

## **The Face of Compassion**

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In Buddhism, the Unborn is not defined by particular attributes such as male or female, but is understood to manifest certain qualities, including compassion, love, and wisdom. These qualities are seen to take on whatever form is useful to provide help and point to one's ability to find these qualities within oneself. Traditionally, compassion has been represented in Buddhism as a Bodhisattva, or an aspect of the Unborn, in the form of Avalokiteswara, Kanzeon, or Kuan Yin. These are all names for the same Bodhisattva. Avalokiteswara is the Sanskrit word originally used to describe compassion in India, where Buddhism began. Compassion was depicted as a male figure in the iconography of that culture. When Buddhism spread to China, however, the Bodhisattva's image became more feminine and was called Kuan Yin. Japanese Buddhists continued to represent the Bodhisattva of compassion as a predominantly feminine figure called Kanzeon. In all of these languages, the name means "regarder of the cries of the world."

To calls from every quarter He responds;  
Of oceanic depth His holy vows.  
A myriad Buddhas has He truly served  
For ages past beyond the thought of man  
And made for aye great vows of purity.  
When people hear His name and see His form,  
And think of Him not vainly in their hearts,  
All forms of ill, in all the worlds shall cease. ...  
When lightning flashes and the thunder rolls, -  
when hailstones beat and rain in torrents pours,  
The power of Kanzeon, - if thought upon, - will quickly  
clear the heavens of the storm.  
If, struck by cruel disaster's evil hand - or tortured by  
interminable pain, - a being flees to Kanzeon's gentle arms  
He, being wise and full of mystic power, - will save him  
from all worldly grief and care.  
With all miraculous powers well endowed  
And widely skilled in knowledge of all things,  
In all the world, in all the quarters,  
There is not a place where Kanzeon does not go.1

Avalokiteswara's vows are wondrous beyond imagining. He responds immediately to heartfelt needs since He is drawn to sufferers by their cries as iron is drawn to a magnet. To give voice to the Dharma He manifests Himself just as a moon reflected in water. In innumerable lands and countries wherein falls His Water of the Spirit He brings the essential matter to a successful end. In particular, within this world of worldliness does He pour forth His benevolence. Time enough does not exist to fully praise His kindness so deep is its flowing. ...2