

FOR LIVING BUDDHISM AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

DHARMA WORLD

APR.-JUNE 2008 Vol. 35



The Many Forms of
the Bodhisattva Kuan-yin

Buddhist Basics Explained for All

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Cover: *Nikkosan Chuzenji*, one of the paintings by Josaku Maeda (1926–2007), depicting more than a hundred of the sacred places in Japan associated with the bodhisattva Kannon. Maeda was a noted artist well known for his modern mandalic paintings and served as president of the Musashino Art University, Tokyo. The series of his paintings of Kannon were inspired by his pilgrimages to the temples on the Saigoku, Bando, and Chichibu circuits of Kannon sites. Acrylic on canvas. 130 x 80.3 cm. Photo: Kazuhiro Komuro. Courtesy of Yamagen Co., Ltd.

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One by One, Becoming a Hand on the Thousand-Armed Kannon

by Yoshiko Izumida

The bodhisattva Kannon has been known for a long time, not only to members of the various sects of Buddhism, but also to the many Japanese who are not religious. I would even say there are almost no Japanese who have not seen an Eleven-Headed Kannon statue or a Thousand-Armed Kannon statue.

Furthermore, I have heard that the bodhisattva Kannon is widely familiar to foreigners as well. Through pictures of Buddhist statues and paintings, Kannon, who is portrayed as female rather than male, is apparently viewed as a symbol of tolerance and maternal, feminine tenderness. As seen in the worship of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Catholicism as well, the tasks of women—giving birth, raising children, and having an influence on human character—are full of unlimited possibilities.

In Buddhism the bodhisattva Kannon is the symbol of great compassion and mercy, representing the wish to take on the troubles and suffering of people. To us Buddhists, Kannon is also an object of devotion. She is also the bodhisattva who sets forth goals for us as we live our lives.

Mother Teresa is the first person who comes to mind as having led a life that followed the way of the bodhisattva Kannon. The next person, after Mother Teresa, who comes to my mind is Japan's Miki Sawada.

Miki Sawada founded the Elizabeth Sanders Home in Oiso, Kanagawa Prefecture, to care for children of mixed blood who were born out of wedlock after the end of the Pacific war to American military men and Japanese women and were abandoned by their mothers. She devoted her life to raising and finding foster parents for a total of two thousand of these children. In my opinion, the way that Sawada lived her life was exactly like the work of the bodhisattva Kannon.

Kannon is known as the bodhisattva that appears in the Lotus Sutra. I first became familiar with the Lotus Sutra after I became involved, as the head of a kindergarten, with the early education of children. At the time, I had read with keen interest the works of Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852), a German educator who had founded the first kindergarten in the world and was known as “the father of early childhood education.”

It was Froebel's opinion that the true nature of human beings is one of divine goodness, that a teacher's role is to draw out the divine goodness within each child, and that the mother is a child's first teacher. He also thought that to

perfect one's character, the pairs “philosophy and life,” “thought and personal experience,” and “theory and actuality” should each be combined. I began to study the Lotus Sutra because I found the interpretation of the Lotus Sutra by our founder, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano, to be similar to the beliefs of Froebel.

Later I was appointed the head of a school for girls whose teaching was based on the spirit of the Lotus Sutra. While performing those duties, I was invited to become involved in the activities of the Women's Committee of the Japanese Committee of the World Conference of Religions for Peace. So not only am I studying the doctrine of the Lotus Sutra, I have also become involved in practical activity.

On the Women's Committee, while working with the Refugee Committee of Religions for Peace Japan, I have been involved in such efforts since the 1980s as looking for sponsorship for Cambodian refugee orphans, distributing books in the Khmer language, and building primary schools in Cambodia. Then, since the 1990s, the Women's Committee has been working to assist refugees from Afghanistan.

What we have learned from our work in relief efforts outweighs what little assistance we have been able to provide the people from areas of conflict; it is in that sense that I truly feel that everything with which we come into contact in society and life is a teaching tool for self-learning for each and every one of us.

Even if we are not so strong individually, if the women of the world combine their power in a maternal frame of mind and provide succor to those who suffer from hunger and sickness, each endeavor will become like a hand on the Thousand-Armed Kannon. □

Yoshiko Izumida, a former honorary executive board member of Rissho Kosei-kai, is chair of the Women's Committee of the Japanese Committee of the World Conference of Religions for Peace.

The Compassion and Wisdom of Kuan-yin

by Gene Reeves

Respecting the hidden wisdom of ordinary people, we might see Kuan-yin devotion as a kind of skillful means used by the Buddha to bring the Dharma to such people in the midst of their suffering.

Kuan-yin (pinyin, Guanyin; Japanese, Kannon)¹ is unrivaled as the most popular Buddhist figure in East Asia, a popularity now spreading to other parts of the world as well. To a large extent, this popularity can be attributed to Kuan-yin's embodiment of Buddhist compassion, giving Buddhists everywhere a way both to experience compassion and to be strengthened in their own compassion. I believe there is also an important sense in which Kuan-yin embodies a special wisdom, a wisdom found in the Lotus Sutra and manifested especially in Kuan-yin devotion.

It is important to recognize that there are a great many Chinese texts, some known as sutras, some of which are Buddhist, some Taoist, some simply Chinese, that are devoted to Kuan-yin or in which Kuan-yin plays a large part. And there are other scriptures from India, especially the Flower Ornament Sutra and the Sutra of Contemplation of the Buddha of Infinite Life, in which Kuan-yin plays an important role. Thus, though it certainly is not the only one, the primary discussion of Kuan-yin in Buddhist sutras is the twenty-fifth chapter of the Lotus Sutra, titled "The Universal Gateway of the Bodhisattva Kuan-yin." In East Asia this chapter is circulated and used as an independent sutra, typically known as the Kuan-yin Sutra.

Two elements are very prominent in this chapter and widely used for various purposes: the idea that simply calling the name of the bodhisattva will be sufficient to save one from any kind of suffering, and the idea that Kuan-yin takes on a great variety of forms in order to save people with different needs. The first is an expression of the compassion of Kuan-yin; the second of Kuan-yin's wisdom.

Calling the Name of Kuan-yin

In chapter 25 of the Lotus Sutra, a bodhisattva named Inexhaustible Mind asks the Buddha why the bodhisattva Kuan-yin is called "Regarder of the Cries of the World." The Buddha explains that if anyone who is suffering calls out Kuan-yin's name wholeheartedly, they will immediately be heard and will be able to free themselves from suffering. A wide variety of possible misfortunes from which one can be saved and a large variety of benefits that can accrue from worshiping the bodhisattva are mentioned. For example, if a huge ship with thousands of fortune seekers is caught in a storm at sea and blown ashore on an island of terrible beasts, if just one person calls on Kuan-yin, all of them will be saved.

The Buddha says to the bodhisattva Inexhaustible Mind, "If there were countless hundreds of thousands of billions of living beings experiencing suffering and agony who heard of this Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World and wholeheartedly called his name, Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World would immediately hear their cries, and all of them would be freed from suffering." Thus, the meaning of the list of misfortunes from which one can be saved by calling on Kuan-yin is quite clear—Kuan-yin can save anyone from any misfortune. The list provides a variety of concrete examples.

Accordingly, Kuan-yin has often been understood by devotees to be one who can do things for those who are devoted to him. This is based, at least in part, on this part of the Lotus Sutra, where it is said that one only has to call out the name of the bodhisattva in order to be saved from calamities and dangers. By remembering and being devoted to the bodhisattva, one can be saved not only from external

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dangers but also from the three inner poisons—lust, or greed; anger, or rage; and folly, or foolishness. Making offerings to Kuan-yin can also result in having a baby of the desired gender, one who will be blessed with great merit, virtue, and wisdom if a boy, and if a girl, she will be marked with great beauty, will have planted roots of virtue, and will be loved and respected by all.

It was this power to save that led early Jesuit missionaries to China to invent the term *Goddess of Mercy* to refer to Kuan-yin and relate the female form of the bodhisattva to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Kuan-yin, in fact, has been a goddess of mercy for a great many, answering prayers and bringing peace and comfort.

Princess Miao-shan

In China, while appealing for help by calling out the name of the bodhisattva remained important in Kuan-yin devotion and religious practices, a great many stories, extracanonical stories, especially stories of embodiments of Kuan-yin's compassion, also attracted popular attention. Probably the most common of these stories down to the present day is the story of Princess Miao-shan.²

Miao-shan (meaning “wonderfully good”) was the third daughter of King Miao-chuang. She was naturally attracted to Buddhism, followed a vegetarian diet from a young age, read Buddhist scriptures during the day, and meditated at night. Having no sons, the king hoped to choose an heir from among his sons-in-law. When Miao-shan became old enough to marry, unlike her two older sisters, who had married men chosen by their father, she refused to get married. This angered her father so much that he found a variety of ways of punishing her. For a while, for example, she was made to do hard work in the garden. When those tasks were completed, she was allowed to go to the White Sparrow Temple for Women, where she underwent further trials designed to discourage her from becoming a nun. But she persevered, causing the king to burn down the temple, killing the five hundred nuns who lived there. And he had Miao-shan executed for disobedience.

While her body was being protected by a mountain spirit, Miao-shan's spirit traveled to a kind of purgatory, where she was able to save many beings by preaching the Dharma. Returning to earth, she went to Fragrant Mountain, meditated for nine years, and became fully awakened. By this time, the king had become very ill with a mysterious incurable disease.

Disguised as a wandering monk, Miao-shan went to her father and told him that there was only one thing that could save him—a medicine made from the eyes and hands of someone who had never felt anger. She even told him where such a person could be found. Then she offered her own eyes and hands to be turned into medicine, medicine that was taken by the king, curing him of his disease.

The king then went to Fragrant Mountain to give thanks to the one who had saved him. There, he immediately rec-

ognized the ascetic without eyes or hands as his own daughter. Overwhelmed with remorse, the king and his entire family converted to Buddhism. And Miao-shan was transformed into her real form, that of Kuan-yin with a thousand arms and eyes. Soon after this, Miao-shan died, and her remains were placed in a pagoda.³

Stories such as this extend and deepen the sense of Kuan-yin as compassion embodied in Chinese culture and in human beings.

The Wisdom of Kuan-yin

Nikkyo Niwano, the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, said that chapter 25 is the most misunderstood chapter of the Lotus Sutra.⁴ What he meant by this is that, properly understood, bodhisattvas are not gods from whom we should expect to receive special treatment, even in times of great trouble; bodhisattvas should be models for how we ourselves can be bodhisattvas, at least some of the time. In the Horin-kaku Guest Hall at the headquarters of Rissho Kosei-kai, there is a very large and magnificent statue of the thousand-armed Kuan-yin. In each of his hands there is an implement of some kind, tools representing skills that can be used to help people. When Founder Niwano first showed that statue to me, he emphasized that it should not be understood as meaning that we should pray to Kuan-yin to save us from our own problems; rather, we should understand that the meaning of Kuan-yin's thousand skills is that we ourselves should develop a thousand skills for helping others. Those who would follow the bodhisattva-way should see great bodhisattvas as models rather than look to them as gods or goddesses who can give us special favors.

Still, we might see popular faith in Kuan-yin as an expression of compassion. In the very act of praying to Kuan-yin to be relieved of suffering, there can be an element of wanting, like Kuan-yin, to be compassionate toward others.

Wisdom as Compassion Embodied

Respecting the hidden wisdom of ordinary people, we might see Kuan-yin devotion as a kind of skillful means used by the Buddha to bring the Dharma in some fashion to ordinary people in the midst of their suffering. By being offered a kind of access to Kuan-yin's compassion through countless images, texts, poems, and devotional practices, people in turn gain strength to embody compassion in their own lives.

Buddhism, perhaps especially Indian Buddhism, was closely associated with the goal of awakening, or enlightenment, and especially a kind of wisdom in which teachings are most important. Even the term for *Buddhism* in Chinese and Japanese means “Buddha's teachings.”

With the development of Kuan-yin devotion, while wisdom remained important, compassion came to play a larger role in the relative status of Buddhist virtues, especially among illiterate common people. Thus, there was a slight shift in the meaning of “the bodhisattva way.” From being

primarily a way toward becoming enlightened in mind, it became primarily the way of compassionate action to save others. Princess Miao-shan does, of course, teach her father a great deal, but we are not told that she was devoted to studying scriptures or to cultivating wisdom. She embodies compassion by using her arms and eyes in compassionate action.

Yet compassion is best embodied in skillful compassionate practice. The tools in the hands of the thousand-armed Kuan-yin symbolize the many means by which Kuan-yin can help living beings in need. This imagery is, I believe, revealing of the kind of wisdom embodied in Kuan-yin devotion—not some kind of esoteric knowledge in the mind alone, but the practical wisdom found not only in minds but also in hands.

Skill is, after all, a kind of wisdom. So compassion should not be seen in contrast with wisdom but only in contrast with disembodied wisdom. To be truly compassionate is to embody compassion, not just feel it or think about it or contemplate it. It is to actualize compassion in the world, wherever we are, and thus in our relationships with relatives, neighbors, friends, and even strangers. It is to be com-

passionate. This is a way to embody the Buddha, to give life to the Buddha in the present world.

Being embodied in this way can be contrasted with being “on high,” as Avalokiteshvara is described in some Indian texts. To be embodied is to be a physical presence in this world. This means that Kuan-yin can be seen not only in many splendid images in temples and museums but also in our mothers or sons or neighbors. In this way, Kuan-yin is not only a symbol of compassion, the bodhisattva *is* compassion, so that wherever compassion can be seen, Kuan-yin can be seen. Kuan-yin is not some deity looking down at the world from a distance but the Buddha’s wise compassion embodied in the actual world, the world of quite ordinary men and women.

The tradition says that we should understand that we ourselves should embody Kuan-yin; that if, for example, we concentrate on Kuan-yin or recite the Kuan-yin chapter, we can open ourselves to compassion—not to some abstract compassion exercised from a distance, but to actually embodying compassion by being compassionate in our own lives and behavior.

A Chinese poem says:

The Dharma-body of Kuan-yin
Is neither male nor female.
Even the body is not the body,
What attributes can there be? . . .
Let it be known to all Buddhists:
Do not cling to form.
The bodhisattva is *you*:
Not the picture or the image.

The Universal Gateway

The title of chapter 25 of the Lotus Sutra is “The Universal Gateway of the Bodhisattva Kuan-yin.” The universal gateway implies that while the way of monks and nuns, the way of wisdom, the road to perfect enlightenment, may be extremely difficult, the way of Kuan-yin is open to all. This may be seen as related to the idea of the universality of buddha-nature, the idea that every living being has the capacity and power to become a buddha. But the universal gateway of Kuan-yin is not necessarily dependent on the idea of buddha-nature. It is dependent, rather, on the idea that everyone can be compassionate, a far more accessible goal than becoming a buddha. Kuan-yin, in other words, makes Buddhism open and accessible to everyone.

In the Lotus Sutra, this idea is suggested by a list of the embodiments of Kuan-yin. Often counted as thirty-three, they are sometimes even associated with other lists of thirty-three, such as the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods. The Lotus Sutra does not mention the number thirty-three here but provides a list that can easily be counted as thirty, thirty-two, thirty-three, or even thirty-five. At temples in China, it is not uncommon to see a set of thirty-two or thirty-three panels depicting the various ways in which Kuan-yin is

The Thousand-Armed Kannon (Kuan-yin) in the Horin-kaku Guest Hall of Rissho Kosei-kai in Tokyo.

embodied. There is not enough space to include the entire list here, but a few observations should be made.

In each case, the text says that for those who need someone in such and such a body, Kuan-yin appears in that form and teaches the Dharma to them. This means that the appearance of Kuan-yin, the way in which Kuan-yin appears to someone, is dependent on the perceiver, on what the perceiver needs. In other words, Kuan-yin appears to people in many forms, not as a way of showing off magical power, but as a way of meeting the needs of people—precisely what is called skillful means earlier in the Lotus Sutra. This is why, with the exception of a few named gods, the list is a list of generic titles. For example, it says that Kuan-yin appears in the form of a king but does not say that he appears in the form of “King So-and-So.” This means that Kuan-yin can appear to us in the form of anyone we meet, that anyone at all can be Kuan-yin for us. Regardless of social status or gender or even species, we can find Kuan-yin in anyone.

The list in the text includes shravakas, pratyekabuddhas, and deities but begins with the embodiment of Kuan-yin as a buddha. “If living beings in any land need someone in the body of a buddha to be saved, Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World appears as a buddha and teaches the Dharma to them.” Any Buddhist scholar, indeed any educated Buddhist monk or priest, can tell you that Kuan-yin is a bodhisattva, not a buddha. But countless laypeople, and not a few nuns as well, will tell you that Kuan-yin is a fully awakened buddha who has chosen to be in this world to help relieve living beings of their suffering, an idea that can also be found in much Chinese Buddhist literature. The assertion in the Lotus Sutra that Kuan-yin appears in the body of a buddha to teach the Dharma to those who need someone in the body of a buddha in order to be saved suggests that it is quite reasonable for Kuan-yin to be the Buddha for someone. This tendency of ordinary people in East Asia to regard Kuan-yin as the Buddha can be seen as embodying a certain kind of wisdom, a wisdom that understands that the Buddha comes to us in many different forms, including those of Kuan-yin. While often seen by scholars as a departure from scriptures, popular devotion to Kuan-yin can be seen as a fulfillment of the assertion in the Lotus Sutra that Kuan-yin can take on the body of a buddha.

Male and Female

Several of the forms of Kuan-yin listed in the Lotus Sutra are explicitly female. Included are a nun, a female lay believer, four kinds of housewives, and a girl. Some others could be male or female. Thus, we can see that the transformation in China of Avalokiteshvara from male to both male and female and the identification of Kuan-yin with Princess Miao-shan are entirely in accord with what is written in the Lotus Sutra. They are historical developments to be sure, but they are a kind of flourishing of the Dharma that is entirely compatible with what is written in the sutra.

Much more than any other story in the Lotus Sutra, the story of Kuan-yin develops profoundly and significantly outside the sutra, in both Chinese religion and Chinese culture, beginning around the end of the tenth century. Centering on Kuan-yin devotion rather than doctrine, Chinese Buddhism gradually evolved from a religion of aristocrats and monks into a popular religion of common people. In images, Kuan-yin was portrayed less often as an Indian prince and more often in a relaxed pose—sitting on a rock, for example, or as a woman in a simple white robe. She is portrayed, in other words, as accessible to common people. And, like virtually all Chinese deities but unlike Indian bodhisattvas, Kuan-yin was increasingly seen as a human being, even as one who has a birthday.

In this process, for reasons that are both obscure and complicated, Kuan-yin began to be perceived and portrayed not only as a male figure but also as a female, and quite often as androgynously both male and female. Female Kuan-yin figures are often dressed in a white robe, signifying that Kuan-yin is not a monastic but a layperson. As far as I know, there is no precedent for such female, white-robed Kuan-yin images outside China. She is clearly a Chinese

Byaku-e Kannon (*White-Robed Kuan-yin*) attributed to the Zen monk-painter Mincho (1342–1431) of the temple Tofukuji in Kyoto.

development. While it is sometimes said that in China the male Avalokiteshvara was transformed into a female, I think it is important to recognize that the creation and use of both male and female forms has continued in East Asia down to the present. Thus, Kuan-yin should not be regarded as a male transformed into a female but as one who transcends the limited concept of male and female.

Another Chinese development in which Kuan-yin plays a unifying role is in the common portrayal of her as being accompanied by Sudhana and the Dragon Princess: a boy from the Flower Ornament Sutra and a girl from the Lotus Sutra.

All human beings, I believe, have both male and female qualities, but strict adherence to the ideas that all buddhas are male, and that nuns should always be subservient to monks, restricts access to our female selves, both in women and in men. By being a buddha who is both male and female, Kuan-yin provides a kind of balance to the overwhelmingly male-oriented weight of Buddhist tradition, enabling women to appreciate their value and men to appreciate the woman often hidden in themselves.

Lowland Buddhism

In contrast with those who see religions as a matter of climbing to a mountaintop or the enjoyment of some kind of peak experience, the Lotus Sutra, especially as it is embodied in Kuan-yin, evokes a religion that emphasizes the importance of being earthly, of being this-worldly, of being involved skillfully in relieving suffering in this world here and now. Some prominent Buddhists, especially in Taiwan, have called this “humanistic Buddhism.” The longer Sanskrit Heart Sutra has Avalokiteshvara looking down from on high, but the shorter Chinese Heart Sutra knows nothing of that. In East Asia, Kuan-yin is a bodhisattva of the world, one who sits on rocks, who wears a simple white robe, who takes on a great variety of human forms, including female forms, who appears in a great variety of indigenous stories and scriptures, and who embodies wise compassion or compassionate wisdom in this world.

