

FOREWORD

When I first met Kuan Yin in a back street curio shop the owner described her as “she who hears the cries of the world.” I was immediately drawn to her. Kuan Yin was the merciful guardian, the healer and protector of the suffering and disenfranchised. At that time I was working with the terminally ill, and I closely identified with her. She opened my heart. Taking her home with me that afternoon, I trusted so much what I felt that I never considered I’d need a book about her. Some people told me who she was thought to be, and that was enough.

Sometime later, I read John Blofeld’s *The Bodhisattva of Compassion: The Mystical Tradition of Kuan Yin* and realized that her presence in the world had a profound resonance. So when Stephen told me he was going to work on a book about Kuan Yin and the emissaries of her compassion a few years ago, I was delighted. It was the natural expression of his decades of spiritual practice. It was going to be a doozy!

Once Stephen started writing, the words came as though delivered from the heavens. He was excited as he learned from the remarkable transmission, and it symbiotically affected our practice. Kuan Yin was the Mother of Mercy we had known for so long at the bedside of the dying, offering us an initiation into the universe of her heart.

Late every afternoon Stephen would read the day's work to me, and we both received it as our next teaching. We began to recite the *Kuan shih yin pusa* mantra, the locomotive for Kuan Yin's train, on which we were grateful passengers.

As Stephen continued his work of attempting to receive Kuan Yin's pure essence, imagining what it must have taken to bring the whole world into her heart, it opened our path of service even wider. Kuan Yin taught us to rehabilitate the word "mercy," to bring it back from the shadows of "have mercy on me a miserable sinner" and offer it as a cipher for the longing hearts we knew so well.

He included none of the miracle stories gathered around her image. Her struggle to become what she became was miracle enough. Her presence was sorely needed in this sick and injured, this weeping, world. We are honored to be counted among her students.

—ONDREA LEVINE

PREFACE

For years Kuan Yin's presence permeated our home. Images of her sent from friends, or as a muse from our son Noah, found niches in our home over the years. She personified our devotion to service and the mercy called for to be a whole human being. Ondrea and I had each met Kuan Yin before we met each other thirty-five years ago.

This book, composed of legend and practice, came like dictation mostly at four in the morning. Waking, I would act as an innocent bystander to what might be called grace. Line after line was read off as noted, the main phrases I hoped I would be able to remember when I arose. Sometimes, not wanting to interrupt my half-meditative/half-sleep state, I'd slip from my bed and sit on the floor with a flashlight and a notebook to transcribe what I could. If the material was opening too many doors at once for me to manage, I would leave for my computer in the next room and do my best to record the messages tumbling in the slipstream of thought.

It was a gift beyond measure.

ABOUT A DINGBAT

仁 is the Chinese character for “benevolence.” It is the character that represents “person” combined with the number “2.” Recognizing that when 2 are present, benevolence is a natural occurrence. Benevolence eases duality. It is one of the Maha Viharas, great abodes, of the true heart.



*The images of Kuan Yin and friends that
appear in this story live in our home.*

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Chapter I

KUAN YIN AND THE BEGINNING OF THE WORLD

Namo Kuan Shih Yin Pusa. “Hail to Kuan Yin bodhisattva.”

To know Kuan Yin we need to let go of all that is unloved, judged, forged from old mind clings. She is the unconditional love beyond the conditioned mind.

Some ancient force is called forth in surrendering hindrance after hindrance of our secret wretchedness and obvious suffering, to yield to the light of our Original Heart.

Behind most Asian temple great Buddhas, there is a curtain where a small Kuan Yin figure and an incense burner rest, and a comfortable place to sit in the dharmafield connects the supplicants' heart to the edgeless presence of her loving-kindness. And behind it all, the Buddha-nature—the foundation of our potential for liberation and the liberating of all sentient beings from suffering.

Opening the gate of Kuan Yin, we discover parts of ourselves almost too beautiful for words. The yearning for the direct experience of our luminescent nature.

Most who recognize her name consider Kuan Yin a celestial bodhisattva in the later Buddhist pantheon, and perhaps even its muse. Some consider her an immortal in the Taoist tradition. She responds to many sacred names: Avalokiteshvara, Tara, Chenrize, Mother Mary, the angelic Bernice, Isis perhaps, Krishna of course, and generically (and even genetically) as the Beloved. The essence that reveals our undifferentiated Oneness, which is the unconditioned mind, is not other than unconditional love.

