

Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva's Visual Art In Vietnamese Folk Belief And Mahayana Buddhist Tradition

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Abstract

In Mahayana Buddhism, spiritual purification can be achieved through learning religious teachings or following religious guides, bodhisattvas, who have attained nirvana but are still teaching people to cultivate devotedly leading to benefits for all living beings. One such religious teacher is the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, who attained enlightenment by helping all people compassionately with a distinguished mind. Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva is today considered one of the main bodhisattvas of Mahayana Buddhism. Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, depending on the cultural context, history, and religious beliefs of each country, appears in a feminine or masculine form, but in general, the Bodhisattva symbolizes harmony and harmony between secular and spiritual elegance. Through descriptive and analytical methods, the article aims to clarify the meaning of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva visual arts in Vietnamese folk beliefs and Buddhist traditions. Through this, readers can understand the role of Bodhisattvas in the spiritual life of Vietnamese people.

Keywords: *Mahayana Buddhism, Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, Vietnamese folk beliefs*

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I. Introduction

In many Asian countries, according to the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, the statue of Guanyin is worshiped as a symbol of protection and mercy. However, the symbol of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara in each country is a little different. In Vietnam, the Bodhisattva has been familiar to Vietnamese people for a long time through the formation and development of Buddhism. In fact, in Buddhist temples, home altars, and along rugged mountain roads across Vietnam, devotees rely on Quan Am for guidance and protection.

Avalokiteśvara worshiped in many Mahayana Buddhist temples in Vietnam, is often depicted as a goddess wearing a white robe, standing on a blooming lotus flower, and holding a willow branch and a jug. Sometimes Avalokiteśvara is depicted with countless arms and faces, symbolizing her ability to see and help all sentient beings. Vietnamese also worship Quang Am Thi Kinh and Nam Hai Bodhisattvas as incarnations of Avalokiteśvara

Therefore, this article aims to clarify the importance of carving and devotion to Avalokiteśvara and incarnations of Avalokiteśvara in Vietnamese folk beliefs and Mahayana Buddhist tradition. From there, the reader can understand clearly the role of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva in the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people.

II. Meanings Of Avalokiteśvara In Vietnamese Religious Life.

Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva is one of the most famous bodhisattvas in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. In Chapter 25 of the Lotus Sutra, the Bodhisattva is portrayed as a compassionate bodhisattva who tunes in to the cries of conscious creatures and works resolutely to assist those who call on his title. Among the many bodhisattvas of Mahayana Buddhism, Avalokiteśvara is clearly recognized as the incarnation of compassion and is worshiped as such throughout Buddhist Asia. In Buddhist India and Tibet, Avalokiteśvara was accepted as male. However, from the 7th century to the 11th century, China changed the image of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva into a female benevolent mother goddess. Over time, this female version of the Bodhisattva of Mercy was adopted by other Mahayana Buddhists in East Asian countries, including Vietnam.

In Vietnam, Guanyin Bodhisattva is known as "Quan Am" and has become a popular image in Vietnamese spiritual life because of his unconditional love and compassion. In Buddhist pagodas, home altars, and gruesome mountain trails across Vietnam, devotees follow Quan Am for guidance and protection. In other words, Vietnamese Buddhists rely on Quan Am Bodhisattva for her boundless compassion and power to save them from hardships and suffering.

Vietnamese Buddhists, as a rule, allude to Guanyin Bodhisattva as a "compassionate mother" and the Guanyin Bodhisattva Celebration as "Mother's Day". Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva's boundless cherish is comparable to that of a mother, who is the foremost delicate in her family. She no longer incarnates as a Buddha or other bodhisattva sitting high in the heavens, but in Vietnamese folk beliefs, she appears as a loving mother

who eases the suffering of her children with her hands. Only a mother who brings comfort, warmth, and love can lead her children to compassion, equality, selflessness, and altruism. With this belief, Buddhism can penetrate the hearts of the Vietnamese common people to understand the compassion of Buddhism.

III. Legend Of Incarnations Of Avalokiteśvara In Vietnamese Folk Belief And Buddhist Tradition

There are various legends about Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva due to differences in culture, tradition, geography, history, and the origin of Buddhism in each country. In the course of the formation and development of Vietnamese Buddhism, we are able to see that Buddhism and goddess-worshipping cults have always been linked in folklore. Buddhism and goddess worship complement each other because they share many similar cultural elements such as benevolence, tolerance, protection, especially naivety, and closeness to the masses. Therefore, Vietnamese people also worship Quang Am Thi Kinh and Nam Hai Bodhisattvas as incarnations of Guanyin Bodhisattva.

