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Portrayed in different cultures as either male or female, Avalokiteśvara is one of the **أفالو كيتسافارا** (Avalokiteśvara) (لغة سنسكريتية: अवलोकितेश्वर lit.

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Avalokiteśvar

a



Avalokiteśvara holding a lotus flower. Nālandā, Bihar, India, 9th century CE.

Avalokiteśvara (Sanskrit: अवलोकितेश्वर lit. “Lord who looks down”) is a bodhisattva who embodies the compassion of all Buddhas. This bodhisattva is variably depicted and portrayed in different cultures as either female or male.

Avalokiteśvara is one of the more widely revered bodhisattvas in mainstream Mahayana Buddhism, as well as unofficially in Theravada Buddhism.

1 Etymology

The name Avalokiteśvara is made of the following parts: the verbal prefix *ava*, which means “down”; *lokita*, a past participle of the verb *lok* (“to notice, behold, observe”), here used in an active sense (an occasional irregularity of Sanskrit grammar); and finally *īśvara*, “lord”, “ruler”, “sovereign” or “master”. In accordance with sandhi (Sanskrit rules of sound combination), *a+īśvara* becomes *eśvara*. Combined, the parts mean “lord who

gazes down (at the world)”. The word *loka* (“world”) is absent from the name, but the phrase is implied.^[1]

It was initially thought that the Chinese mis-transliterated the word *Avalokiteśvara* as *Avalokitasvara* which explained why Xuanzang translated it as *Guānzìzài* (Ch.

) instead of *Guānyīn* (Ch.). However, according to recent research, the original form was indeed *Avalokitasvara*^[2] with the ending *a-svara* (“sound, noise”), which means “sound perceiver”, literally “he who looks down upon sound” (i.e., the cries of sentient beings who need his help; *a-svara* can be glossed as *ahr-svara*, “sound of lamentation”).^[3] This is the exact equivalent of the Chinese translation *Guānyīn*. This etymology was furthered in the Chinese by the tendency of some Chinese translators, notably Kumarajiva, to use the variant *Guānshìyīn* (Ch.), literally “he who perceives the world’s lamentations”—wherein *lok* was read as simultaneously meaning both “to look” and “world” (Skt. *loka*; Ch. , *shì*).^[3] This name was later supplanted by the form containing the ending *-īśvara*, which does not occur in Sanskrit before the seventh century. The original form *Avalokitasvara* already appears in Sanskrit fragments of the fifth century.^[4]

The original meaning of the name fits the Buddhist understanding of the role of a bodhisattva. The reinterpretation presenting him as an *īśvara* shows a strong influence of Hinduism, as the term *īśvara* was usually connected to the Hindu notion of Krishna (in Vaishnavism) or Śiva (in Śaivism) as the Supreme Lord, Creator and Ruler of the world. Some attributes of such a god were transmitted to the bodhisattva, but the mainstream of those who venerated Avalokiteśvara upheld the Buddhist rejection of the doctrine of any creator god.^[5]

An etymology of the Tibetan name Jānräsig (Jainraisig) is *jän* (eye), *rä* (continuity) and *sig* (to look). This gives the meaning of one who always looks upon all beings (with the eye of compassion).^[6]

In other parts of Asia other than China, Avalokitasvara is commonly refers to the Bodhisattva of Compassion or the Goddess of Mercy. In Korean Buddhism Avalokitesvara is Gwaneum, or Gwanseeum-bosal. In Sanskrit, Avalokitesvara is also referred to as *Padmapāni* (“Holder of the Lotus”) or *Lokeśvara* (“Lord of the World”). In Tibetan, Avalokiteśvara is known as *Chenrezig*, (Wylie: *spyan ras gzigs*) and is

said to emanate as the Dalai Lama,^[7] the Karmapa^{[8][9]} and other high lamas.

1

2 Origin



Avalokiteśvara painting from a Sanskrit palm leaf manuscript. India, 12th century.