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Chapter 2

BUDDHA COMES TO CHINA

For many hundreds of years the quality of devotion in Buddhism was mostly reserved for a profound thankfulness for Buddhadharma and meditational practice. Indeed, devotion was otherwise reserved for a beloved teacher, but little else.

When Siddhartha Gautama emerged as Buddha from beneath the bodhi tree, he said he taught only “the cause and end of suffering,” mostly through a precise mindfulness. To this day, this is the basis of every Buddhist tradition following.

Decades after his original enlightenment and first teachings, Buddha’s subsequent teachings, known as the Second Turning of the Wheel, expanded the already healthy heart of Buddhism. The extended teachings added various celestial representations of powerful states of mind, increasing people’s familiarity with those same qualities mindfulness explored. These personifications of states of mind, afflictive and regenerative, were a skillful



means to stay in the middle of the often strenuous path of self- and communal liberation. For instance, the image of Manjushri on the ready, sword raised to subdue ogres and wrathful deities, represents cutting through or liberating the hindrances to the heart. And Tara, Avalokiteshvara, and, of course, Kuan Yin remind us of loving-kindness and compassion, forgiveness and equanimity.

This Mahayana school of Buddhism naturally employed the *Maha Viharas*, the great abodes of wisdom and service, such as mercy, gratitude, generosity, perseverance, devotion to practice, and sympathetic joy, which strengthen the liberation of the mind and the revelation of the heart.

Spreading from northern India down the Silk Road to parts east and China, these *Mahayana*, or “big raft” teachings, expanded by the further insights and interpretations of bodhisattva adepts, became the activation of the compassionate teaching to serve, to relieve the suffering of all sentient beings. The Mahayana school created some of Buddhism’s most remarkable teachings, such as the Diamond Sutra, which came to be the foundation for a practice that acknowledged broader fields of awareness/reality, and deeper realms of responsibility on which Buddhadharma was practiced. These included an intuitive mysticism, rights of empowerment, shamanic elements of healing practices, and the influence of mystery teachings, led by enlightened male and female masters that included but went beyond the earliest teachings.

In China, Kuan Yin gave form to the formless through the open lotus of her heart, enabling her to become “she who hears the cries of the world.” She personifies the alleviation of suffering and became a major organizing factor in the widespread devotional element of Buddha’s later teachings. The vow she took was, “For as long as space endures, and for as long as living beings remain, until then may I too abide to dispel the misery of the world.”

Carried down the Silk Road into China, Kuan Yin became a profound spiritual and social influence that envisioned an ideal Pure Land, a perfect environment for the perfections of the practice’s deepest work with increased concentration, illuminated by the heart, including an astral physical realm by some reckoning, a psychological reality certainly, and doubtlessly a matter of the heart, brought to the birth and deathbed.

In the Lotus Sutra there is the first recognition that women are capable of enlightenment. In the earliest, Indian years of Buddhism, the bodhisattva of compassion was housed in a male body, represented as Avalokita (short for Avalokiteshvara). Thus, Kuan Yin embodies both the male and female aspects that unite the whole.

Some say that Kuan Yin, having been male for centuries before being born in the Chinese collective consciousness in her present female form, created the perfect balance between yin and yang, anima and animus, which perfectly prepared her to be, as many believe, the Buddha of the present era. Kuan Yin is the first acknowledged female Buddha.

It is said that a bodhisattva can manifest in whatever form those in need can most easily perceive, in whatever form the teachings in compassion might require, whether male or female, young or old, of this world or another, ghost, dragon, fish, animal, bird, or even burning bush. She came to me as Kuan Yin. Elevated to the status of goddess by many grateful millions, she is revered for the light she has brought and the sense of protection she has instilled in many. She is seen as a safe harbor for the heart. The Lotus Sutra says that anyone, even a “lowly” caste person, can become liberated before some old Brahman busy playing with his gold toe ring if her whole heart is turned toward the well-being of others and compassion is acted upon.

The sutra also acknowledges that liberation is invited in by a gracious mercy. That the inborn spirit can be realized in a sudden overwhelming flash of clarity. It was a brand-new world of spiritual equality!

The Mahayana practices found a home in a variety of cultures, such as Vajrayana in Tibet and Zen in Japan. Kuan Yin and Buddhism, which was called the “Light of Asia,” then crossed the great waters and was welcomed in all the Americas and Europe, as the Tibetan prophecy predicted: “When chariots run on rails and iron birds fly in the sky, the light will cross the sun heading west.”