I believe that, like Kuan-yin, we should all be lowland Buddhists, seeking the low places, the valleys, even the earthy and dirty places, where people are suffering and in need. That is how we will meet Kuan-yin, at least if we are lucky or perceptive. That is where we will find those who hear and respond with compassion to the cries and sorrows of this world. They too are bodhisattvas like Kuan-yin; they are Kuan-yin embodied. That Kuan-yin hears the cries of those who suffer is a reflection of Kuan-yin’s continuing presence in the world

Notes

1. In Sanskrit, the bodhisattva is known primarily as Avalokiteshvara (Avalokiteśvara), the name often preferred by museums. This name, the interpretation of which is problematic, was translated into Chinese characters that are written in Roman script

as Kuan-shih-yin, which is often shortened to Kuan-yin. Since the pronunciation in Mandarin Chinese is somewhere between an English *g* and *k*, the Chinese character written here with a *K* is expressed as a *G* in pinyin, giving Guan-shih-yin and Guan-yin, which is preferred in mainland China. These same Chinese characters are pronounced in slightly different ways in other Chinese dialects, such in Cantonese, where they become Kwun Yum or Kun Yam, and in other languages, such as Korean, where it is Kuanum, and Japanese, where it becomes Kannon. In addition, the name Kuan-shih-tzu-tsai (Kanzejizai in Japanese pronunciation) or, in the shorter version, Kuan-tzu-tsai (Kanjizai) can often be seen. In the West, the female form of Kuan-yin is also known as the Goddess of Mercy, but this is not a translation.

While there is no universal agreement on how best to translate this name, the three characters used to write Kuan-shih-yin, or Kanzeon, mean approximately this: *kuan* has to do with seeing, sensing, observing, or perceiving; *shih* means “world”; and *yin* basically means “sound.” So a very literal rendering of this name might be “perceiver of the world’s sounds.” By implication, the kind of perception involved here is not an indifferent observing, not mere perception; it involves compassion. And the sounds involved are not just any noise but the cries of the suffering of the world. So I translate the name as “Regarder of the Cries of the World.” While useful as a translation, that is not always convenient. I think the most commonly used name in English, as in Chinese, is Kuan-yin, and that is what I will use here.

This same bodhisattva also has a great variety of common names in usage that are derived from his or her portrayal in Chinese Buddhist art, images that for the most part are derived from stories about the bodhisattva. The most common of these include “thousand-armed” or “thousand-handed” or “thousand-handed and thousand-eyed” Kuan-yin, so named because the image has a great many arms, typically forty-two being used to represent a thousand. Often each of those hands has an eye in it. More often they hold a symbol of some kind, quite often of some kind of implement or tool, such as a willow branch to drive away illness, a conch to summon friendly spirits, a jug for dispensing water or nectar, a monk’s staff, a sutra, a bowl of fruit, and so on. Other popular forms include the “Sacred” or “Holy” Kuan-yin, the Water and Moon Kuan-yin, White-Robed Kuan-yin, Kuan-yin of the Southern Sea, Kuan-yin of Eleven Faces, Fish-Basket Kuan-yin, and Wish-Fulfilling Kuan-yin. It is often said that there are six forms of Kuan-yin, corresponding to the six kinds of living beings who are subject to rebirth, but there are at least two very different sets of six, and many popular forms of Kuan-yin are not included in either set of six. There are also lists of the thirty-three embodiments of Kuan-yin found in chapter 25 of the Lotus Sutra. Other East Asian sets show Kuan-yin in fifty-three forms, combining images from various Chinese sources.

2. For this and much of this article, I am indebted to Chün-fang Yü’s wonderful book *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). Anyone with even a passing interest in Kuan-yin or East Asian Buddhism should read this book, remarkable not only for insights gained from familiarity with Kuan-yin devotion but also for extensive use of popular materials usually ignored by scholars.

3. This account follows quite closely that given by Chün-fang Yü in *Kuan-yin*, 293–94.

4. Nikkyo Niwano, *Buddhism for Today* (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Company, 1976), 377.

Kuan-yin Devotion in China

by Chün-fang Yü

The sexual transformation from the masculine Avalokiteśvara to the feminine Kuan-yin seems to be a unique Chinese phenomenon that has fascinated many scholars.

Kuan-yin, or Kuan-shih-yin, is the Chinese name for Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, who has long been worshiped throughout the Buddhist world. A Chinese saying aptly describes the great popularity of this savior bodhisattva: “Everybody knows how to chant Omituofo (Amida-butsu), and every household worships Kuan-yin.” Under Chinese influence, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese have also used the same names (Kannon or Kanzeon in Japanese, Kwanse’um in Korean, and Quan-am in Vietnamese). However, the cult of Avalokiteśvara is, of course, not limited to East Asia but exists throughout Asia. Called Lokeśvara (Lord of the World) in Cambodia and Java, Lokanātha (Protector of the World) in Burma, Nātha Dēviyō in Sri Lanka, and Chenrezig (*spyan-ras-gzigs*, “One Who Sees with Eyes”) in Tibet, Avalokiteśvara might not be identified by the same name, but all the South, Southeast, and East Asian Buddhist cultures have known and worshiped this bodhisattva.

The bodhisattva has also become well known in the United States and Europe, the combined result of feminism and the immigration of Buddhist teachers to the West. Although Buddhism was introduced to the United States in the nineteenth century, political events in Asia since World War II have greatly facilitated the religion’s westward movement. When China became Communist in 1949, many Chinese monks escaped to Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and the United States. Similarly, while most Tibetan lamas escaped to India, some came to the United States when Tibet was occupied by China in 1959. With the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 and the arrival of new immigrants from Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries since the 1980s, people in America have been exposed to many forms of Buddhism as well as the different names and identities of the bodhisattva. Avalokiteśvara is present in all of these Buddhist traditions. In addition, American feminist scholars have become interested in uncovering a goddess tradition—either in the West prior to the rise of patriarchal Christianity or in the deities of non-Western religious traditions. In the latter case, Kuan-yin, together with Tara, Kali, and Durga, is the favorite candidate for such citations. The contemporary focus on

Kuan-yin as a great goddess is understandable, for this is how most East Asians see her. I myself was first introduced to this deity as such by my maternal grandmother. Many blanc de chine porcelain statues of Kuan-yin made in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on display in museums (where many Westerners first encounter the deity) are also decidedly feminine. However, Avalokiteśvara has never been worshiped as a goddess in India, Tibet, Sri Lanka, or Southeast Asia. Nor, indeed, was Kuan-yin perceived to be feminine by the Chinese at first, for many paintings from Tun-huang dating to the tenth century clearly show him with a mustache. The sexual transformation from the masculine Avalokiteśvara to the feminine Kuan-yin seems to be a unique Chinese phenomenon that has fascinated many scholars.

Prior to the translation of the Lotus Sutra in the third century, there was no Chinese deity to compare with Kuan-yin, who was not only a universal and compassionate savior but also easily accessible. The teaching of the “Universal Gateway” preached a new and democratic way of salvation. There was no specific thing a person had to do to be saved. One did not need to become a scholar learned in scripture or a paragon of virtue or a master proficient in meditation.

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One did not have to follow a special way of life, take up a strange diet, or practice any ritual. The only requirement was to call Avalokiteśvara's name with a sincere and believing heart. This was a new deity who would help anyone in difficulty. There was no discrimination on the basis of status or gender. And the benefits of worshiping him were both spiritual and worldly. Although there were goddesses in China before the appearance of Kuan-yin, none of them seem to have enjoyed lasting and continuously active cults. There was thus a religious vacuum in China that Kuan-yin could conveniently and comfortably fill.

One of the characteristics of Buddhism as a universal religion is that it has always supplied the necessary symbols and ideals to the host countries. In accommodating itself to the different religious and cultural traditions in the various Asian countries, new and different forms of Buddhism developed. In the case of Sino-Japanese Buddhism, the creation of the T'ien-t'ai (Tendai), Hua-yen (Kegon), Pure Land (Jōdo), and Ch'an (Zen) schools is a prominent example. Although the Chinese based their main teachings and practices on some scriptures translated from Indic languages, the specific emphases and formulations reflected the native modes of thought and cultural values. This process of domestication created diversity in the pan-Asian Buddhist tradition. I would like to use the case of Kuan-yin's transformation into the compassionate Goddess of Mercy in China as another example of this process.

There are numerous Buddhist scriptures connected with Kuan-yin. The bodhisattva appears in more than eighty sutras. This is by no means an exhaustive list, for the esoteric sutras connected with Kuan-yin alone amount to eighty-eight and occupy 509 pages of the Taishō canon (volume 20), the modern edition of the Chinese Buddhist Tripitaka printed in 1922–33 in Japan. Avalokiteśvara's roles vary widely in these sutras translated from Indic languages into Chinese, ranging from a walk-on bit player of the attending entourage surrounding Śākyamuni Buddha to the leading star of his own grand dramas of universal salvation. The faces of the bodhisattva in canonical scriptures, just as in art and other media, are thus highly multivocal, multivalent, and multifaceted. The different roles Avalokiteśvara assumes in the scriptures might reflect the increasing importance of his stature in India. On the other hand, they might also reflect different cultic traditions about the bodhisattva. At least three separate and distinct cults can be identified: that of a compassionate savior not bound to a specific place as represented by the Lotus Sutra, that of the chief helper of Amitābha Buddha found in the Pure Land sutras, and that of a sage connected with the holy island Potalaka, as seen in the Avatamsaka Sutra. The three cultic traditions developed independently. In the esoteric scriptures, Avalokiteśvara is usually identified as living on Potalaka.

Anyone who visits a temple in Taiwan, Hong Kong, or 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. This is one way to generate merit. I believe the indigenous sutras helped to promote and disseminate the belief in Kuan-yin in China, just as the translated sutras, miracle stories, new images of Kuan-yin, pilgrimages, and rituals devoted to the bodhisattva did in their different ways. In recent decades, scholars have begun to reevaluate the traditional distinction between the sutras translated from Indic languages and those composed in China. Attitudes toward *i-ching* (suspicious scriptures) or *wei-ching* (spurious scriptures) have undergone revision. They see these scriptures as creative attempts to synthesize Buddhist teachings and adapt them to the Chinese cultural milieu.

Indigenous sutras are closely connected with miracle stories. Compilation of miracle stories began in the fourth century, not long after the first translation of the Lotus Sutra by Dharmaraksha in 286 CE. Miracle tales about Kuan-yin are an important and enduring genre in Chinese Buddhism. They have been collected down the ages and are still being produced and collected today. Miracle tales served as a powerful medium for transforming and domesticating Kuan-yin. Because the stories relate real people's encounters with the bodhisattva in specific times and places and under critical circumstances, Kuan-yin was no longer the mythical figure mentioned in the sutras but, rather, became a "real presence." Miracles happen that vouch for Kuan-yin's efficacy (*ling*). They work because there is the relationship of *kan-ying* (sympathetic resonance) between the sincere devotee and the bodhisattva. Both concepts have deep cultural roots in China.

Many miracle tales mention images of Kuan-yin. Devotees worshiped the images, which often served as talismans. New forms of Kuan-yin appearing in devotees' visions of the bodhisattva as contained in some later miracle tales served as effective media for the domestication and transformation of Kuan-yin. While most early miracle tales refer to Kuan-yin as a monk when he appears in the dreams or visions of the devotee, the bodhisattva gradually appears as either a "person in white" (*bai-i-jen*), indicating perhaps his lay status, or a "woman in white" (*bai-i fu-jen*), indicating her female gender. There is clearly a dialectic relationship between the changing forms of the bodhisattva appearing in the devotees' visions and dreams and the development of new iconographic representations. Changing visions of Kuan-yin led to new artistic representations of the bodhisattva. But conversely, an image of Kuan-yin depicted with a new iconography could also predispose the devotees to see him/her in this way in their visions and dreams.

Miracle tales about Kuan-yin provide strong evidence that Kuan-yin has been worshiped in China by both monastics and laypeople. In fact, the cult cuts across all social classes. Miracle tale collections were compiled by both monks and literati. The collections included stories about people from diverse walks of life who, for a brief moment,

experienced a salvific encounter with Kuan-yin, and their lives were changed forever. Buddhist sutras glorifying Kuan-yin received verification from such tales. Scriptural teachings were no longer doctrinal and abstract but became practical and concrete through the living testimonies of real men and women. At the same time, through their tales about their dreams or visions of Kuan-yin, the devotees helped to make the bodhisattva take on increasingly Chinese manifestations. The foreign Avalokiteśvara was, in the process, gradually changed into the Chinese Kuan-yin.

The intimate and dialectical relationship between visions, media, and iconography highlights the role that art has played in the cult of Kuan-yin. Art has indeed been one of the most powerful and effective media through which the Chinese people have come to know Kuan-yin. It is also through art that one can most clearly detect the bodhisattva's gradual yet undeniable sexual transformation. Buddhist scriptures always present the bodhisattva as either masculine or asexual. Not only does Kuan-yin usually appear as a monk in early miracle stories and in the dreams and visions of the faithful, but wonder-working monks such as Bao-chi and Seng-jie are also regarded as incarnations of the bodhisattva. But the deity underwent a profound and startling transformation beginning sometime during the tenth century, and by the sixteenth century, Kuan-yin had become not only completely Chinese but also the most beloved

Goddess of Mercy, a nickname coined by the Jesuit missionaries who were much impressed by the similarities between her iconography and that of the Madonna. Of all the imported Buddhist deities, Kuan-yin is the only one who has succeeded in becoming a genuine Chinese goddess. So much so that many Chinese, if they are not familiar with Buddhism, are not even aware of her Buddhist origin.

Chinese created indigenous forms of Kuan-yin, just as they composed indigenous sutras. In time, several distinctive Chinese forms of Kuan-yin emerged from the tenth century onward. They are the Water-Moon Kuan-yin, White-Robed Kuan-yin, Child-Giving Kuan-yin, Kuan-yin of the South Sea, Fish-Basket Kuan-yin, and Old Mother Kuan-yin (Yü 2001). Canonical and indigenous scriptures, miracle stories, rituals, and pilgrimages, as well as art and literature, have all contributed to the process. While each medium promoted Kuan-yin, it transformed the bodhisattva at the same time. Thus, while Kuan-yin was represented and perceived as a monk prior to and during the T'ang dynasty (618–907), the bodhisattva was increasingly feminized and eventually turned into Venerable Mother Kuan-yin. These media, moreover, never existed and functioned in isolation but constantly interacted and influenced one another. I have been much impressed, for instance, by the fact that visions of devotees and pilgrims were both reflected in and inspired by the contemporary iconography.

And it is interesting to see how closely indigenous scriptures, miracle accounts, ritual practices, and popular precious volumes reinforced each other. I now believe that the development and evolution of the cult was fueled by such dialectical interactions among these media.

Since Avalokiteśvara became a feminine deity only in China and, furthermore, this happened only after the T'ang dynasty, it is necessary to offer some hypothetical explanations in closing. I think it has to be examined in the context of new developments in Chinese religions, including Buddhism, since the Sung dynasty (960–1279). The emergence of the feminine Kuan-yin must also be studied in the context of new cults of other goddesses, which, not coincidentally, also developed after the Sung era. The appearance of the feminine Kuan-yin in indigenous sutras, art, and miracle stories occurred from the tenth to the twelfth centuries. It was also during these centuries that Neo-Confucianism was established as the official ideology, functioning very much like a state religion. I do not think these events happened by coincidence or independent of each other.

I would venture to say that the appearance of the feminine Kuan-yin and other new goddesses at this particular time might be connected with the antifeminist stance of established religions, chief of which was undoubtedly Neo-Confucianism. This was the hegemonic discourse and ruling ideology of China during the last millennium. Neo-Confucianism was a philosophy and a system of political thought, but it was also an ideology sustaining the lineage and family system. In one sense, then, the new goddesses' cults can be seen as similar responses to this totalistic system of belief and praxis, but in another way, the feminine Kuan-yin might be viewed as the model and inspiration for the other goddesses. Organized Buddhism and Taoism do not fare much better. Despite the Ch'an rhetoric of nonduality and the Taoist elevation of the feminine principle, these did not translate into actual institutional support for women. We cannot name any woman who became a prominent Ch'an master or Taoist priestess.

Having said that the birth of goddesses might have been in response to the overwhelmingly masculine character of the three religions, I must also point out that some of these new goddesses did reflect the belief in universal sagehood and enlightenment espoused by Neo-Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Just as the emperors Yao and Shun were not born sages but became so, this was apparently also the case for gods and goddesses. Wang Ken (1483–1540) could salute everyone he met as sages because they were potential sages if not actual ones. Can we also say that the street was full of bodhisattvas and goddesses?

Finally, we may ask: Did the female Kuan-yin offer more options to Chinese women? It is often assumed that when a religion provides goddesses to worship, it can empower women. When Avalokiteśvara was transformed into Kuan-yin, the Goddess of Mercy, new forms and expressions of

religiosity became available to women and men in China. But as long as the traditional stereotypical views about women's pollution or inferiority remained unchallenged, the feminine images of Kuan-yin had to be either more or less than real women. They were not and could not be endowed with a real woman's characteristics. It is for this reason that the White-Robed Kuan-yin, though a fertility goddess, is devoid of sexuality. Real women, in the meantime, together with their male countrymen, worshiped Kuan-yin as the "child-giving" Kuan-yin who saw to it that the family religion would never be disrupted by the lack of a male heir. Chinese women never really left the patriarchal home.

But on further reflection, one may ask, what kind of home was it? Clearly, something close to a sea change occurred after the Sung dynasty in both Chinese religion and the Chinese family system. There was an increasing emphasis from the Southern Sung period and following on the lineage ideal, particularly on genealogies and generation markers (Ebrey 1986, 32–39, 44–50). By the mid-Ming dynasty, around the fifteenth century, with fierce competitiveness in the civil examinations on the rise, lineage became even more important, for it supported individuals in surviving as successful degree candidates (ter Haar 1992, 113). The desperate need to secure a male heir, the frantic effort to keep the head of the household alive, and the fanatical adherence to the ideal of chaste widowhood—all the disparate elements of a "domesticated religiosity" began to take on a new significance. The cult of Kuan-yin did indeed serve Confucian family values, and in this sense we can speak of a Confucianization of Buddhism. While it is true that because of the diffused character of Chinese religion, the family was never a completely secular institution, separated from the transcendent and devoid of religious status, it was still primarily Confucian in its orientation (Yang 1961, 28–57, 294–340). In the end, the influence went both ways. As the common saying familiar to many Chinese people goes, "Kuan-yin is enshrined in every household"; thus, it was ultimately a home where Kuan-yin was very much present. Kuan-yin had indeed found a home in China. □

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The Many Forms and Functions of Kannon in Japanese Religion and Culture

by Mark R. Mullins

The bodhisattva became domesticated, moving beyond the original Buddhist sources to be appropriated more widely by large numbers of religious groups and institutions.

The cross-cultural diffusion of religions has long been a subject of scholarly interest to historians and sociologists. As religions move across cultural boundaries, they are invariably transformed through the process of translation and the encounter with the dominant cultures and religious traditions of the receiving society. In *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara*, Chün-fang Yü provides a rich and detailed treatment of this process in connection with the spread of Buddhism in China. “The bodhisattva,” she explains, “became domesticated to serve the interests and needs of host societies that adopted him/her.”¹ In Japanese scholarship, “domestication” is usually referred to as “indigenization” (*dochakuka*) and, in terms of religion, is defined as the process whereby a foreign-born religion is transformed through its encounter with native religion and culture. As in the Chinese context, the history of Kannon in Japan reveals that the process of indigenization has produced multiple forms and functions. While the initial forms were based on transplanted Buddhist traditions from China, over the centuries Japanese have freely adopted and adapted the Kannon figure in the context of other religious traditions (Shinto and Christianity) and have inspired the creation of a number of new religious movements over the course of Japanese modernization. This essay briefly reviews some of the major patterns and ways in which Kannon has been transmitted and transformed over the course of Japanese history.

Kannon Devotionalism: A Transdenominational Buddhist Phenomenon

The history of Kannon in Japan can be traced back to the earliest period of the transmission of Buddhism from the Asian continent.² There are records that indicate that scriptural texts and various forms of Kannon (Shō Kannon, Jūichimen Kannon, Senju Kannon, and Batō Kannon, for example) had arrived in Japan by early in the eighth century. Tasuku Hayami points out that although the *Kannon-gō* was a part of the Lotus Sutra (*Hokekyō*), it was already

treated as an independent text and listed as such in various records as early as 743 (Tenpyō 14).³

In the earliest period (Nara, 646–710), Kannon was transmitted primarily in relation to the esoteric tradition (*mikkyō-tekki dentō*), spread largely among the nobility and powerful families, and became a central element of “state-protecting Buddhism” (*chingokokka bukkyō*). Over several centuries, numerous temples dedicated to Kannon were established and a variety of images were enshrined. In the Heian period (9th–10th centuries), the Kannon faith became increasingly oriented toward *genze riyaku*, or a wide range of this-worldly benefits beyond the protection of the state. From the tenth century on, however, the Kannon faith expanded to include a more otherworldly dimension. The concern for otherworldly individual salvation became particularly important from this time and reshaped Kannon faith accordingly. The larger context of this development was the spread of the Chinese Buddhist teaching regarding *rokudō*—the six lower states of existence or the six realms of hell—which became particularly prominent in Tendai and Pure Land circles. Kannon came to be perceived as one who was able not only to protect and prevent individuals from falling

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Pilgrims at the temple Shimabuji, the first of thirty-four Kannon sites of Chichibu in Saitama Prefecture.

into one of the six realms but also to transport them to the Pure Land. In this way, the roles of Amida and Kannon begin to merge and overlap.

