

# THE CELESTIAL BODHISATTVAS IN MAHAYANA BUDDHISM

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Who is *Kuan Yin* (Avalokita)? Who are *Wen-shu* (*Manjusri*), P'u-Hsein (Samantabhadra), and other beings known to Mahayana Buddhists by the resounding title of '*Pu-sa Mo-ho-sa*' (Bodhisattva Mahasattva)? So important is the place they occupy in the forms of Buddhism current in China, Japan, Tibet and neighbouring countries that it is quite surprising to discover how seldom this question is asked. One difficulty that immediately arises when one seeks to answer it is that the term 'Bodhisattva' has three or four distinct meanings, which are often confused in people's minds.

## The Bodhisattvas

To *Theravadins*, 'Bodhisattva' or 'Being to be Enlightened' is a title meaning 'Buddha-To-Be' and is often applied to Sakyamuni (Gautama) Buddha with reference to the period preceding his Enlightenment and stretching backwards to cover all the previous lives mentioned in the Jataka stories and so on. The same title is given to Mi-Lo (Maitreya) who is destined to become Buddha of the Buddha-era subsequent to the present one, which has now reached a stage of decline.

To *Mahayanists*, 'Bodhisattva' means three or four different kinds of being, although believers do not often stop to ponder the distinction. They are:

1. The beings regarded as Bodhisattvas by the Theravadins.
2. (a) Ordinary human beings who have taken the sublime 'Bodhisattva's Vows' to renounce Nirvana's tranquillity and remain within the universe as spiritual guides to others until every sentient being has at last achieved Enlightenment. The motive of this vow is pure compassion; he who vows reflects: "How can I, when Enlightenment is won, slip into Nirvana's peace – leaving behind billions upon billions of deluded beings to suffer the perils, griefs and frustrations with which samsara's bitter ocean abounds? Can my own peace mean more to me than the cries and groans and anguished tears of an infinitude of my fellow-sentient beings? If it does, dare I call myself compassionate? Yet how can one be a true disciple of the Buddha and yet be lacking in compassion?"
  - (b) Sentient beings who, having attained Enlightenment, remain in samsara actively pursuing the vow described in 2(a).

3. ‘Celestial Bodhisattvas’. There is, to my knowledge, no special term in Sanskrit or Chinese to distinguish this category from the Bodhisattvas described in 2(a) and 2(b), but a few Western writers have found the adjective ‘celestial’ convenient for making what is in fact a notable distinction. These beings are not historical figures, like the others. They are not thought to have been ordinary people prior to the taking or fulfilment of the Bodhisattva’s vow. Kuan Yin (Avalokita) and the others mentioned at the outset of this essay are among the chief Bodhisattvas belonging to this final category. But if they are not regarded as evolved human beings, what are they? Why is no definition given here as a counterpart to the definitions just given for the other categories? In a sense, the whole of what follows constitutes an answer to these questions. For the sake of brevity, the case of just one of them, Kuan Yin, will be discussed; what needs to be known about the others can be inferred from it.

### **Kuan Yin Bodhisattva**

Kuan Yin, also known as Kuan-Shih-Yin, Kuan-Tzu-Tsai and many other names, is generally supposed to be identical with the celestial Bodhisattva named in Sanskrit sutras as Avalokita or Avalokitesvara. In actuality, she is the same and yet not quite the same as Avalokita, as will presently be seen. Her nature is comprehended in a number of different ways according to the level of understanding of her devotees, almost all of whom are Chinese, Japanese, Koreans or Vietnamese although the present writer hopes that a book that he is now preparing will make her better known in many other parts of the world.

### **The First Level of Understanding**

To many ordinary people not deeply versed in Buddhist learning, Kuan Yin is the Chinese ‘Goddess of Compassion’. Perhaps because her fabled home is seagirt. Potalake (often identified with P’uT’o Island off the coast of Chekiang province), she is especially loved by water-folk-sailors, fisherman, boat-dwellers and so forth. Many ordinary lay-Buddhists, Taoists, and followers of the ancient Chinese folk religion esteem her as a goddess renowned for pity and compassion, an ever-powerful helper at moments of disaster, especially disorders due to the raging of the sea or to earthquake, fire, storm, or pestilence. She also responds to pleas for handsome, healthy sons and for beautiful, high-minded daughters. Even at this simple level, Kuan Yin is unique among gods and goddesses; she demands no special offerings, no sacrifices, and never does she punish – unless in a way that will presently earn the punished man’s warm gratitude. All she requires of her followers is that they will themselves try to be merciful and compassionate, abstain from the slaughter of living beings, and, if possible, eschew eating the flesh of animal. Even these, she does not make conditions; her help is unconditional to every being in trouble who cries to her from a full heart.

