



Newsletter Archives

Kuan Yin, The Compassionate Rebel

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Kuan Yin, The Compassionate Rebel

Article of the Month - November 2005

It is unfortunate that Buddhism's most enduring (and universal) contribution to the world has been insufficiently translated as compassion. The original Sanskrit word is 'karuna,' which holds within itself traces of the fragment 'ru,' meaning to weep. While the Oxford dictionary describes compassion as pity bordering on the merciful, karuna is actually our ability to relate to another in so intense a measure that the plight of the other affects us as much as if it had been our own.

The term karuna is central to the entire Buddhist tradition. It is frequently described as a love for all beings, equal in intensity to a mother's affection for her child. However, it is quite unlike conventional love (Sanskrit: priya, kama or trishna), which is rooted in dualistic thinking and is egoistic, possessive and exclusive, in contrast to the all-encompassing nature of compassion. The root meaning of karuna is said to be the anguished cry of deep sorrow and understanding that can only come from an unblemished sense of oneness with others.



Kuan Yin

In fact, the evolution of Buddhism in Asia and its spread throughout the world is, from a spiritual point of view, none other than the unfolding of karuna in history. Nowhere is this more explicitly exemplified than in the Chinese assimilation of Buddhism. Few would deny that the defining symbol of this integration is the goddess, who with her sweet and merciful disposition, has won the hearts of not only the Chinese, but also profoundly affected even those who, belonging to a foreign tradition, have only had a fleeting interaction with her. This divine female is none other than Kuan Yin, beloved goddess of over a billion people the world over. Her name too signifies her compassionate nature, literally meaning 'One who hears the cries of the world.'

It remains a historical fact that Kuan Yin is the Chinese version of the male god Avalokiteshvara, whom the ancient texts eulogize as the patron deity of compassion. It is fascinating however to observe that nowhere in India (where he originated) or Tibet (where he remains the most popular deity) is the latter ever deified as a female figure. In China too, his worship began as a male god, but over time, changed into a goddess and by the ninth century her popularity had prevailed over that of Avalokiteshvara's.



Four-Armed Avalokiteshvara

There are many reasons why this gender transformation took place. As Avalokiteshvara evolved into the supreme personality of the Buddhist pantheon, with this heightened pedestal came the inevitable elitism. Karuna, however, cannot be and is not (as it has become today under the pseudonym of compassion), the exclusive preserve of a charmed circle, but rather a symphonic identification with the masses, sharing their suffering and pleasure alike. No wonder then that Avalokiteshvara shed streams of tears observing the plight of his people. Now, any emanation from a divine form is bound to hold a dynamic potential within itself and indeed Indian mythology is replete with examples where fluids emerging from deities have led to enormous consequences. Tears similarly are a spontaneous emotional response to external stimuli and represent the outward flow of Avalokiteshvara's infinite karuna.



The Ever Graceful Tara

From these pearls emanated a beautiful female as attractive as she was compassionate. The goddess Tara, thus born, has continued her upward spiral of popularity and remains one of the most loved and widely recognized deities of the Buddhist pantheon today. Truly, even though Avalokiteshvara retains his foremost status in the gallery of Tibetan gods, in the popular imagination it is Tara, who with her supple charm, has come to symbolize the tenderness of karuna.

It is relevant here to observe that Kuan Yin is often depicted in art holding a leafy twig, derived from the 'weeping willow' tree, known so due to its trailing leafy branches that droop to the ground and along which raindrops trickle down like tears.



The Weeping Willow



Kuan Yin as Child Giver

One of its distinctive characteristics is remaining green throughout the year, pointing perhaps to the goddess' fertility aspect, which is further echoed in images showing her with an infant.

The willow also has a deeper and direct connection with Chinese culture and it is believed that Lao Tzu, the author of Tao-te Ching, loved to meditate under its shade (6th century BC). It was under the same tree that the younger Confucius had his famous interview with Lao Tzu, telling his disciples afterwards:

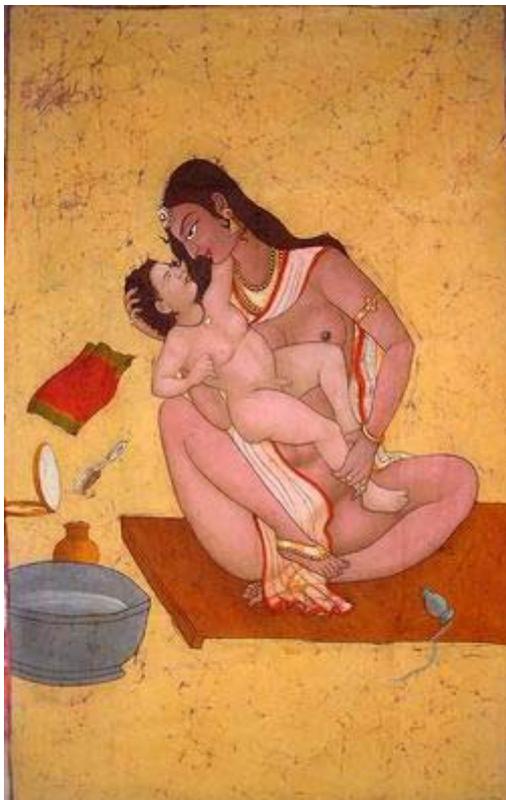
"I know how birds fly, fishes swim and animals run. But there is the dragon - I cannot tell how he mounts on the winds through the clouds, and rises to heaven. Today, having seen Lao Tzu, I can only compare him to the dragon."

Over centuries, Kuan Yin's visual depictions have highlighted her lithe, flowing form, much like the willow tree itself, which has the ability to bend during the most ferocious winds and then spring back into shape again. Indeed, who wants to stand rigid like the tall oak that cracks and collapses in a storm? Instead, one needs to be flexible like the willow, which survives the tempest.

Or perhaps, Kuan Yin merely uses the willow branch to sprinkle the divine nectar of life on her devotees, which is stored in the vase she holds in her other hand.



Kuan Yin



Mother and Child

The Chinese (ever disposed to envisage friendly divinities in idealized human forms), seem to have been initially perplexed by Avalokiteshvara's complex iconography. Not for them his thousand hands or even the seven eyes of Tara. Exposed for eons to the essentially humanistic philosophy of Confucianism, such images were alien and felt to be unsuitable for portraying the 'soft' emotion of karuna, the yearning passion a mother feels for her child.

The Tibetan mind solved the craving for a down to earth, visual embodiment of karuna by envisioning the goddess Tara; the Chinese genius did the same by enclosing this virtue in the graceful and beautiful Kuan Yin, who was eminently human in appearance and approachable by all. Indeed, she gradually became the favored goddess of the peasants and fishermen of China, retaining her place in their hearts to the present day.



**Kuan Yin Holding a
Fisherwomen's Basket**

Additionally in China, not only had popular gods always been real people who had once lived in specific times and places, even mythical figures were turned into historical cultural heroes who were then venerated as the founding fathers of Chinese civilization. Unlike Greece, where human heroes were transformed into Olympian gods, in China the reverse held true and if a god or goddess was not perhaps originally a human being, there was often an effort to turn her or him into one. Kuan Yin thus again had to change from a goddess into a living woman, so that she could be worshipped as a Chinese goddess. Truly, the human character of Chinese deities is one of the most distinctive features of their religion, and like ordinary mortals they too have birthdays, ancestries, careers and titles. Therefore, even though Kuan Yin is not given a date of birth in any of the Buddhist sutras, her birthday is widely celebrated on the nineteenth day of the second month of the lunar calendar.

The legend describing how Kuan Yin was once a woman gives a fascinating insight into the working of the Chinese genius and the process by which she was given a distinctively local flavor and absorbed into their pantheon:

It is said that in the past, there once lived a king under whose rule the people led a peaceful existence governed by Confucian ethics. He had three daughters; the eldest two having already married the grooms of their father's choice. The youngest offspring however, was unlike any other normal child. Firstly, when she was born, her body glowed with an almost unearthly light so much so that the palace seemed on fire. She was thus befittingly named Miao Shan (Wonderful Goodness).

Secondly, as she grew up, she wore only dirty clothes and never did display any urge to adorn herself. Further, she would subsist on only a single meal every day. In her conversations she would talk about the impermanence of material things and how human beings suffer because of

their attachment to such objects. Naturally worried about their daughter's detached inclinations, her parents proposed that (as per the Confucian ideals of filial piety) she too marry a husband of their choice. To this she replied:

"I would never, for the sake of one lifetime of enjoyment, plunge into aeons of misery. I have pondered on this matter and deeply detest this earthly union (marriage)." Nevertheless, when her parents insisted, she agreed to comply with their wishes if only her future mate would save her from the following three misfortunes:

- 1). When people are young, their face is as fair as the jade-like moon, but when they grow old, the hair turns white and faces become wrinkled; whether walking, resting, sitting, or lying down, they are in every way worse off than when they were young.
- 2). Similarly, when our limbs are strong and vigorous one may walk as if flying through air, but when we suddenly becomes sick, we are confined to the bed.
- 3). A person may have a large group of relatives and be surrounded by his flesh and blood, but when death comes, even such close kin as father and son cannot take the person's place.