2.1 Mahayana Account

Main article: Guanyin

According to Mahāyāna doctrine, Avalokiteśvara is the bodhisattva who has made a great vow to assist sentient beings in times of difficulty, and to postpone his own Buddhahood until he has assisted every sentient being in achieving Nirvāṇa. Mahāyāna sūtras associated with Avalokiteśvara include the following:

- *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra* (*Lotus Sūtra*)
- *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra*
- *Prajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya Sūtra* (*Heart Sūtra*)
- *Mahākaruṇā Dhāraṇī Sūtra* (*Nīlakaṇṭha Dhāraṇī*)
- *Avalokiteśvara Ekādaśamukha Dhāraṇī Sūtra*
- *Cundī Dhāraṇī Sūtra*

The *Lotus Sūtra* (Skt. *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*) is generally accepted to be the earliest literature teaching about the doctrines of Avalokiteśvara.^[10] These are found in the *Lotus Sūtra* chapter 25, *The Universal Gateway of Avalokitasvara Bodhisattva* (Ch.). This chapter is devoted to Avalokitasvara, describing him as

2 ORIGIN

a compassionate bodhisattva who hears the cries of sentient beings, and who works tirelessly to help those who call upon his name. A total of 33 different manifestations of Avalokitasvara are described, including female manifestations, all to suit the minds of various beings. The chapter consists of both a prose and a verse section. This earliest source often circulates separately as its own sūtra, called the *Avalokitasvara Sūtra* (Ch.), and is commonly recited or chanted at Buddhist temples in East Asia.^[11]

When the Chinese monk Faxian traveled to Mathura in India around 400 CE, he wrote about monks presenting offerings to Avalokiteśvara.^[12] When Xuanzang traveled to India in the 7th century, he provided eyewitness accounts of Avalokiteśvara statues being venerated by devotees of all walks of life, from kings, to monks, to laypeople.^[12] Avalokiteśvara remained popular in India until the 12th century when Muslim invaders conquered the land and destroyed Buddhist monasteries.^[12]

In Chinese Buddhism and East Asia, practices for an 18-armed form of Avalokiteśvara called Cundī are very popular. These practices have their basis in early Indian Esoteric Buddhism. Cundī is also referred to as “Cundī Buddha-Mother” or “Cundī Bhagavati.” The popularity of Cundī is attested by the three extant translations of the *Cundī Dhāraṇī Sūtra* from Sanskrit to Chinese, made from the end of the seventh century to the beginning of the eighth century.^[13] In late imperial China, these early traditions of Esoteric Buddhism are known to have been still thriving in Buddhist communities. Robert Gimello has also observed that in these communities, the esoteric practices of Cundī were extremely popular among both the populace and the elite.^[14]

In the Tiantai school, six forms of Avalokiteśvara are defined. Each of the bodhisattva’s six qualities are said to break the hindrances respectively of the six realms of existence: hell-beings, pretas, animals, humans, asuras, and devas. These six qualities are listed below.

1. Great compassion
2. Great loving-kindness
3. Lion-courage
4. Universal light
5. Leader of devas and human beings
6. The great omnipresent Brahman

2.2 Tibetan Account

In the Tibetan tradition, Avalokiteśvara is seen as arising from two sources. One is the relative source, where in a previous eon (*kalpa*) a devoted, compassionate Buddhist monk became a bodhisattva, transformed in the present

2.3 Theravāda Account



Four-armed Tibetan Chenrezig form of Avalokiteśvara.

kalpa into Avalokiteśvara. That is not in conflict, however, with the ultimate source, which is Avalokiteśvara as the universal manifestation of compassion. The bodhisattva is viewed as the anthropomorphised vehicle for the actual deity, serving to bring about a better understanding of Avalokiteśvara to humankind.

