saved, immediately he becomes a householder and preaches the Law for them.

If they need a chief minister to be saved, immediately he becomes a chief minister and preaches the Law for them.

If they need a Brahman to be saved, immediately he becomes a Brahman and preaches the Law for them.

If they need a monk, a nun, a layman believer, or a laywoman believer to be saved, immediately he becomes such and preaches the Law for them.

If they need the wife of a rich man, of a householder, a chief minister, or a Brahman to be saved, immediately he becomes such and preaches the Law for them.

If they need a young boy or a young girl to be saved, immediately he becomes such and preaches the Law for them.

If they need a heavenly being, a dragon, a yaksha, a gandharva, an asura, a garuda, a kimnara, a mahoraga, a human or a nonhuman being to be saved, immediately he becomes all of these and preaches the Law for them.....”

"Inexhaustible Intent, this Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds has succeeded in acquiring benefits such as these and, taking on a variety of different forms, goes about among the lands saving living beings....”

The second half of the “Universal Gateway” chapter expands further on the nature of this bodhisattva. That part of the chapter is concisely summed up in this excerpt from *Myths and Legends of China*, by Edward T.C. Werner (1922). (From Chapter 10, titled “The Goddess of Mercy: The Guardian Angel of Buddhism) (at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cfu/mlc/mlc12.htm>)

“She is called Kuan Yin because at any cry of misery she ‘hears the voice and removes the sorrow.’ Her appellation is ‘Taking-away-fear Buddha.’

If in the midst of the fire the name of Kuan Yin is called, the fire cannot burn;

if tossed by mountain billows, call her name, and shallow waters will be reached.

If merchants go across the sea seeking gold, silver, pearls, and precious stones, and a storm comes up and threatens to carry the crew to the evil devil’s kingdom, if one on board calls on the name of Kuan Yin, the ship will be saved.

If one goes into a conflict and calls on the name of Kuan Yin, the sword and spear of the enemy fall harmless.

If the three thousand great kingdoms are visited by demons, call on her name, and these demons cannot with an evil eye look on a man.

If, within, you have evil thoughts, only call on Kuan Yin, and your heart will be purified; anger and wrath may be dispelled by calling on the name of Kuan Yin.....

Kuan Yin may take the form of a Buddha, a prince, a priest, a nun, a scholar, any form or shape, go to any kingdom, and preach the law throughout the earth.”

Kuan-Yin is Adopted and Domesticated by Chinese Culture

“(Initially)... Kuan-yin was perceived as masculine, and was so depicted in art prior to and during the T’ang (Dynasty) (618-907). However, by the early Sung (960-1279), around the eleventh century, some devotees saw Kuan-yin as a female deity, and new forms of feminine Kuan-yin images began to be created by Chinese artists. The feminine transformation of the bodhisattva probably reached its completion during the Yuan (1206-1368).” (from p. 6, in “Kuan Yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara” by Chun-fang Yu)

“Although Sutras glorifying Kuan-yin were translated into the Chinese quite early on, knowledge about and faith in the bodhisattva did not come from the sutras alone. Scriptural authority regarding Kuan-yin was made real through testimonials provided by actual persons who experienced life-saving miracles. At the same time, the kind of miracles handed down to us tended to conform to the ones promised in the sutras.” (from p. 24, in “Kuan Yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara” by Chun-fang Yu)

“... monks and literati played leading roles in the composition and compilation of miracle records, temple gazetteers, ritual texts, and possibly indigenous sutras glorifying Kuan-yin....” (from p. 25, in “Kuan Yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara” by Chun-fang Yu)

“It is through such stories that the Chinese people form a personal connection with Kuan-yin. The stories concretize the knowledge about Kuan-yin provided by the scriptures and make the sculpted and painted images of Kuan-yin come to life. Miracles tales teach people about Kuan-yin and validate what the scriptures claim the bodhisattva can do.... (Furthermore), experiences of miracles often lead to the creation of icons or, conversely, the worship of Kuan-yin images facilitate the experiences. Finally, how a person (who) experiences such a miracle sees Kuan-yin in a vision can often be predetermined by the existing iconography of the bodhisattva; or, in another direction, lead to the creation of new forms of the bodhisattva.” (p. 151-152, in “Kuan Yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara” by Chun-fang Yu)

“The Confucian tradition identified the Mandate of Heaven with the innate goodness of human nature, which was first emphasized by Mencius (c. 372-289 B.C.E.). Human nature is good because it is bestowed by the Way... to follow our inborn moral nature and cultivate it to its fullest potential should be the goal of humankind. In the Confucian tradition, the spiritual force fueling this self-transformation and self-realization is called ‘sincerity’ (ch’eng) or ‘humanity’ (jen).... When a person fully develops his or her nature through sincerity, he or she forms a trinity with Heaven and Earth. It is safe to say that this was the ultimate goal for Chinese who were educated in the literati tradition. But even for those who were not necessarily so educated... the belief in the cosmic power of sincerity was universal. The only difference is that the same spiritual force was directed towards making contact with Kuan-yin, instead of one’s own sagehood.” (from p. 155-156, in “Kuan Yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara” by Chun-fang Yu)

“... she draws near to the people and the people draw near to her....”

