

Avalokiteśvara and Brahmā's Entreaty

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Preamble

As is well known, Avalokiteśvara is a bodhisattva representative of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and beliefs in Avalokiteśvara have flourished wherever Buddhism, especially Mahāyāna Buddhism, spread in Asia. Partly because the characteristic of assuming various forms to save people in distress was attributed to Avalokiteśvara, there evolved six, seven, and thirty-three forms of Avalokiteśvara, who also amalgamated with earth goddesses such as Niangniang 娘娘, and in Japan pilgrimages to sites sacred to Avalokiteśvara have been long established among the general populace, typical of which is the pilgrimage to thirty-three temples in the Kansai region (*Saigoku sanjūsansho* 西國三十三所).

There exists much prior research on Avalokiteśvara, who was accepted in various forms in many regions to which Buddhism spread, and on his iconography, concrete representation, and cult. But on the other hand it is also true that there remains much that is puzzling about the name “Avalokiteśvara” and its meaning, origins, and background. In the following, having first provided a critical overview of recent relevant research, I wish to reconsider the meaning and background of his original name (*avalokita-īśvara*, *-svara*, *-smara*, etc.) in relation to the story of Brahmā's entreaty, a perspective that has been largely missing in past research.

1. Recent Research on Avalokiteśvara's Original Name

Among studies of Avalokiteśvara in recent years, worthy of particular note are those by Tanaka (2010),¹ who discusses in detail with reference to the history of the development of the *maṇḍala* how the basic form of the *maṇḍala* in India has its origins in the triad of Śākyamuni, Padmapāṇi, and Vajrapāṇi, who in turn derived from Śākyamuni, Brahmā, and Indra; Miyaji (2010), who discusses in detail images of Avalokiteśvara in the history of Indian art from the Gandhāra period onwards, including the triad of Śākyamuni, Maitreya, and Avalokiteśvara (especially Part IV on “The Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and Esoteric Buddhas”); and Sakuma (2011), who considers Avalokiteśvara from the twin

* This article is a slightly modified version of my previous paper entitled “Kannon (Kanjizai) to Bonten kanjō” [Avalokiteśvara and Brahmā's Entreaty]. *Tōhōgaku* 122, 2011, pp. 1-12. Since then, regarding the present topic, several publications to be referred to have appeared: Fussman and Quagliotti 2012, Tanaka 2013, and Saito 2015.

¹ Tanaka (1993), dealing with the interpretation of Four-armed Avalokiteśvara, has demonstrated on the basis of both texts and iconography that there are points in common with Brahmā and Paśupati (i.e., Śiva).

aspects of texts and images with a focus on the *Sādhanamālā*, a compendium of ritual manuals dating from the latter phase of Indian Tantric Buddhism.

Meanwhile, Brough (1982), arguing that a Kharoṣṭhī inscription on the pedestal of a Gandhāran triad (with the figure to the right of the central Buddha missing and dating possibly from the second to third century) could be translated as “The Avalokiteśvara of Buddhāmītra, a sacred gift, the Amṛtābha of Buddhāmītra...,”² concluded that this triad consisted of Amitābha, Avalokiteśvara, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta (missing). This conclusion was accepted by Iwamatsu (1994) and Fussman (1999).

More recently, Salomon and Schopen (2002) have examined the actual sculpture, now held by the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Florida, and have conducted a detailed reexamination of the inscription with reference to usage found in manuscripts recovered in recent years from Afghanistan, etc., and they present a reading and interpretation that is completely at odds with that proposed by Brough. According to their decipherment of the inscription, the three figures do not represent an Amitābha triad, and the inscription can be translated as follows: “Gift of Dhamītra [*sic*] at Oloīspara [?], for the immortality [i.e. *nirvāṇa*] of Buddhāmītra...”³ They therefore conclude that there is no mention of either Amitābha or Avalokiteśvara. Rhi (2006: 169), Fujita (2007: 278–279), and Miyaji (2010: 145) have all endorsed this interpretation.