To satisfy simple devotees of this kind, the story is told that the ‘Goddess’ is a heavenly incarnation of the Princess Miao-Shan. According to the legend, Miao-Shan enraged her royal father by refusing to marry, preferring to devote all her time to meditation and deeds of compassion. Once, angered beyond all bearings by such unfilial disregard of his wishes, the sonless and heirless monarch barked out an order that the poor girl be destroyed forthwith. Some versions relate that the executioner’s sword was miraculously shattered before it fell upon her submissive neck and that she was carried off to Potolake Island to become a goddess; others relate that her prison was deliberately set on fire and that she escaped the billowing flames in the form of a beautiful white bird which ascended to heaven.

### **The Second Level of Understanding**

The Sutras relate that Avalokita Bodhisattva was born from a ray of Compassion that shone from the eye of Amitabha Buddha (a celestial Buddha who embodies the energy of pure compassion in a Buddha-like form, enabling the abstract quality of compassion to be contemplated in a relatively concrete mental form). This miraculously formed being took certain vows, renouncing Nirvana’s peace by declaring that he would mentally create a pure-land in which all who called upon his name with deep sincerity could be reborn there to receive the training in Dharma needed for the attainment of Enlightenment. Moreover, he vowed that, should any being who called upon him sincerely do not achieve that result, he himself would renounce Supreme Unexcelled Enlightenment. Originally, Kuan-Shih-Yin being simply the translation of that *male* Bodhisattva’s name, ‘He-who-listens-to-the-Cries-of-the-world,’ the two of them were in all respects identical. Later, however, the Chinese began making statues and pictures of Kuan-Yin in female form, which has been a source of puzzlement to many. The mystery has now been solved. Very early Chinese and Japanese depictions of a female Kuan-Yin reveal beyond all doubt that this was the Chinese way of amalgamating the male Avalokita with one of his female emanations Tara. The idea behind it is, of course, that if people wish to contemplate or evoke the abstract principle of Buddha-like compassion in a form that is readily visible to the mind’s eye, a female figure is more suitable and natural, since the highest form of compassion encountered in daily life is the self-sacrificing love of a mother for her child. Avalokita and Tara are, in any case, two embodiments of the same marvellous concept – pure compassion. What could be more natural than for the humanistically inclined Chinese to simplify the Indian concept of Buddha-like compassion by creating a symbol representing Avalokita (compassion) in a female form (Tara)? Henceforth Kuan-Yin was worshipped as one who combines the sweetness of a mother-figure with the purity of a virgin.

## **The Third Level of Understanding**

In the Tibetan ‘Bardo Todol’ (Book of the Dead), innumerable ‘deities’ are mentioned; at the same time, it is made very clear that all these ‘deities’ are in fact projections of the forces of our own mind. Both Chinese and Tibetan meditation Masters with direct intuitive experience of Reality recognize Chenresig (Avalokita) or Kuan-Yin, as the case may be, as a personification of a powerful energy which lies either dormant or active within the mind of every being – compassion! It may be, and often is, so heavily overlaid with karmic accretions of selfishness and self-love as to be invisible, but it is always there, waiting to be aroused. The Mahayana Sutras teach that every man has within himself the ‘root of Buddha-hood’, the potentiality of ultimately becoming Enlightened. One aspect or quality of this potential Buddhahood is the potentiality for compassion. Compassion – Kuan-Yin – exists visibly or invisibly in every mind.

Visualizing Kuan-Yin’s form, calling upon her name, meditating upon her are ample *upaya* (skilful means) for arousing within our minds the energy of compassion. That those who call upon Kuan-Yin, whether as a goddess or a Bodhisattva or as an abstract principle, often receive remarkable, magical-seeming responses to their cry is not at all surprising; for the only reality is Mind; no forces or energies in the universe are more powerful than mental energies. Crying ‘Namo Kuan-Shih-Yin Pu Sa!’ (Nama Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva!) we are indeed summing the most potent of all energies and one that is absolutely essential to Enlightenment; for compassion is the perfect antidote to selfishness, and Enlightenment can never be achieved without the total destruction of the ego!

There is more to this than can be understood in terms of modern psychology. A psychologist would agree that if we often emphasise one of our qualities, such as compassion, we can gradually strengthen it; he would not agree that suddenly appealing to it could rescue us from danger or fill us with god-like power to crush the danger. Nevertheless, a sudden cry to Kuan-Yin from a full and deeply trusting heart does have such power. If we accept the Mahayana doctrine that only Mind is real and that ultimately, there is no boundary between mind and mind, then we realize that, in calling upon Kuan-Yin, we mobilize not merely the force of compassion in a single mind, but a mighty force that is the sum total of the compassion in all minds, the Buddha-force extending throughout the universe!

This is also Manjusri – Buddha – Wisdom with Samantabhadra – Buddha-Action!

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Extract from "Voice of Buddhism" magazine, Vol.17 No.2 Dec. 1980, KDN.0541/80,  
Published by Buddhist Missionary Society, Jalan Berhala, Kuala Lumpur