

## **Guanyin: Goddess of Embodied Compassion**

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Guanyin, Chinese Goddess of Compassion and Mercy, defies clear categorization. She is a goddess within a religion that does not recognize goddesses, and the female evolution of the male bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. There are many theories regarding her evolution and many scholars who have devoted entire bodies of work to her transformational nature. This essay offers some of the most commonly accepted theories regarding Guanyin's identity and describes the most widely recognized forms she has taken. A synthesis of her many creation myths is followed by methods for interacting with the principles represented by this merciful goddess.

### Guanyin as the Embodiment of Compassion

Guanyin embodies the essence of compassion. "Embodied" is a multi-faceted term meaning to incorporate, incarnate, or personify. Incorporating bodhisattvas and goddess from many traditions into a unified whole, this goddess incarnate is invested with the principles of mercy and compassion. She personifies these principles in human form as the princess Miao-Shan, who gladly sacrificed her eyes and arms for her father's well being.

Guanyin is commonly referred to as the "goddess of compassion and mercy" but she began as a celestial bodhisattva. This holy title describes one who has reached enlightenment and is free from samsara – the endless wheel of birth, death and rebirth - but compassionately forgoes nirvana in order to save others. Compassion is a triune phenomena entailing an awareness of suffering, a desire to relieve suffering and the

execution of plans intended to do the same. This trinity was embodied within Guanyin. She was aware that others still suffered, she desired to relieve their suffering and she renounced her own spiritual transformation in order to bring all beings to enlightenment. This selfless act established Guanyin as a favored champion of the people.

#### Avalokitesvara and Guanyin

Guanyin is the synthesis of divinity and merciful action, but she was not the first to express this embodied form of compassion. Buddhist holy books are replete with stories of earlier bodhisattvas who performed similar feats, and there is one in particular of particular interest when considering Guanyin's origins. Buddhism is a non-theistic religion that refutes the concept or worship of a creator God. Buddha acknowledged the existence of gods or devas who could help when invoked, but considered them mortal and trapped in samsara. He taught about salvation in a series of sermons known as sutras. One of the best-known—the Lotus Sutra—tells of “a compassionate Buddha who sends forth the light of enlightenment and salvation to the whole world” (Palmer, Ramsey, and Kwok 1995). Chapter 25, “The Universal Gate” is devoted to a bodhisattva named Avalokitesvara, “the lord who hears the cries of the world.” Avalokitesvara was the embodiment of compassion, and his life was “dedicated to the salvation of others and to becoming a Buddha only in some far distant eon” (Leeming 2001). Described as androgynous in presentation and mannerism, many early statues and drawings portray Avalokitesvara in a masculine, yet effeminate, form. He also possessed decidedly maternal propensities to protect the weak, heal the sick and assist in matters of pregnancy and childbirth. Avalokitesvara could assume any form necessary to help those who called

upon him, and granted “compassion wondrous as a great cloud, pouring spiritual rain like nectar, quenching all the flames of distress” (Palmer, Ramsey, and Kwok 1995).

In 406 AD, a renowned translator named Kumarajiva completed what has become the most favored translation of the Lotus Sutra in China. In it, the Sanskrit name of Avalokitesvara was translated into the Chinese name of Guanshiyin, “hearer of the cries of the world”, thus rendering the bodhisattva gender-neutral. Portrayed as masculine through the Tang Dynasty (618-907) (Yu 2001), by the eighth century Guanyin was regularly depicted as a female (Palmer, Ramsey, and Kwok 1995), and by the fifteenth century Guanyin was completely feminine (Yu 2001).

Hypotheses regarding this sexual transformation are many. It is likely that Guanyin is an evolution of an earlier goddess. In the fifteenth century BCE, the indigenous shamanic religion of China recognized a divine being called the Queen Mother. Near the same time period, Christianity arrived in China, bringing Mary, Mother of Christ. Mary’s image and narrative had taken over some earlier goddesses, including Egyptian Isis. Buddhism was introduced into China during the latter half of the Han Dynasty (220 BCE-206 BCE) (Yu 2001) and continued to grow through the first six hundred years of the Common Era, as did the native Taoism. During this time, Confucianism became the state ideology of China, leaving both Buddhism and Taoism to compete for resources and patronage (Yu 2001). By the second century CE, Taoism was the primary religion of China. Having assimilated the earlier practices of Shamanism, Taoism acknowledged female deities, including the “Queen Mother of the West” described in Max Dashu’s essay within this volume.