The wider diffusion of Kannon devotionism was facilitated by the development of pilgrimage routes that connected various temples known for their history of Kannon manifestations and miracle stories. By the tenth century numerous sacred sites and Kannon temples were linked, and by the late eleventh or early twelfth century the first thirty-three-Kannon pilgrimage route in the Kansai region (Saigoku pilgrimage) was probably completed.⁴ The number thirty-three, which is duplicated in numerous pilgrimage routes, is based on the *Kannon-gyō* (chapter 25 of the Lotus Sutra), which indicates that this bodhisattva assumes thirty-three different forms in addressing human suffering and need. MacWilliams points out that Kannon pilgrimage routes were developed in associations of thirty-three temples to correspond to these multiple manifestations of Kannon. This form of devotionism proved to be popular, and subsequently “over two hundred and thirty-six copies (*utsushi*) of the route spread throughout Japan, one-third of which were located in eastern Japan.”⁵ The three most important pilgrimage routes devoted to Kannon are the Saigoku pilgrimage in western Japan (Kansai), which has thirty-three Kannon sites; the Bandō pilgrimage in the Kantō region, with another thirty-three Kannon sites; and the Chichibu pilgrimage in Saitama, which has thirty-four Kannon sites. These are collectively known as the *hyakuban Kannon fudasho*, or circuit of one hundred sites.

Kannon devotionism, at least as it has developed in Japan, is clearly a transdenominational phenomenon, a fact that can be illustrated by the well-known pilgrimage routes that were created in many areas throughout Japan. Yoritomi's overview of the three major Kannon pilgrimage routes helpfully illustrates the transdenominational nature of these devotional practices.⁶ On the Saigoku route, Tendai (twelve temples) and Shingon (fifteen) are the dominant traditions represented. Likewise, Tendai (twelve temples) and Shingon (sixteen temples) dominate the Bandō circuit, though the Sōtō sect (two temples) and Jōdo sect (two temples) are also represented. What is distinctive about the Chichibu route is that it is dominated by the Zen tradition (Sōtō sect, seventeen temples; Rinzai sect, thirteen).⁷ The affiliation of temples on these pilgrimages clearly reveals that Kannon has been appropriated widely across sectarian or denominational lines.

To what extent the Kannon-related practices were monopolized by elite groups (priests, noble families, etc.) during the earlier centuries is not entirely clear, but Hayami maintains that Kannon faith did not spread widely among the masses until the Muromachi period (fifteenth century), which coincides with the improvement of the general economic and living conditions. Over time, in any case, numerous religious confraternities dedicated to Kannon (*Kannon-kō*) developed throughout Japan in association with these temples. Even today such groups hold meetings in households, participate in monthly Kannon services in local temples, assist in the care and cleaning of the Kannon hall, and continue to organize and participate in one or more of the well-known pilgrimages.

It is important to recognize that these historical developments should not be read too narrowly as exclusively Buddhist. Many of the Kannon devotional centers were established in shrine-temple complexes. The incorporation of Kannon into these sacred sites, which also enshrined various indigenous *kami*, contributed to the process whereby Kannon was disembedded from his/her original Buddhist framework in the consciousness of many Japanese. It is rather clear that for many Japanese today, Kannon is simply one more divine being in the larger pantheon of benevolent deities who can be called into service in times of need. This is still apparent in many sacred sites in modern Japan, in spite of the government's efforts to clearly separate Shinto from Buddhist institutions through the *haibutsu kishaku* movement during the Meiji era. One well-known example is the Toyokawa Inari Shrine, which is also the site of a Sōtō temple, which enshrines numerous Inari (fox deity), Jizō (guardian of children), and Kannon. Another prominent example in Tokyo is the Asakusa Kannon Temple, the sacred complex that combines Sensōji Temple and Asakusa Shrine.

It should also be noted that Kannon-related pilgrimages are no longer exclusively related to Buddhist institutions. At Akakura Mountain Shrine, a Shinto complex in Aomori

Prefecture, there is another thirty-three-temple/shrine pilgrimage route that extends beyond Buddhist denominational boundaries. It includes a large Shō Kannon statue and thirty-three smaller Kannon statues that are central to the practice of members in this religious community. This eclectic shrine complex, founded in the 1920s by a spirit medium, is the site of healing rituals, ascetic training, and numerous festivals, including veneration of Kannon, Kōbō Daishi (founder of the Shingon tradition), and the founder of the shrine.⁸

Kannon and Japanese Christianity

The examples above reveal that Kannon has moved beyond the initial Buddhist carriers and been appropriated more widely by Japanese religious groups and institutions. Here I would like to briefly consider the appropriation of Kannon in Japanese Christianity, which is where my interest in Kannon initially began. It was through reading the works of Shūsaku Endō, the Roman Catholic novelist, that I became fascinated with the development and role of Maria Kannon among the Kakure Kirishitan (hidden Christians). In most instances, treatments of Maria Kannon take place in the context of Japanese adaptations of Roman Catholicism from the sixteenth century to the end of the Tokugawa period, a time in which Christianity was a proscribed religion. The camouflaged Virgin Mary—in the disguise of the bodhisattva Kannon—provided the Kakure Kirishitan with

a sacred image upon which to focus their worship and ritual under very difficult circumstances. The concealed sign of the cross—placed somewhere on the image (often on the back of the statue)—is usually the only feature that distinguishes it from a typical Buddhist image.

Kentarō Miyazaki, one of the foremost authorities on the Kakure Kirishitan, explains that

the Maria Kannon is often a figure of Koyasu Kannon or Jibo Kannon [which portrayed a mother holding a child] in white or blue porcelain, imported from China. In times of persecution during the Edo period, the underground Kirishitan could not possess a figure of the Christian Virgin Mary, therefore they projected Mary's image on the gentle image of the Buddhist Kannon and venerated her in this way. . . . For the underground Kirishitan who every year trod on the *fumie* and denied God, this Father God was a fearful divine judge. Therefore, the center of their faith shifted without notice to the gentle and limitless embrace and forgiveness of the mother deity, Mariya.⁹

This historical reality, no doubt, is what inspired Endō's interpretation of the feminization of Christianity in the Japanese context. In his autobiographical short story, "Mothers," Endō writes that "the missionaries long ago brought to this country the teaching of a Father God. But in the course

Kodakara Kannon (Child-Granting Kannon) at the Toyokawa Inari Shrine complex in Akasaka, Tokyo.

The mound dedicated to the fox deity in the precincts of the Toyokawa Inari Shrine.

of time, after the missionaries had been driven out and the churches destroyed, the hidden Christians gradually threw over all the elements of the religion that didn't suit them, replacing them with what is most essential in all Japanese religion, *devotion to Mother*." (emphasis mine)¹⁰

This interpretation builds on Endō's distinction between *chichi no shūkyō* (paternal religion) and *haha no shūkyō* (maternal religion). While the Jesuit missionaries may have introduced the Virgin Mary along with other teachings regarding Jesus and the creeds, Endō argues that the missionaries transmitted an expression of Christianity that was overwhelmingly paternal, with an emphasis on the God who judges and punishes. In another essay, he writes that "Christianity matured in Europe as a religion not of the mother figures, but of the father figure, and this figure is considered an extremely frightening presence."¹¹ In this context, one is reminded of the well-known Japanese proverb *Jishin, Kaminari, Kaji, Oyaji* (Earthquakes, Thunder, Fires, and Fathers), which suggests rather negative associations with the father image in Japan.

This perception of the nature of motherhood and fatherhood in Japan shapes Endō's interpretation of why maternal religion is so attractive in this context and why the Japanese have a general coldness toward paternal religion. It is so powerful in Japan, he claims, that it has also transformed Buddhism:

Buddhism as well came to Japan after passing through China and Korea. It was chewed and digested by the Japanese until by the time of the Heian and Muromachi periods, it also became a mother-oriented religion. The feeling that the Japanese have as they worship the Amida Buddha is a strong reflection of the heart of a child making emotional demands of its mother. There is a very strong mother-image in the case of Amida Buddha in the hearts of the Japanese. Thus, we find that . . . as Buddhism became Japanized, it also became a mother-oriented religion.¹²

No doubt there are some who would challenge Endō's interpretation here, but it is undeniable that there is a longing for the divine feminine—or a more compassionate, understanding, and forgiving divine being—that has significant cross-cultural appeal. The feminine forms of Kannon, in any case, seem to be very compatible with Japanese religious sensibilities.

Although most discussions of Maria Kannon focus on its role in the premodern period or in the dwindling Kakure Kirishitan communities in isolated areas of Kyushu, there is also evidence that it has appeared in other Christian communities. More than a decade ago, in the process of documenting indigenous Christian movements that appeared in Japan's modern century, I came across the Holy Ecclesia of Jesus (Sei Iesu Kai), founded by Takeji Ōtsuki in 1946. Some years ago, this movement identified a healing spring

in Ayabe City, Kyoto Prefecture, close to the birthplace of Ōtsuki and to the site of the discovery of a Maria Kannon figure. The spring has since become a pilgrimage site for members of the movement. They often fill containers with water from the spring and share it with persons suffering from all sorts of maladies. Those who are ill are encouraged to drink the water "while calling on the name of God" in the belief that God can heal them. Numerous healings have been reported by members during worship-service testimonials and recorded in church publications.

Kannon, Charismatic Founders, and New Religious Movements

Another development that parallels the pattern of appropriation in China can be seen in the experiences of charismatic founders and the formation of new religions in Japan. Many founders in the twentieth century have identified themselves with Kannon, seen Kannon as a source of new revelation, or designated Kannon as a central figure and resource in the new religion. Several examples are worth noting here.¹³ The first example is Mokichi Okada (1882–1955), a charismatic leader who founded the Nihon Kannon Kyōdan in 1947. As with other new religions, Okada's inspiration for what would become Sekai Kyūsei-kyō (The Church of World Messianity) came from multiple sources. Like many other founders, Okada suffered as a child from numerous illnesses. His various difficulties continued until he was in his twenties. He eventually became convinced that the natural healing possibilities of the human body had been weakened by the overuse of medications. In 1920 Okada joined Ōmoto-kyō and immersed himself in their sacred text, the *Ofudesaki*. In the midst of studying this text, Okada had a powerful religious experience, in 1926, one in which he claimed Kannon actually entered his body. This was envisioned as a "ball of fire" or "Kannon power" (*Kannon-riki*), which was believed to reside within him and empowered him to heal others of all kinds of sickness. Shortly after this experience, Okada left Ōmoto-kyō and began advocating *jōrei*, or the practice of purification and healing through Kannon's powerful light, which emanated from the palms of his hands. Okada eventually came to be regarded as an incarnation of the bodhisattva Kannon by his followers. In 1935 he organized the Dai Nihon Kannon Kai, a movement that was renamed Sekai Kyūsei-kyō after he moved the headquarters from Tokyo to Atami in 1950. Following his death in 1955, the movement experienced numerous schisms and became the fountainhead of some twenty-five different religious groups.

Seiyū Kiriya, who founded the Agon-shū, provides another interesting example. At a low point in his life when he was about to commit suicide, Kiriya came across a copy of the *Kannon-gyō*. This text revealed to him the compassion and salvation provided by Kannon, and he had a life-transforming religious experience. The experience of Kannon's saving grace led him to establish a Kannon-wor-

shipping religious movement, the Kannon Jieikai, and he began to pursue serious ascetic training to cultivate his spiritual life.¹⁴ Additional revelatory experiences from Kannon in Kiriya's dreams apparently inspired him in new directions, including new rituals and the organization of Agonshū in 1978. In particular, the *goma* rites, or fire rituals, that have historically been associated with esoteric Buddhism and Shugendō became central to this movement. This new religion, with headquarters in Kyoto, has some eight hundred thousand members and attracts considerable media attention in connection with the *Hoshi matsuri* festival, which is held in the spring each year. There are numerous other new religions that have been inspired and shaped by Kannon, but these two examples must suffice for our purposes here.

Kannon in Contemporary Japanese Society

The brief review above has sketched some of the ways in which Kannon has become a divine being in diverse religious contexts. In this concluding section, I would like to draw attention to both continuity and change in the functions and forms of Kannon in contemporary Japan. One of the most prominent developments has been in relation to *mizuko kuyō*, which refers to memorial services for children lost through miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion. This is a

topic that has been the focus of considerable research in recent decades.¹⁵ *Mizuko* clearly fall into the category of those who have died an untimely or "bad" death and reside in a nearby spirit world along with other *muen-botoke* (people who died with no one to look after their graves), or *gaki* (hungry ghosts). According to popular beliefs, such spirits hover around the living with a feeling of *urami* (resentment) and are the potential source of *tatari* (retribution, curse). While the bodhisattva Jizō, a popular savior figure devoted to children, has been the dominant figure in *mizuko* rites, in recent years Kannon has also been given a prominent place in a number of temples devoted to this practice. Given the long history of identification of Kannon with the needs of mothers and children, it is not surprising that Kannon has also been appropriated as a central figure in these memorial rites—both to care for spirits in the "other world" and to comfort those in the world of the living who oftentimes are struggling with personal remorse, regret, and guilt. Kannon and Jizō are clearly both highly adaptable savior figures who are able to appear in diverse settings to address a variety of needs.

Today there are numerous temples that have appropriated Kannon as a central figure in *mizuko kuyō* rites throughout Japan. Newspapers carry advertisements for these rites, and in recent years some temples maintain Internet sites to pro-

Front and side views of a ceramic statue of a Maria Kannon, produced in Guangzhou, China, in the seventeenth century. For many generations the statue belonged to a Christian family who lived in Sakitsu, in the Amakusa islands. Repository: Sophia University, Kirishitan Bunko.

mote these services. The home page of Daikannonji in Mie Prefecture, for example, claims that its three Kannon images (Mizuko San Kannon) are the best in the land and explains the specific functions and benefits of each Kannon as follows: The Jibo Mizuko Kannon takes the place of the parents and provides for the *mizuko* in the other world with a heart of compassionate love; the role of the Shō Mizuko Kannon is to remove the evil spirit that has attached itself to the *mizuko* and provide protection; finally, the Daihi Mizuko Kannon is able to save all *mizuko*—without exception—and transport them to paradise.¹⁶ Another example is the Reizan Kannon Akasaka Betsuin, in Akasaka, Tokyo, a small Buddhist temple also devoted exclusively to *mizuko kuyō*.¹⁷ It provides similar services but at a more reasonable rate.

Another new role for Kannon is connected to the “graying” of Japanese society and the increasing concerns of the elderly about growing old, fears of senile dementia (and Alzheimer’s disease), and long illnesses followed by an unpleasant death. Kannon’s powers have been expanded to include the “suppression of senility” (*boke-fūji*), and she has become a central figure in *pokkuri-dera*, or temples where the elderly—often those lacking adequate family support—go to pray for a sudden or painless death.¹⁸ Young and Ikeuchi describe one example drawn from Myōtokuji (Izu Peninsula), where a Kannon statue was added to the pan-

theon in recent years to care for the specific needs of the elderly:

What distinguishes this Kannon from others are a pair of elderly male and female figures kneeling at its feet in a gesture of supplication. An entirely new medical role is thus being attributed to Kannon, who is here called the Kannon Who Heals (or Prevents) Senility (*Boke-fūji Kannon*). It was not a monk-artisan who made this Kannon at the impulse of piety. . . . Rather, it was produced by professional designers employed by a company in Japan’s flourishing religious-goods industry, whose salesman came to Myōtokuji with a glossy brochure and persuaded it to erect one.¹⁹

While it is not difficult to imagine that the power of Kannon affirmed in the *Kannon-gyō* could be extended to address the needs of the elderly, it is also not surprising that some observers are concerned that the elderly may be exploited by commercial interests in these recent developments.

Kannon has also become a favorite comforting figure used by the numerous pet cemeteries that have been built across Japan over the past two decades. The Dōbutsu Shugo Kannon is devoted to the care of suffering animals and offers eternal rest to the pets. Sanzen’in in Toki City, Gifu Prefecture, one such temple devoted to pets, has sites in

several prefectures for the reception of animals and explains that it offers pet owners “one last opportunity to express their love and gratitude” through the services it offers.²⁰ Another facility, the Meihan Pet Kannonji in Iga City, Mie Prefecture, was established in 1994 and provides similar services of cremation, a Kannon stone monument, and a priest conducting a memorial service.²¹ In addition to the services offered for pets at these specialized cemeteries and temples, it is also possible to purchase online a Pet Kannon Jizō for 12,600 yen (US\$120), which has a standing image of Kannon with several pets at her feet.²²

In these various ways—*boke-fūji*, *mizuko kuyō*, pet *kuyō*—Kannon has been appropriated to address a wide range of rather personal or individualistic concerns in recent decades. Another significant trend in the postwar period, however, is one that is of a more social or civil religious nature: the widespread use of Kannon in memorial sites and rituals dedicated to those who died in connection with Japanese military conflicts in East Asia and World War II. Yasukuni Shrine—one of the *gokoku jinja*, “state-protecting shrines”—is often seen as the central institution responsible for the war dead. It is a controversial memorial site because it enshrines Class-A war criminals and promotes a version of Japanese history (through the Yūshūkan, a museum that is a part of the shrine complex) that the international community—especially Chinese and Koreans—find particularly offensive. In addition to Yasukuni Shrine, however, numerous other religious institutions and municipalities have also built memorials and regularly conduct rituals on behalf of the war dead. In most cases, Kannon has been selected to serve as the central figure to care for the spirits of the dead and comfort the spirits of those left in the land of the living. Several examples are worth noting here.

Kōa Kannon in Atami. The Kōa Kannon was initially established because of the strong desire of Iwane Matsui, a general in the Japanese army, to memorialize and comfort those who died in the war with China (1937), including both Chinese and Japanese soldiers who lost their lives in the conflict. The Kannon image was established for this purpose in 1940. At the end of World War II, Matsui stood trial and was convicted as a Class-A war criminal and was executed on December 23, 1948. In 1960 the remains of Matsui and six other executed Class-A war criminals were enshrined in the precincts. In addition, there are memorials for 1,619 individuals convicted as Class-B and Class-C war criminals. There is also a memorial to Radhabinod Pal, who served as a judge and representative of India during the Tokyo War Crimes Trials. Dissenting from the decision of the tribunal, Pal concluded that the twenty-five Japanese charged as Class-A war criminals were in fact innocent. He also rejected other charges made by the tribunal against the Japanese government.²³

Kamikaze Peace Kannon Shrine. In the town of Chiran in Kagoshima Prefecture, the Kamikaze Peace Kannon Shrine was built in 1955 on land that was formerly a part of the

Chiran Air Base. Inside the Kannon statue is a list of the names of the deceased pilots, and numerous lanterns have been placed on the shrine grounds in honor of the some one thousand kamikaze pilots who flew out from the Chiran bases (as well as other bases) in the last days of World War II.²⁴

Setagaya Kannon Temple. This temple is also dedicated to the memory and care of the Tokkōtai—almost five thousand kamikaze pilots—who died on behalf of the nation. Shō Kanzeon is the principle image (*honzon*) enshrined here, which is often referred to as the Tokkō Heiwa Kannon-sama. This independent temple holds monthly and annual memorial services, which include chanting of the *Kannon-gyō* and a Dharma talk by a priest from Sensōji, another Kannon temple.²⁵

Peace Parks and Memorials. In addition to these explicitly religious sites, Kannon has also been incorporated in a number of war memorial-peace parks in places that suffered most tragically in the last days of World War II—Nagasaki, Hiroshima, and Okinawa. A Kannon statue was placed at the Hiroshima Memorial Mound, which contains the ashes of the unidentified victims of the atomic bomb. Another was placed in the Hall of Mourning, which was built in the Nagasaki Peace Park in 1995. These sites are especially dedicated to the unknown dead, whose “untimely” or “bad” death resulted from the atomic bombs. John Nelson’s helpful analysis of the Bodhisattva of Compassion in these contexts concludes with the observation that Kannon has “been so widely dispersed in Japanese culture, like the air one breathes, she has become part of the social and cultural landscape in ways that transcend sectarian doctrine.” He goes on to suggest that “perhaps we are limiting the possibilities by thinking of Kannon as a specifically *Buddhist* deity. Surely it makes as much sense in the context of the Peace Park and Japanese religious culture to see her role as similar to that of a Shinto *kami*: specific to the situation of one place and its people, attentive to sincere petitions, and with an ability to restructure violence and chaos to restore harmony and social stability.”²⁶

Conclusion

The foregoing review has revealed that the multiple forms and functions of Kannon in Japanese history indicate that this figure has now transcended its identity as a Buddhist bodhisattva and become a more generalized member of the Japanese pantheon of protective and benevolent gods and spirits. Kannon remains a popular figure today, both within and outside religious contexts. An Internet search will quickly lead one to sites advertising Kannon noodles, Kannon hot springs, and Kannon golf associations. One will also learn that even the well-known Canon camera began as “Kwanon”—the name that Gorō Yoshida, a dedicated Buddhist believer, gave his camera when it was first advertised in 1934. Kannon also appears as a figure in popular youth culture. The Kannon Record Company, established in Sapporo in

1984, claims that the “Goddess of Mercy gives you great rock’n roll!” The appearance of Kannon in these nonreligious spheres of Japanese life indicates this bodhisattva still retains symbolic power in contemporary society, but it also shows that established Buddhist institutions cannot control how Kannon will be interpreted or domesticated. While religious authorities often make efforts to control or prevent deviation from the “received tradition,” in the long run they do not appear to be very effective. It turns out that the intentions of the initial carriers (priests, monks, missionaries) are ultimately less important than the perception, reception, and creative adaptation by the “natives” in the long process of cross-cultural diffusion. □

Notes

1. Chün-fang Yü, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 6.

2. The following historical sketch relies largely on the work of Tasuku Hayami, *Kannon Shinkō* (Tokyo: Hanawa Shobō, 1970).

