

KUAN YIN

By John Blofeld

Kuan Yin is an abbreviated form of the name of a Bodhisattva who plays an immensely important part in the Buddhism of China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam., i.e, all the major Mahayana Buddhist countries, except those belonging to the branch of Mahayana sometimes known as Vijrayana (namely Tibet, Mongolia, Nepal and Asiatic Russia plus, perhaps, certain parts of Indonesia). Her full Chinese name is Kuan Shih Yin P'u-sa - the Bodhisattva who heeds-the-cries-of-the-world. In Japan, she is known as Kanon Bosatsu. It is generally, but not universally accepted that she is a female form of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva.

The purpose of this article is to answer the question: "How is it that Kuan Yin is so important in Chinese Buddhism although unknown to the Theravadins (Hinayanists)?"

We must begin by distinguishing between two meanings of the word "Bodhisattva" (Enlightened Being or Being Destined for Enlightenment). In the Theravadin tradition, the term is used only in the latter sense (although the exact meaning of the Pali or Sanskrit is "Enlightenment Being"). Thus a Bodhisattva is always a future Buddha. The term is applied to the Lord Sakyamuni (Gautama) Buddha in his previous lives and in his final life prior to the moment of his Enlightenment, and also to Maitreya who is expected to achieve Buddhahood in the next Buddha-age. In the Mahayana tradition, Bodhisattva has that same meaning, but also another and more metaphysical connotation. Mahayanists accept as Bodhisattva certain beings who may or may not be connected with historical figures; they are in fact personifications of particular Buddha-qualities, e.g.

Kuan Yin (Avalokitesvara) personifies Compassion;
P'u Hsien (Samandabhadra) personifies Right Action;
Man Chu (Manjursi) personifies Wisdom.

There are many popular legends about these Bodhisattvas. For example, one tells us that Kuan Yin was originally a Chinese princess. Such stories can be looked at in two ways. They may be regarded as mere legends invented by simple people who did not really understand the nature and functions of a Bodhisattva; but many Mahayanists would be inclined to think that the Chinese princess in the legend and similar "story-figures" may have really been one of the numerous physical manifestations of a Bodhisattva who actually existed aeons before the princess or some similar person was born. This view is quite

acceptable even to the learned, as it is believed that Bodhisattvas, whose main function is laboring for the liberation of sentient beings, can take on any form suitable to their sublime task – male or female or a-sexual, human or animal, ghost or devil, etc.

There is no doubt that many of the common people regard the Bodhisattvas as separate divinities who give mundane help rather like the gods of Hinduism or the saints and angels of Catholic and Orthodox (Greek-Russian) Christianity. No harm comes from this misconception; indeed people profit from it. For example, whoever worships Kuan Yin as a “goddess” believes that she loves kindness and gentleness and hates cruelty and harshness; accordingly she tries to practise tolerance and compassion, avoiding unkindness to humans, animals and ghosts or devils as best she can.

With this in mind, we shall first study Kuan Yin at the non-intellectual level, at which she is regarded as a merciful and compassionate “goddess”, ever ready to help those in distress, but particularly responsive to prayers from those in sudden danger (during storms at sea, etc.) and from childless couples who long to have children. There are many legends to account for the origin of this “goddess”. According to one version, a princess, who wished to remain chaste and devote her time to alleviating the misery in her father’s kingdom, was ordered to marry on pain of death. Since nothing can persuade her to accept a husband, the King, in a fit of rage, ordered his followers to set fire to her retreat. The flames spread rapidly until the whole building was consumed; but the gods, taking pity on the kind and gentle princess, changed her into a white bird, which was seen winging its way to heaven, where it was transformed into the Bodhisattva Kuan Yin.

Off the coast of Cheking province, there is an island called Pu-t’ou (Potala), which is believed to be the residence of Kuan Yin. The sea in that area is often whipped by violent storms and there are many stories of pilgrim ships being miraculously saved from destruction as a result of the prayers offered to Kuan Yin by the passengers and crew. On arrival at the Island, where numerous temples have been built in Kuan Yin’s honour, it is usual to visit a large cave with a sandy floor. There is nothing to be seen but rocks and sand - except through the eyes of the truly compassionate and pure of heart. To them, Kuan Yin appears seated upon a lotus throne and smiling sweetly. During the time this vision remains, the beholders are caught up in an ecstasy of joy. (Belief in the possibility of this vision is not confined to simple-hearted people who regard Kuan Yin as a kind of goddess. It is reported that many learned monks, including the great Ch’an monk, Hse Yun, who died quite recently, vouchsafed this moving experience)

This conception of Kuan Yin as a goddess, not clearly distinguishable from

Taoist deities and others, belongs to the level of popular Buddhism which, in every Buddhist country without exception, is in some respects quite far away from scholarly Buddhism. A slightly different and more truly Buddhist conception is that of Kuan Yin as a compassionate being who, unlike a goddess, does not grant prayers for mundane wants (by bestowing a son, for example) as she is solely concerned with the true work of a Bodhisattva, that of ferrying sentient beings across the ocean of Samsara (the world of the senses) to the "Other Shore" (Liberation, Enlightenment, Nirvana). The idea of Bodhisattvas being able to hasten Liberation by influencing the hearts of their devotees is accepted by most Mahayana Buddhists. Indeed, serious Buddhists of this school take a vow not to enter Nirvana until all beings have been Liberated; they aim, in the meantime, at becoming Bodhisattvas. Kuan Yin usually depicted in the Far East in female form is sometimes shown there in male form or even as a horse! This is consonant with the belief that Bodhisattvas can take on any form at will to make it easier for them to carry out their saving work.