Finally she concluded: "If indeed my future husband can ensure my deliverance against these misfortunes, I will gladly marry him. Otherwise, I vow to remain a spinster all my life. People all over the world are mired in these kinds of suffering. If one desires to be free of them, the only option is to leave the secular world and enter the gate of Buddhism."



Buddha's Encounter with Death

This narrative of course, is parallel to one of the most significant episodes from the life of the Buddha when he encountered the three maladies of physical existence: sickness, old age and death.

Exasperated to no end, the king summoned an old and experienced nun of his kingdom. He asked her to take the princess under tutelage and expose her to as much hardship as possible in the nunnery, so that she realize the futility of her desired path. The instruction was tinged with a threat of annihilation if after seven days Miao Shan was not 'reformed'.

Needless to say, all the travails she had to undergo at the monastery, including hard manual labor, were insufficient to deter her from the path of Dharma. However, Miao Shan did realize that she was being thus subjected because the inhabitants of the nunnery were under the threat of death. She addressed them, saying:

"Don't you know the stories about the ancient prince Mahasattva, who plunged off the cliff in order to feed the hungry lions, or King Sivi's cutting off his flesh to save a dove? Since you have already left the life of a householder, you should regard this material body as illusory and impermanent. Why do you fear death and love life? Don't you know that attachment to this dirty and smelly leather bag (body) is an obstacle?"

At the end of the stipulated period, the monarch, in a mad and frenzied reaction, ordered that Miao Shan be beheaded. As her executioners approached the monastery gates, Miao Shan rushed out of the building, eager to embrace her impending death. No sooner had she kneeled at the stake and the deadly sword been raised, than a blinding thunder rose. Before the assailants could regain their composure, a tiger darted out of the darkness and carried away the swooning girl into the nearby hills. The king, now beyond the bounds of reason, ordered the hermitage to be burnt down with all its inhabitants.

It was not long before his karma caught up with him and he fell sick with kaamla (jaundice). He was restless for days on end, finding no rest even in sleep. The disease spread all over his body and the best doctors throughout the land were unable to cure him. One day, a holy mendicant came to his door and predicted: "If some person would willingly consent to give his or her arms or eyes without the slightest anger or resentment, the elixir made of these potent ingredients will surely relieve you from your suffering."

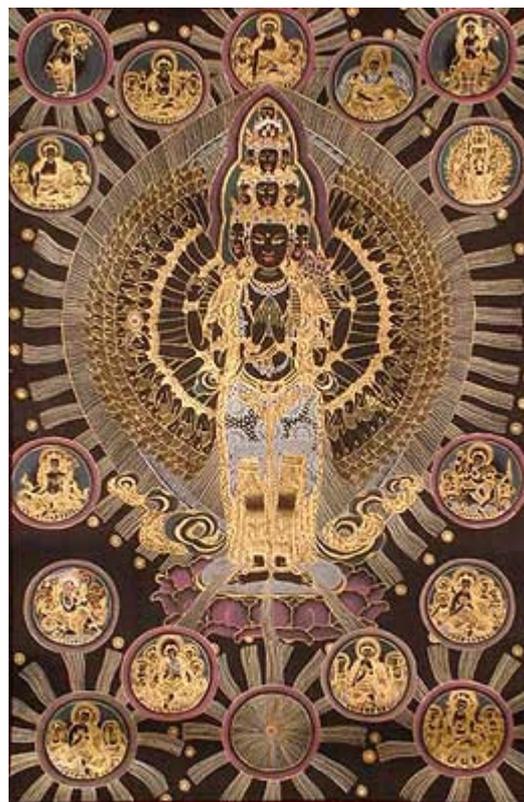
"Where alas will I find such a compassionate being?" lamented the king. "In this very land," said the monk. "Go southwest in your dominion, on top of the mountain there is a hermit who possesses all the characteristics which are necessary for your healing."