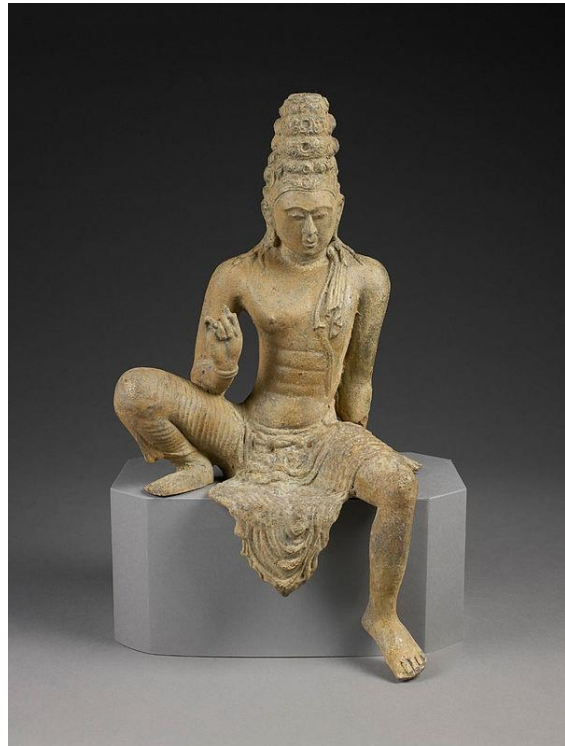
Tibetan traditions assert that Avalokiteśvara is actually the Brahma that convinced Sakyamuni Buddha to teach rather than stay in seclusion after his enlightenment. He then became one of the two major disciples of the Buddha from the Deva realms. The other was Indra, King of the Gods, who became known as Vajrapani.

Seven forms of Avalokiteśvara in Tibetan Buddhism :^[15]

1. Amoghapāśa: not empty (or unerring) net, or lasso.
2. Sahasrabhujalokeshvara : 1000-hands and 1000eyes,
3. Hayagriva: with the head of a horse
4. Ekadasamukha: with 11 faces
5. Cundī

6. Cintamani-cakra: wheel of sovereign power

7. Arya Avalokiteśvara: great compassionate Avalokiteśvara;^{[16][17]} the Holy sovereign beholder of the world (loka), a translation of īśvara, means “ruler” or “sovereign”, holy one.



Bronze statue of Avalokiteśvara from Sri Lanka, ca. 750 CE

2.3 Theravāda Account

Veneration of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva has continued to the present day in **Sri Lanka**, where he is called Nātha.^[18] In more recent times, some westerneducated Theravādins have attempted to identify Nātha with Maitreya Bodhisattva. However, traditions and basic iconography, including an image of Amitābha Buddha on the front of the crown, identify Nātha as Avalokiteśvara.^[19] Andrew Skilton writes:^[20]

... It is clear from sculptural evidence alone that the Mahāyāna was fairly widespread throughout [Sri Lanka], although the modern account of the history of Buddhism on the island presents an unbroken and pure lineage of Theravāda. (One can only assume that similar trends were transmitted to other parts of Southeast Asia with Sri Lankan ordination lineages.) Relics of an extensive cult of Avalokiteśvara can be seen in the present-day figure of Nātha.

Avalokiteśvara is popularly worshiped in **Burma**, where he is called Lokanat, and **Thailand**, where he is called Lokeshvara.

2.4 Modern Scholarship

Western scholars have not reached a consensus on the origin of the reverence for Avalokiteśvara.



Pothigai Malai in Tamil Nadu, proposed to be the original Mount

Potalaka in India

Some have suggested that Avalokiteśvara, along with many other supernatural beings in Buddhism, was a borrowing or absorption by Mahayana Buddhism of one or more Hindu deities, in particular Shiva or Vishnu (though the reason for this suggestion is because of the current name of the bodhisattva: *Avalokiteśvara*, not the original one: *Avalokitasvara*).^[4]

The Japanese scholar Shu Hikosaka on the basis of his study of Buddhist scriptures, ancient Tamil literary sources, as well as field survey, proposes the hypothesis that, the ancient mount Potalaka, the residence of Avalokiteśvara described in the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra* and Xuanzang's Records, is the real mountain Potikai or Potiyil situated at Ambasamudram in Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu.^[21] Shu also says that mount Potiyil/Potalaka has been a sacred place for the people of South India from time immemorial. With the spread of Buddhism in the region beginning at the time of the great king Aśoka in the third century B.C.E., it became a holy place also for Buddhists who gradually became dominant as a number of their hermits settled there. The local people, though, mainly remained followers of the Hindu religion. The mixed Hindu-Buddhist cult culminated in the formation of the figure of Avalokiteśvara.^[22]

The name Lokeśvara should not be confused with that of Lokeśvararāja, the Buddha under whom Dharmakara became a monk and made forty-eight vows before becoming Amitabha Buddha.