With regard to these two conflicting interpretations, Murakami (2008) recognizes the careful investigations carried out by Salomon and Schopen, but apart from Brough’s identification of the right-hand figure with Mahāsthāmaprāpta, he supports the possibilities of the latter’s interpretation. As grounds for this, in addition to problems associated with the donor’s name Dhamītra and the toponym Oloīspara, accompanied by [*sic*] and [?] respectively in the reading given by Salomon and Schopen, Murakami argues that when one takes into account the correspondences between the three names in the inscription, including the donor’s name, and the two extant larger figures and a smaller figure, kneeling to the right of the Buddha and regarded as the donor, it is appropriate to identify the two larger figures as Amitābha and Avalokiteśvara.⁴

The figure to the left of the Buddha is holding a lotus in his left hand and is in a thinking pose with the right leg bent and resting on the left knee, and as has been pointed out by Miyaji (1992), it is fairly clear that this figure represents Avalokiteśvara. However, the interpretation of the inscription will require further investigation.

Next, among recent studies of Avalokiteśvara’s name, a detailed study by Karashima (1999) merits particular attention. Nattier (2007), taking into account this study by Karashima, has conducted a detailed examination of Chinese renderings of “Avalokiteśvara” in early Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures.

Karashima first examined in detail the various Chinese equivalents of

² *budhamītrasa olo’īspare danamukhe budhamītrasa amṛidaha...* (Brough 1982: 66–67).

³ *dhamītrasa oloīspare danamukhe budhamītrasa amṛidae ///* (Salomon and Schopen 2002: 27).

⁴ For recent studies dealing with this question, see Miyaji 2010: 156–157, suppl. note 1.

“Avalokiteśvara”—Kuiyin 闍音, Xianyinsheng 現音聲, Guangshiyin 光世音, Guanshiyin 觀世音, Guanyin 觀音, Guanshizizai 觀世自在, Guanshiyinzizai 觀世音自在, etc.⁵—in relation to the putative original Indic appellations, and then, positing historical changes in these Indic appellations, considered them through an analysis of the contents of the prose and verse sections of chapter 24 of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra* (*Lotus Sūtra*), the “Samantamukha-parivarta,” or “Chapter on [the Bodhisattva] Who Faces All Directions” (corresponding to chapter 25, “Guanshiyin pusa pumen pin” 觀世音菩薩普門品, in Kumārajīva’s Chinese translation). The greatest contribution made by Karashima and Nattier is that they have provided a detailed analysis and examination of Chinese equivalents of “Avalokiteśvara” and demonstrated in great detail that the Chinese equivalents, ranging from Kuiyin to Guanyin, correspond to *avalokita-svara* (= Guanyin, “He Who Observes Sounds”), of which at least eight instantiations have been confirmed since Mironov 1927 in manuscript fragments from Central Asia.

Karashima (1999) also took up the question of the Chinese word *shi* 世 ‘world’ appearing in the forms Guangshiyin and Guanshiyin, and, arguing that Dharmarakṣa (Zhu Fahu 竺法護) used the translation Guangshiyin because he misread *avalokita-svara* as *ābhā*(*guang* 光 ‘light’)-*loka*(*shi* 世 ‘world’)-*svara*(*yin* 音 ‘sound’) owing to peculiarities of the Kharoṣṭhī script and northwestern Prakrit, he speculated that Kumārajīva and Faxian 法顯 adopted the translation Guanshiyin, retaining the word *shi*, in the *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經 and *Foguo ji* 佛國記 respectively, because they were influenced by Dharmarakṣa’s “Guangshiyin.” Further, taking Karashima’s research into account, Nattier then suggested that in the second to third centuries, when the Chinese equivalent Kuiyin appeared, it may in fact have been meant to represent **avaloka-svara* (with the asterisk indicating a reconstructed form rather than an actually recorded form).