Yet other conceptions include that of Kuan Yin, not as being, but as the active force of Compassion working in the universe; and that of Kuan Yin as a purely symbolical form of the Buddha's Compassion, using the term Buddha not so much in relation to individual Buddhas such as Sakyamuni (Gautama) or Dipamkara, but in its additional Mahayana sense of the Enlightenment Principle, the Enlightenment, or the State of Enlightenment, Bodhi in fact. At once an objection may be raised; what is the need for such a symbol? There are several possible answers, one of which is that everything is in fact thought of in symbols of one kind or another. When we say "Buddha" or "Compassion", we are in fact using a sound or a rapidly visualized combination of letters as a symbol for a concept the full meaning of which we have no time to call to mind. If it is accepted that symbols can by no means be avoided, there is much to be said for taking such a figure as Kuan Yin – at once chaste and motherly – to represent the concept of Compassion.

The need for such a symbol – assuming for the moment that Kuan Yin is not more than a symbol – becomes very apparent in meditation at the stage where words are left behind. In certain forms of meditation, the devotee dedicates himself to Compassion and, in so doing, visualizes that quality in the form of Kuan Yin – a figure which appeals to "the inward eye" as a beautiful symbol of pure, impartial, infinite compassion for all sentiment being alike. Even a simple person not deeply instructed in the difficult art of meditation can summon up a picture of Kuan Yin in his mind and renew his promise to exercise compassion to the utmost of his ability in all his dealings with sentient beings.

The fact is that, whether Kuan Yin is merely a symbol or indeed a Great Power for Compassion, her devotees find her responsive. That is to say, anyone who with a believing heart, evokes a vision of Kuan Yin in his mind and holds it

there, will indeed become conscious of a great flood or purifying “light” or “sensation” which, besides bringing him great comfort, will influence him to become a more compassionate person. If the practice is regularly repeated, his character will undergo a notable change for the better. This can be explained in many ways; all that really matters is that the method works.

Some Theravadins may comment “Well, all this is very beautiful, but what has it got to do with the Doctrine of the Buddha?” The Pali Canon has an answer to that. It contains a famous passage of which the essence can be reduced to: “Whatever is not conducive to the welfare and true happiness of beings is wrong Dharma; whatever is conducive to their welfare and true happiness is right Dharma.” The Buddha stressed the need for Upaya (skilful means) in the search for Enlightenment. Emulating or drawing upon the Bodhisattvas’ powers – Compassion, Right Action, Wisdom, etc. – whether the Bodhisattvas are regarded as actual or symbolic, is indeed a proper use of skilful means. Moreover, at the higher levels of consciousness reached in meditation, distinctions (including the distinction between actual and symbolic) begin to melt away. Ultimately, the meditator reaches a state at which he is not prepared to accept any distinctions whatever; asked whether Kuan Yin is actual or symbolic, he will just smile. So we come back to the saying “What matters is that the method works.”

Another subject of great interest is the identity or otherwise of Kuan Yin and Avalokitesvara. It has generally been assumed that these two beings are identical. The Chinese name Kuan Shih Yin, if rendered into English, has virtually the same meaning as the Sanskrit term Avalokitesvara and may be regarded a free translation of it. Their status is the same – Bodhisattva Mahasattva. Their function is the same – Compassion (Metta-Karuna). However, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, himself an incarnation of an emanation of Avalokitesvara, is doubtful of their identity as, in Tibet. Avalokitesvara is invariably depicted as a male Bodhisattva. Accordingly the present writer ventures to offer what is a mere theory for resolving the conflict between the Tibetan and Chinese views. In Tibet, there is a Bodhisattva-like figure known as Jetsun Drolma, the Green Tara or Maha Arya Tara, who was “born of a tear shed by Avalokitesvara”. Tara is, in other words, an emanation of Avalokitesvara – a support used for meditation relating to Compassion. It may be noted in passing that, in Tibet all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the Great Pantheon are held to exist within the meditator’s own mind since all beings and things are, like our minds, of the essence of Sunyata (Void, the Void which contains all the potentialities of the Non-Void and which is therefore not void in the ordinary sense of the term). This disposes of any need to question whether Tara is actual or symbolic. She is both or either or neither, according to how one looks at the problem.

Now in Mongolia, the important place occupied by the Green Tara in Tibetan Buddhism is taken by another form of that emanation from Avalokitesvara, namely the White Tara. Curiously, in Chinese iconography, Kuan Yin is almost invariably depicted as wearing a white headdress and white robes. It is therefore just possible that Kuan Yin was originally equated with the White Tara, who is not actually Avalokitesvara but his emanation. Since both alike are embodiments (or, if you prefer, symbols) of the Buddha's Compassion, it may well have happened that a confusion resulted, whereby Kuan Yin has been wrongly taken to be Avalokitesvara instead of being recognized as one of his female emanations, namely the White Tara.

In practice, of course, it makes not the smallest difference whether this theory is right or wrong. The fact remains that worship of Kuan Yin does make her devotees deeply compassionate people, and that meditation on her has very remarkable effects. Therefore, those of us who value Compassion (and this must surely include all Buddhists of whatever school), regardless of whether they accept Kuan Yin as an actual being or a symbol, will do well to join in the invocation;

NAMO TA-TSU TA-PEI KUAN SHIH YIN P'U-SA MO-HO-SA, or NAMO MAHAKARUNA AVALOKITESVARA BODHISATTVA MAHASATTVA.

Which means

HOMAGE TO AVALOKITESVARA BODHISATTVA MAHASATTVA,
EMBODIMENT OF GREAT COMPASSION.

(The Young Buddhist)