3 Mantras and Dharanis

Mahāyāna Buddhism relates Avalokiteśvara to the sixsyllable mantra:

oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ

Due to his association with this mantra, Avalokiteśvara, in Tibetan Buddhism, is also called *Shadakshari*, which

3 MANTRAS AND DHARANIS

means “Lord of the Six Syllables.” Recitation of this



OM MAṆI PADME HŪṢ. The six syllable mantra of Avalokiteśvara written in Tibetan script.

mantra along with prayer beads, is the most popular religious practice in Tibetan Buddhism.^[23] The connection between this famous mantra and Avalokiteśvara occurs for the first time in the *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra*. This text is first dated to around the late 4th century CE to the early 5th century CE.^[24] In this sūtra, a bodhisattva is told by the Buddha that recitation of this mantra while focusing on the sound can lead to the attainment of eight hundred samādhis.^[25] The *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra* also features the first appearance of the Cundī Dhāraṇī, which occurs at the end of the sūtra text.^[13] After the bodhisattva finally attains samādhi with the mantra “oṃ maṇipadme hūṃ”, he is then able to observe 77 koṭīs of fully enlightened buddhas replying to him in one voice with the Cundī Dhāraṇī:

namaḥ saptānāṃ samyakṣaṃbuddha koṭīnāṃ

tadyathā om cale cule cunde
svāhā^[26]

In Shingon Buddhism, the mantra for Avalokiteśvara is:

On Arurikya Sowaka

The *Mahākaruṇā Dhāraṇī* (Great Compassion Dhāraṇī), also called the *Nīlakaṇṭha Dhāraṇī*, is an 82-syllable dhāraṇī for Avalokiteśvara.

Another mantra which describes the 'Lord Avalokitesvara' is:

Namah Srimadavalokitesvaraya

This was given by the ruler or king of Chamba Riyasat of Himachal Pradesh-India. The temple of Lord Trilokinath (Avalokitesvara), Lahaul Valley of Himachal Pradesh India has the ancient writings of that king.

4 Thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara



Thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara. Guanyin Nunnery, Anhui, China

One prominent Buddhist story tells of Avalokiteśvara vowing never to rest until he had freed all sentient beings from *samsara*. Despite strenuous effort, he realizes that still many unhappy beings were yet to be saved. After struggling to comprehend the needs of so many, his head splits into eleven pieces. *Amitabha* Buddha, seeing his plight, gives him eleven heads with which to hear the cries of the suffering. Upon hearing these cries and comprehending them, Avalokiteśvara attempts to reach out to all those who needed aid, but found that his two arms shattered into pieces. Once more, *Amitabha* Buddha comes to his aid and invests him with a thousand arms with which to aid the suffering multitudes.^[27]

The *Bao'en Temple* located in northwestern *Sichuan* province, *China* has an outstanding wooden image of the thousand armed Avalokiteśvara, an example of *Ming* Dynasty decorative sculpture.^{[28][29]}

5 Tibetan Buddhist Beliefs Concerning Chenrezig

Avalokiteśvara is an important deity in *Tibetan Buddhism*, and is regarded in the *Vajrayana* teachings as a Buddha.^[30] In the *Mahayana* teachings he is in general regarded as a high-level *Bodhisattva*. The *Dalai Lama* is considered by the *Gelugpa* sect and many other Tibetan Buddhists to be the primary earthly manifestation of Chenrezig. The *Karmapa* is considered by the *Karma Kagyu* sect to be Chenrezig's primary manifestation. It is said that *Padmasambhava* prophesied that Avalokiteśvara will manifest himself in the *Tulku* lineages of the *Dalai Lamas* and the *Karmapas*. Another Tibetan source explains that Buddha *Amitabha* gave to one of his two main disciples, Avalokiteśvara, the task to take upon himself the burden of caring for *Tibet*. That is why he has manifested himself not only as spiritual teachers in Tibet but also in the form of kings (like *Trisong Detsen*) or ministers.