Next, taking the unnaturalness of the compound *avalokita-svara* (“he who observes

⁵ Kuiyin 闍音: *Fajing jing* 法鏡經 (trans. An Xuan 安玄 of Later Han), T. 323, 12: 15b5; *Foshuo Weimojie jing* 佛說維摩詰經 (trans. Zhi Qian 支謙 of Wu), T. 474, 14: 519b16. Xianyinsheng 現音聲: *Fangguang bore jing* 放光般若經 (trans. Mokṣala [Wuluocha 無羅叉] in 291), T. 221, 8: 1b3. Guangshiyin 光世音: *Zhengfahua jing* 正法華經 (trans. Dharmarakṣa [Zhu Fahu 竺法護] in 286), T. 263, 9: 128c23, etc. Guanshiyin 觀世音: *Foshuo Wenshushili banniepan jing* 佛說文殊師利般涅槃經 (trans. Nie Daozhen 聶道真 of Western Jin), T. 463, 14: 480b8 et alia. Guanyin 觀音: *Longshu pusa wei Chantuojia wang shuofa yaojie* 龍樹菩薩為禪陀迦王說法要偈 (trans. Guṇamati [Qiunabamo 求那跋摩] in 431), T. 1672, 32: 747c22 et alia. Guanshizizai 觀世自在: *Shengsiwei Fantian suowen jing* 勝思惟梵天所問經 (trans. Bodhiruci [Putiliuzhi 菩提流支]), T. 587, 15: 80c29–81a1 et alia. Guanzizai 觀自在: *Da bore boluomiduo jing* 大般若波羅蜜多經 (trans. Xuanzang 玄奘), T. 220, 7: 1c10, etc., et alia. Guanshiyinzizai 觀世音自在: *Qianshou qianyan Guanshiyin pusa zhibing heyao jing* 千手千眼觀世音菩薩治病合藥經 (trans. Jiafandamo 伽梵達磨), T. 1059, 20: 103c13. See also Tanaka 2013: 529-533.

sounds”) as a starting point, Karashima turned his attention to expressions in the verse section of chapter 24 of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra* such as “by thinking of (*smarato*) Avalokiteśvara” and proposed that the designation *avalokita-svara* may have been preceded by **avalokita-smara* “he who observes the thoughts [of the world].” On this basis, he concluded that there occurred the following historical changes in Avalokiteśvara’s name: **avalokita-smara* > *avalokita-svara* > **avalokita-śvara* > *avalokiteśvara*. According to Karashima, “Judging from these Sanskrit manuscripts of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra* and the above-mentioned Chinese translations, it is to be surmised that around the sixth century there was a shift from the old form Avalokitasvara to the new form Avalokiteśvara.” The view that the form Avalokitasvara, originally unrelated to the cult of Īśvara, later—but prior to Xuanzang 玄奘—changed to Avalokiteśvara under the influence of the Īśvara cult in Hinduism has in fact been put forward on several occasions since it was first proposed by Honda in 1934.⁶ I will return to this question below.

Karashima’s careful investigations and observations are extremely interesting, and in parts there is much with which I can agree. But as will be discussed below, as far as his above conclusion is concerned, there is a certain riskiness in his premise that differences in word forms and their Chinese translations, which were affected to a considerable degree by geographical factors such as the regions where the manuscripts circulated and local dialects, reflect historical developments in Sanskrit within the “cultural sphere of ancient India.” There are no major problems concerning the spelling *-svara* itself, found in manuscript fragments from Central Asia. More problematic is the fact that, rather than understanding *-svara* as a corrupted or dialectal pronunciation of *-śvara* and therefore no more than a spelling reflecting this pronunciation, Karashima has mistaken it for the Sanskrit word *svara* ‘sound’. It was because of such considerations that Xuanzang and Xuanying queried the Chinese equivalents Guangshiyin and Guanshiyin, containing the word *yin* 音 ‘sound’, and judged them to be wrong.⁷ I will touch on this point again below in connection with the question of the presence of the word *shi* in the appellations Guangshiyin and Guanshiyin.

2. The Buddha’s Surveyal (*ava-√lok*) of the World and Brahmā’s Entreaty

As can be inferred from the above overview, there are, broadly speaking, three points that

⁶ Honda 1934: 320–323.

