

Kuan Shih Yin - Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva

The Bodhisattva of Great Compassion

The Sanskrit name "Avalokiteshvara" means "the lord who looks upon the world with compassion". Translated into Chinese, the name is "Kuan Shih Yin" or Quan Yin.

Kuan: observe

Shih: the world / the region of sufferers

Yin: all the sounds of the world, in particular, the crying sounds of beings, verbal or mental, seeking help

Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva is the embodiment of great compassion. He has vowed to free all sentient beings from suffering.

Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva has great powers and can help all sentient beings. His skilful 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, for example, when caught in a fire, shipwrecked or facing an attack.

In the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni Buddha said that if a suffering being hears the name of Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva and earnestly calls out to the bodhisattva, Avalokiteshvara will hear the call and relieve that being from his suffering.

According to the Huayen Sutra, Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva transforms himself into forms that suit the nature of those to be helped. His manifestations or transformation bodies are countless.

e.g. if a boy or girl is about to gain some enlightenment, Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva transforms himself into a boy or a girl to teach the child.

e.g. If a monk is about to attain some enlightenment, Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva transforms himself into a monk.

In short, he can appear as a monk, a nun, or a normal person like you and me. The purpose of such transformations is to make people feel close to him and willing to listen to his words.

In China, Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva is represented in female form and is known as Kuan Yin. Probably because of Kuan Yin's great compassion, a quality which is traditionally considered feminine, most of the bodhisattva's statues in China since the Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618 - 907) have appeared as female figures.

In India, however, the bodhisattva is generally represented as a male figure.

In her hands, Kuan Yin may hold a willow branch, a vase with water or occasionally, a lotus flower.

The willow branch is used to heal people's illnesses or bring fulfillment to their requests. The water (the dew of compassion) has the quality of removing suffering, purifying the defilements of our body, speech and mind, and lengthening life.

In Buddhist art, Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva is sometimes shown with eleven heads, 1000 hands and eyes on the palms of each hand (Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva). 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.

Sometimes, he is represented with one head and 4 arms. This is the Four-Armed Avalokiteshvara, worshipped by all Tibetans as "Chenrezig", the Holder of the White Lotus. It is in the male form which has two hands in the praying gesture while the other two hands hold his symbols, the Crystal Rosary and the Lotus Flower.

There is a sacred place for the worship of Kuan Yin in China - the Putuo Mountain. It is actually an island located near the city of Ningpo, in Zhejiang Province. There are many stories of Kuan Yin's miraculous appearances at Putuo Mountain.

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 skilful 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 world.

The Mani Mantra (The Mantra of Universal Protection) : OM MANI PADME HUM



Kuan Shih Yin P'usa