Other manifestations popular in *Tibet* include *Sahasrabhuja* (a form with a thousand arms) and *Ekādaśamukha* (a form with eleven faces).

In Tibetan Buddhism, *Tara* came into existence from a single tear shed by Chenrezig. When the tear fell to the ground it created a lake, and a lotus opening in the lake revealed Tara. In another version of this story, Tara emerges from the heart of Chenrezig. In either version, it is Chenrezig's outpouring of compassion which manifests

Tara as a being^{[31][32][33]}

6 Manifestations

Avalokiteśvara has an extraordinarily large number of manifestations in different forms (including wisdom goddesses (*vidyaas*) directly associated with him in images and texts). Some of the more commonly mentioned forms include:

7 Gallery

- Gandhāran statue of Avalokiteśvara, abhaya-mudrā. 3rd century CE.
- Indian cave wall painting of Avalokiteśvara. Ajanṭa Caves, 6th century CE.
- Torso of Avalokiteśvara from Sanchi in the Victoria and Albert Museum
- Cambodian statue of Avalokiteśvara. Sandstone, 7th century CE.
- Avalokiteshvara sandstone statue, late 7th century CE.
- PadmapaniSailendran art,holdingPlaosaṇatemple,lotus. Jav8ath-9th, Indonesicenturya.
- Eight-armed Avalokiteshvara, ca.tury (Bāyon). The Walters Art Museu12mth-13th cen. -
- South Sumatra.Avalokiteshvara from Bingin Jungut,Srivijayan art (c. 8th-9th centuryMusi Rawas, CE)
- The bronze torso statue of Padmapani, 8th centuryCE Srivijayan art, Chaiya, Surat Thani, Southern Thailand.
- The stone head of Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, dis-covered in Aceh. Srivijayan art, estimated 9th century CE.
- century CE.Malaysian statue of Avalokiteśvara. Bidor, 8th-9th
- Chinesokiteśvara and hanging scroll depictingLongnü, Yuan DynastShancay. i, Aval• Korean painting of Avalokiteśvara. Kagami Jinjya,Japan, 1310 CE.
- Nepales14th century CE.e statue of Avalokiteśvara with six arms.
- Japanese painting of meditating. 16th century CE.
- Avalokiteśvara, crimson and gilded wood. Restoredin 1656 CE. Bút Tháp Temple, Bắc Ninh Province, Vietnam
- Tibetan statue of Avalokiteśvara with eleven faces.
- The world tallest octagonal pavilion to shelter theMalaysia Kek Lok Si Temple in Air Itam, Penang.
- Goddess of Mercy statue.
- teen arms.Esoteric Cundī form of Avalokiteśvara with eigh-
- Thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara bronze statue fromTibet, circa 1750. Birmingham Museum of Art
- Avalokiteśvara in the form of Cintamani WheelAvalokiteśvara. A dhāraṇī written in Sanskrit in the Siddham script behind. Singapore.

8 See also

- Chinethe sea, c. 1025 CE.e statue of Avalokiteśvara looking out over
- Guanyin
- Eleven-Faced Avalokitesvara Heart Dharani Sutra
- Isvara

- Narayana

9 NOTES

- Pure Land Buddhism

- Vishnu

9 Notes

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11 External links

- The Origin of Avalokiteshvara of Potala
- An Explanation of the Name Avalokiteshvara
- The Bodhisattva of Compassion and Spiritual Emanation of Amitabha - from Buddhature.com
- Depictions at the Bayon in Cambodia of Avalokiteshvara as the Khmer King Jayavarman VII -
- Mantra Avalokitesvara

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