3. This of course refers to chapter 25 of the Lotus Sutra, “The Universal Gateway [*Fumon-pon*] of the Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World’s Sounds,” which is the primary scriptural basis of Kannon faith in Japan (see *The Lotus Sutra*, trans. Burton Watson. [New York: Columbia University Press, 1993]). According to this text, the bodhisattva Kannon can both provide “deliverance” from all forms of trials and suffering (fire, threat of attack, etc.) and “confer many benefits” (that is, *genze riyaku*). In addition to the *Kannon-gyō*, it should be noted that services dedicated to Kannon—at least those conducted at Sōtō Zen temples—also involve chanting the *Hannya Shingyō*, or Shorter Heart Sutra, which is no doubt related to the fact that in this text it is the bodhisattva Kannon, rather than Shakyamuni Buddha, who describes the nature of reality to the arhat Shariputra.

4. Ken’ichi Yokota, *Kannon Shinkō to Minzoku* (Tokyo: Toshō Shuppan, 1990), 110.

5. Mark W. MacWilliams, “Temple Myths and the Popularization of Kannon Pilgrimage in Japan: A Case Study of Ōya-ji on the Bandō Route,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 24, no. 3–4 (1997): 376.

6. Motohiro Yoritomi, *Shomin no Hotoke—Kannon, Jizō, Fudō* (Tokyo: NHK Books, 1984), 79–84.

7. William Bodiford has noted that more than one-fourth of the 3,817 rural Sōtō Zen temples in Japan are Kannon temples (“Sōtō Zen in a Japanese Town: Field Notes on a Once-Every-Thirty-three-Years Kannon Festival,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 21, no. 1 [1994]: 29). The combination of devotional practices with Zen is difficult to reconcile with our usual textbook explanations of *jiriki* versus *tariki* forms of Buddhism. This is not limited to rural Sōtō temples, however. In my own neighborhood in Aoyama, Tokyo, the Sōtō temple Chōkokuji prides itself on being a place of practice (*shugyō dōjō*) that combines a Kannon faith and Zen (*Kannon shinkō to zen o shūgō suru shugyō dōjō desu*).

8. For a detailed ethnographic study of this sacred site, see the monograph by Ellen Schattschneider, *Immortal Wishes: Labor and Transcendence on a Japanese Sacred Mountain* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) and her Web site, <http://people.brandeis.edu/~eschatt/ImmortalWishes/kannon.html>, which includes a number of photos.

9. Kentarō Miyazaki, “The Kakure Kirishitan Tradition,” in *Handbook of Christianity in Japan*, Mark R. Mullins, ed. (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 2003), 28.

10. Shūsaku Endō, “Mothers,” trans. Francis Mathy, *Japan Christian Quarterly* (Fall 1974): 203.

11. Shūsaku Endō, “Nihonjin no Shūkyō Ishiki,” in *Nihonjin no Kokoro*, Don Kenny, ed. (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1985), 17.

12. *Ibid.*, 19.

13. A valuable source of information for these and other examples is Nobutaka Inoue et al., eds., *Shin Shūkyō Jiten* (Tokyo: Kōbundo, 1990).

14. Ian Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 209.

15. The literature on *mizuko kuyō* is already quite extensive. Some representative works in English include Ann Page Brooks, “Mizuko Kuyō and Japanese Buddhism,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 8, no. 34 (1981); Eiki Hoshino and Dōshō Takeda, “Mizuko Kuyō and Abortion in Contemporary Japan,” in *Religion and Society in Modern Japan: Selected Readings*, ed. Mark R. Mullins, Susumu Shimazono, and Paul Swanson (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1993); and Helen Hardacre, *Marketing the Menacing Fetus in Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

16. The cost for *kuyō* services is thirty-five thousand yen (US\$330) for one *mizuko*, and sixty-five thousand yen (US\$600) for two. All of the transactions can be conducted by sending funds to the temple’s bank or postal account. This information has been gleaned from Daikannonji’s home page; see <http://www.daikannon.or.jp/mizuko/top.html>.

17. See <http://www.mizuko-kuyo-akasaka.org/> for additional information on this specialized temple.

18. For a helpful introduction to this phenomenon, see Fleur Woss, “Pokkuri-Temples and Aging: Rituals for Approaching Death,” in *Religion and Society in Modern Japan*.

19. Richard Young and Fuki Ikeuchi, “Japanese Religion in the ‘Hateful Years’: Reflections on Geriatric Rituals in an Aging Society,” *International and Regional Studies: Meiji Gakuin Review*, no. 12 (1993): 41.

20. See http://www.sanzenin.jp/i/i_doubutukuyou.html.

21. Charges for these services vary and depend on the size of the pet (cats and small dogs cost thirty-five thousand yen [US\$330], while a larger husky or golden retriever will cost fifty-five thousand yen [US\$520]).

22. See <http://www.artmemory.co.jp/buddha/1225/>.

23. See Rabhabinod Pal, “In Defense of Japan’s Case 1 and Case 2” (vols. 1 and 2), ed. and annotated by Akira Nakamura (published in the Kenkyusha Modern English Readers 17) and available at the following site: <http://homepage3.nifty.com/kadzuwo/history/Hall-content.htm>.

24. See the following site for a more detailed description of the Kamikaze Peace Kannon Shrine and other war memorials and monuments: <http://wgordon.web.wesleyan.edu/kamikaze/monuments/chirankannon/index.htm>.

25. This information has been drawn from the temple home page: http://www.setagayakannon.com/p_tokkoh.pdf.

26. John Nelson, “From Battlefield to Atomic Bomb to the Pure Land of Paradise: Employing the Bodhisattva of Compassion to Calm Japan’s Spirits of the Dead,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 1, no. 2 (2002): 160–61.

“Deeply Female and Universally Human”: The Rise of Kuan-yin Worship in America

by Jeff Wilson

Beyond gender, two closely connected aspects of the bodhisattva make her particularly appealing to convert Buddhists, compassion and the ability to take on any form to help those in need.

One of the most fascinating things about Buddhism is how—considering that it is such an inherently Indian religion—it has managed to successfully cross so many cultural boundaries and display such a wide diversity of local variations.¹ The classic case has been the transmission of Buddhism from India to China, and the reimagining of Avalokiteshvara as a female bodhisattva has perhaps been the most popular subject of speculation. For example, Chün-fang Yü, in her magnum opus *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteshvara*, has meticulously traced many of the pathways by which the bodhisattva entered and was domesticated by Chinese culture.²

Today Buddhism is in the process of being transmitted to yet another cultural sphere, one arguably even more different from Buddhist Asia than ancient China was from India. This is the North American and European realm of the West, especially the United States of America, where Buddhism is one of the fastest-growing religions and enjoys a remarkably high public profile. It is natural to turn to the example of Chinese Buddhism to look for clues as to how Buddhism might once again be transformed in a new host culture. Yet, so far, only the most cursory consideration has

been made of that famous Chinese figure Kuan-yin, whose worship now extends beyond East Asia into the temples and homes of many Americans.

Knowledge of bodhisattvas, especially Avalokiteshvara and Manjushri, has been present to some degree in Buddhist communities of converts from the beginning. Nonetheless, what I wish to call attention to is the noticeable rise in devotion by convert Buddhists to particular Buddhist mythological figures. Where earlier periods in American Buddhism saw bodhisattvas relatively marginalized, appearing as a statue here or there or dismissed with a few words about what a bodhisattva symbolically represents, bodhisattvas are now a visibly growing presence in American Zen and other traditions, with a substantial industry of bodhisattva-related products, books advocating devotion to one or more figures, and large numbers of converts claiming Kuan-yin as an integral part of their Buddhist practice. Many Kuan-yin devotees are quite self-conscious in their attempts to attract newcomers to these movements and increase the profile of their favorite figure in Buddhist circles.

I believe that these bodhisattva movements, as highlighted especially by devotion to Kuan-yin, represent a new phase within forms of American Buddhism dominated by converts. It is a phase that shows significant changes in how supernatural, ritualistic, and iconographic aspects of Buddhism are related to this popular religious subculture and suggests a need to reassess current studies on it.

I must emphasize that the phenomenon I am talking about is one within convert Buddhism specifically, with some additional attention to Kuan-yin devotion among non-Buddhist Americans. Asian American Buddhist communities also include devotion to various bodhisattvas, and the presence of such devotion in these communities sometimes reinforces the devotion or interest of converts. Ultimately, Kuan-yin and other bodhisattvas are not “owned” by either cultural or convert Buddhists. But devotion to these figures in non-convert communities is usually part of an inherited tradition that stretches back more or less seamlessly to earlier

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periods of American history and further into the Asian past. This contrasts with what I am trying to point out: the phenomena and forces behind the recent explosion of interest in bodhisattvas among convert Buddhists, who learn about, think about, and practice in relationship to these figures in ways quite different, in certain respects, from cultural Buddhists.

Obstacles and Contributing Factors to Kuan-yin Devotion

Chün-fang Yü herself notes in passing the rise of knowledge about Kuan-yin in America, attributing it to Buddhist immigration since World War II and to feminist interest. After the lifting of racist immigration laws in 1965, immigration from China and other parts of Asia brought significant numbers of Buddhists to the United States, which in turn contributed to a precipitous rise in the number of European Americans converting to Buddhism. However, there was less contribution to convert Buddhism from new immigrants than might be supposed. European Americans were often wary of practicing at Chinese American and other Asian American temples, where they might feel uncouthly in the minority, and in many ways the new convert Buddhism was inhospitable to bodhisattva devotions and Buddhist mythology in general. Convert American Buddhists evidenced a marked preference for individualistic meditation practice, disdain for mythology and superstition, prejudice against ritual, and tendency toward psychological approaches to religion.³ Asian American Buddhism was often conceived by these new Buddhists as being traditional and conservative, loaded with foreign cultural baggage and empty ritualism that needed to be jettisoned so that a purer Buddhism, more authentic to the spirit of the founder, could be recovered. In this approach is clearly seen an instance of the dominant Protestant mind-set of North American religion applied to Buddhism by converts from Christianity.

These attitudes were especially true of Zen Buddhism, which, even with its historical connection to Kuan-yin (in the Japanese form of Kannon), was slow to adopt widespread bodhisattva devotion. For instance, Zen teacher Philip Kapleau published a dialogue between himself and some of his students in his 1979 book *Zen: Dawn in the West*. One of the students opens the dialogue by expressing distaste at the Lotus Sutra teaching that Avalokiteshvara saves those who call on him, which the questioner finds “impossible to accept.”⁴ Kapleau responds by suggesting that rather than a supernatural being, “Kannon is the embodiment of your own compassionate heart.” But he also tries to leave a little wiggle room for more expansive ideas of Kannon by calling Kannon “a living reality who never fails to respond to impassioned cries for help from those who believe in him.”⁵ His students are dissatisfied and refuse to accept even this tenuous degree of supernaturalism. They demand to know why Kapleau speaks of Kannon as alive when the bodhisattva

lived years ago, try to suggest that the Lotus Sutra teaching would unfairly free Hitler from his karmic due, and puzzle at why someone would want to sit before a Kannon statue instead of meditating in the zendo.⁶ Even though Kapleau’s replies describe Kannon as a vague “energy” of compassion that works subtly rather than directly in response to sincere pleas, his students become increasingly frustrated. Finally they begin to ask dismissive questions: “Is there a point in Zen training when you can dispense with the figures of both Buddha and Kannon and just do zazen?” and “I thought that Zen Buddhists didn’t believe in miracles.”⁷ Kapleau finally agrees that the Buddha and Kannon are only rafts that can be discarded and that the real miracle is how Kannon helps practitioners to gain insight into reality.

Kuan-yin and other bodhisattvas, then, did not receive the warmest of welcomes. The initial converts to Buddhism in the post-1965 era by and large wished to leave behind the supernaturalist religions of their upbringing and sought refuge in an unfamiliar tradition that they imagined as rational, individualistic, and nonritualistic. However, the seeds sown by the spread of even antimythologizing Buddhism contained the potential to flower into greater engagement with traditional elements of Buddhist devotional culture, and over time Kuan-yin in particular would prove to possess elements attractive to many Westerners. After all, Kuan-yin was part of the ritual life of Zen that, even if in attenuated form, was transmitted along with the meditation practices. Also, Kuan-yin appears in a number of important koans, and this koan literature was of tremendous interest to converts.⁸ Furthermore, Buddhism’s success led to inevitable change. As Buddhism grew it attracted new practitioners by serving new niches; meditation simply cannot meet the wishes of all people potentially interested in Zen, and experiments such as the Kuan-yin movement provided other ways for Americans to interact with Buddhism.

When traditions such as Zen were concentrated in a small number of central sites—San Francisco Zen Center, Rochester Zen Center, Zen Center of Los Angeles—they could be more easily policed. But beginning in the late 1980s Buddhism expanded beyond centralized head temples into much wider and looser networks of branch temples, in many cases led by the first generation of women convert teachers. With the increase in the number of Zen centers and other temples, there was greater opportunity for different expressions and models. Today most small cities and even many rural areas have Zen or other Buddhist groups. Women and priests amenable to ritual and bodhisattva devotion lead temples in locations throughout the country and have found their own voices amid the parallel explosion in the number and visibility of media venues available for championing Kuan-yin and other previously marginalized aspects of Buddhism.

Why did devotion to Kuan-yin eventually succeed in the face of the antibodhisattva sentiment of earlier American

convert Buddhism? Sometimes historians are faced with a difficult challenge in explaining why a particular figure or image becomes popular with a specific religious demographic. Luckily, no such difficulties pertain in the case of Kuan-yin. This bodhisattva is increasingly favored by convert Buddhists for some very obvious reasons. The first is gender: among a constellation of male buddhas, bodhisattvas, and arhats, Kuan-yin stands out as a *female* bodhisattva. She thus attracts the attention of many convert Buddhist women, particularly those who are actively looking for feminist or at least overtly woman-friendly approaches to Buddhism. For women who have left forms of Judaism or Protestant Christianity that are dominated by male deity images, Kuan-yin is a welcome alternative; for women who have left Catholicism, she is a warm reminder of the Virgin Mary, yet without the same negative implications for women's sexuality. Kuan-yin represents for convert women an affirmation that they, too, have a place in Buddhism. For both women and men, Kuan-yin's female gender makes her more approachable than the Buddha or Manjushri. She proved especially attractive in the wake of a series of sex- and power-related scandals that rocked American convert Buddhism beginning in the early 1980s; the male leaders who misused their positions were widely perceived as abetted by patriarchal Asian Buddhist models, and more egalitarian and woman-friendly models were advanced in many centers as a corrective.

Beyond gender, two closely connected aspects of the bodhisattva make her particularly appealing to convert Buddhists. First is her status as the embodiment of compassion, arguably valued even more highly than wisdom by these practitioners. Second is her ability to take on any form in order to help those in need. This is a characteristic of her compassionate activity, which is implicitly tied to her gender by Americans (women are often assumed to be the more caring and helpful sex by Americans, Buddhist or otherwise), and together these qualities of adaptable female compassion stand out as *uniquely* Buddhist contributions to religion. It is not my wish to argue that such qualities or analogous figures are in fact absent in non-Buddhist religions.

Finally, Kuan-yin is valued because she not only embodies these valued traits but, unlike ancient goddesses such as Athena or Isis, also has an enormous body of worshipers in the modern world. Adherents of the Kuan-yin movement thus do not feel they are attached to an abstract goddess artificially imagined in order to balance out the male vision of God, or to the dead cult of a lost religion; instead they see themselves as copracticitioners with hundreds of millions of others around the world. The sheer number of Kuan-yin devotees in East Asia enables new devotees in America to feel that they are in solidarity with a large group, rather than scattered individuals subsumed in a culture that overwhelmingly affirms the male image of deity. While this attitude appears among converts to Buddhism, it is particularly

important to New Age and neo-pagan devotees of Kuan-yin, as will be discussed below.

Print, Visual, and Material Sources in the Rise of the Kuan-yin Movement

Avalokiteshvara, the Indian bodhisattva of infinite compassion, is widely revered in Buddhist Asia. The bodhisattva appears in many forms, such as Chenrezig in Tibetan Buddhism, where he receives frequent devotion. But not all images are equally accepted by American convert Buddhists. The most popular form of Kuan-yin in America shows her in a flowing white robe with a high cowl, often holding a willow branch and a vase. Amitabha Buddha is usually depicted seated between her eyebrows and she may stand on the head of a dragon, near the seashore, or against the backdrop of a full moon. Sometimes a child or children accompany this Kuan-yin, in some cases cradled in her arms.⁹

A second image that is tremendously popular is of the bodhisattva seated with right leg raised in the pose of royal ease. This is a specific statue, the *Water and Moon Kuan-yin Bodhisattva* held in the collection of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri.¹⁰ Although distinct in the minds of art historians, in convert Buddhism these two forms seem to have been collapsed into a single idea of the Buddhist goddess of mercy. Ironically, the Kansas City Kuan-yin is actually a somewhat androgynous male figure, but Americans persistently mistake it for female, and it is the perceptions that are important in this case. Together, these two forms of the bodhisattva are among the most easily recognizable images in American Buddhism, and it is likely that the majority of contemporary practitioners can readily identify either as Kuan-yin.

As mentioned above, the expansion of Buddhism in the late 1980s and 1990s also coincided with a growth in outlets for Buddhist information, and both contributed to the heightened profile of Kuan-yin. Such new venues included the Internet—first widely available in the mid-1990s—and many print publications, such as *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (established in 1991) and *Buddhadharma* (established in 2002).

The diminishing strength of the antisupernaturalistic critique and rise in interest in bodhisattvas in general among American convert Buddhists can be seen in the popularity of Taigen Dan Leighton's 1998 book *Bodhisattva Archetypes: Classic Buddhist Guides to Awakening and Their Modern Expression*.¹¹ Leighton is a priest in the American Soto Zen lineage of Shunryu Suzuki. Explicitly conceived as a way to encourage appreciation of bodhisattvas by Westerners, Leighton's book focuses on seven figures from the Buddhist tradition, including Kuan-yin. Although he presents them as psychological forces and role models, the book nonetheless contains many miracle stories and significant information about devotional practices associated with these bodhisattvas, from pilgrimage to Kuan-yin's Pure Land of

Putuoshan, to Jizo and the rituals of *mizuko kuyo* (memorial services for children lost through miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion); and, differing from Kapleau, Leighton is frank that the Lotus Sutra is usually understood as advocating calling upon an exterior savior. The book thus reinforces the tendency of American Zen to psychologize Buddhism and simultaneously undercuts it with elements usually perceived as superstitious in convert Zen. Furthermore, while preserving a prominent place for modern reconstructed ideas of the historical Buddha—a perennial icon in Western Buddhism—it also decentralizes him by offering multiple alternative (and ahistorical) objects of veneration in the form of cosmic bodhisattvas. To help his American audience relate to them, Leighton offers famous contemporary personages as examples of bodhisattvas—for instance, he suggests that readers look to Albert Schweitzer and Mother Teresa as models of Kuan-yin’s unflinching compassion. We can see in this work of the late 1990s a bridge between an earlier Protestant Buddhism that resisted elements other than meditation and avoided savior figures and ritual, and more recent reappraisals of ceremony, saviors, and devotion. *Bodhisattva Archetypes* reflects growing interest in these figures among American Buddhists and has also contributed significantly to greater interest among both priests and laypeople.

A number of publications are particularly relevant in the increase of interest in Kuan-yin specifically. First is a 1988 reprint of *Bodhisattva of Compassion: The Mystical Tradition of Kuan Yin* by John Blofeld. Blofeld’s book rambles over the Buddhist landscape, exploring various aspects of Avalokiteshvara, but primarily it is focused on the female aspect of the bodhisattva and her worship in China. The book came to be quoted in many venues, including an excerpt in a special section devoted entirely to Avalokiteshvara in the spring 1996 issue of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, the primary Buddhist magazine for English readers.¹²

In 1997 Sandy Boucher published *Opening the Lotus: A Woman’s Guide to Buddhism*. A very popular book, Boucher’s work specifically singles out Kuan-yin as an ideal object of devotion for American Buddhists. She describes how she herself came to be a devotee of the bodhisattva in 1982, when a friend took her to the Nelson-Atkins Museum specifically to introduce her to Kuan-yin.

In the museum we entered a high-ceilinged room empty except for a splendid statue of a woman. She was about life size, with Asian features, dressed in gorgeous loose red trousers, a gold robe, wearing a jeweled crown, many bracelets, and long dangling earrings. She sat with one leg up, knee bent, foot on the seat on which she sat, her arm balanced casually on this upraised knee. She braced herself with her other arm. Her eyelids were nearly closed, as if we had come upon her in some sort of relaxed reverie.

“How beautiful!” I burst out.