⁷ Xuanzang, *Da Tang xiyuji* 大唐西域記 3: 中有阿縛廬枳低濕伐羅菩薩像。唐言觀自在。合字連聲。梵語如上。分文散音，卽阿縛廬枳多。譯曰觀。伊濕伐羅，譯曰自在。舊譯爲光世音，或云觀世音，或觀世自在皆訛謬也。(T. 2087, 51: 883b21–24)

Xuanying 玄應, *Yiqie jing yinyi* 一切經音義 5: 觀世音。梵言阿婆廬吉低舍婆羅。此譯云觀世自在。舊譯云觀世音，或言光世音並訛也。又尋天竺多羅葉本，皆云舍婆羅(*śvara)。則譯爲自在。雪山已來經本皆云娑婆羅(*svara)。則譯爲音。當以舍(*s)婆(read 娑)(*s)兩聲相近，遂到訛失也。

need to be considered with regard to the original form and interpretation of the name “Avalokiteśvara”: (1) how to understand the past passive particle *avalokita-*; (2) how to understand the word *shi* (**loka*) inserted in the Chinese translations Guangshiyin and Guanshiyin; and (3), when interpreting Avalokiteśvara’s name as Sanskrit, whether *-svara* ‘sound’ is an old form or whether it was originally *-(ī)śvara* ‘master(ful)’. In addition, the intent expressed by the current—and, according to the conclusion of the present study, the original—form *-īśvara* in terms of the history of Indian religious thought is no doubt another important topic requiring investigation.⁸

When considering the original form of Avalokiteśvara’s name, the story of Brahmā’s entreaty is quite important, but it has been ignored to a surprising degree in past research. To the best of my knowledge, the first person to take note of how the word *avalokita* overlaps with expressions related to the Buddha’s compassionate behaviour, including Brahmā’s entreaty, was Thomas (1933: 189, n. 1). But regrettably until now there has been no thorough comparative examination of this issue that takes into account several of Avalokiteśvara’s distinctive characteristics.

With regard to Brahmā’s entreaty, there have been published in recent times some interesting findings by Sakamoto (1992), who conducted a careful examination of the prototype of this story, and by Hara (2006), who compared the story of Brahmā’s entreaty in Buddhist texts with the story of “Brahmā’s intervention” in the two great Indian epics, i.e., the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*. Sakamoto has summarized the basic plot shared by versions of the story of Brahmā’s entreaty found in Pāli, Sanskrit, and Chinese works in the following manner:

A. After his awakening, the Blessed One sat absorbed in meditation beneath a tree beside the banks of the Nerañjarā/Nairamjanā river in Uruvelā/Uruvilvā, enjoying his solitude, and decided not to preach the Dharma because the truth he had realized was too profound and difficult to understand.

B. The god Brahmā, fearing the destruction of the world, arrived from his realm, explained the diversity of living beings, and asked the Blessed One to preach the Dharma.

C. The Blessed One surveyed the world with compassion through the eyes of an awakened one, perceived the diversity of dispositions among living beings (analogy of the lotus), took pity on them, and declared that he would preach the Dharma. Delighted, Brahmā vanished.⁹

What is important in relation to Avalokiteśvara here is C, but A and B can also not be

⁸ In the *Śvetāśvatara-Upaniṣad*, considered to have close links, textually speaking, with the origins of the god Śiva (or Rudra), the word *īśvara* is frequently used, along with *īśa* and *īśāna*, as an epithet of the supreme principle Brahman or its personification as Śiva (or Rudra); see Gonda 1970: 10–11, 18–24.

⁹ Sakamoto 1992: 473–474. For studies of the meanings imputed to the story of Brahmā’s entreaty, see Hara 2006: 202–203.

overlooked when considering the various characteristics of Avalokiteśvara. For reasons of space, next I wish to quote from the *Vinayaṭīṭaka* I (Mahāvagga), *Mahāvastu*, and *Lalitavistara* those passages corresponding to C for a comparison of their word usage.