Legend of Quan Am Thi Kinh

The legend of Quan Am Thi Kinh¹ in Vietnam has been passed down from generation to generation among ordinary people through the art of Cheo (traditional Vietnamese tuong singing), Cai Luong (Cai Luong theater), plays, poetry, and stories in prose. However, the author and time of writing Quan Am Thi Kinh's poetry are unknown.

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful and virtuous girl called Thi Kinh. Her young husband, Thien Si, was so jealous that one day, because of a minor misconception, he misdoubted her of having an affair. The guiltless young lady bore her fate but because she felt bored with her life, she dedicated herself to Buddhism. She had her hair cut and made herself a monk as an appropriate disguise not to cause men to commit when they saw her beauty. Unfortunately, a young girl, Thi Mau, who often went to the temple, fell deeply in love with the young monk. After that, she sought to fasten herself to "him", and slandered him by hand over in his arms a child without a father. The youthful monk was at that point kicked out of the pagoda, beaten, and criticized by the heartless swarm.

Because she had become the Buddha's ordained disciple, although her skin was bruised at that time, her soul was stronger than ever and she felt deeply sorry for the blindness of humanity. Suicide to end suffering? No, she immediately dismissed the idea, and in an explosive noble sacrifice, she accepted the baby, cherished it, and raised it in difficult labor and hardship, living alone in disgrace, until the day of her passing away. Finally, her old torturers realize their mistake, so Thi Kinh was also understood. She received justice and people made her a bodhisattva.

Because Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara is a symbol of loving kindness manifested in many different forms, people implicitly believe that Thi Kinh is one of the incarnations of the Avalokiteśvara. Therefore, in Vietnamese folk belief, a statue of Thi Kinh Bodhisattva is sculptured with a lady holding a child in her arms and having a parrot next to her, which is none other than Thien Si, the envious husband.

Legend of Nam Hai Bodhisattva

Nam Hai Bodhisattva or Quan Am Nam Hai² is particularly commonplace to people within the coastal region of Vietnam. Especially, in the Mekong Delta, Nam Hai Bodhisattva's image, is considered by individuals as a goddess rather than just a bodhisattva in Buddhism. This Avalokitesvara has nearly totally ended up the Sacred Mother or the Goddess of the Ocean within the minds of the tenants of the ocean here because the people believe that the bodhisattva is the one who always protects the fishermen from the storm.

In Bac Lieu, there are numerous stories about the beginning of Bodhisattva Nam Hai. In special, the origin of Nam Hai Bodhisattva stems from the story that once upon a time, sailors built a small temple to worship Princess Thuy Te to pray for peace and prosperity for the villagers. When the statue of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara was raised here, gradually, Princess Thuy Te was recognized as an incarnation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and was called Nam Hai Bodhisattva (Tran Hong Lien, 2004). Another legend says that in the past, local people built a little sanctuary to revere Thien Hau, a goddess of the Chinese ocean.

¹ Bhikkhuni Gioi Huong (2019). *Commentary on avalokiteśvara bodhisattva* (Fourth Edition). Ananda Viet Foundation. ISBN: 978-0-359-47726-5. California 92570, USA, p. 7.

² Truong Thu Trang, *Nam Hai Bodhisattva Festival in Bac Lieu* (Vietnam: Fine Arts Publishing House, 2017).