“Yes,” my companion said. “This is Kwan Yin.”

Cover of Buddhadharma: The Practitioner’s Quarterly (volume 1, fall 2002), featuring the famous Nelson-Atkins Kuan-yin statue. Used with permission of Buddhadharma and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

“Kwan Yin,” I repeated. I had never heard those words before, had known nothing of this female figure, even though I had begun Buddhist meditation the previous year. . . .

Her serenity and power gradually reached out to me, engaged my senses until it held me there before her, filled with something like happiness and sorrow all mixed together. Mysteriously the space between us had become palpable; indeed the whole cavernous room seemed vibrant in her presence.

Eventually I gave up examining with my eyes the gold buckle that held together her robe, the earrings that I now realized were long pendulous earlobes, the lines like successive smiles on the skin of her throat, and just took in her whole figure. The feelings in me settled, and a stillness opened in and around me. . . .

She had come from that distant past on the other side of the world to sit, as tranquil as a lake on a windless day, here in a museum on the Great Plains of America. I was grateful for her presence.

As I drove east the next day, leaving the expanse of the Great Plains behind and entering the more densely populated industrial part of the Midwest, I kept a postcard of Kwan Yin, bought at the museum, on the car seat next to me. Sometimes I glanced at her, and without understand-

Vietnamese immigrants naturally brought her with them when they came here. But her presence has also reached beyond the immigrant communities to enter the lives of countless European-Americans. . . .

Looking at how Kwan Yin has come to America, I realize that she is making her way in the lives of today's women, too. Women call upon her for help, revere her, write poems or songs about her, embody her in her pure compassionate energy. Those of both European and Asian descent respond to her wide, tender mercy.¹⁴

Boucher now leads workshops on Kuan-yin around the country.

Other recent works on Kuan-yin include *Kuan Yin: Myths and Revelations of the Chinese Goddess of Compassion* by Martin Palmer et. al., and *Compassion: Listening to the Cries of the World* by Christina Feldman. A host of New Age titles have also appeared that purport to channel or otherwise reveal secret teachings of the bodhisattva goddess.

Images, objects, and their marketing are another fruitful site to examine for evidence of the Kuan-yin movement. The Nelson-Atkins Museum Kuan-yin has appeared on the cover of many publications in the past ten years, including a best-selling book by the popular convert Buddhist author Lama Surya Das, *Shambhala Sun* (the most important English-language Buddhist periodical after *Tricycle*), and a translation of *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. When the Shambhala Sun Foundation sought to launch a new quarterly (*Buddhadharma*) to directly compete with *Tricycle*, they chose the Nelson-Atkins Kuan-yin to grace the cover of their initial issue. The statue has also been "honored" with inclusion in *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Buddhism*. Innumerable other depictions of Kuan-yin have also appeared on or in materials intended for convert Buddhists.

Kuan-yin is also sold directly as a painting, photograph, or statue. Often one can simply go to the nearest gardening store to find not only Buddhas but also Kuan-yins for placement in the yard. There are a number of specialized merchants, most connected to actual American Buddhist communities, that sell meditation cushions, incense, Buddhist statuary, and other goods. The largest is DharmaCrafts, run by the Kwan Um (i.e., Kuan-yin) lineage of Korean-derived convert Zen. Their large glossy catalogs contain many pages of Kuan-yin statues for sale, including reproductions of the Nelson-Atkins Kuan-yin. Kuan-yin has become so popular that major mainstream booksellers have begun to produce mass-market items related to the bodhisattva, such as the Kuan Yin Box—essentially a cheap portable shrine, which consists of a box with a small white statue of Kuan-yin, a little altar bearing an image of the eleven-headed, thousand-armed Avalokiteshvara, and a short book about the bodhisattva.

It is not only traditional representations of Kuan-yin that are being marketed and spread in convert Buddhism. The

Cover of Shambhala Sun (volume 16, number 2, November 2007), featuring a close-up of a traditional porcelain Kuan-yin statue. Photograph by Liza Matthews. Used with permission of Shambhala Sun.

ing why or how, I knew that I had set out upon a relationship with a being who embodied something profound, at once deeply female and universally human.¹³

This image in the Kansas City Museum seems to have the power to transfix viewers. They also project onto it what they want to see; Boucher, like many others, was mistaken about the one thing she most valued about the statue. As stated earlier, although admittedly somewhat androgynous with its supple form and pursed lips, the Nelson-Atkins Kuan-yin is male. It is noteworthy that Boucher carried away with her an image of the bodhisattva, cherishing it in an almost talismanic fashion.

Boucher followed up in 1999 with *Discovering Kwan Yin, Buddhist Goddess of Compassion: A Woman's Book of Ruminations, Meditations, Prayers, and Chants*. The book, which opens with a quotation from Blofeld's work, is a manifesto of sorts that asserts through numerous examples the importance of the bodhisattva in the lives of many American women, Buddhist and otherwise. She proudly proclaims

As the feminine reasserts itself in Western spirituality, a towering female figure has arrived on our shores from Asia. Her name is Kwan Yin. She is the most revered goddess in all of Asia, and Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and

bodhisattva's popularity has also resulted in an entirely new iconography without precedent in Asia, in some cases specifically designed to domesticate Kuan-yin for her new American audience. One such example is Universal Mother Kuan-yin. Created by an American artist, this image depicts a woman in a vaguely Oriental robe, with a headdress. Her robe is open, revealing a pregnant stomach that is actually the earth itself, complete with oceans and continents. Naturally, it is North America that is the main focus of the image, printed across the bodhisattva's bulging belly. This rather unobtrusive image combines the convert desire for a female bodhisattva, veneration of Mother Earth, and American-centricity into one neat package. DharmaCrafts introduced the image in their spring 2007 catalog, offering the Universal Mother Kuan Yin on both Tibetan-style prayer flags and small Japanese-style lamps.¹⁵

The increase of visual and physical representations of Kuan-yin translates into a higher profile for the bodhisattva in American Buddhism—it is now rather difficult to go to a Zen temple, or even many Tibetan or Vipassana groups, without encountering depictions of Kuan-yin. This naturally has increased the possibility for ritual and other practices related to the bodhisattva, thereby decreasing the relative profile of seated meditation in convert Buddhism. For instance, the Zen Center of Los Angeles has a Kannon-do, a small room set aside as a chapel for Kuan-yin. A white statue of the bodhisattva stands as the central object of worship, along with smaller images. Votive candles (sold by a local shop in this heavily Latino neighborhood and originally intended for worship of a Catholic saint, such as Mary) flank the image, and a prayer booklet with a picture of the Nelson-Atkins Kuan-yin sits nearby. Zen Center members can enter this sacred space to pray and light candles, presenting a different side of American Zen away from the meditation cushion.

Likewise, a towering wooden Kuan-yin in the back garden of the Zen Center of Los Angeles, carved by an American female devotee, overlooks a site for pet funerals and other rites. Meanwhile, Kannon ceremonies, often consisting of 108 bows and chanting of the Enmei Juku Kannon-gyo and Kuan-yin chapter of the Lotus Sutra, are becoming increasingly popular in convert Zen centers. Even Philip Kapleau's lineage—seen as somewhat bodhisattva-phobic in earlier times in the example provided above—has become heavily infiltrated by such practices.

One of the interesting phenomena revealed by attention to objects is the prevalence of Kuan-yin devotion among Vipassana (Insight Meditation) practitioners. Textbook descriptions of Buddhist traditions would suggest that Kuan-yin should not be present in the Vipassana movement, which is derived from reformist trends in modern Theravada Buddhism. Not only is Theravada Buddhism supposedly uninvolved in the worship of transcendent bodhisattvas, but the Vipassana movement specifically is alleged to be particularly aniconic and disdainful of more-religious

elements in Buddhism. Yet Kuan-yin is venerated by converts committed to Vipassana practice, such as Sandy Boucher and Christina Feldman, and appears regularly on the altars of Vipassana centers and individual practitioners in America. Wendy Cadge notes, for instance, that Kuan-yin was specifically introduced to the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center in order to balance the male images of the Buddha; it is her female gender that they value.¹⁶ Similarly, in my fieldwork in Richmond, Virginia, many Vipassana practitioners told me that they had Kuan-yin statues on their home altars, a phenomenon that I have observed in other parts of the country as well. Many practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism in America also favor Kuan-yin and keep images of her on their altars, despite the presence of popular male Tibetan forms of Avalokiteshvara (as well as the female deity Tara).

The Great Goddess: Kuan-yin beyond Buddhism

Just as Kuan-yin is worshiped not only by Buddhists in China but by Taoists as well, Kuan-yin's charms are appreciated by Americans outside the Buddhist fold. Important American occult figures, such as Helena Blavatsky (1831–91), founder of Theosophy, and Manly Palmer Hall (1901–90), founder of the Philosophical Research Society, have given attention to Kuan-yin in their writings. But it wasn't until the New Age movement, which has roots in nineteenth- and twentieth-century occultism, that the bodhisattva began to attract consistent attention from non-Buddhists. The New Age movement, an extremely broad and eclectic collection of alternative spiritualities, began in the 1970s and achieved widespread public attention by the 1980s. Common beliefs relate to magic, crystal power, extraterrestrials, angels, Atlantis, the Egyptian pyramids, spirit channeling, extrasensory perception, reincarnation, chakras, and

The Universal Mother Kuan-yin, from the DharmaCrafts spring 2007 catalog. Note the appearance of North America on the bodhisattva's pregnant belly. Used with permission of DharmaCrafts.

other somewhat unconventional religious ideas. Not a formal religion per se, the New Age movement sometimes clusters around the personalities and published works of prominent spokespersons, such as actress Shirley MacLaine and J. Z. Knight (Ramtha), but it is largely a decentered collection of individuals uninterested in fully organized religion. A related but to some extent more organized movement is neo-paganism, which attempts to revive the ancient pre-Christian and pre-Muslim religions of Europe and the Middle East.

New Age and neo-pagan interest in Kuan-yin follows many of the same patterns that American convert Buddhism does—which is hardly surprising, since they draw on the same demographic of disaffected religious liberals looking for an alternative to traditional Western Christianity or Judaism. Indeed, many convert Buddhists show more than a little influence from New Age ideas, and the dividing line between New Age and Buddhist material and ideas can be hard to find in some new Buddhist groups. New Age proponents are typically most interested in Kuan-yin's female gender, seen as a balance of, or even a rebuke to, the ideas of male deity common in American religious history. New Age women have found comfort in the idea that females, too, can be great spiritual beings, and, more abstractly, the female-coded qualities of compassion and nonjudgment are appreciated by both men and women in the personified form of Kuan-yin. For example, a New Age practitioner described the bodhisattva thus:

In this country Kuan Yin is known mostly to art connoisseurs, but 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. People of all ages bring gifts of flowers and fruit, but not in supplication. There is no need for that. Kuan Yin, like a wise and loving parent, knows and does what is best; does it with gentle guidance and never needs to punish or coerce. Of all the world's great gods, she is undoubtedly the kindest and most giving.¹⁷

Of course, in real life Kuan-yin does receive a tremendous amount of supplication. What is important here is the way in which New Age believers reimagine the bodhisattva specifically as never punishing or coercing people, a subtle jab at the God of conservative American Christianity. Kuan-yin is valued not simply for what she is but also for what she is *not*: not judgmental, not demanding, never turning her back on anyone or sending them to hell. She is used to critique and resist dominant religious ideas in America, carving out a new space where people who feel abused or disappointed by Christianity can seek alternate paths that they feel are more holistic.¹⁸

Beyond simply writing and talking about Kuan-yin, New Age believers have also developed a range of practices

The Kannon-do at the Zen Center of Los Angeles. The main figure is Kuan-yin, as are many of the other images in the room (not all are visible in this picture). Photograph by the author.

related to the bodhisattva. One is channeling Kuan-yin: spiritualists, usually women, claim to receive messages from, be possessed by, or even be Kuan-yin, and in the process they deliver teachings on karma, diet, future events, dolphins, and a host of other New Age concerns. For example, Marjorie Musacchio, a retired dental hygienist, offers private sessions with Kuan-yin. For a \$150 fee, Musacchio will channel Kuan-yin for an hour, allowing clients to ask the bodhisattva questions and receive answers from a higher plane.¹⁹

Another form of Kuan-yin practice involves extended personal rituals, usually interpreted in the New Age culture as having psychotherapeutic value. An example is provided by Laurie Sue Brockway, a New York City-based interfaith minister, in her book *A Goddess Is a Girl's Best Friend*. The ritual participant sets up an altar with an image of Kuan-yin, vases, a bowl, and a picture of herself. The ritual begins by lighting incense and playing sad music while the participant chants "*Om mani padme hum*"—the Sanskrit mantra of Avalokiteshvara—nine times. Next she bows her head to Kuan-yin and goes into a reflective state of internal searching for the parts of her soul that need healing. The reader is instructed to bring all of her hidden pains to the surface and start naming them, pulling off a petal and throwing it into the bowl for each one. When this stage of the ritual is complete, the participant changes to happy music and relaxes. She holds the remaining flowers to her head and asks Kuan-yin to fill her with compassion and self-love. Then she offers a flower to Kuan-yin and one to her own image, and keeps one to place under her pillow.

Countless similar rituals abound in New Age circles; here, the appropriation of Kuan-yin gives the rite a particular

female gender connection and emphasizes the value of compassion. Like many New Age rituals, this one is essentially self-oriented despite the appeal to an external power and can be performed by a single person without assistance from a professional or a clergyperson. The ritual is heavily informed by popular notions of psychology and the self-help movement, with only a tenuous connection to Chinese religion or Buddhism. Also of note is how Kuan-yin appears in this book about goddesses. Formal Buddhist ideas, such as rebirth, samsara, levels of bodhisattva advancement, *bodhicitta*, and so on, are ignored or elided in the reproduction of Kuan-yin by New Age proponents. She becomes a goddess like Isis or Aphrodite, with no particularly Buddhist or Taoist doctrinal content connected to her worship.

Indeed, she is most often appropriated as yet another local variation of the so-called great goddess, a kind of universal mother deity who is seen as appearing in different cultures under different names (such as Kuan-yin) but who is alleged to in fact be a single entity or concept that transcends any specific name or traditional depiction. This is one reason that Kuan-yin so often appears on lists of goddesses popular in New Age and neo-pagan groups. Kuan-yin's importance for New Age practitioners is less in her particularity as the patroness of great compassion or her ability to assist in the quest for nirvana than in her generality as another affirmation of female spiritual power and worth.

We can conclude that Kuan-yin worship is already an increasingly prominent part of the American religious landscape not only among Asian Americans but also among convert Buddhists and even non-Buddhists. Though this worship was initially retarded by convert Buddhist ambivalence toward savior figures, a new generation of female teachers and an expansion in the number of both practice groups and media available as venues for bodhisattva devotion have led to new developments that push convert Buddhism in directions in some ways opposite from earlier trends. At the same time, we continue to see the influence of psychological and relatively antsupernatural orientations in many interpretations of Kuan-yin by convert Buddhists. Kuan-yin's domestication in America involves different forces from those that acted on Avalokiteshvara in the transmission of the bodhisattva from India to China. But a fundamental parallel remains in the way that each population has reimagined Kuan-yin to suit its own religious and social needs. □

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was first published in *The Journal of Contemporary Religion*. The original draft was developed for presentation at the 2007 Lotus Sutra Seminar in Putuoshan, China. I would like to thank Dr. Gene Reeves for organizing the conference and Rissho Kosei-kai for providing the opportunity for

the participants to meet and discuss our research on the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara.

2. Chün-fang Yü, *The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteshvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). Kuan-yin is only one possible spelling of the bodhisattva's name. Other spellings include Kwan Yin, Kwan-yin, Kwanyin, Kuan Yin, Kuanyin, Quanyin, and Guanyin, with the last, the pinyin spelling, being perhaps the most faithful to the Chinese pronunciation. Additionally, in Japan this same incarnation of Avalokiteshvara is known as Kannon, Kanzeon, or Kanjizai; in Korea as Kwan Um; and in Vietnam as Quan Am.

3. See, for instance, James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

4. Philip Kapleau, *Zen: Dawn in the West* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1979), 200.

5. *Ibid.* It is worth noting that Kapleau used the male pronoun for Kuan-yin. References to the bodhisattva as male are common in earlier convert Zen sources, virtually all of which came from the mouth or pen of male Buddhist leaders. But today, in the wake of the Kuan-yin movement, Kuan-yin is more likely to be referred to as female, especially by the growing body of women teachers.

6. *Ibid.*, 200–201.

7. *Ibid.*, 202–3.

8. For example, the bodhisattva is referenced in cases 1 and 89 of the classic koan collection *Hekiganroku* (*Blue Cliff Record*). I thank Miriam Levering for her insight into how Kuan-yin's presence in koans ensured her a permanent place in Zen discourse.

9. In actual fact, to art historians these are all different forms of Kuan-yin. However, my American consultants are unable to distinguish between these forms, and because this paper focuses on their attitudes and perceptions, I have chosen not to provide a detailed analysis of the various different Chinese manifestations of Kuan-yin.

10. This figure is also sometimes referred to as the Seated Kuan-yin Bodhisattva. *The Water and Moon Kuan-yin Bodhisattva*, 11th/12th century. Wood with paint; height, 95 inches (241.3 cm). Northern Sung (960–1127 CE) or Liao (907–1125 CE) dynasty. Purchase: Nelson Trust [34–10]. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

11. Taigen Dan Leighton, *Bodhisattva Archetypes: Classic Buddhist Guides to Awakening and Their Modern Expression* (New York: Penguin Arkana, 1998).

12. John Blofeld, "Kuan Yin," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* 5, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 30–31. The appearance of this special section indicates the growth of devotion to Kuan-yin.

13. Sandy Boucher, *Opening the Lotus: A Woman's Guide to Buddhism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 57–59.

14. *Ibid.*, *Discovering Kwan Yin, Buddhist Goddess of Compassion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 1, 8.

15. DharmaCrafts spring 2007 catalog: 1, 35, 56.

16. Wendy Cadge, *Heartwood: The First Generation of Theravada Buddhism in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 178.

17. Eloise Hart, "Kuan Yin: Goddess of Mercy, Friend of Man-kind," *Sunrise* 34, no. 2 (December 1984–January 1985): 35–40.

18. While the focus here is on Christianity, it is certainly the case that some New Age practitioners are seeking distance from other religious upbringings, such as conservative Judaism.

19. See www.kwanyin.com.

Becoming One with Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Compassion

by Yasuaki Nara

A person who suffered a series of misfortunes throughout his life learned to accept reality and live with a positive attitude after entrusting everything to Kannon.

I am a traveling devotee of Kannon. Since I have many opportunities to travel in my work, I visit statues of Kannon everywhere my travels take me.

Although there are many Kannon statues that I have become deeply attached to, the most compelling one is definitely the Kogenji Temple Eleven-Headed Kannon (a National Treasure) close to Lake Biwa near Kyoto. I have seen it many times while traveling; its elegant features and its softly pursed mouth show an exquisite tenderness, yet there is also forcefulness. Within the expression of contemplation and calmness, there is an overflowing intelligence and benevolence. Contemplating the image, my mind clears and becomes calm. As I contemplate it, I always recall the word *semui*. It means “bestowing fearlessness.” That is the special quality with which the Buddha and Kannon save us, saying “Fear not.”

I know a person who has suffered a series of misfortunes in life. He lost his mother when he was in primary school and went to work right after junior high school. He has a timid personality, so when an unethical employer accused him falsely of a crime, he was forced to leave his job. From then on, no matter what he did, jobs didn't pan out. He drifted from job to job, and whenever he thought he'd gotten

settled, the company would go out of business. He became ill, and then his father died. Yet he persevered. He was about in his mid-thirties when he told me, with a sunny expression, “I'll be fine. I've got a job in a nice place. It's just a small factory in town, but the owner and his wife are both good people. It looks like I'm settled from now on. I've been working here for a half year, and for the first time in my life I have someone working under me. Since I'm not getting any younger, I'm even thinking about getting married.” It was a short while later that he lost the use of his fingers in a machinery accident.

Something should be done about this, an outside observer might think, but life does not move so smoothly.

When he was in his fifties, I happened to see him again, and he told me, “I've been worshiping Kannon.” He said there was someone who had been teaching him, and for the past three years, in his spare time, he had been sitting silently and praying to Kannon. He found himself complaining, saying, “O Kannon, if you are the bodhisattva who saves people, why do you make me suffer?” Or imploring, “O Kannon, I beg you to restore my body.”

“But that's not how it works, is it?” he said.

“Now, I am able to realize that praying to Kannon has nothing to do with complaining or imploring; rather, it means paying reverence to oneself,” he said.

He said this casually, but from just that much I got a sense that I could understand his hardships, the depth of his psychological troubles, and the peace of his now-saved mind. That had been his reality, resulting from a combination of many causes and conditions. Complaining got him nowhere. He made up his mind to accept his reality at face value and to live on with a positive attitude. There is no doubt that this happened after he entrusted everything to Kannon.

He and Kannon had become one.

I thought, “The belief in the ‘mindfulness of the power of Kannon’ in the Kannon Sutra has become a central part of his life.” In Buddhism, the word *nen* (mindfulness) can mean “to recall.” But it's not recalling something that has

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been forgotten but etching something in one's mind so that it won't be forgotten. For instance, the feeling of being in love is comparable to *nen*. Asleep or awake, one cannot forget the loved one. The loved one is recalled many times, and one's whole life is caught up with love.

