

Avalokitesvara

Sound or Light & Sound?

(Quan Âm hay Quang Âm?)

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

Lord of the Light or Lord of the Light & Sound?

"Avalokitesvara" comes from two roots, "avalokita" and "isvara".

"Avalokita" means "glance" or "look". "Isvara" means "lord".

"Avalokitesvara" has been taken to mean such things as "Lord of what we see," "Lord who is seen," "Lord who is everywhere visible", "Lord who sees from on high," and "Lord of compassionate glances."

Avalokitesvara does not appear in the earliest texts about bodhisattvas. However, after a while he becomes one of the important bodhisattvas. By the second century C.E., in the larger Sukhavativyuha, Avalokitesvara is described along with Mahasthamaprapta as one of the two bodhisattvas in Sukhavati, the pure land of the Buddha Amitayus.¹⁵

Both of them are described as the source of the light (Quang) that illumines the pure land. They also teach the devotees of Amitayus, adapting their techniques of sound (Âm) to the understanding of the listeners.

Probably, around the fifth century C.E., a full-blown cult of Avalokitesvara emerged. Avalokitesvara evolves into the supreme savior of all suffering beings. He takes on the characteristics of various brahmanic gods, such as Brahma, Visnu, and Siva. Like Brahma, Avalokitesvara is described as the creator of the universe. Let there be light.

"From his eyes arose the sun and the moon, from his mouth, the wind, from his feet, the earth."

Descriptions of his physical form become increasingly fantastic. He is described as being enormously large. His face is a hundred thousand yojanas in circumference (a yojana is a few miles long). His body is gold colored. He has a halo in which there are five hundred buddhas, each attended by five hundred bodhisattvas, each attended by numberless

gods. From the hair between his eyebrows there flow eighty-four kinds of rays. Each ray (VN: Tạng Quang Minh) contains a vast number of buddhas and bodhisattvas. Each of his ten finger tips has eighty-four thousand pictures and each picture has eighty-four thousand rays (**phóng quang**) which shine over everything that exists. And so forth.

Bodhisattva Vow

At this point, Avalokitesvara takes precedence over the buddhas. Even the buddhas cannot estimate Avalokitesvara's merit. It is said that just thinking of him garners more merit than honoring a thousand buddhas.

Avalokitesvara's rise to prominence may be partially caused by the Mahayana doctrine of the bodhisattva vow. This doctrine says that the most wonderfully compassionate decision is to vow to stay a bodhisattva instead of becoming a buddha, because bodhisattvas can more effectively help other beings become enlightened.

Because of his compassion, Avalokitesvara has vowed not to become a buddha and slip into nirvana until after all sentient beings are saved from the nearly endless round of suffering in samsara. Instead, he has committed to continued existence so that he can help suffering beings.

Avalokitesvara is not the only bodhisattva who has made this vow. However, he embodies the compassionate motivation which led all bodhisattvas to the vow. Thus, valuing the bodhisattva vow leads to valuing Avalokitesvara and everything he signifies.

As compassionate action is Avalokitesvara's essence, he is supremely helpful. He can assume any form in order to help sentient beings, and there are descriptions of him appearing as buddhas, brahmanic gods, humans, and animals. In all these forms he does wonderful things to help alleviate the suffering of beings and bring them towards enlightenment.

He rescues his followers from fires, from drowning, from bandits, from murder, from prisons. He gives children to female followers who want children. He helps release beings from the suffering of three mental poisons of passion, hatred, and delusion. In addition to being the personification of compassion, he is helpful both on the physical, worldly plain, and on a more psychological or spiritual level.

Avalokitesvara in Sri Lanka

The cult of Avalokitesvara also spread to Sri Lanka. This is a little surprising as Sri Lanka primarily follows Theravada Buddhism, while Avalokitesvara was originally a strictly Mahayana conception.

In Sri Lanka, he is called Natha, which is an abbreviation of Lokeshvaranatha, which means "Lord of the World". He has become identified with the bodhisattva Maitreya, the "future Buddha". He is also seen as being identical with several Hindu gods. Natha is seen as the guardian deity of Sri Lanka, and is reportedly worshipped primarily because he is regarded as a pragmatically useful source of advantages in the phenomenal world.

The Lord of the Light

Avalokitesvara has been connected with light more thoroughly than any other Buddhist deity. The stories say that he was created from a ray of light which emanated from Amitabha Buddha.

Avalokitesvara is a luminous being of light, and is repeatedly described as radiating light, which shines over all sentient beings and over all corners of the universe.

Similarly, he sees everything, and shines everyone in all corners of the earth, a fact that is emphasized by his name, light, (VN: Quang.) His ability to see/shine everywhere is important because it allows him to

manifest his compassion everywhere faster than speed of sounds. **The light that he emanates everywhere is sometimes described as a representation of the flow of his compassion to all parts of the universe.**

The earliest translation of the name Avalokiteśvara into Chinese by authors such as Xuanzang was as Guānzìzài (Chinese: 觀自在, look at ease), not the form used in East Asian Buddhism today, Guanyin (Chinese: 觀音, Vietnamese: Quan Âm or Quán Âm). **It was initially thought that this was due to a lack of fluency**, as Guanyin indicates the original Sanskrit form of only sound was, instead Avalokitasvara, "who looked down upon sound", i.e., the cries of sentient beings who need help.¹⁶

It is understood Avalokitasvara was the original form of sounds.^{17,18}

And, it has also known from **the original derivation of Guanyin (Quan Âm or Quán Âm), "Perceiving sound, cries for salvations."**

However, this translation was favored by the tendency of some Chinese translators, which is only suitable with the Chinese Buddhism's narrative.

Notably, Kumārajīva, to use the variant 觀世音 Guānshìyīn "who perceives the world's lamentations"—wherein lok was read as simultaneously, meaning both "to look" and "world" (Sanskrit loka; Chinese: 世; pinyin: shì).¹⁶ The original form Avalokitasvara appears in Sanskrit fragments of the fifth century.¹⁹

We are all known within light has sound but within sound there are no light. However, recently new research confirms a theory – high frequency acoustic waves can be converted to light. This is the first time that sound has been converted to light.

We can listen and hear without light but we can't look and see without light.

The name Avalokiteshvara, Lord of the Light, is fun to say once you have practiced it: Ah-vah-lo kih-TESH vah-rah or ‘Quang’ (Âm) Bồ Tát in Vietnamese.

What parts of those sculptures below look most realistic? Why?

Close your eyes gently, and feel yourself breathing from nose to dantian for several minutes. Then open your eyes, and look calmly at one with your empty mind to those statues for three minutes without speaking, or writing.

What thoughts and feelings do you have about it?

What do you hear/see first light, or sound?



**Chinese statue of Avalokiteśvara
looking out over the sea, c. 1025 CE**



**Eight-armed Avalokiteśvara, ca. 12th-13th century (Bàyon).
The Walters Art Museum**



**Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara
from the Museum of Vietnamese History**



**Cambodian statue of Avalokiteśvara.
Sandstone, 7th century CE**



**Indian cave wall painting of Avalokiteśvara.
Ajanta Caves, 6th century CE**



1000-armed Avalokiteśvara dated 13th - 15th century AD at Saspol cave (Gon-Nila-Phuk Cave Temples and Fort) in Ladakh, India



Quang Âm Bồ Tát



**Avalokiteśvara of One Thousand Arms,
lacquered and gilded wood.
Restored in 1656 CE.
Bút Tháp Temple, Bắc Ninh Province, Vietnam**



**Statue of Ruyilun Guanyin (Cintamanicakra)
in the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple and Museum in Chinatown,
Singapore.**

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