Dieu Thien Bodhisattva

The story of Dieu Thien Bodhisattva³ has been transmitted orally in Vietnam and China. The story goes that a princess converted her evil father by going forth. She is the third girl of Lord Hung Lam of India. When the queen gave birth to a princess, it made profound hatred within the king's intellect since he needed a prince to acquire his position of authority. Not at all like her two sisters, the third princess likes to examine Buddhist sacred texts and needs to get to be a friar. She denied to wed, so she was imprisoned in the royal residence. Unable to persuade the princess to give up the monkhood, the king pretended to let her practice at Bach Tuoc pagoda and then forced the monks to ask her to give up her wish to become a nun. If the princess doesn't stop her ordained wish, the king is going to kill the monks in the temple. In any case, this did not shake her will to provide up. Because of this hostility, the king ordered the temple to be burned, but fortunately, it rained heavily. Out of anger, the king ordered the princess to be killed, but a storm arose and the executioner's hammer was struck by lightning from the sky. When the princess was executed, an extraordinary white tiger showed up to require her to Huong Pagoda. Since at that point, she remained there beneath the title Dieu Thien and restrained all the wild creatures. Because of the guilt, the king fell seriously ill, with sores all over his body. No one can heal him. His hands gradually disappeared and he got to be blind. When the princess learned of this terrible news, she returned to visit him. She gave her eyes and arms to heal the king. As a result, she converted all of her royals, rulers, and two sisters. The above stories praise the merits and benefits of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, especially the daughter's filial piety towards her parents. Her parents gave up their evil deeds because it was her honesty that awakened them to abandon ignorance and practice the right path and wisdom for the benefit of themselves and others.

IV. The Worship Of Avalokiteśvara In Vietnamese Spiritual Life

A Buddhist researcher named Nguyen Minh Ngoc said that Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara has been a fundamental portion of Vietnamese people's everyday lives for centuries.⁴ Every year, there are three main Avalokiteśvara festivals held at many Mahayana Buddhist temples in Vietnam, namely 19/02 (lunar calendar): Avalokiteśvara's birthday, 19/06 (lunar calendar): Avalokiteśvara's enlightenment, and 19/09 (lunar calendar): Avalokiteśvara's renunciation.

Most Buddhist temples display the Guan Yin statue placed adjacent to the Buddha image inside the temple in the most reverent position. Amitabha Buddha statue always is put between Bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta on the right and Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara on the left. It is a unique image of three saints according to Pure Land belief. In addition, additional Guanyin statues are placed at the main gate of each temple, facing the outside world, symbolizing the Buddhist understanding of the Bodhisattva's compassion and aspiration to reach out to humanity. Some temples in northern Vietnam also worship the statue of Quan Am Thi Kinh carrying a baby on her chest. In addition, the statue of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara in the state of women often wears necklaces with the image of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara with emeralds is also placed on cars or boats.

Nam Hai Bodhisattva within the minds of the people within the Mekong Delta and encompassing regions has ended up the picture of a compassionate mother, sparing all living beings. The picture of Our Woman of Nam Hai is continuously put in Ong's tomb, on the Bat Nha pontoon, or has its possess sanctum within the region of Ong's tomb, or standing on a lotus stage, the image of Our Woman is all over. In addition, Nam Hai Bodhisattva is additionally worshiped at domestic by numerous families within the Mekong Delta. Depending on diverse financial conditions, there will be diverse ways of worshipping the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara statue at domestic, distinctive within the measure of the statue, the put where the statue is shown, or within the house. Moreover, in the beliefs of the gods of the Mekong Delta, among the Bodhisattvas who are worshiped, there are Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and Nam Hai Bodhisattva. She is worshiped in the most solemn place in the house and has her own altar. That is the location of the God altar, which should be lower than the Buddha altar (if any), but higher than the ancestors' altar. The altar is on the right (from the inside), facing the front. In addition, some well-to-do families, with one or more floors, spend an outer space of the top floor to make a very solemn worship room.

In short, In Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition in Vietnam, paying homage and worshipping Avalokiteśvara has become the religious tradition in pagodas and houses. Besides, Buddhists moreover wear a chain with a pendant that has a picture of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva with the trust of getting her kindness and supernatural security.

V. Avalokiteśvara's Visual Art In Vietnamese Buddhist Temples

Worshipping and paying homage to the statue of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara is one of the main religious rituals in Mahayana Buddhism in many South Asian and East Asian countries, especially in India, Sri Lanka,

³ Bhikkhuni Gioi Huong, *Commentary on Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva*, Fourth Edition, California 92570, USA: Ananda Viet Foundation, 2022), ISBN: 978-0-359-47726-5, 9.

⁴ Nguyen Minh Ngoc, *Bodhisattva Quan Am at Buddhist Temples in The Red River Delta* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 2014).

China, Japan, and India. Tibet, Korea, and Vietnam. In particular, the art of these countries has created the image of Guan Yin Bodhisattva in many different forms depending on their social, cultural, and religious needs. In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition in Vietnam, paying homage to and worshipping Avalokitesvara has become a religious tradition in temples and homes.