Courtesy of Kogenji

That is how *nen* works, and so to be “mindful of the power of Kannon” is to always be mindful of Kannon, to live with Kannon every day of our lives. The process of living like that is itself a testament to the belief in Kannon.

I recalled the Zen priest Teikei Denson (1648–1735), who said, “Kannon is not a different being. He is you and everyone.” Just so, Kannon had encouraged my friend, had become one with him, and had saved him, pure and simple.

However, Kannon is a bodhisattva who also imparts benefits in this world gained through the observance of Buddhist teachings.

Not only in Japan but in China and India as well, Kannon's compassion saves us in very tangible ways. Even if you are dropped into a burning pit of fire, “if you mindfully recall Kannon's power,” the fire pit will change into a cool pond; if you are adrift on the seas, “if you mindfully recall Kannon's power,” the waves will not drown you. If you are pushed off a cliff, you will stop in midair, and if someone tries to cut off your head, the sword will break into pieces. These are some examples of “salvation from the eight difficulties” that are mentioned in the Kannon Sutra.

In fact, from early times, it has been understood that these accounts of Kannon's benefits in this world are metaphors. It goes without saying that in reality, a person who is dropped into a pit of fire will burn to death, that it would be an impossibility even for Kannon to literally turn a pit of fire into a cool pond. But that is not what the sutra is really saying. The interpretation is that the “fire” refers to our desire; Kannon saves us from destruction in the flames of our burning desire.

This is an easily understood interpretation. Somebody, such as the acquaintance I mentioned earlier, laments the misfortunes and physical disability that have befallen him; he is tormented by the desire to have his original body back; his mind is saved, and he comes to accept his actual reality and can now live each day with a positive attitude. He was thus saved from the flames of desire, the interpretation goes.

But I disagree with this. Why should it be wrong to cry out, when about to be burned in flames, “O Kannon, help me”? We cannot avoid, as we go through life, praying constantly for things. Along with prayers asking, “Please strengthen my devotion,” there are certainly also prayers that implore, “Save me!” Historically speaking, Kannon was originally prayed to in India to obtain benefits in this world. In the course of the evolution of Buddhism, the level of devotion to Kannon has been raised, and he has become the bodhisattva who leads us to satori (enlightenment). But he has not lost his original character of bestowing benefits in this world, and it is for this reason that many people believe in him in Japan as well.

Another very important thing to realize is that it is the very fact that Kannon is the bodhisattva who becomes one with us and saves us that makes it possible for us to receive benefits in this world through him. □

The Eleven-Headed Kannon at the temple Kogenji in Shiga Prefecture, sculpted in the early Heian period. Height: 177.3 cm. Wood. National Treasure.

Mindfully Invoking Kannon's Power

by Ryokan Ara

A Buddhist priest has come to understand that reading the Kannon Sutra as it is, and believing in it as it is, is all one needs to do.

Although I was born into a lay family, shortly after I turned ten years of age I was sent to a temple in a town about twelve kilometers (seven miles) away and became a young priest in training.

The main object of worship in that temple was a statue of the Thousand-Armed Kannon, so I was awakened every day before dawn and made to read the Kannon Sutra aloud in front of this statue of Kannon. There were several Kannon festivals every year, and on those days the women of the parish would gather at the temple in the morning and prepare food; a lively luncheon would follow the memorial services.

I was a growing boy and always hungry, and because on these particular days I could eat to my heart's content, I would put my palms together to Kannon, and say, "I am very grateful, dear Kannon!" Since the Kannon Sutra is a long one, it was not easy for a very young boy like me to recite the entire sutra aloud at the top of my voice. When I would get to the part where the phrase *nenpi Kannon-riki* (think on the power of Kannon) is repeated, I would know that I was getting close to the end of the sutra, so I would read the "*nenpi Kannon-riki*" part in an even louder voice.

At first I didn't understand what it meant, it was just sounds to be sung, "*nen-pee-kan-non-ree-kee*," but after a year of having to repeat it over and over again, I came to understand that it meant something like, "Should you be in danger of falling from a high mountain, in danger of falling into a pit of fire, or in peril of drowning while adrift on the sea, if you mindfully invoke Kannon's power, you will be saved."

But my young mind, which had started to become somewhat scientific, began to doubt this, wondering, "Is this really true?" Before long, I was old enough to read introductory guides to Buddhist teachings, which had literal and metaphorical explanations of this, and I came to understand that the literal interpretation was to believe just what the sutra says, while the metaphorical interpretation was to interpret the sutra's mountains, seas, and fires as the hardships, suffering, and grief we encounter as we live our lives in this world. In the scientific period of my youth, I read it totally

as metaphor and explained it to others as metaphor as well.

As the years have gone by, however, I have increasingly thought more and more along the lines of, "How good of you to have helped me back then" and "Thanks to you, I've lived to this point."

When I was young, I climbed mountains all the time. One time I slipped and fell from a rocky area. If my body had rolled one more meter, I would have plummeted more than a hundred meters over a cliff; it was a solitary small pine tree that saved me. Again, shortly after the Pacific war, I was trying to board a crowded train. All the cars were packed full, and after I finally got on, on the deck between two cars, I started to fall off. An unknown gentleman shot out his hand and held on to me. So there have been many times that I have considered myself to have been saved by the considerable power of Kannon. For that matter, even just recently, when at an intersection in Honolulu, a half second earlier or later and I would have been in a major accident—the quick reaction of another driver averted a horrible outcome.

Shu-on shittaisan (All enemies will be routed). When we are misunderstood or resented by others, or when we are living in anger or hatred, how often by reading the words of the Kannon Sutra have we surmounted danger?

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When he was alive, Ven. Etai Yamada, the head priest of the Tendai denomination, who died several years ago, told me the following. Drafted into the army in the final days of the Pacific war, he was in charge of protecting a ship that was evacuating fifteen hundred schoolchildren from Okinawa to the main islands. At the time, American submarines frequently prowled the seas near Okinawa and off Kyushu, and one never knew when the ship might be sunk by one of them. Ven. Yamada would go out onto the deck often and call out to Kannon over and over, "These chil-

All of Japan had been glued to their television sets, praying that the family would be found alive. I don't think anyone really believed that someone could still be alive after being buried under a landslide for five days, but when they saw little Yuta being held by the rescue team, people throughout Japan let out shouts of joy, deeply moved that this little life had been saved.

I was watching the event on television in Hawaii that day. When I saw little Yuta's head move on the chest of one of the rescuers, without thinking I started chanting a verse from the Kannon Sutra, "*Nenpi Kannon-riki fu no son ichimo*" (If you mindfully invoke Kannon's power, not a single hair on your head will be harmed).

I'm certain that as a large boulder was falling on top of her car, the mother must have cried out, "My children are in danger!" I believe that it was the determination of the mother, who thought of her children more than herself, that saved her youngest child.

There were many reasons given by the mass media for why Yuta was miraculously saved—the coincidence of lucky circumstances, such as the fact that there was airspace of fifty centimeters (about 1.6 feet) between the boulder and the car, the fact that a very young child's body can withstand low temperatures, and the fact that there was a container of milk in the car. Yet if this life-and-death drama had involved just a series of physical coincidences, I do not think such deep emotions would linger in people's minds.

Kannon is said to be a buddha that is neither male nor female but of neuter gender. But as the name Jibo Kannon (Loving Mother Kannon), by which Kannon is sometimes called, implies, Kannon's mind surely is the very mind of a mother who thinks of her children.

Kannon is often depicted in Buddhist images as female because of this.

If you mindfully invoke Kannon's power
A pit of fire will turn into a pool.

When reading this verse, my heart always, without fail, fills with the words of the person who told me that his mother, fleeing the fires caused by an atomic bomb, carried him to a river and jumped in.

Day after day, whenever I learn of some sad event on television or in the newspaper, I am made to realize once again that the scenes that are described one by one in the repeating of the *nenpi Kannon-riki* are all nothing but the realities of everyday life.

The Kannon Sutra teaches us that the mind of each person who is mindful of Kannon will be a force for happiness and peace in this world. At my advanced age, this has become all the more my firm belief. □

The White-Robed Kannon, one of the ink paintings by the author.

dren must not be killed!" "*Nenpi Kannon-riki, haro fu no motsu*" (If you mindfully invoke Kannon's power, the billowing waves cannot drown you). As is promised by the sutra, the ship arrived in Kyushu without incident. Ven. Yamada had been firmly convinced ever since that there is no error in believing the words of the sutra verbatim.

From that time onward, I have read the Kannon Sutra with neither a literal nor a metaphoric interpretation, having come to understand for myself that all one needs to do is to read it as it is and believe in it as it is; I have been able to confidently teach this to others as well.

During the Chuetsu earthquake in Niigata Prefecture on October 23, 2004, a car carrying a mother and two children was buried by a landslide and could not be located after part of the mountainous terrain collapsed. On the fourth day after the earthquake, a rescue team was finally able to ascertain the location of the car from a helicopter; they pulled a two-year-old boy, Yuta, from the car the next day.

Kannon's Compassion: The Thinking of Rev. Nikkyo Niwano

by Michio T. Shinozaki

*The founder of Rissho Kosei-kai saw it as more than ordinary sympathy,
which tends to have human attachments. In his view it is a practical
model for helping others by preaching the Dharma.*

I would like to discuss Kannon's (Avalokiteshvara's) compassion as seen in the thought of Rev. Nikkyo Niwano (1906–99), the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai. What I would like to demonstrate in this essay is that in Rev. Niwano's thinking, on one level, Kannon's compassion is unconditional, a transcendent love that saves people in times of urgent difficulty if they really believe in Kannon and invoke the name of Kannon, and, on a more advanced level, Kannon's compassion is a practical model to be followed by everyone in order to help others who are suffering in this world. In addition, for Rev. Niwano, Kannon's compassion is more than ordinary sympathy, which tends to have human attachments and cravings; it is more a balanced combination of wisdom and compassion. I will describe how, in the context of the Lotus Sutra, Kannon's compassion in the thirty-three bodies of manifestation can be understood as the active forms of the Eternal Buddha's preaching of the Dharma.

The title of chapter 25 of the Lotus Sutra is "The Universal Gate of the Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World." The bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World is called Kanzeon Bosatsu in Japanese, and this is usually shortened to Kannon Bosatsu. This chapter has been circulated in East Asia as a separate sutra. In China, Korea, and Japan, it was well known as the Kannon Sutra. Faith in Kannon has long been popular among ordinary people in those countries. In Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama has been revered as a manifestation of Kannon.

Chapter 25 explains how the name of the bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World (Avalokiteshvara) came to be and makes the claim that all people who are suffering and who call upon the bodhisattva's name will be delivered instantly from all of their sufferings.¹

Kannon's Compassion

Basic Faith in Kannon's Grace

Traditionally, once you chant the name of Kannon, you will be delivered instantly from all your sufferings and be

rewarded with your worldly wishes and desires. The phrase "Keep in mind the powers of the Cry Regarder" appears thirteen times in this chapter.

The idea of chanting "*Namu Kanzeon*" (Hail to Kannon), or "Keep in mind the powers of the Cry Regarder," has a close relationship with the chanting of "*Namu Amida Butsu*" (Hail to Amitabha Buddha) in Pure Land practice. Traced to its origins, this idea is related to the prayers of invocation to gods in Hinduism, by means of which people's wishes or desires are fulfilled, as seen in the Atharva Veda. Kannon's compassion is naturally understood as something like a deity's grace.²

Bestower of Freedom from Fear

In the Lotus Sutra, it is written: "This Regarder of the Cries of the World, this great one, is able to bestow freedom from fear on those who are faced with a frightening, urgent or difficult situation. This is why in this world everyone gives him the name Bestower of Freedom from Fear" (*The Threefold Dharma Flower Sutra*, trans. Gene Reeves, 365).

In his final book, *Shabyo mui* (Last Full Message), Rev. Niwano introduced Kannon's miraculous power³ as experienced by Ven. Etai Yamada, head priest of the Tendai Buddhist denomination. In the terminal phase of the Pacific

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war, Ven. Yamada was onboard a transport ship from Okinawa to mainland Japan with fifteen hundred pupils. The transport ship lacked even one escort ship.

Phrases of the Kannon Sutra came to his mind. "If there are hundreds of thousands of billions of beings who . . . go out to sea and have their ships blown off course by a fierce wind to the land of the ogre demons, and if among them there is even a single person who calls the name of Regarder of the Cries of the World Bodhisattva, all those people will be saved from difficulties caused by the ogres. . . . Or if you are drifting around in a great ocean, / Threatened by dragons, fish and various demons, / Keep in mind the Cry Regarder's powers / And you will not drown in the waves!" (*Threefold Dharma Flower Sutra*, 360, 366–67).

On the transport ship from Okinawa to Kyushu, Ven. Yamada devoted himself to chanting the Kannon Sutra wholeheartedly. After reaching their destination safely, he had no doubt that what the sutra says is the truth. After that, Ven. Yamada, who had a thorough knowledge of Tendai doctrine, stopped giving lectures on the linguistic meanings of the sutras. He said that at the age of fifty, he became awakened to the fact that if we simply believe in and practice the sutras, we are embraced by the power of the Buddha.

It is important to know that Ven. Yamada prayed not only for his own safety but for that of all fifteen hundred pupils. One of the most characteristic acts of compassion of this bodhisattva is to bestow freedom from fear.

Sharing the Same Sorrow and Suffering, and Making Oneself a Vicarious Sacrifice.

The Japanese word *jihi* is usually translated as compassion. It is more than human sympathy. The *ji* of *jihi* is often used

as a translation of the Sanskrit *maitri*, meaning friendship, or giving pleasure or comfort (*yoraku*). The *hi*, often a translation of the Sanskrit *karuna*, means sorrow, or hearing the cries of suffering, taking suffering away from someone (*bakku*). I think the Latin word *pietas* is close to *karuna* in meaning.

As the name of Kannon shows, regarding the cries of the world is seen as one form of compassion, sharing the same suffering and pain out of sympathy.

Wherever and whenever people are experiencing suffering and agony and call his name, "*Namu Kanzeon*," this bodhisattva will immediately hear their cries and they will be freed. Not only will he hear their cries, this bodhisattva will appear, immediately responding to their needs, in a manifestation appropriate to help them.

As both the name of Kannon and his thirty-three bodies of manifestation suggest, the action of this bodhisattva is only sympathy oriented; it comes out of sharing the same pain and suffering. Naturally, this suffering comes down to making oneself a vicarious sacrifice.

In folk and religious stories of miraculous experience in Japan, many compassionate figures of Kannon can be found. Among the thirty-three bodies of manifestation in the sutra, a mother figure does not appear. Yet often this bodhisattva is depicted as a mother figure in popular culture. There are two types of mother figure: Hibo Kannon and Jibo Kannon. The former is a mother who is compassionate from sorrow and pity; the latter, from love and mercy.

The former is like the mother taking on her child's pain and suffering, experiencing them whenever possible so as to make of herself a vicarious sacrifice. The mother's compassion comes especially from the oneness between herself and her child.

During the Fifth World Assembly of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, which was held in Australia in 1989, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano (right) met and deepened friendship with Ven. Etai Yamada (center), and Rev. Zao Puchu (left), president of the Buddhist Association of China.

Commenting on Kannon's great pure vow that is as deep as the sea, Rev. Niwano claimed that this vow is nothing but the spirit of making oneself a vicarious sacrifice based on compassion.⁴ It is quite understandable that in the history of Japanese folk religions, bodhisattva statues representing vicarious sacrifices (*migawari bosatsu*) have been popular.

Kannon's Compassion in the Context of Bodhisattvas Making Vows

Kannon's Compassion Understood in Terms of "Other Power"

Rev. Niwano maintained that Kannon's compassion should not be superficially understood only in terms of "other power" (*tariki*). He tried to caution people who expect Kannon to be a transcendent and supernatural power who saves suffering people if they worship him. If you pray to Kannon by invoking his name and are delivered from some mental or physical suffering, such a salvation is only temporary. Suffering in this life is always coming and going, as long as we live. Real "salvation lies in our awareness of the existence of the Eternal Buddha, who is omnipresent both within and outside us."⁵ Until we realize that our own life is enabled by the Eternal Buddha, we cannot be free of suffering. Once we feel that we are always and already with the Eternal Buddha, we can be in a profound state of peace. Kannon's compassion must lead people to awaken to this ideal state of mind.

Kannon as a Model of Compassion

Rev. Niwano stressed the point that bodhisattvas should be models for us, not objects of worship. His idea was that we should visualize an image of Kannon and want to be like this bodhisattva and perform as this bodhisattva does. That is the real compassion that human beings can have.

Rev. Niwano understood Kannon in the context of bodhisattvas making vows. I think this is in keeping with the real intention of the Lotus Sutra.

Let me explain in more detail. First, the main idea of the Lotus Sutra is that all living beings can become buddhas through practicing the bodhisattva way. The main line of bodhisattvas in the Lotus Sutra comprises a group of beings who, out of compassion toward people suffering in this world, have made a vow to help them. In the Lotus Sutra, there are two types of bodhisattvas: those who have made a vow to save this world, like the bodhisattvas who spring up out of the earth in chapter 15, and those who tend to be objects of worship and have some divine authority to save people. We can be like mother Kannon for her children. From Rev. Niwano's point of view, the former are the authentic bodhisattvas in the Lotus Sutra. I agree with him in the sense that such a view is much more comprehensible.

The authentic bodhisattvas of the Lotus Sutra are working together, sharing the same sadness and suffering. The

story in chapter 15 tells of innumerable bodhisattvas emerging from the earth, entrusted with a task by the Eternal Buddha. They are the so-called apostles of the Buddha, responsible for this *saha*-world, this world of suffering.⁶ This story was interpreted by Rev. Niwano to mean that the experience of being under the earth is a hardship that can be shared with the people of this world. Therefore, those who have been given the mission to spread the teachings are people who have experienced hardship before and can be sympathetic with the suffering of others.

An important concept of the bodhisattva is sharing "the same sadness and the same suffering" (*dohi-doku*). It symbolizes those who have had much suffering and hardship during their lives but then have awakened to their own buddha-nature and have had some real power to help and benefit others. These bodhisattvas are those who help people become compassionate by making the Buddha's compassion real. Compassion is sympathy for those who suffer. In Rev. Niwano's understanding of compassion, sharing the same sadness and the same suffering, Kannon is

Figure 1. The Great Compassion of Kannon

Migawari (vicarious sacrifice) Jizo in the precincts of the Toyokawa Inari Shrine in Akasaka, Tokyo.

in the line of the innumerable bodhisattvas emerging from the earth.

Japan Should Be a Nation of Kannon

Rev. Niwano also insisted that not only can an individual be a bodhisattva, but Japan should also be a Kannon nation. He said: "To gain true international affection and respect, Japan should play the role of the compassionate bodhisattva by discerning the needs and desires of other nations and extending a helping hand to them in ways suited to each situation. Obviously this entails a certain amount of sacrifice, but only the stingy flinch at self-sacrifice. One of the great merits of Regarder of the Cries of the World is the compassion to feel the suffering of others as if it were his own."⁷

Compassion Is Teaching the Dharma

In the Lotus Sutra, what is the compassion of the Buddha? There are three principles of teaching the Dharma.

In chapter 10, "Teachers of the Dharma," we find this idea: "Medicine King, after the extinction of the Tathagata, if there are good sons or good daughters who want to teach this Dharma Flower Sutra for the four groups, how should they teach it? Such good sons or good daughters should enter the room of the Tathagata, put on the robe of the Tathagata, sit on the seat of the Tathagata, and then teach this Sutra everywhere for the four groups.

"To enter the room of the Tathagata is to have great compassion for all living beings. To wear the robe of the Tathagata is to be gentle and patient. To sit on the seat of the Tathagata is to contemplate the emptiness of all things" (*Threefold Dharma Flower Sutra*, 218).

From the perspective of the history of Mahayana Buddhism, the Lotus Sutra tries to teach the reality of all things (*shoho jisso*) instead of the emptiness in other Mahayana sutras. One of the messages in the Lotus Sutra is to realize the truth of emptiness while living in this actual world. Such a realization of emptiness is not nihilistic but, rather, a creative and compassionate way of life. These lines suggest that great compassion for all living beings must come with the contemplation of the emptiness of all things. Such compassion is not just human sympathy—it must be free from attachments and delusions.

Here, the room of the Tathagata is great compassion. This means that the heart of the Buddha is compassion. In early Buddhism as well as in the Mahayana, to teach the Dharma is an act of compassion. The Lotus Sutra says the same. This is affirmed in the following verse in chapter 7, "The Parable of the Fantastic Castle-City": "Out of your great compassion, we beg you— / Open wide the gates of nectar / And turn the unexcelled dharma-wheel!" (*Threefold Dharma Flower Sutra*, 187).

The idea that the Eternal Buddha's compassion is expressed in teaching the Dharma can also be found in the closing words of chapter 16, "The Lifetime of the Tathagata":

"I always know which living beings / Practice the way and which do not. / In accord with what they need to be saved, / I share various teachings for them. / I am always thinking: 'How can I lead all the living / To enter the unexcelled way / And quickly perfect their Buddha-bodies?'" (*Threefold Dharma Flower Sutra*, 290–91).