In hopes of appealing to the native Chinese people, Buddhism engaged in the practice of *ko-i*, a method of teaching Buddhist concepts by pairing them with Taoist terms and ideas (T'ang 1951). It is possible that the Taoist Queen Mother and the male Avalokitesvara were paired together for teaching purposes, resulting in Guanyin's arrival. Recognition of the need for a feminine divinity may also have inspired the growing Mahayana tradition of Buddhism to borrow the increasingly popular Hindu Goddess Tara. Sixth-century Tibetan Buddhists believed Tara to be the *sakti*, or consort, of Avalokitesvara. Born from one of his tears, she was also considered a bodhisattva of compassion. Some scholars believe that Guanyin is actually a combination of the male Chinese Avalokitesvara and the female Hindu Tara.

Guanyin's popularity spread across China in the seventh and eighth centuries. By the time of the Song Dynasty (960-1279), she had taken on attributes of other regional female deities and was quite popular, with evolutions as the previously mentioned Hindu Tara, Japanese Kwanon (often depicted as male), Vietnamese Quan Am, and Taiwanese Ma-tsu.

#### Images of Guanyin

There are many iconographic depictions of the bodhisattva Guanyin. The Lotus Sutra references thirty-three different forms, eleven each for the worlds of heaven, sky and earth (Kiang 2004). Some of the best-known include: The White-Robed Guanyin, the Royal Ease Guanyin, Guanyin of the Sea (and other water based depictions), The Thousand-Armed Guanyin, and the Princess Miao Shan. In each, her clothing, posture, and surroundings are symbolic, as are the objects that she is shown with. Some are

common to the religious art of the time, while others originate from the myth of her transformation from human to immortal (which follows this section).

In the most popular and widely loved portrayals, Guanyin is quite young and beautiful. As the White-Robed Guanyin, she is clothed in a simple white robe similar to that worn by the Christian Mary. Other times she is dressed in the colorful skirts, tops, and jewelry of a princess or goddess.

The Royal Ease Pose shows Guanyin seated. Her right knee is raised, and her right arm rests upon it, while her left leg and arm remain down in a relaxed position. This decidedly unfeminine pose gives a glimpse into Guanyin's disregard for traditional feminine expectations, for while she is regarded as especially helpful to women, she is tethered to no man or child. Guanyin also resists easy categorization as feminine in less common depictions as a great warrior, armed with weapons and shields.

Many forms show Guanyin on or near the water. Guanyin with Fish Basket carries a basket of fish on her arm, while Guanyin of the South Sea is shown on P'u-t'o Island. Floating in a lotus flower, walking among the waves, sitting on a rock contemplating the sea or slaying a dragon (another image shared with the Christian Mary), these images are dear to sailors and seafarers, who call upon her for protection and safe journeying.

Guanyin is sometimes portrayed with a thousand arms and hands reaching out in compassion. In each hand, an eye watches over the suffering of the world.

As a bodhisattva, Guanyin has vowed to lead all beings to enlightenment, and the items she is portrayed with are symbolic of this awakening. In some depictions, Guanyin holds a string of beads, reminiscent of the Buddhist mala or the Christian rosary. These

beads symbolize the importance of chanting and prayer as tools for enlightenment. At other times she carries The Lotus Sutra, which details the path to enlightenment. She is often shown pouring water from a vase. The water represents compassion, which Guanyin pours onto all who are sick and suffering. The weeping willow branch is a similar emblem. Flexible, yet strong, it represents Guanyin's grace under pressure, femininity, and compassion. It can also be used in exorcisms and shamanistic contacts with the spirit world (Palmer, Ramsay, and Kwok 1995).

In many images, Guanyin holds or is surrounded by lotus flowers. The lotus flower is an important symbol in Buddhism, representing the purity of mind necessary to achieve enlightenment. Just as the lotus grows from the dark, muddy sediment of the pond, humans begin in the darkness of ignorance and fear. The lotus flower opens only when it reaches the light of day, just as the blossoming of the human mind occurs only with enlightenment.