“No other figure in the Chinese pantheon appears in a greater variety of images, of which there are said to be thousands of different incarnations or manifestations.” (From the Holy Mountain Trading Company’s “The Legend of Quan Yin Goddess of Mercy”, at <http://www.holymtn.com/gods/kuanyin.htm>)

“The men love her, the children adore her, and the women chant her prayers. Whatever the temple may be, there is nearly always a chapel for Kuan Yin within its precincts; she lives in many homes, and in many, many hearts she sits enshrined. She is the patron goddess of mothers, and when we remember the relative value of a son in Chinese estimation we can appreciate the heartiness of the worship. She protects in sorrow, and so millions of times the prayer is offered, ‘Great mercy, great pity, save from sorrow, save from suffering,’ or, as it is in the books, ‘Great mercy, great pity, save from misery, save from evil, broad, great, efficacious, responsive Kuan Yin Buddha.... Other gods are feared, she is loved; others have black, scornful faces, her countenance is radiant as gold, and gentle as the moon-beam; she draws near to the people and the people draw near to her.... She is the model of Chinese beauty, and to say a lady or a little girl is a ‘Kuan Yin’ is the highest compliment that can be paid to grace and loveliness.... There are many metamorphoses of this goddess.” [excerpt from *Myths and Legends of China*, by Edward T.C. Werner (1922). (From Chapter 10, titled “The Goddess of Mercy: The Guardian Angel of Buddhism) (at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cfu/mlc/mlc12.htm>)]

A seventh century Tibetan painting presents the idea of infinite mercy as Avalokitesvara-Kuan Yin with a thousand arms with which to scatter blessings. Usually, two arms are sufficient, Kuan Yin's beneficence being suggested by the various objects she holds in her hands: in one, a vase of *amrita*, the dew of immortality; in the other, a spray of willow branches with which to sprinkle her inexhaustible compassion upon her devotees.” (From “Kuan Yin: Goddess of Mercy, Friend of Mankind” by Eloise Hart, at <http://www.theosophy-nw.org/theosnw/world/asia/as-elo.htm>)

“As reference to fishermen, sailors and water, she can be seen on a boat or a lotus flower, crossing the sea.” (from “Kwan Yin: An Introduction to the Goddess”, at <http://www.mykwanyin.com/kwgoddess.html>)

“... in the Far East, notably in Japan, Korea, Tibet, and China, she is the beloved personification of compassion. Images of her can be found in homes, temples, and within thousands of shrines and grottoes beside roads and shaded pools.” (From “Kuan Yin: Goddess of Mercy, Friend of Mankind” by Eloise Hart, at <http://www.theosophy-nw.org/theosnw/world/asia/as-elo.htm>)

“Her range of influence is vast, from China to Korea and Japan, all the way down into Malaysia. She has superseded her Buddhist traditions and jumped into the realm of a more universally venerated goddess, now known to those of many different faiths and sects. Her image can be found on most any altar of worship in temples, homes, schools, shops, restaurants, out of the way grottos and even on the dashboards of taxis.” (from “Kwan Yin: An Introduction to the Goddess”, at <http://www.mykwanyin.com/kwgoddess.html>)

“The Goddess of Mercy is unique among the heavenly hierarchy in that She is so utterly free from pride or vengefulness that She remains reluctant to punish even those to whom a severe lesson might be appropriate. Individuals who could be sentenced to dreadful penance in other systems can attain rebirth and renewal by simply calling upon Her graces with utter and absolute sincerity. “ (from “Kuan Yin: The Goddess of Compassion and Mercy”, presented by Bethleen Cole, at <http://www.purifymind.com/KuanMed.htm>)

“She achieved enlightenment long ago but refused to go on to total bliss until all suffering humanity could go with her.” (from “Quan Yin” at <http://mypage.uniserve.ca/~bggibson/sara/Healing/QuanYin.html>)

“The many stories and anecdotes featuring this Goddess serve to convey the idea of an enlightened being who embodies the attributes of an all pervasive, all consuming, unwavering loving compassion and who is accessible to everyone. Quan Yin counsels us by Her actions to cultivate within ourselves those particular refined qualities that all beings are said to naturally possess in some vestigial form. Contemplating the Goddess of Mercy involves little dogma or ritual. The simplicity of this gentle being and Her standards tends to lead Her devotees towards becoming more compassionate and loving themselves. A deep sense of service to all fellow beings naturally follows any devotion to the Goddess.” (from “Quan Yin: The Goddess of Compassion and Mercy” at <http://www.purifymind.com/GoddessMercy.htm>)

Concluding Comments

“Japanese monk pilgrims noticed the popularity of this new icon and began to transport it back home. Jogyo brought one home in 839 (C.E.) and commented: ‘The Great Compassionate One manifests in ten thousand forms and, observing the sentient beings, eliminates suffering and bestows happiness. That is why he shows himself in images and portraits—in order to make people have faith. Now in China people believe that he is the cause that can eliminate disasters and produce blessings in the world. Since this form is not known in our country, I have brought it back.’ (from p. 241, in “Kuan Yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara” by Chun-fang Yu)