Professor Yoshiro Tamura pointed out that in the Lotus Sutra the eternal life of the Buddha is revealed in the bodhisattva way and through the historical appearance of the Eternal Buddha in this world. In other words, the historical Buddha is the human form in which the Eternal Buddha appeared in India, and the acts of this historical Buddha were those of a bodhisattva. Not only the historical Buddha but also the Eternal Buddha continues to follow the bodhisattva way.⁸

In the final words of chapter 16, the Buddha's deep compassion is expressed as the Buddha's bodhisattva way, teaching the Dharma. The eternity of the Buddha is not everlasting quietude. The eternity or the eternal life of the Buddha is revealed in the concrete and the practical activities of the bodhisattva way, that is, in teaching or preaching the Dharma. The eternal Buddha keeps this in mind and watches over all the living and leads all toward buddhahood by preaching the Dharma. This idea is related to the manifestation of Kannon in thirty-three bodies. Instead of simply teaching the Dharma in words, Kannon appears as an appropriate body, helping suffering people to overcome their fear. This is precisely teaching the Dharma by appearing as a compassionate body.

Real Compassion is Integrated with Wisdom: Penetrating Wisdom

In the title of chapter 25 is the term *fumon* (universal gate, or gate open to all), which is a translation of the Sanskrit term *samata-muk*, which means "all-sidedness" or "facing in all directions."⁹ The manifestation in thirty-three bodies signifies an open gate through which all people can be saved. It signifies universal salvation. This can be reaffirmed by the following phrases found toward the end of the chapter: "Viewing all [living beings] with compassionate eyes, / His [Kannon's] ocean of accumulated blessings is immeasurable" (*Threefold Dharma Flower Sutra*, 369). The compassion of Kannon is universal and the same for all living beings, even though his appearances are concrete and fitted to a particular person in a particular situation.

The manifestation of the thirty-three bodies of Kannon is called *fumon-jigen*—salvation open to all through means of a needed body. The meaning of this term is translated by Rissho Kosei-kai as "the manifestation of compassion for all."¹⁰ Responding to the need of all living beings who are suffering anytime and anywhere, Kannon appears as a suitable figure for their sake. Thus, in order to fulfill this task in various situations, Kannon's compassion must come with the kind of wisdom that can penetrate the desires, un-

derstandings, and talents of people and their circumstances.

The miraculous power of Kannon is the power of wisdom to perform freely and without hindrance in the manner most appropriate to various situations. It is more than human sympathy. This sympathy comes with the exceptional wisdom to use the appropriate skillful means.

Kannon's compassion is integrated both with wisdom and with practice. As his name suggests, the bodhisattva looks at each living being and his or her situation without hindrance. Kannon's virtue is expressed in the following verse: "True regarnder, pure regarnder, / Vast wisdom regarnder, / Compassionate and kind regarnder— / Always called upon, always looked up to! / His pure and spotless radiance / Is a wisdom-sun, destroying all kinds of darkness" (*Threefold Dharma Flower Sutra*, 368–69).

Rev. Niwano commented on this paragraph, saying that Kannon's compassion is more than human sympathy. It is an integration of both compassion and wisdom.

Conclusion

Rev. Niwano thought that the image of merciful Kannon who gives worldly benefits to the people in terms of a deity's grace is not an authentic one. The central idea of the Lotus Sutra lies in bodhisattvas making vows. The compassion of Kannon is grasped in the forms of sharing the same pain and suffering and vicarious sacrifice. Rev. Niwano understood that from the perspective of the comprehending of bodhisattvas, Kannon's compassion is not a merely passive and receptive response through which human beings are to be saved but a positive and active practice through which they accomplish the Buddha's vow to save all living beings. Therefore, Kannon's compassion is a practical model for us, and real compassion is to become like Kannon. The real compassion of Kannon lies in penetrating wisdom, which sees clearly the hearts and situations of all suffering beings. Real compassion is more than human sympathy; it is integrated, being free from attachments and delusions. It must be the middle way. Compassion is nothing but the Buddha's vow to save all living beings by teaching the Dharma. □

Notes

1. The genesis of Kannon's name, according to Keisho Tsukamoto's *Hokekyo no seiritsu to haikei* [Source Elements of the Lotus Sutra], stems from the three extant Chinese translations corresponding to the Sanskrit text of the *Saddharma-pundarika sutra*. In the *Sho Hokke* version, it is Kozeon (Light of the Cries of the World), but in the other two versions, the *Myohorenge-kyo* and the *Tenpon Myohokke-kyo*, it is Kanzeon (Regarder of the Cries of the World). Other sutras use various forms of the name, including Kannon, Kanjizai, and Kanzeon-jizai. The word *jizai* means "freely independent without any hindrances." Tsukamoto aligns himself with a hypothesis that this bodhisattva's name originated under the influence of the Hindu supreme god Ishvara. Philologically

speaking, the name Avalokiteshvara is a combination of the word *Avalokita* (regard) and the name of the god Ishvara.

2. Tsukamoto, *Hokekyo no seiritsu to haikei*, 427–28.

3. Nikkyo Niwano, *Shabyo mui*, 30–31.

4. "His great vow is as deep as the sea, / Unfathomable even after eons. / Serving many hundreds / Of billions of buddhas, / He has made a great pure vow." (*Threefold Dharma Flower Sutra*, 366.)

5. Nikkyo Niwano, *Buddhism for Today*, 377–78.

6. In reference to the mentioned story: "Inexhaustible Mind Bodhisattva said to the Buddha, 'World-Honored One, now I should make an offering to Regarder of the Cries of the World Bodhisattva.' Then he took from his neck a necklace of many valuable gems worth a hundred thousand pieces of gold and presented it to him. . . . But Regarder of the Cries of the World Bodhisattva would not accept it then." But then, out of sympathy for those in the assembly, Regarder of the Cries of the World Bodhisattva accepted the necklace, and "dividing it into two parts, offered one part to Shakyamuni Buddha and the other to the stupa of Abundant Treasures Buddha" (*Threefold Dharma Flower Sutra*, 365). Kannon can be considered an apostle of the Buddha.

7. Nikkyo Niwano, "Unlimited Manifestation of Compassion," *Dharma World* May/June 1988: 3.

8. Tamura, *Hokekyo*, 115–77.

9. Hiroshi Kanno, *Hokekyo nyumon* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, Publishers, 2003), 180–81.

10. Rissho Kosei-kai calls the present time the years of the manifestation of the spirit of the open gate (*fumon-jigen no jidai*). Rev. Niwano said on the fiftieth anniversary of Rissho Kosei-kai's founding on March 5, 1988: "We have now entered the eleventh year since we proclaimed the Unlimited Manifestation of Compassion as Rissho Kosei-kai's guiding principle. This means that we have entered a new decade with that lofty goal. Keeping in mind this goal and the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of Rissho Kosei-kai, which we celebrated on March 5, I should like to reexamine the spirit of 'Unlimited Manifestation of Compassion' and reaffirm our resolution to abide by it. It means that we can show the compassionate heart to others by our bodhisattva way."

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The Dancing Gods of Mount Chokai: The May Festivals of Warabioka and Fukura

by Gaynor Sekimori

*A special participant in two annual spring events describes their
continuing social role in their communities, although few
of the local people are aware of their origins.*

Mount Chokai dominates the northwestern border of Yamagata Prefecture, one end of a chain of mountains that embraces the Shonai plain. Farmers who grow rice in the fertile fields at its foot have for centuries regarded it as a sacred mountain where gods (*kami*) dwell. Until around 1869, when government legislation forced religious institutions to make a clear distinction between Buddhism and Shinto, the mountain was under the jurisdiction of a number of communities of *shugenja*, or *yamabushi*, adherents of Shugendo, who performed rituals on behalf of pilgrims and guided them in season to the summit. Because Shugendo was characterized by an admixture of Buddhist and Shinto elements, *yamabushi* were forced by the legislation, in the course of the 1870s, to make a decision whether to become fully ordained Buddhist priests or Shinto priests, or to give up their calling altogether. It was not easy to survive in those difficult times, and only a minority remained priests; those who did preferred to maintain association with their traditional sites, most of which the government decreed to be Shinto, since they were connected with sacred mountains that were generally deemed to be the abode of the *kami*, and thus Shinto. Temples

became shrines or were demolished, and whole communities elected to affiliate themselves to the newly designated shrines by choosing to have Shinto rather than Buddhist funerals.

Below Mount Chokai, on its southern slopes, are two small, today rather sleepy towns, Fukura and Warabioka. In the middle of the nineteenth century though, they were thriving *yamabushi* settlements at the base of the two main trails from the south to the summit, with clusters of pilgrim lodgings run by *yamabushi* nestling close to shrine-temple complexes dedicated to the gods of the mountain. Today, nearly 140 years later, very few people remember the Shugendo past, yet in both places fleeting memories remain, particularly in the spring festivals performed in May. These festivals are also fascinating because they clearly retain the traditional pattern of organization based on parishioner groups rather than being dominated by priests and religious organizations. And although the two towns are less than twenty minutes' drive from each other, their festivals are uniquely different. I spent four days in the area in May 2007 and attended both festivals. They are not tourist spectacles but community celebrations, providing the local people with a focus for rites of passage, particularly for children and youths, farmers, fishermen, and shopkeepers in the locality to pray for prosperity in the coming year.

Climbing to the Heavens

Warabioka is a tiny village built on a lower ridge of Mount Chokai overlooking the green plains below. In the past, nearly all of its inhabitants were *yamabushi*, and even today a large number of houses, mainly strung along the single road that runs in front of the original shrine-temple complex, retain the traditional architecture of pilgrim lodgings called *shukubo*, with large gates and high sloping thatched roofs. The most important of these are called “——in,” a temple designation adopted by *yamabushi* in the past. Interestingly, most of the local people have no idea that this has any religious significance and think it is simply a “store name” used by prominent merchant families. May 2, the day

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before the festival, is very busy for the men of Warabioka, who congregate in the village hall to make the necessary preparations. The most important of these is the long decorated pole called the *bonden*. In the past, women played only an indirect role in festivals; in some places, they were not even allowed to participate. My friend Kanda-san and I were adopted as honorary males for the occasion and were welcomed to join the men as they prepared the festival apparatus and offerings, attended a dedicatory service conducted by a shrine priest, and then had a celebratory meal with a great deal of sake. The only other women stayed in the small kitchen to organize the food and drink.

The *bonden* is without question the centerpiece of the festival ritual. Directions for its design and decoration are passed down among the men of Warabioka from year to year. It consists of a long double-bamboo pole to which long white paper streamers are attached at the top. The green bamboos are tied together with rope, and the top two-thirds are covered with white and red cloth, tied in place with white cloth strips and straw cord. The top one-third is further decorated with a multiple layering of hanging white and red cloth, with a rich brocade overlay, on top of which is attached a long tuft of black horsehair. When the *bonden* is stood upright, this portion is normally hidden. A triangular white fan with a red sun symbol is placed at the very top, above the mass of paper streamers. This decoration is a representation of both male and female elements; its overall

Bonden dedication. Warabioka, May 2, 2007.

shape suggests the male symbol, while the (usually hidden) top section is the female (made apparent particularly through the horsehair). Such male-female symbolism is widespread in Shugendo rituals, and the *bonden* represents such a survival. But the symbolism of the *bonden* does not stop there. As we will see in the course of the festival, it is also a cosmic tree, a device by means of which the gods may descend to the ritual site and by which a human being (perhaps a shaman in the past) can penetrate the heavens.

Early next morning, the *bonden* is carried outside and erected at the entrance of the hall. Meanwhile, the young men of the village begin gathering in the gatehouse of the residence of the former headman, where they change into their festival gear and down large amounts of sake. Three of the youths have been designated pole climbers, but only one will actually climb to the top of the *bonden* after it has been dragged along the road to stand in front of the shrine gate, in what is the central rite of the whole festival. Their status has already been confirmed in a rite performed earlier that morning in the community hall, in the presence of the mountain *kami* (Gongen-sama) in the form of a lion, which dances its blessing on the occasion and purifies the participants. The youths wear a short indigo-colored kimono tied with straw rope, white split-toe socks (*jikatabi*) and straw sandals, with blue and white striped leggings, and a white headband. When all are ready, they erupt out of the gatehouse into the street and make their raucous way, scuffling rather like rugby players in a scrum, bursting wildly in all directions. They are contained by a number of officials carrying long sticks to keep them in order. Everyone is in the best of spirits. A middle-aged man told me that when he

Group of youths. Warabioka, May 3, 2007.

was young it was quite usual for there to be a number of injuries among participants, and being injured was considered a matter of pride. In the more safety-conscious present, though, the police have requested restraint, so while the boisterousness continues, it is controlled.

Once the youths arrive at the community hall, six or more ropes are attached to the *bonden* and it is dragged along the road, precariously balanced in an upright position, supported by men holding long sticks. It is not easy to balance the *bonden*, as it has no external support such as a trolley to aid the transport. But though it tipped dangerously at times, it was not allowed to fall. When the group arrived at the bottom of the steps to the shrine, they came to a stop, and those holding the ropes tightened them, while a number of men took hold of the base to steady it. Then without warning, one of the youths swarmed to the top, pulling himself up by means of the rope and cloth ties around the trunk of the *bonden*. This accomplished, the *bonden* was dragged along again, under the shrine gate and up the stone steps to the area in front of the main shrine building. There it was inserted in a wide round hole that had been dug in preparation, and twirled rapidly clockwise and then counterclockwise by men holding the ends of the ropes, rather like a whirling maypole.

Dedication ritual and Gongen-sama. Fukura, May 4, 2007.

The various rituals involving the *bonden* have many points in common with the *hashiramatsu* (pillar-pine) rites that used to be performed all over Japan. In their simplest form, they consisted of two tall brushwood pillars topped with white zigzag streamers (*gohei*) that were set alight in order to perform divination regarding the year's harvest. Such rites were almost always performed by *yamabushi*. For example, at Mount Hiko in Kyushu, a *yamabushi* would climb the pillar, set fire to the *gohei*, and then cut it off with his sword. Like the *saito goma* (outdoor *goma* ritual) of Mount Haguro nearby, fire signified purification of the senses by consuming the passions; villagers, however, may have seen it as a way of subduing the potentially malevolent spirits that were believed to reside in the mountains. And yet, perhaps we can discern an even earlier form in the Warabioka rite, one that does not incorporate fire. Records, again from Mount Hiko, mention that a single tall pillar surmounted with a *gohei* would be set up at the beginning of a festival. At its conclusion a *yamabushi* would shinny up and cut off the *gohei*, without, however, setting it alight. This signified the descent of the *kami* through the pillar at the beginning of the festival and the send-off of the *kami* at the end. A further layer of meaning is suggested by the rite of *bonden-taoshi* performed at the beginning of the Autumn Peak (Akinomine) ritual at Haguro. A *bonden* of similar shape, but undecorated, has an important phallic meaning; it is rotated three times in three cycles and then thrown up the steps of the temple. This is interpreted as the moment the reborn souls of the *yamabushi* are conceived, just before they enter the womb of the mountain, where they undergo training that symbolizes ascent through the realms of enlightenment. Another *yamabushi* dimension is suggested by the possibility of interpreting the physical action of climbing the pole as a kind of *gen-kurabe*, a test of physical and spiritual strength. At Warabioka, people cannot now explain the meaning of the pole climbing and tend to inter-

Climbing the bonden. Edo period print. Warabioka.

pret it simply as confirmation, if successful, of a good harvest that year. Nevertheless, memories of the villages's Shugendo past are there for those who have the knowledge to recognize them.

The Warabioka festival concludes with a series of sacred *kagura* dances performed by different age-groups—lower primary school, middle primary school, youths, and adults. Formerly only boys could perform, but in recent years the falling numbers of children in general have opened the way for girls to be included, though so far this has occurred only in the youngest age bracket.

Fish and Flowers

Fukura is a small market town and port on the southwestern side of Mount Chokai, and here the *kami* of the mountain, Omonoimi no mikoto, is regarded as a protector, particularly of fishermen and shopkeepers. Fukura was the site of an important Shugendo shrine-temple complex until 1868, but today there is very little left of the section of the town where the *yamabushi* used to have their residences. Here, too, the Shugendo past has been erased, yet it continues to live within festival rituals. The Fukura festival is on a much larger scale than Warabioka's and in form follows a

standard series of rituals, centered on dedication, procession, and *kagura* dances. Of particular interest is the existence of rituals that focus on the lay management of the festival, although it takes place completely within a shrine context. In particular, there is a ceremony held on the eve of the festival, May 4, where the responsibility of managing the festival is handed over from the person organizing the current event to the person doing the next year's. Shrine priests make offerings, and then a lion dance is performed to purify the laymen concerned. It is structurally very similar to the dedication ceremony performed at Warabioka the previous day.

That same evening another important rite takes place, an outdoor *kagura* performance by men wearing elaborate hats decorated with real flowers. The dance is slow and circular. At its conclusion, spectators scramble to secure flowers from the hats. This is a form of spiritual souvenir, but it is probably more accurate to regard the flowers as representing the god of the mountain, brought down by means of the flowers. In this sense, by taking one home, a person has divine protection. The identification of flowers with the god also has Shugendo connotations: the Spring Peak ritual was known in a number of places as the "Flower-Gathering

Peak” (Hanaku no Mine). At this time, *yamabushi* would go into the mountains and bring flowers and grasses back to the shrine-temple. This symbolized the descent of the god of the mountain down to the plains in spring to become the god of the rice paddies.

The chief event on May 5 is the procession, whose long route covers most of the town. Besides the usual *mikoshi* (portable shrine), there are two distinctive types of participation: young children carrying elaborate flower arrangements or carrying a *mikoshi*-type fishing-boat model. The participation of young children is centered on three-, five-, and seven-year-olds, so again we can see the festival as a rite of passage.

The fishing-boat *mikoshi* attests to the close ties Fukura has with the fishing industry. At the end of the procession, just as the boat was about to reenter the shrine gate, it stopped, and fish began flying through the air. People vied to catch them, as if receiving a charm in the form of the bounty of the sea. Modernity, though, had again made its

presence felt, since the fish raining down on the enthusiastic crowd were frozen and prepacked.

The final portion of the festival was, as at Warabioka, a *kagura* performance of a distinctive type of dance called *bangaku*. The final dance was performed by men wearing hats brightly decorated with red paper flowers. To acquire one of these flowers was the object of many of those who had come to watch, and the competition was so rough that shrine officials divided us, letting only a limited number of people into the roped-off area near the stage. These were the hard-core “collectors,” who knew from past experience the best place to stand to catch flowers or to pull them off discarded hats. Luckily I was adopted by a couple of veterans and stood with them in a favorable place. Still, when the moment came when the hats were thrown into the crowd, the pushing and shoving was severe. Nevertheless, I acquired a flower, which I brought back to Tokyo as a souvenir of my journey. Perhaps I, too, was taking one of the gods of Mount Chokai back to the city. □

Left: Flying fish. Fukura, May 5, 2007. Above, right: Children taking part in the procession. Fukura, May 5, 2007. Below, right: Hats decorated with red paper flowers. Fukura.

Daily Prayers, Daily Reverence

by Nichiko Niwano

*The role members now have to play will of course give proper respect
to history and tradition, but at the same time
embrace changes appropriate to our era.*

This year Rissho Kosei-kai marks a major turning point—the seventieth anniversary of its founding. Today’s sangha was created thanks to the tireless dedication of elder members, who ate and slept their faith in the early days, and our gratitude to them is inexhaustible. We are taught that real compassion means communicating the Truth and the Dharma to others. Retaining in our hearts the image of those elder members who pursued that path every day should help us expand our commitment to dissemination work. As an organization, we have considered various ways to commemorate our seventieth anniversary. The central feature of our celebration will involve installing the icon of Shakyamuni Buddha in the family altar of every member, starting this year. This is something I have had in mind even since before I inherited the Lamp of the Dharma.

The organization will make the arrangements and hopes to gradually carry out the plan with the help of the congregations at each branch. It goes without saying that we are Buddhists. It therefore follows that installing in every member’s family altar the icon of the Eternal Buddha Shakyamuni—the foundation on which our religion rests—is a basic and very natural thing for us to do. All kinds of people belong to our organization. Some joined more than half a century ago, some have just now joined, and each represents a unique combination of age, gender, nationality, lifestyle, and role in the organization. Each is an irreplaceable individual.

As expressed by the well-known phrase, “All sentient beings innately possess the buddha-nature,” we are taught that everything in this world is a manifestation of buddha-nature. The ultimate source of life is one and the same for all. When our acceptance of this runs deep, we realize that as all people received life from the same, single source, we are all brothers and sisters, and that “the self and others are one and inseparable.” This is also expressed in the “Parable” chapter of the Lotus Sutra: “The living beings in [this triple world] / All are my children.”

The Buddha does not separate us from the buddhas as “ordinary people,” but sees us all as his children. As Buddhists, we should simply and frankly accept this affection and do our best to be children of the Buddha. More than

anyone, Founder Nikkyo Niwano believed in and recognized the value of every single person. The founder did not say that a person could become a true believer only through long and arduous religious training. He held that “all new members are missionaries of the Dharma,” and urged those who had just joined to have the confidence to communicate to others the joy they felt on having found faith.