No sooner had he heard this than the king ordered his envoys to hurry to the abode of the recluse. On being informed of his plight and its prescribed remedy, the hermit readily agreed to undergo the supreme sacrifice, requesting them to ask the suffering king to direct his mind to the three treasures of Buddhism and then very calmly proceeded to gauge out both the eyes and asked one of the men to sever the two arms. The three worlds shook under the impact of this terrible sacrifice.

When he had fully recovered, the king made haste with his wife to pay homage to the one who had so miraculously saved his life. After bowing low before the mutilated form, as soon as they raised their heads they let out a shriek of astonished horror; the hermit's true identity lay bare before them. She was none other than their youngest daughter Miao Shan. Realizing what she had done for him, despite all that he had done to her, the king fell prostrate upon the floor and asked for forgiveness. Overcome with emotion, the parents embraced her and the father said: "I am so evil that I have caused my own daughter terrible suffering." Miao Shan replied,

"Father, I have suffered no pain. Having given up these human eyes, I shall see with diamond eyes. Having yielded the mortal arms, I shall receive golden arms. If my calling is true all this will follow."

Much sobered by this intense experience, the king returned to his palace and ordered a statue to be made of her, which, emphasizing her sacrifice was to be without eyes and hands. Now, in Chinese, the sound for 'bereft' or 'deficient' are virtually identical with 'thousand.' At some stage in the transmission of this message, the two words were confused and the sculptor toiled away, desperately seeking some way to capture the essence of the king's wishes. He very imaginatively (or perhaps following Indian or Tibetan models) placed one eye on each palm, making the number of eyes equal to the arms,



**Eleven Headed Thousand Armed
Avalokiteshvara**



Thousand-Armed Kuan Yin

giving rise in the process to an awesome and complex image of breathtaking splendor.

Unable to relate to the thousand-armed Avalokiteshvara, the above legend provided a rational explanation to the bewildered viewer and helped integrate the goddess into the Chinese ethos.

The story of Miao Shan represents the fusion of the Buddhist theme of the gift of the body and the Confucian concept of filial piety. In the former tradition, giving is one of the six perfections performed by a bodhisattva (would be Buddha). Amongst the different forms of gifts, that of one's own body is the best. The only difference is that while the bodhisattvas give up their bodies in order to feed or save sentient beings regardless of any formal relationship with them, the fact that Miao Shan does so for her father is where the Confucian model comes in. In the former context, a tale is narrated of the Buddha, who in one of his previous births was a pigeon. He saw a man lose his way during a snowstorm, driven to the point of starvation. The pigeon gathered twigs and leaves, made a fire and threw himself wholeheartedly into it, to become food for the distressed soul. It is this lofty ideal that Kuan Yin was following, a self-sacrifice par excellence, motivated by pure (selfless) and indiscriminate compassion (karuna).

On the other hand, Kuan Yin as Miao Shan gives a bold and provocative message, challenging Confucian value systems as delineated in the 'Classic of Filial Piety' (published by the emperor Xuan in AD 722). Her life glorifies austerity, celibacy and renunciation, which, as per Buddhism, are highly valued (against the householder, who is necessary in Confucianism for creating offspring to perpetuate the lineage). In times of the Ming for example, one could achieve religious sanctification by performing one's domestic obligations to the fullest degree. Eventually, Chinese of all social strata and both sexes came to know Kuan Yin as the strong-willed yet filial girl, who refused to get married and rebelled against stifling authority.

Conclusion:

The goddess Kuan Yin is a symbol, not only of the Chinese assimilation of Buddhism, but also of the many hued flavor of karuna, expressed through the softer wisdom of a woman. She is a pointer to the re-emergence of the goddess and the gender transformation of Avalokiteshvara in China represents perhaps a universal imperative, which is similarly reflected in the emanation of the goddess Tara from the compassionate tears of the same bodhisattva. Though often images are encountered, which show her sporting a moustache, emphasizing masculinity; this is negated by the softness of her demeanor.

Can anything be more subtly female than her graceful poise - modest and inward looking, yet potent enough to generate and compassionately nourish the whole outside world? In the words of Martin Palmer: "The divine feminine cannot be suppressed for long. In China, it emerged by the transformation of the male into the female," only god (or the goddess) knows how it will transpire in other cultures.



Kuan Yin with Moustache

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This article by Nitin Kumar.

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