Vinayaṭīṭaka I (Mahāvagga): “Then the Blessed One, having become aware of Brahmā’s request, surveyed the world out of compassion towards beings, with the eye of an awakened one. Indeed the Blessed One, surveying the world with the eye of an awakened one, saw beings whose eyes had little defilement, [beings] whose eyes had much defilement, ..., [beings] easy to instruct and difficult to instruct, some of them living while seeing fear of sin in a future life.” (*atha kho bhagavā Brahmuno ca ajjhesanaṃ veditvā sattesu ca kāruṇṇataṃ paṭicca buddhacakkhunā lokam volokesi. addasa kho bhagavā buddhacakkhunā lokam volokento satte apparajakkhe mahārajakkhe suviñṇāpaye duviñṇāpaye appekacce paralokavajjabhayadassāvino viharante//*)¹⁰

Mahāvastu: “Then the Blessed One, having himself become inwardly aware, through the knowledge due to his enlightenment, of the request of Great Brahmā, and surveying the whole world with the unsurpassed eye of an awakened one, saw beings high and low, inferior and exalted...” (*atha khalu bhagavāṃ mahābrahmaṇo yācanāṃ veditvā sāmaṃ ca pratyātmaṃ bodhīye jñānena sarvāvantaṃ lokam anuttareṇa buddhacakṣuṣābhivilokayanto adrāksīt satvā uccāvacāṃ hīnapraṇītāṃ ...*)¹¹

Lalitavistara: “Then, O monks, the Tathāgata, surveying the whole world with the eye of an awakened one, saw beings inferior, middling, and exalted...” (*atha khalu bhikṣavas tathāgataḥ sarvāvantaṃ lokam buddhacakṣuṣā vyavalokayan sattvān paśyati sma/ hīna-madhya-praṇītān...*)¹²

While the above three biographies of the Buddha differ in their provenance, having been composed by followers of the Theravāda school, the Lokottaravāda school affiliated to the Mahāsāṃghikas, and the Mahāyāna, respectively, it is interesting to note that they share some stock phrases about the Buddha’s surveyal of the world, after some of hesitation, in response to Brahmā’s entreaty. That is to say, they all state that when (out of compassion) he surveyed (*vo-√lok* [= Skt. *vyava-√lok*], *abhivi-√lok*, *vyava-√lok*) the world (*loka*) with the eye of an awakened one, he saw (*√drś*) that there were, broadly speaking, three categories of beings with regard to their relative defilement and understanding.

¹⁰ *Vinaya* I: Mahāvagga (PTS, p. 6.23–28).

¹¹ *Mahāvastu*, Senart ed., vol. 3, pp. 317.19–318.3.

¹² *Lalitavistara*, Lefmann ed., p. 399.21–22.

The fact that Avalokiteśvara is a bodhisattva who is basically characterized by the act of observation is evident from the title of chapter 24 of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra* (corresponding to the so-called *Guanyin jing* 觀音經), which means “Chapter on [the Bodhisattva] Who Faces All Directions (*samantamukha*),” and also from the later development of Eleven-faced (Ekādaśamukha) Avalokiteśvara, reflecting this characteristic, and the four-faced sculptures at the Bayon in Angkor Thom, which have been identified as Avalokiteśvara. At the same time, one cannot overlook the similarities in wording to be seen in *ava-√lok* as used in the name Avalokiteśvara and in the verbs used to describe the Buddha’s surveyal of the world prompted by Brahmā’s entreaty,¹³ nor can one overlook the way in which the image of the Buddha as depicted in the story of Brahmā’s entreaty overlaps with the main characteristic of Avalokiteśvara.

3. Avalokiteśvara’s Name and Its Meaning

Taking into account the above observations, I now wish to examine the three issues noted in connection with Avalokiteśvara’s name at the start of the previous section, presenting several pieces of fresh evidence as I do so.

First there has been much discussion in the past about the past passive participle *avalokita*.¹⁴ In the case of *avalokita-īśvara*, it may be safely regarded as a nominal usage signifying the act of “observing,” just as the past passive participle *śruta* signifies the act of “listening” or “studying” in the three kinds of wisdom (*prajñā*) based on *śruta-cintā-bhāvanā* (listening, thinking, and practising).