The symbols of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara are made in many different forms, but the most popular is the image of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara standing in a lake, holding a willow branch in his right hand and a jug of pure water in his left hand (Figure 1). Head: There are from one, three, five thousand to eighty-four thousand heads which symbolizes the responsibility of shouldering and dealing with difficulties. Eyes: There are from two to three to eighty-four thousand eyes (the eyes represent understanding, human wisdom, and the teachings that lead people to happiness according to their level). Hand: There are two, four to eighty-four thousand hands (two hands represent boundless compassion). Numerous heads, numerous hands, and numerous eyes speak to her heart and intellect toward all creatures (Figure 2). She employs flexible abilities to liberate sorrowful people. She, who is considered a dynamic and cherishing bodhisattva, is ready to help all sentient beings if needed. The willow department and the vase speak to the sympathy and illumination that she will sprinkle to suppress or relieve the defilements and sufferings that are burning within the minds of creatures.

There's too a picture of Avalokitesvara to be beside a bird which is holding pearl jewelry in its nose, and a child standing with collapsed hands. Buddhists too regularly delineate her standing on a lotus, riding a mythical dragon flying on the clouds, or standing in a waterfall or lotus lake. A popular symbol depicts her standing on an island rescuing shipwreck victims and the ocean is a symbol of the cycle of birth and death. Another image is Avalokitesvara known as Bodhisattva Cundī eighteen arms and three faces, an incarnation of Avalokitesvara with a thousand hands and eyes.

While Manjushri Bodhisattva represents wisdom, Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva is the embodiment of Buddha's compassion. From past to present, the individuals of Asia, counting Vietnam, have regarded, venerated, and believed in Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. In Asian Buddhist thoughts, Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara is regularly portrayed as a female Buddha keeping a willow department in her hand to spare aware creatures from sorrow. In Vietnam, Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara has many sacred names and incarnations (sambhogakaya), which are clearly illustrated in many scriptures and oral tale stories; for example, Quan Am Nam Hai (Figure 3), Quan Am Thi Kinh, and Quan Am Dieu Thien. In particular, Quan Am Thi Kinh is shaped in the image of a woman holding a child and with a parrot beside her (Figure 4). The picture of Avalokitesvara on the head of a whale, or white lotus, or on the undulating ocean infers that individuals are living in a world full of severe enduring, and they will escape it if they sincerely recite the name of Avalokitesvara. To the Vietnamese, she is the greatest of mothers and has countless heads and arms that rise above the dragon's head to prevent humans from drowning. Therefore, the natural consciousness of people in general and Buddhists, in particular, is all about femininity and motherly tenderness, so worshipping and sculpting the Bodhisattva statue has become a very clear expression of this tendency in the Vietnamese mind.

VI. Conclusion

In many Asian countries, people worship Guanyin Bodhisattva as the goddess of mercy and protection. However, her bodhisattva symbol is slightly different in each country. Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva is worshiped as a confidence to convey the Buddhist soul of kindness and to be additionally a way of endeavoring for an otherworldly source leading to a life of being free from suffering and attaining happiness.

Vietnamese Buddhists believe that Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva appears frequently to help people. Especially when people chant the name when they find happiness and peace and are gradually extricated from hardships and dangers. Numerous individuals in Vietnam regularly adore their otherworldly icons rather than Buddhas at home. This worldly belief is additionally reflected in the adoration of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva in the front yard, entrance hall, or open upper floors.

In Vietnam, due to dependence on and adaptation to social, cultural, and religious needs, the iconography of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva has been made in various forms in combination with local religious traditions. The foremost well-known, be that as it may, is the iconography of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva standing among lotus blossoms by a lake, with a willow department in his right hand and a container of unadulterated water in his cleared-out. The Quan Am statues have been made in many different forms, but the Quan Am images always carry a message of compassion and happiness for all living things in the world in the hearts of the Vietnamese people.

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Appendixes



Hinh 1: The image of the white Guanyin statue in the Linh Ung-Bai But Pagoda, Da Nang province, Vietnam



Hinh 2: The statue of Avalokitesvara, lacquered and gilded wood at the But Thap Temple, Hoa Binh Province, Vietnam



Figure 3: The statue of Nam Hai Mother at Quan Am Phat Dai in Bac Lieu province, Vietnam



Figure 4: The statue of Am Quan Thi Kinh at Mia temple, Ha Noi capital, Vietnam