The concept of the “One Vehicle” teaches that the fundamental nature of human existence puts us all together, like passengers on a single vehicle, and so we should be open-minded toward, have mutual respect for, and cooperate with one another. In this spirit, the founder treated all people with reverence and respect, greeting them with hands held together in prayer. Thus I believe that we can consider the act of installing the icon of Shakyamuni Buddha in every member’s family altar to be something he would have eventually carried out.

Given the background of the changing times since our organization was founded, the history of its growth, and other various sequences of events, I expect that there were things that the founder did not get around to doing in his lifetime. I believe that the proper role for a second-generation president is to accomplish these things in the following era. After visiting members at all branches as fellow relatives in the Dharma, taking part in nationwide guidance tours, and learning from participants in branch leaders’ meetings and elsewhere, I am now confident that the time is now ripe to take the opportunity of our seventieth anniversary to promote the installment of the icon of Shakyamuni Buddha in all members’ family altars.

Making the Prayer of the Buddha, the Founder, and the Cofounder Our Own

Installing the icon of Shakyamuni Buddha in our family altars will help clarify our focus of devotion as Buddhists. Zen master Dogen is said to have called the Buddha “Jifu

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Daishi Shakyamuni,” “Jifu” meaning “deeply affectionate father,” and “Daishi” meaning “great teacher/master.” This expression encompasses the implication that, as humans are born with only one father, for Buddhists there is only one great teacher, Shakyamuni. To install the icon of the Eternal Shakyamuni Buddha in the family altar and worship there every day is fundamental to us as Buddhists. We can say that the ultimate goal of educating ourselves as human beings is to become people who can kneel before the Buddha and devote ourselves to him.

Also, the motivation for carrying out this plan will be a firm self-awareness of the true nature of Buddhism, which is the point we need to keep foremost in mind as we do so. In addition, also beginning in this year, the Dharma titles of Founder Nikkyo Niwano and Cofounder Myoko Naganuma will also be installed together with the icon of Shakyamuni Buddha. The founder and cofounder are the teachers who directly communicated to us the teaching of the Buddha, and the installing of their Dharma titles will clarify that we are the direct disciples of the founder and cofounder, and members of Rissho Kosei-kai.

Shakyamuni’s constant wish was “salvation of the multitudes.” The founder and cofounder made this prayer their own, and spent their whole lives working to bring salvation to all living things. As we install the icons of Shakyamuni Buddha and the Dharma titles of the founder and cofounder, we need to foster the self-awareness that we also shelter this same prayer within us. We have received life as human beings, and, through the founder and cofounder, we have encountered the Truth and the Dharma to which Shakyamuni had become enlightened. These are no small gifts. Contemplating the meaning of this and allowing ourselves to feel deeply grateful will release a natural upwelling of devotion.

Families in particular are the basic training ground for building character. Having an icon of Shakyamuni Buddha in each family altar and living a life that revolves around the Buddhist altar is an extremely fortunate thing for families. Paying homage to the icon and expressing gratitude through the practice of chanting sutras and offering greetings at the family altar in the morning and evening has a decisive effect, of course on the adults, but most particularly on building the maturing character of the young people in the family. Paying homage to the icon helps us to consider things from a Buddhist point of view and live lives in which we judge things according to Buddhist standards as an everyday, regular practice. In the immediate context, this means parents, children, and couples will be respecting each other as living beings and greeting each other with hands held together in prayer.

Warm family relations can be realized through a faith that revolves around the Buddhist altar. Our organization’s task is to undertake dissemination work in and outside Japan in the hopes of increasing the number of such fortunate families. When families lose this function, praying for

peace becomes a futile exercise. Putting families into order will lead to peace in societies, nations, and the world.

All Members of One Mind in a World of Giving and Receiving Salvation

As in the expression “the sangha of the four quarters,” we are taught that all people in the world—in the north, south, east, and west—are originally members of the universal sangha in which harmony prevails. Because Shakyamuni’s teaching makes the Truth intelligible, Buddhism is a world religion in every sense of the word. Buddhism is completely accessible to anyone in any country who feels that it is compatible with their spirit. In this world of deepening conflict and never-ending war, there is more than enough basis for accepting Buddhism, which teaches us to be generous in spirit and is fundamentally universal.

In this context, I believe that in the future our organization needs to communicate more clearly that the Lotus Sutra is comprehensible to anyone. Children, adults, and people of all countries and cultures can understand it. For us as a religious organization it is of great importance to help all people understand it; and as individual members, to be able to explain it to others in ordinary, everyday language.

Founder Niwano gave everything he had to the era in which he was born, and used a hundred and twenty percent of his energy and ability. As people alive in the present, we who come after him must aim for further creative development. All parents want their children to become independent—one day we will have to let go of the hand we now hold. This is how we must see the death and entry into nirvana of the founder. By embracing death and entry into nirvana, the founder awakened in us a spirit of independence.

The role we now have to play is one that will of course give proper respect to history and tradition, but at the same time embrace changes appropriate to our era. “You are yourselves. Be yourself. Use the powers that you have; create your own era.” I believe that that was what the founder wished for us.

The turning point of the seventieth anniversary of the founding of our organization can also be perceived as a new departure point for each one of us to confirm a true and independent faith and set out with great enthusiasm on the missionary path. With all members of one mind and making the prayer of the Buddha, the founder, and cofounder our own, we can devote ourselves to bodhisattva practice, and what will provide both the ground and the root for this is the installment of the icon of Shakyamuni Buddha and the Dharma titles of the founder and cofounder. The Lotus Sutra teaches that lodged in the innermost recess of everyone’s heart is the wish that all sentient beings will be saved and attain happiness, and this wish motivates us to be born into this world—this is called *gansho*, or birth by aspiration. I hope that we can concentrate our energies to create a world in which all give and receive salvation. □

“Until . . . the Morning Star Rises in Your Hearts”

by Notto R. Thelle

Encounters with Eastern religions can make people in the West aware that faith not only hears, but it also sees.

A legend describes how the Buddha received his spiritual breakthrough, after he had searched for many years. Toward the close of a long night of meditation, he finally awakened as the morning star shone at daybreak. He had become a buddha—an awakened one.

Buddhism is the religion of the eye: its aim is insight, clarity, enlightenment. The great breakthrough comes as soon as the false values fade away in the light of truth. The world is not changed, but one sees its true form, just as things in the world take on form and meaning when the darkness of night gives way to the day.

We are surely justified in affirming that Christianity has had a greater appreciation for the ear than for the eye. Lutheran Christians in particular are conscious of being “the church of the Word.” Hearing the Word is the foundation of faith. The Word is received in obedience, and obedience naturally involves listening. The prophets listened to the voice of God, and they admonished the people to accept the Word. Hearing and obeying the Word are basic characteristics of faith.

The encounter with the religions of the East can make us more aware that faith also sees; we realize that the Bible itself attaches greater importance to this function than we ourselves have done. Jesus taught his disciples to see: “Blessed are the pure of heart,” he said, “for they shall see God” (Mt 5:8), and it is above all the apostle of love, John, who makes the contrast between human blindness and the faith that sees. Paul speaks of light for “the heart’s eye”: “Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face” (1 Cor 13:12). This insight is not some isolated intellectual understanding, but a spiritual insight that accompanies an inner liberation.

It is not for nothing that the church was reluctant to emphasize faith’s character as “sight” and “insight,” since it

did not wish to make a distinction between “ordinary” believers and so-called “spiritual Christians,” between the obedient hearers in faith and those who appealed to “higher” wisdom and insight. But the church is impoverished if it refuses to acknowledge the need to see with greater clarity. Faith too knows a growth in insight, a movement toward seeing with “the heart’s eye.”

The Bible has a strange expression that recalls the description of the Buddha’s spiritual breakthrough. We are told to hold fast to the message of the prophets, which is like “a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Pet 1:19). Faith is not only obedience. Faith includes a search for enlightenment, a desire to see with greater clarity and insight. May we not look forward to the day when the morning star rises in our hearts?

Various meditation practices from the East have gradually begun to disturb our one-sidedness. I do not intend to discuss here the validity of their many promises of harmony and world peace; but there is no doubt that this interest in meditation and inner silence has led many people to appreciate new approaches to religion. For the church, these movements have been a timely reminder that there are aspects of reality that our traditional piety has not taken with full seriousness.

It is no exaggeration to say that many spiritual seekers find the church superficial and garrulous; they abandon the church because their religious yearnings find no place in it. They long for the deep dimension of faith, and they look in vain in the church for silence, mystery, meditation—they are not looking for *more* words about God, for better explanations, or elegant formulations! They want to travel into the landscapes of faith, to sense the mystery, and see the inner connections of things.

We live our faith with many senses: we want to hear, but also to see. We need guides who can open our eyes, so that the morning star may rise in our hearts. □

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This essay is a translation from the author’s 1991 book (in Norwegian) whose title translates as “Who Can Stop the Wind? Travels in the Borderland between East and West.”

The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law

Chapter 13

Exhortation to Hold Firm

(2)

This is the ninety-third installment of a detailed commentary on the Threefold Lotus Sutra by the late founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano.

COMMENTARY Yashodhara, as we know, was Shakyamuni's wife when he was still a prince. She is said to have been chaste and gentle, but apparently she was also a woman of strong will. When the prince suddenly renounced the world, leaving his wife and infant son, of course she was overcome by sorrow, but she soon pulled herself together and devoted herself to bringing up her son, Rahula. Moreover, she ceased using cosmetics after the prince left the palace. When she heard that he had exchanged his finery for a simple brown robe, she too donned such a robe; when she heard that he ate only one meal a day and slept under a tree or on a rock, she did the same. In this way she remained with him in spirit.

The first time Shakyamuni returned to his birthplace after becoming the Buddha, he set up residence in the forest outside Kapilavastu and then went from house to house in the city begging his food, as usual. While doing so he came upon King Shuddhodana and preached the Law to him, after which the king escorted him to the palace. The entire clan had gathered to greet him. Yashodhara alone was absent. She did not want to meet Shakyamuni in front of a crowd. She remained in her room, thinking that if Shakyamuni still felt fondly toward her he would surely seek her out. He was immediately aware of her feelings and went to her room accompanied by Shariputra and Maudgalyayana. When Yashodhara saw him, she was speechless with emotion. She could only cling to his feet, sobbing. Shakyamuni stood serenely as she wept. Finally she grew calmer and, recalling that her former husband was now the Buddha, stood up, wiped away her tears, and bowed quietly to him. Gazing at her with affection, Shakyamuni nodded in satisfaction and then told her of her previous life.

Seven days later, when Shakyamuni and his disciples were on their morning begging round in the city, Yashodhara dressed Rahula in formal clothes and gave him his first glimpse of his father.

"See those religious mendicants [*shramana*]? The one of such outstanding nobility and dignity is your father," she told the boy.

"I didn't know I had a father. The only father I know is the old king," Rahula said doubtfully.

"That's understandable. But that fine mendicant is your real father. Go to your father now and ask for your inheritance. Your father has a treasure no one has seen."

Eventually Shakyamuni entered the palace to receive the offering of a meal. Rahula went up to him and said innocently, "Father, being near you makes me very happy." He stayed by Shakyamuni's side, smiling, throughout the meal.

When the Buddha rose to return to the forest, Rahula said, "Father, please give me my inheritance," and followed him. No one tried to stop the boy. Weeping, Yashodhara watched him leave. Rahula, having followed his father to the forest, was immediately accepted as a disciple and thus received his priceless inheritance.

After that Yashodhara led a lonelier life than ever, secluded deep in the palace. Eventually King Shuddhodana died, and Gautami left to become a bhikshuni. Yashodhara resolved to do the same and went to Vaishali, where Gautami—now known as Mahaprajapati—was living. Refusing the carriage offered to her, she walked all the way with her serving women and was accepted into the Sangha.

Yashodhara then went to the Jetavana Monastery in Shravasti, where Shakyamuni was staying, to receive instruction from him. It was not long before she attained a clear and pure state of mind, and she passed her days happily in religious practice. Since Rahula, then a novice (*shramanera*), was also living at the monastery, Yashodhara dwelt nearby. She often went to hear Shakyamuni teach and, with his permission, visited Rahula from time to time.

There are no stories of Yashodhara's noteworthy accomplishments as a bhikshuni, but her gentle character seems to have attracted the love and respect of many people, lay and

ordained alike. Followers of the Buddha in Shravasti heaped offerings on her—so much so, it is said, that she could have lived in greater luxury than when she had been in the palace. She found this irksome, however, and moved to Vaishali, but the same thing happened there. So she moved yet again, to the outskirts of Rajagriha. As we can see, she was truly a dedicated bhikshuni.

TEXT Then the Bhikshuni Mahaprajapati and the Bhikshuni Yashodhara, together with all their retinue, all rejoiced greatly, having obtained [such] unprecedented [felicity], and immediately before the Buddha spoke thus in verse:

“World-honored leader! / Comforter of gods and men! / We, hearing thy prediction, / Have perfect peace in our hearts.”

After uttering this verse the bhikshunis spoke to the Buddha, saying: “World-honored One! We also are able to publish abroad this sutra in lands in other regions.”

COMMENTARY The predictions of the bhikshunis’ buddhahood form a kind of coda to the teaching of women’s ability to attain buddhahood presented through the story of the dragon king’s daughter. It must seem odd, however, that women like the bhikshunis Mahaprajapati and Yashodhara, who were highly cultivated, had accumulated much merit, and had been instructed directly by Shakyamuni, had to wait till the very end to have their buddhahood predicted, whereas the dragon king’s daughter—too young to have gained much learning or accumulated much merit, and taught not by Shakyamuni himself but by Manjushri—accomplished buddhahood first.

There are two reasons for this order, I think. The first, as pointed out earlier in relation to the prediction of the buddhahood of Ananda and Rahula in chapter 9, “Prediction of the Destiny of Arhats, Training and Trained,” has to do with the difficulty of instructing those extremely close to one. Mahaprajapati had reared Shakyamuni from infancy, while Yashodhara had been his wife and had even conceived a child by him. Someone unrelated in any way to his or her teacher, as in the case of the dragon king’s daughter and Manjushri, often finds it easier to accept the Law than someone to whom one is closely related, such as a parent or a spouse, because in the latter case emotions get in the way. We can interpret the Buddha’s delayed predictions directed at Mahaprajapati and Yashodhara as his way of teaching this principle. It does not mean that the two bhikshunis were in any way inferior to the dragon king’s daughter.

The second reason is to demonstrate that anyone can transmit the Buddha’s teaching as long as it is done correctly and that anyone, no matter how uneducated, can attain the Buddha’s enlightenment as long as he or she is truly receptive. It does not matter whether the person is the Buddha’s direct disciple or lives thousands of years later.

Nor does it matter what country or ethnic group the person comes from. All that is necessary for salvation is receptivity to the true teaching.

The eight-year-old girl symbolizes a heart as open and impressionable as a child’s. Her belonging to the dragon king’s realm symbolizes people of “uncivilized” lands, who are much more capable of wholehearted faith than the half-baked intellectuals of “civilized” countries. In studying the Buddha’s teaching, it is important that we cast aside conventional wisdom, preconceived ideas, and the emotions with which we are encrusted, making our minds and hearts a tabula rasa. This is one of the lessons we must learn from the narratives of female attainment of buddhahood in both chapter 12, “Devadatta,” and the present chapter.

TEXT Thereupon the World-honored One looked upon the eighty myriads of kotis of nayutas of bodhisattva-mahasattvas. All these bodhisattvas were of [the stage] *avaivartika*, who rolled the never-retreating Law wheel and had attained to the *dharanis*.

COMMENTARY [*The stage*] *avaivartika*. One of the ten stages of bodhisattva practice, this stage is called *avaivartika*, *avaivartya*, or *avinivartaniya*, which means no backsliding from the degree of attainment already reached. Having determined to attain buddhahood, the bodhisattvas reach a stage from which they will never again regress to being shravakas, pratyekabuddhas, or ordinary people.

• *Rolled the . . . Law wheel*. This phrase means to teach the Dharma. Expounding the Law is like rolling a wheel that never stops and saves all living beings.

• *Dharanis*. See the October–December 2007 issue of DHARMA WORLD.

TEXT Immediately they rose from their seats, went before the Buddha, with one mind folded their hands, and reflected thus: “If the World-honored One commands us to keep and expound this sutra, we will proclaim abroad this Law as the Buddha has taught it.” Again they reflected thus: “The Buddha now is silent; we are not commanded; what shall we do?”

Then these bodhisattvas, respectfully obeying the Buddha’s will and themselves desiring to fulfill their original vow, before the Buddha raised a lion’s roar and uttered a vow, saying: “World-honored One! After the extinction of the Tathagata we will compass and travel through the worlds in all directions, in order to lead all the living to copy this sutra, receive and keep, read and recite it, expound its meaning, practice it as their Law, and rightly keep it in mind, all by the Buddha’s might. Be pleased, World-honored One, [though] in another quarter, to behold and guard us from afar!”

COMMENTARY *Respectfully obeying the Buddha’s will and*

themselves desiring to fulfill their original vow. The Buddha's intention is to bring all living beings to salvation. The original vow of the bodhisattvas, unchanged through all the lifetimes of the past, is also to save all living beings. To strive to achieve this goal is to obey the will of the Buddha as well as to fulfill one's original vow.

- *A lion's roar.* The Buddha's mien when teaching is compared to the roar of the lion, the king of beasts, before which all must prostrate themselves. Here the metaphor is applied to the discourse of the bodhisattvas themselves.

- *Compass.* The Chinese compound for "compass," *chou-hsüan*, means "to encircle" and "to rotate," thus, "to go around."

- *Travel.* The Chinese word translated as "travel" here means to go and come back again, that is, to go repeatedly to the same place.

- *Rightly keep it in mind.* This phrase means to memorize fully and without error. Rightly keeping in mind the Buddha's teaching is not the same as merely memorizing it. First of all, practitioners must thoroughly understand its meaning. Understanding is not enough, though; they must also believe deeply in it. When faith and understanding are thus united, the teaching will become engraved indelibly upon their minds and can be recalled at any time. This is what the sutra means by "rightly keep in mind." It is an extremely important point.

- *All by the Buddha's might.* To say "I can do this, not by my own strength but because of the Buddha's power" may seem to imply complete reliance upon the Buddha (the power of another), but that is not so. Each person must strive with all his or her might. A holy task such as this, however, cannot be achieved through the puny strength of one human being; what makes it possible is one's receptiveness in conjunction with the responsiveness of the Buddha's power (the compassion of the Original Buddha). Trying to do something by one's own power alone may seem courageous, but in fact it is mere bravado. In whatever we do, we must always acknowledge that we can succeed only because of the activity of the Original Buddha's compassion. We must therefore submit to that great power with humility.

The bodhisattvas go on to express their message in verse. This is the famous "twenty-line verse of the 'Exhortation to Hold Firm' chapter." Nichiren, becoming aware that everything expressed in the verse applied to himself, realized that he had been born with the mission to spread the teaching of the Lotus Sutra in the period of the Decay of the Law. The verse can also be interpreted as a vow to put into practice the three rules of the abode, the robe, and the throne of the Tathagata outlined in chapter 10, "A Teacher of the Law" (see the November/December 2005 issue). Lines 1 to 17 (until "for remembering the Buddha's command . . . [we] will endure all these things") correspond to wearing the robe of the Tathagata, that is, the practice of gentleness and forbearance. Line 18 ("Wherever in villages and cities . . . we will all go there and preach the Law bequeathed by the

Yoryu Kannon (*Kannon with a willow branch*), an ink painting by Rev. Nikkyo Niwano.

Buddha") corresponds to entering the abode of the Tathagata, the practice of great compassion. Line 19 ("We are the World-honored One's apostles . . . abide in peace") corresponds to sitting on the throne of the Tathagata, the realization that all phenomena are empty, and the practice of spreading widely the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. Line 20 brings together the whole.

To be continued

In this series, passages in the TEXT sections are quoted from *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Company, 1975, with slight revisions. The diacritical marks originally used for several Sanskrit terms in the TEXT sections are omitted here for easier reading.

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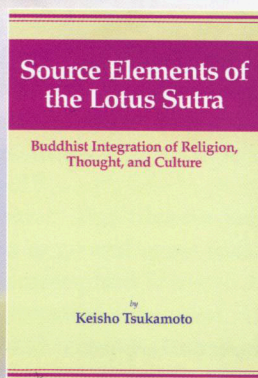
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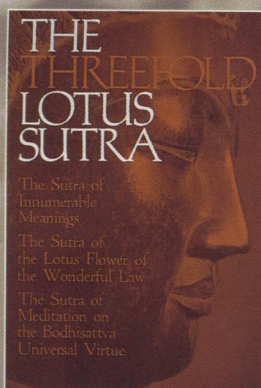
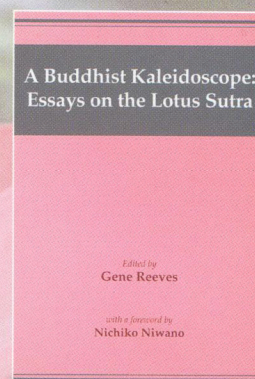
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