This is also evident from the fact that the *Avalokitaṃ nāma sūtram* quoted in the *Mahāvastu*¹⁵ is quoted twice under the title *Avalokana(/ā)-sūtra* in Śāntideva’s *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (and is given in transliteration in the colophon to the Tibetan translation as *ārya-avalokana-nāma-mahāyānasūtra*).¹⁶ It could be said that here *avalokita* is used as a synonym of *avalokana* ‘observation’.¹⁷

¹³ In this respect, it is well worth noting aspects shared with the wording used at the start of the *Heart Sūtra*, in which Avalokiteśvara expounds the teaching of emptiness and the mantra of *prajñāpāramitā*: “The bodhisattva Noble Avalokiteśvara, practising [his] practice in the profound perfection of wisdom, observed the five constituent elements [of body and mind] and saw that they are intrinsically empty.” (*āryāvālokiteśvaro bodhisattvo gaṃbhīrāyāṃ prajñāpāramitāyāṃ caryāṃ caramāṇo vavalokayati sma: pañca skandhās, tāṃś ca svabhāvaśūnyān paśyati sma.*) I hope to address this topic on another occasion.

¹⁴ See, e.g., La Vallée Poussin 1913, de Mallmann 1948: 59–82, and Karashima 1999: 49.

¹⁵ *Mahāvastu*, Senart ed., vol. 2, pp. 257.6–397.7.

¹⁶ *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, Bendall ed., pp. 89.15–90.3: *avalokanā-sūtra*; pp. 297.10–309.4: *avalokana-sūtra*; Tib. P. No. 862, Mu 261a6-7: *’phags pa spyan ras gzigs shes bya ba theg pa chen po ’i mdo, ārya-avalokana-nāma-mahāyānasūtra*.

¹⁷ In the case of *Avalokitavrata (ca. 7th–8th cent.), the author of the *Prajñāpradīpāṭikā*, too, it is to be surmised that his name means “he who has observation as his vow,” i.e., “he who vows to observe [the world].”

Next, I wish to turn to the question of *shi* (**loka*) found in the Chinese renderings Guangshiyin and Guanshiyin for Avalokiteśvara. In this case too it would seem appropriate to suppose that, as is shown by all three passages on Brahmā’s entreaty quoted in the previous section, it has its origins in the surveyal of the world (i.e., worldlings), which was the Buddha’s first act in response to Brahmā’s entreaty. As is stated in all three biographies of the Buddha quoted above, it was the “world” (*loka*) that the Buddha surveyed (*lokam volokesi; sarvāvantaṃ lokam ... abhivilokayanto; sarvāvantaṃ lokam ... vyavalokayan*). As if to corroborate this, in the Chinese translation of the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (by Dharmarakṣa et al.) the sūtra title *Avalokana(/ā)-sūtra*, which appears twice, is translated as *Guanyin jing* 觀音經 (T. 1636, 32: 93b23–24) and *Guancha shijian jing* 觀察世間經 (ibid., 131b20). In the latter case, it may be supposed that the object (i.e., *shijian* ‘world’) of the Buddha’s act of surveyal (*guancha, ava-√lok*) was supplemented by the translators. It is to be surmised that it was widely understood that when the Buddha, out of compassion, performed the act of surveying with the eye of an awakened one in response to Brahmā’s entreaty, the object of his surveyal was naturally the “world.”

When considered from the perspective of the world, it was being surveyed by the Buddha out of compassion, with the eye of an awakened one, and the past passive participle *avalokita* assumes its literal meaning. In this respect, it is not impossible to interpret *avalokita-īśvara* as the *madhyapadalopa* form of *avalokita-loka-īśvara* (“master of the surveyed world”), that is, as an example of the omission of an internal member of a compound, in this case *loka*. It is then also easy to explain the connection with Lokeśvara, a later appellation of Avalokiteśvara. However, no actual example of the form *avalokita-loka-īśvara* has been found, and therefore, although such an explanation of the meaning of *avalokita-īśvara* is possible, it is probably best to assume that the word *avalokita* in *avalokita-īśvara*, as discussed above, refers to the act of observing (*ava-√lok*), that is, the very act of surveying the world on the part of the Buddha, who did indeed survey the world, and on the part of Avalokiteśvara, whose name has its origins in this act.