When portrayed with a child or children, Guanyin expresses a mother's compassion. In this form, which has much in common with the Christian images of the Virgin Mary and infant Christ, she is the patroness of women, pregnancy, and safe delivery.

The peacock - one of Guanyin's companion animals - sometimes accompanies her in statues and pictures. This is due in part to a legend in which Guanyin transformed a simple bird into a beautiful peacock with a thousand eyes on his tail-plumes, to help her keep watch over the feuding animals of earth.

Many of the aforementioned tools and objects come together in a great statue honoring Guanyin. Located on the south coast of China's island province of Hainan, it

stands 108 meters tall and is the third tallest statue in the world. It is fashioned with three faces—one facing inland and the other two seaward—which represent Guanyin’s blessing and protection of China and the whole world. One shows Guanyin holding the Lotus Sutra. In the next she is shown with a string of mala beads. She is holding a lotus flower in the third. Circling the halos of the three faces are the words “Om mani padme hum,” one of the prayers said to invoke Guanyin. These three facets express Guanyin’s commitment to enlightenment, which is also captured in her many myths and legends.

Before exploring the best-known of Guanyin’s stories, it is useful to review the basic principles of Buddhism, known as “The Four Noble Truths.” The First Noble Truth, reflecting on the ever-changing nature of life, tells that health, relationships, finances, possessions, ideals, and beliefs change throughout life. Avoidance of these changes is impossible, and attempts to avoid these changes cause suffering. The Second Noble Truth states that suffering is caused by attachments to people, places, and things, and the desire to avoid pain. The Third Noble Truth offers reassurance that it is possible to achieve liberation from suffering, and the Fourth Noble Truth directs the seeker to follow an Eight-Fold Path of virtues leading to enlightenment.

The rigors of daily survival left Guanyin’s followers little time for religious study. While they could see that life was filled with suffering and desired to be free from it, applying the principles of the Eight-Fold Path to their daily lives was difficult. The male Buddha was sometimes more intimidating than accessible, and enlightenment could take many lifetimes to achieve. Throughout time, story-telling has been used as a method of teaching otherwise esoteric principles. Stories of Guanyin were created in which she expressed the virtues of the Eight-Fold Path in ways people could relate to and emulate,

The best known of Guanyin's legends are the stories of her transformation from human to divine (Blofeld 1988). There are many of these creation myths, each tailored to a particular belief system or geographic region. Most involve a young mortal princess named Miao Shan whose compassionate nature causes her to suffer the wrath of her angry father—the King.

### The Princess Miao Shan

Miao Shan was the third daughter born to a king and his queen. At her birth, a beautiful light enveloped her and the smell of apple blossoms filled the air. Many at the court thought these signs were proof that Miao Shan was divine, but her parents, hoping for a son, were disappointed and did not recognize her true nature.

Miao Shan was an unusual little girl. The comfort of the royal palace did not impress her, and she did not care to be treated as a princess. Her concern for the well-being of insects, animals, and people took up a great deal of her energy, and she spent much time in prayer and meditation. As she and her sisters grew older, her father was eager to marry them off. He arranged marriages for the older sisters without any difficulty, but Miao Shan did not wish to marry. She wanted only to bring healing to those who suffered and did not see how this would be possible if she were tied to a man and expected to run a household.

The king was very displeased with his daughter. Since she wanted a life of simplicity, he ordered that she work beside the palace servants and be given the most unpleasant tasks. Miao Shan undertook these chores cheerfully, but her mother's heart was heavy with the knowledge that her daughter was being treated so poorly. She begged

the king to send Miao Shan off to a nunnery, where she could live the contemplative life she desired.

The king had not given up hope of breaking Miao Shan's spirit. He allowed her to enter the nunnery but ordered the abbess to make her life difficult, hoping that his daughter would change her mind and return home to marry. Miao Shan was sent to the kitchens and given the jobs that no one else wanted. At first, she completed these tasks with good cheer, but eventually they became too much for her. Fortunately, divine forces interceded. Animals and other deities were sent to assist Miao Shan, and together they completed the assigned tasks and more.

