

GUANYIN

ASIA, ELEVENTH–EARLY TWELFTH CENTURIES CE

*In the lands of the universe there is no place
Where She does not manifest Herself...
Compassion wondrous as a great cloud,
Pouring spiritual rain like nectar,
Quenching the flames of distress!*

—THE LOTUS SUTRA

Guanyin (Kuan Yin) is the most universally beloved of Chinese deities. As the *Bodhi-sattva* of Compassion, she hears and answers the cries of all beings. In popular conception, Guanyin went through a long and interesting transformation from male to female (see Text Notes). In this beautifully powerful, androgynous statue of painted wood, she is in the “royal ease” posture: seated, but about to rise to help those in need. In other images, she carries the pearl of illumination or pours a stream of healing waters from a vase, blessing her devotees with physical and spiritual peace. Numerous legends recount the miracles which Guanyin performs to help those who call on her, and children may be dedicated to her by grateful parents.

Women in particular devote themselves to Guanyin. Like Artemis, she is a Virgin

Goddess who protects women, offers them a religious life as an alternative to marriage and grants children to those who want them. Guanyin brings souls to the newborn and rain to the Earth. Again like Artemis, she is a deity of the wild places, often appearing under a full moon, by ponds and willow trees.

In the Chinese Buddhist meditative tradition, practitioners are encouraged to develop the qualities of Guanyin which everyone contains in potential. By meditating on her attributes and her image, we can begin to cultivate compassion and a deep sense of service. In doing this, we not only help others but also move more easily and peacefully in the world. The following meditation is adapted from a Chinese Buddhist nun’s description of her own practice.

Find a comfortable position and close your eyes. Allow your breathing to deepen and your mind and body to relax. Imagine that it is nighttime and that you are on top of a hill, looking out over the ocean. The full moon has just risen and the moonlight shimmers on the water. You gaze at the moon for a long time; the moonlight is powerful but soft, and looking at it makes you feel very calm and happy.

The moon now begins to get brighter and brighter, so bright you can barely look at it. Gradually it becomes Guanyin herself, her whole body surrounded by a glowing aureole. She stands on a lotus that floats on the waves. At the sight of you, she smiles a beautiful smile, and tears of happiness shine in her eyes. Imagine her radiance filling you, her strength, her peace and her compassion becoming a part of you. If you repeat her name, your mind will be calm, and she will stay with you.

Finally, it is time for her to leave, and she becomes smaller and smaller. At last the sea and sky vanish too, and you rest in contemplation of the beautiful, empty space that is left...Let yourself become space...When you are ready, come back into your body and slowly stretch. Open your eyes and look at the world about you.