It was noted earlier that Karashima has suggested that Dharmarakṣa mistook *avalokita-svara* for *ābhā-loka-svara*, and this was then followed by Kumārajīva and Faxian. This is an interesting hypothesis, but was this actually the case? A similar misunderstanding is not to be seen in earlier translations of “Avalokiteśvara” such as Kuiyin and Xianyinsheng, and it is also difficult to suppose that Kumārajīva and Faxian, who were well-versed in Sanskrit, would have followed Dharmarakṣa’s error so blindly. If we take into account connections with the story of Brahmā’s entreaty and the example in the Chinese translation of the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, it ought to be assumed that for Indian Buddhists it was a matter of common knowledge that the object of Avalokiteśvara’s observations was the “world.”

Thirdly, there is the question of the words *yinsheng* 音聲 and *yin* 音 (*svara* ‘sound’) that have appeared from an early stage in Chinese renderings predating Xuanzang. As

will be evident from the above observations, this resulted from the fact that, instead of interpreting the spelling *svara* appearing in Central Asian manuscripts as a form reflecting a dialectal pronunciation, the translators mistook it for the Sanskrit word *svara* and translated it accordingly. Furthermore, Kumārajīva, in his translation of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra*, inserted an extra sentence that would seem to give credence to the rendering Guanyin, and this has made the situation still more complicated.¹⁸

Lastly, I wish to touch on the thesis that Avalokitasvara changed to Avalokiteśvara some time prior to Xuanzang, or around the sixth century. First, it has to be noted that, as Karashima himself admits,¹⁹ the compound *avalokita-svara* (‘seen sound’ or ‘he who sees sound’) is difficult to comprehend as an Indic word. Further, if this word is considered to represent an old form of a Sanskrit compound, it is difficult to explain why it has been found only in manuscript fragments reflecting geographical peculiarities from Khotan and elsewhere in Central Asia (five fragments held by Lushun Museum and three fragments held by Harvard University) and not a single example of this old form has been ascertained in either Nepalese manuscripts or manuscripts from Afghanistan, Gilgit, and elsewhere south of the Pamirs. Again, if Avalokitasvara were the original correct form, then even if it gradually changed to Avalokiteśvara some time prior to Xuanzang under the influence of the Īśvara cult, it is inexplicable why the original form Avalokitasvara should have fallen completely out of use.

It may also be noted that it has been reported by Srinivasan (1971) that the appellation “Noble Avalokiteśvara” (*āryāvalokiteśvara*) is found in a fifth-century inscription from Mathurā.²⁰ Nor can one overlook the reference to “Noble Avalokiteśvara” in the *Suḥr̥llekha* (v. 120), a letter said to have been composed by Nāgārjuna for the benefit of a king of the Sātavāhana dynasty,²¹ and there is also the following example in the

¹⁸ Dharmarakṣa, trans., *Zhengfahua jing* (chap. 23, “Guangshiyin pumen pin” 光世音普門品): 唯然世尊。所以名之光世音乎，義何所趣耶。...。若有衆生，遭億百千姪困厄患難苦毒無量，適聞光世音菩薩名者，輒得解脫無有衆惱。故名光世音。(T. 263, 9: 128c23–27)

Kumārajīva, trans., *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經 (chap. 25, “Guanshiyin pusa pumen pin” 觀世音菩薩普門品): 世尊。觀世音菩薩，以何因緣，名觀世音。...。若有無量百千萬億衆生受諸苦惱，聞是觀世音菩薩，一心稱名，觀世音菩薩即時觀其音聲皆得解脫。(T. 262, 9: 56c4–8)

The problematic underlined words—which may be translated with the surrounding passage as follows: “... If there are immeasurable hundreds of thousands of myriads of millions of beings experiencing pain and distress and they hear of this bodhisattva Guanshiyin and call his name single-mindedly, the bodhisattva Guanshiyin will immediately observe their voices and [make them] all gain deliverance”—are not only missing in the Sanskrit text and Tibetan translation, but are also not found in Dharmarakṣa’s translation. For further details, see Saitō 2015: 12–15.