When the king realized that he could not break his daughter's spirit, he ordered her killed. As his soldiers stormed the nunnery, they showed no mercy for any in their way, including the women Miao Shan had come to love as spiritual sisters. Her heart broke as she watched the monastery go up in flames, trapping the nuns in certain death. In desperation she called upon Buddha and received the idea to prick the roof of her mouth and spit blood into the air. Instantly the skies filled with clouds and rain extinguished the fires. The nunnery and its occupants were safe but Miao Shan was not, for the king ordered that she be brought home and executed immediately.

Hands bound behind her back, Miao Shan was led into the public square to be beheaded. Again, divine forces intervened. As the sun hit the blade of the executioner's sword, it shattered into a thousand pieces. He tried to kill her with one of the shards, but it disappeared. Desperate to do the king's bidding, he strangled Miao Shan with a cord. But as she fell to the ground, a great tiger leapt upon the platform and carried her lifeless body to the woods and gave her a pill of immortality. It freed her from her physical body

and allowed her to enter the realm of immortal beings. There she witnessed the eighteen Buddhist Hells, where she saw tortured souls whom she was compassionately moved to save. Her earnest prayers liberated the suffering and transformed hell into a paradise.

Miao Shan was returned to her mortal body.

Some stories credit the Emperor of Hell with returning Miao Shan to her physical body, while others credit Buddha. Most stories agree that she was given a magical peach upon her reincarnation and that she was returned to the island of Mt. P'u-t'o, one of four great mountain chains that represent the elements of earth, water, fire, and air. Mt. P'u-t'o, located off the Chinese mainland, is associated with water. There, Miao Shan continued to pray and meditate until she achieved enlightenment and release from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Choosing to forgo this release in service of liberating all beings from suffering, Miao Shan achieved her full bodhisattva nature. She remains associated with the sea and the moon, and the isle of Mt. P'u-t'o has become a place of pilgrimage to her.

While Miao Shan was pursuing enlightenment, her father had grown very ill. All his power and wealth could not buy a cure for his illness. Near death, he was visited by a monk. The monk informed him that “the arm and eye of one who is without anger” could be made into a medicine that would save his life (Palmer, Ramsay, and Kwok 1995). The king and his queen were at first horrified by the idea of dismembering someone, however in selfish desperation they grew willing to try. But they knew of no one who was both without anger and willing to give up an eye and an arm. The visiting monk knew of such a person, a divine being who had obtained perfection and resided on the island of Mt.

P'u-t'o. He assured them that she was without anger and would grant their request. A messenger was sent to the island to make the king's plea.

The messenger returned with the necessary ingredients—the arm and eye of one who was without anger – and the monk made the healing potion. He gave it to the king who drank it and was instantly returned to good health. When he tried to thank the monk, the monk advised him to thank the one who had sacrificed her eye and arm. So the king, queen and their court made their way to Mt. P'u-t'o. When they were granted audience before the great bodhisattva who had saved the king's life, they bowed low. Then the queen, sneaking a glance at the mutilated face of her husband's savior, screamed with horror as she recognized her own daughter, Miao Shan. The king fell at his daughter's feet and begged her forgiveness, but Miao Shan assured him that she had sacrificed nothing and would be made whole again. With this proclamation, the air was filled with the same fragrance of apple blossoms that had attended her birth. Beautiful flowers fell from the sky, and clouds of color swirled around all gathered. When the clouds parted, Miao Shan had been transformed into the Thousand-Armed and Thousand-Eyed Guanyin. She encouraged her parents to return home to their castle and ascended into heaven, leaving her mortal body behind. Her parents buried her body on the island and built a lovely temple above it to honor her. Then they returned to their castle where, with love and compassion, they brought the Buddhist teachings to all the kingdom.

