

KWAN YIN AND THE DRAGON OF WISDOM

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Kwan Yin has for centuries been venerated throughout East Asia as a mother-goddess, the personification of compassion and mercy. A highly revered manifestation of the Buddha, depicted in many different symbolic and mythological figures, both male and female. Kwan Yin has various names and spellings such as: Guanyin, Guanshiyin, Kuan Yin, Kwan-Shi-Yin, Kuan-Shi-Yin, Miao Shan; Guanyin Bodhisattva, Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara and in Japan Bodhisattva Kannon or Kanzeon. Signifying an immortal being, Kwan Yin represents limitless transcendence beyond gender, and therefore has both attributes: “Male and female, positive and negative, physical and spiritual, the two being the one Primordial Force”.¹



The Chinese translation of Kuan-Shi-Yin is: Kuan - to observe, Shih - the world of manifestation, and Yin - all the sounds of creation; interpreted in scriptures as ‘he who perceives the world’s lamentations’. In Sanskrit Avalokiteshvara means ‘the lord who looks upon the world with compassion’ or ‘he who looks down upon sound’ (‘Svara’ - ‘sound or noise’), the sorrow of the world. Kwan Yin may be shown standing by willows and rocks, by lotus pools or running water, and can also be seen holding a vessel pouring water; a willow branch, a lotus flower (jewel of the three treasures); or sometimes a basket of fish. Water signifies the waters of life and purification of the mind and body, harmony and peacefulness; the lotus represents wisdom and enlightenment; willow symbolises strength and healing and fish nourishment.



A Buddhist legend relates how Avalokitesvara vowed never to rest until all beings were freed from samsara (the cycle of birth, death and rebirth); and becoming overwhelmed, his head split into countless pieces. A Buddha re-assembled them into eleven heads and a thousand arms, so that by seeing everywhere all at once he could reach out to suffering humanity. Avalokitesvara is said to have the ability to assume any form necessary in order to alleviate suffering. The Lotus Sūtra* refers to thirty three manifestations of Kwan Yin or Avalokitasvara. Seven are female and according to the doctrines of the Mahāyāna Sūtras, it does not matter whether Kwan Yin is male, female, or genderless, as the ultimate reality is in emptiness.[§]

In the Secret Doctrine, HPB tells us: “Kwan-Shi-Yin is Avalokiteshwara, and both are forms of the seventh Universal Principle; while in its highest metaphysical character this deity is the synthetic aggregation of all the planetary Spirits, Dhyani Chohans. He is the ‘Self-manifested’; in short, the ‘Son of the Father’”. Crowned with

¹ Secret Doctrine, H. P. Blavatsky. Proem, Stanzas 1 to 6, summing up, footnote 13.

* The Lotus Sūtra was translated in the 3rd century. In Sanskrit: Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra - Sutra on the White Lotus of the Sublime Dharma (Sacred Duty). For many Buddhists the Lotus Sūtra contains the last teaching of the Buddha.

[§] Yan Chung. Across the Himalayan Gap: An Indian Quest for Understanding China. 1998. p. 222. ‡ SD, Vol. 1, p 471-472. Image. Top: Guan Yin in the courtyard of Daien-in Temple, Mount Koya, Japan. Jpatokal 2004. Courtesy Wikimedia Commons. Bottom: Eleven-faced depiction of the bodhisattva Avalokite vara, from Jiuhuashan in China’s Anhui province. Released into the public domain by its author, Nat Krause at the wikipedia project.



seven dragons, above his statue there appears the inscription Pu-Tsi-K'iun-ling, 'the universal Saviour of all living beings'. Literally interpreted, Kwan-Shi-Yin means 'the Lord that is seen', and in one sense, 'the divine SELF perceived by Self' (the human) - the Atman or seventh principle merged in the Universal; perceived by, or the object of perception to, Buddhi, the sixth principle or divine Soul in man. In a still higher "sense, Avalokiteshwara or Kwan-Shi-Yin (referred to as the seventh Universal principle), is the Logos perceived by the Universal Buddhi - or Soul, as the synthetic aggregate of the Dhyani-Buddhas.... the omnipresent universal Spirit manifested in the temple of Kosmos or Nature. Kwan-shi-yin, then, is 'the Son identical with his Father' mystically; or the Logos — the word. He is called the 'Dragon of Wisdom'.[‡]

The ancient Chinese considered themselves to be the descendants of the dragon and statues of dragons have been around for thousands of years. In Chinese mythology, dragons are often shown with a horse's head, four legs and a snake's tail; symbolising different aspects of the esoteric teachings and various attributes of the mundane world. As a sign of auspicious power, dragons were lavishly embroidered on the silk robes of Chinese Emperors. Dragons with two horns and five-clawed feet were reserved for the Emperor ('son on heaven'); princes and nobles were restricted to four-clawed dragons.

In simple terms, when seen esoterically, the two horns represent the duality of spirit and matter, the five clawed feet, the five principles of nature operating in the material world, and four represents the manifested world and earthly responsibilities. A horse signifies physical form. The snake is a symbol for Wisdom and Eternity.

Frequently, the Wisdom Teachings are hidden in plain sight. So next time you look at a beautiful statue of Kwan Yin, or your eye is taken by a striking painting of a dragon; look a little closer and try to discover the real nature of the story it has to tell. There is an age-long tradition of esoteric knowledge, and aside from their great beauty, such images endure over millennia because of the esoteric Truths they hold.

Susan is a deep theosophical student and a well-known speaker. For many years she served as a Trustee on the Foundation's board and in numerous roles for the TS in England, and is editor of Esoterica. Susan has had a life-long interest in spirituality and both Eastern and Western philosophies.

[‡] Secret Doctrine, H. P. Blavatsky. Vol. 1, p471- 472. (Online Edition).

Image: One of the dragons from 'The Nine Dragons' hand scroll, painted by the Song-Dynasty Chinese artist Chen Rong. Public domain image.