¹⁹ “Just as I am unable to see a voice, it would seem that people in ancient India too were unable to see voices, and although I have examined Sanskrit, Pāli, and Middle Indic texts, I have not found any examples in which *svara* (‘voice, sound’) or its synonyms collocate with *ava-√lok* (‘to see’)” (Karashima 1999: 60).

²⁰ See Srinivasan 1971: 12; Salomon and Schopen 2002: 24–25.

²¹ “Helping many suffering people with the practice of Noble Avalokiteśvara (**āryāvalokiteśvara*)”

Madhyamakahrdayakārikā by Bhāviveka (ca. 490–570):

[The Dharma-body] is revered by learned ones and sages such as Noble Avalokiteśa and Noble Maitreya by the method of non-reverence.²²

Here, the original term is *āryāvalokiteśa* rather than *āryāvalokiteśvara*. In meaning, *īśa* is synonymous with *īśvara*, signifying a “freely capable [bodhisattva],” and the former form has been used here for metrical reasons. It is at any rate clear that for the author Bhāviveka this was a bodhisattva “freely capable of observing,” and it would surely not have occurred to him that *avalokitasvara* was the original, meaningful form of the bodhisattva’s Sanskrit name.

Conclusion

In the above, I have critically examined some questions pertaining to the original form of Avalokiteśvara’s name, and I have argued that there are close connections between this bodhisattva’s name and characteristics and the story of Brahmā’s entreaty. The following conclusions may be drawn from the above considerations.

1. Avalokiteśvara, or the synonymous Avalokiteśa, may be regarded as the original form of this bodhisattva’s name, and it means “he who is freely capable of observing.”

2. In this case, the past passive participle *avalokita* can be safely understood as a nominal usage signifying the act of observing.

3. Therefore, as was fittingly noted by Xuanzang and Xuanying, in light of its meaning in Indic languages (Sanskrit and related dialects) the appropriate Chinese translation is Guanzizai, not Guanyin.

4. The origin of Avalokiteśvara may be assumed to lie in the Buddha’s “surveyal of the world” when, in response to Brahmā’s entreaty, he surveyed the world, out of compassion, with the eye of an awakened one. The origins of both the designation “Avalokita” and Avalokiteśvara’s distinctive quality of “compassion” can be found in this important episode in the life of the Buddha which became the starting point of his preaching of the Dharma.²³

(*'phags pa spyan ras gzings dbang spyod pa yis// 'gro ba nyam thag mang po rjes bzung ste//* [P No. 5682, Nge 289b7–8; D No. 4182, Nge 46a6]).

²² *āryāvalokiteśāryamaitreyādyās ca sūrayaḥ/
anupāsanayogena munayo yad upāsate//*

(*Madhyamakahrdayakārikā* III.290, Ejima ed., p. 340)

²³ Takasaki (1992) argues that the origins of compassion in Buddhism go back to the Buddha himself and that there was no benefiting of others by the Buddha apart from his preaching of the Dharma. The starting point of his preaching of the Dharma was, as is related in the story of Brahmā’s entreaty, the Buddha’s own inner conflict after his awakening, his surveyal of the world (i.e., worldlings), and his decision to preach the Dharma after having correctly understood the level of people’s understanding and defilement. Further, with regard to Avalokiteśvara’s sharing of certain

5. Therefore, the word *shi*, or “world” (*loka*), seen in Chinese renderings such as Guangshiyin and Guanshiyin signifies the object of the Buddha’s surveyal. Consequently, it is to be surmised that Guangshiyin and Guanshiyin are translations in which the word “world” has been supplemented to indicate the object of Avalokiteśvara’s observation.

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characteristics with Brahmā (such as holding a lotus in his hand), the significance of Avalokiteśvara’s half-cross-legged meditative pose in Gandhāran triads of Śākyamuni, Maitreya, and Avalokiteśvara, and “metamorphotic buddhas” displaying the *dhyāna-mudrā* or *dharmapravartana-mudrā*, which are also characteristic of Avalokiteśvara, there is much that can be elucidated by seeking the origins of Avalokiteśvara in the story of Brahmā’s entreaty. I hope to address these issues on another occasion.

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