

Thousand-armed and Thousand-eyed Avalokiteshvara

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Painting of the Thousand-armed and Thousand-eyed Avalokiteshvara, Tang Dynasty (618-907), Photograph © Trustees of the British Museum

The Buddhist pantheon consists of a vast array of deities, beginning with the historical Buddha Shakyamuni and expanding to include bodhisattvas, guardian figures, wrathful deities, and more. This painting depicts the Thousand-armed and Thousand-eyed Avalokiteshvara surrounded by attendant and guardian deities. Avalokiteshvara, one of the most important bodhisattvas in Buddhism, was popularly known as the “perceiver of the world’s cries.” Bodhisattvas, meaning literally “enlightening beings,” were devoted, out of a deep sense of compassion, to aiding other sentient beings in their quest for enlightenment, even to the point of postponing their own entry into nirvana. In this particular form of Avalokiteshvara, the deity is seated facing forward on a lotus pedestal with a resplendent jeweled canopy above him. The “thousand” arms of the deity, each containing a single eye, fan out in a circular fashion so as to completely envelop his body. The largest of the arms, located closer to the body, hold implements such as a sutra, mirror, water vessel, alms bowl, and willow spray. Inside the bodhisattva’s

elaborate headdress is a tiny figure of Amitabha, the Buddha of the Western Pure Land with whom Avalokiteshvara was associated.

In this brief essay, I'd like to ponder the implications of multiplicity in visual expressions of Buddhism, particularly in the case study of the bodily transformations of Avalokiteshvara. The Lotus Sutra, widely circulated throughout East Asia via the Kuchean monk Kumarajiva's translation of 406 CE, asserted the ability of Avalokiteshvara to hear the cries of suffering individuals who called out the bodhisattva's name seeking aid. The Lotus Sutra also described the ability of Avalokiteshvara to undergo thirty-three distinct physical transformations in order to appear to devotees in the most expedient manner possible. These forms could range from a monk or nun to a layperson or even a young child, in addition to other human or nonhuman beings, and even other deities.

Other textual traditions, among them the Karandavyuha Sutra, not only extolled the physical transformations of Avalokiteshvara, but also described forms in which the bodhisattva appeared with multiple heads, arms, and eyes. The Karandavyuha Sutra was likely originally composed in Kashmir in the northwestern region of the Indian subcontinent around the end of the fourth century to the early fifth century CE. It dealt at some length with the "thousand-fold" nature of Avalokiteshvara, describing an appearance of the bodhisattva with one hundred thousand arms and hundreds of thousands of eyes. Additionally, the sutra describes the sun and moon as having been born from the eyes of the bodhisattva. Other deities owed their births to other parts of his body. The "thousand-fold" nature of Avalokiteshvara, who is identified in the sutra as a universal savior, was likened to the vastness of the bodhisattva's body and his corresponding omnipotence.

During the Tang Dynasty (618-907) in China, other textual sources and devotional practices named the Thousand-armed and Thousand-eyed Avalokiteshvara as the "Great Compassionate One." In the Song Dynasty (960-1279), repentance rituals taking the "Great Compassionate One," the Thousand-armed and Thousand-eyed Avalokiteshvara, as the center of devotion were popularized. They aimed to expiate the past sins of devotees, and also provided a vast array of spiritual and worldly benefits. The thousand arms and eyes of the bodhisattva were correspondingly identified as the result of his vow to save all suffering beings.

The description of the bodhisattva's appearance in relevant textual sources is reflected in his depiction in this painting. He appears to possess one thousand arms and one thousand eyes, and the sun and moon bodhisattvas are represented as small figures within red and white disks in the upper right and left corners of the image. The frontal pose of Avalokiteshvara and attendant figures in the painting reinforce the centrality of the bodhisattva as the main focus of devotion. The probable identification of the figures in the middle register are on the left, Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of prosperity, and to the right, the Indian male ascetic Vasu. Both figures commonly flank images of the Thousand-armed and Thousand-eyed Avalokiteshvara, and are associated with the group of twenty-eight deities that accompany the bodhisattva. Also part of this group

are two multi-armed guardian deities in the lower left and right corners, their bodies enclosed within flames. The bottom horizontal register contains images of female donors on the left and those representing male donors on the right.

Mural and scroll paintings of the Thousand-armed and Thousand-eyed Avalokiteshvara and sculptures in various media were produced from the Tang Dynasty (618-907) forward, reflecting the widespread devotion to this bodhisattva in China; this painting is but one example. From great power to great compassion, the multiple forms and multiple arms of Avalokiteshvara expressed a number of closely related meanings within varied doctrinal and ritual contexts. They were a visual metaphor for the omniscience of the bodhisattva or, alternatively, for his boundless capacity to effect spiritual transformation.

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