### Perceptions of Guanyin

People relate to Guanyin in two different ways. For some, she is the Goddess of Compassion. As a goddess, Guanyin is approached in supplication to grant requests for

healing, mercy and protection. She is honored and celebrated for her compassionate interventions. Others consider Guanyin an archetype of mercy. Archetypes are instinctual patterns of character common to all people, such as the hero, villain, good mother or fierce warrior. These patterns are largely unconscious and are consequently projected outside of the self, where they can be interacted with and expressed. As an archetype, Guanyin can be considered an externalized expression of the mercy and compassion common within all of humanity. Whether she is perceived as a goddess or an archetype, Guanyin's benevolent spirit remains the same. And just as it is possible to interact with the spirit of gratitude on Thanksgiving, it is possible to interact with Guanyin's mercy and compassion through celebration, chanting prayer, and meditation.

There are three annual celebrations of Guanyin, held on the nineteenth day of the second, sixth, and ninth lunar month. The first celebration acknowledges her birth from the Buddha's compassionate tear, or the eye of God. The second celebration marks her vow to forgo enlightenment until all sentient beings have reached it as well. The third celebrates her final ascension into nirvana. Celebrations on these feast days include chanting, prayer, the reading of sacred texts and meditation upon the virtues of compassion.

In the Mahayana Tradition of Buddhism, chanting is believed to prepare the mind for meditation, and also aids in ritual invocations. Four mantras, recited in their original Sanskrit form, are commonly used to invoke Guanyin.

The best known of these mantras, "Om Mani Padme Hum," translates as "praise to the jewel in the lotus." Common to many sects of Buddhism and present on many statues of Guanyin, it is said to invoke Chenrezig, the Buddha of Compassion, and is

believed to be as powerful as all of the teachings of the Buddha combined. The Venerable Thubten Chodron recalls her teacher Lama Yeshe insisting that “Even if you don’t want to develop compassion, recitation of Om Mani Padme Hum will make compassion grow in your mind!” (Chodron, 2005). Guanyin is said to have uttered this phrase at the moment of her genesis.

The most powerful chant honoring Guanyin, known as Te Pei Chow or the Dharani of Great Compassion, is “Namo Kuan Shi Yin P’u Sa” which means “All hail to Guanyin, Bodhisattva!” Chanted three times slowly, it salutes Guanyin at the beginning and end of worship. Chanted more rapidly over a longer period of time, it invokes aid for specific purposes.

Lesser known are the chants “Chiu K’u Chiu-Nan P’u Sa Lai” (“Save from suffering, Bodhisattva come!”) used in emergency situations, and the single word “Hri”, which has no actual translation but is believed to capture the pure essence of Guanyin.

In many traditions, altars and shrines are constructed to bring symbolic form to otherwise intangible expressions of divinity. An altar can be as simple as a statue on a small table, or as elaborate as a three-tiered style with Guanyin, Buddha, and other enlightened beings on the top, representations of ancestors in the middle, and offerings of fruit, flowers, incense and candles on the bottom. An altar to Guanyin can be used as a place to pay homage, chant, pray and meditate. Prayer and meditation can be distinguished by the direction of their intentions; prayers ask for help, give praise or exclaim awe, often in the form of chants or other recitations. Meditation is a form of listening in stillness. Meditations specific to Guanyin are not as common as more generalized meditations of compassion, which appear to bring physiological benefits.

EEG brain scans of Tibetan Lamas performing compassion meditations show significant increases in the activity of the left frontal lobe—home to positive emotion—confirming Lama Yeshe’s assertion that compassion is good for the mind. Lastly, simple acts like the waving of a willow branch or the pouring of water can be viewed as rituals designed to embody and express Guanyin’s protective and healing powers.

### Conclusion

Guanyin is a sympathetic goddess. The word sympathy has its roots in the Latin *sympathia* meaning “to suffer together”. Guanyin has pledged to suffer together with humanity until all reach enlightenment. She is also an empathetic goddess, feeling the pain of those who suffer as if it were her own. It is this awareness that fuels the mercy and compassion she is known for. Ultimately, Guanyin is an enigmatic goddess. Despite varied spiritual and social segregations of the time, she has existed as a bodhisattva, man, woman, princess and goddess. This transformative ability has helped her to endure religious and political dynasties across hundreds of centuries. In taking the bodhisattva’s vow, Guanyin has committed to liberate all who suffer. This holy bond creates a channel for her waters of compassion to pour over humanity. All who seek relationship with Guanyin will feel her kindness and mercy, for she is truly the embodiment of compassion.

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