Chapter 3

THE ORIGIN OF KUAN YIN

There are many accounts of Kuan Yin's origin, but the story that has the most versions is of Miao Shan, the compassionate daughter of a feared despot and usurper of the throne in another period of upheaval in China. Contemplating the writings of Lao Tzu, Confucius, Li Po, Chuang Tzu, and many other hearts and minds, Miao Shan came to sense their experience. A poet in her own right, she was absorbed in the writings of Gautama Buddha. The later Heart Sutra, attributed to Miao Shan's evolution into Kuan Yin, contains the *Prajna Paramita*, also known as the Kuan Yin Sutra, which is still chanted throughout the Buddhist world today.

Miao Shan was born into the Miao culture, known for its animistic reverence for all living things, which was the inherited basis of her spiritual memory.

As was the tradition of the Miao clan, a tree was planted at Miao Shan's birth and was to be cut down after she died to make her coffin. As she grew, the tree-like Miao Shan's *Ficus religiosa*, the bo tree, grew with her.

Though living in an atmosphere of anger and violence, Miao Shan nonetheless found time to slip away from the palace to walk in the forest, and in a sunlit clearing she would tend to a sapling she thought of as the Tree of Life, and all the sacred elements of nature that surrounded and nurtured it. Singing to it as the center of the forest spirits' mandala. Collecting stones from a nearby creek, she laid labyrinthine paths that spiraled out from the "heart" of the tree. She walked the paths each day, her songs and the pathways expanding outward from the center.

When her father presumed Miao Shan was having emotional crying fits during these frequent disappearances into the forest, she was actually in bliss and experiencing a profound interconnection with all of life.

As a child she was known to sit under the tree conversing with tigers and tiger lilies alike. Dogwood blossoms deepened her silk rug in mottled shadow. She loved most to lie secreted in dappled shadow as the light danced bright and soft through her dreams of a hallowed land for the animals she loved and protected. Her first dream of the worlds of consciousness awaiting.



Drawn at age 9.

Miao Shan thought she heard the big koi surfacing in the pond nearby with a word rising from its lips: “Remember.” She always admired carp for their intelligence and straightforwardness. Fish seemed happier than most people.

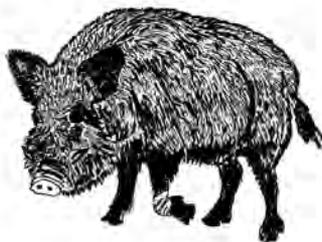
Dragonflies dipped their long quills in the water and wrote poetic formulas for the benefit of the air aching for their music; the whirl and hum of fairy-winged flashes of color braided the visiting lion’s mane on the water’s shimmering surface. Everything had a voice. The insects, fish, and pond had their own music. Miao Shan sang harmony.

Injured birds fluttered broken-winged onto her blanket, waiting. Their small, hollow bones of flight joined and set almost instantaneously, as if time was malleable in her cupped hands open in prayer for their next flight in or out of their body.

Though just a child, somehow she understood. She recognized how fragile life was, and how much compassion hurt. Her hands soft as down soothed the birds as they healed or died, both in the light of her patient kindness.

Wild things came close then halted, not out of fear, but in reverence to her reverie, not wanting to interrupt. When she raised her head, fox and jackrabbit, bobcat and bullfrog approached as original supplicants before the sun. Breathing quietly, Miao Shan listened to each unique lyric with a heart that could hear the sorrow of the world. Sometimes they inadvertently harmonized, making her giggle, the dark green spears of the leaves above fluttering in her world—blessing out breath.

The few people who were allowed by edict near her marveled at how lighthearted a child she was, considering the dark pall that permeated the palace.



Drawn at age 14.

Oblivious to her despotic father, Miao Shan handed the deer in the courtyard, usually followed about by a sizable wild boar whose broken leg she had wrapped in bamboo leaves and set with a silk ribbon. His slight limp endeared him to her all the more. It was quite a sight to see Miao Shan and her animal friends resting together by the stream, to see the wild boar snoring loudly on one side of her, his foot in her lap, while the tiger she had raised from a cub, considerably bigger than herself by then, stretched out and purred against her on the other.

In the fall of her ninth year, dozing in the moonlight, a small emerald-green grass snake seeking warmth curled up under her arm and remained motionless until she was awoken by one of the palace staff. Miao Shan thought it quite lovely, and, holding it lightly in her palm, she smuggled it up into her bedroom. Putting Greenie in the shirt

pocket of her silk pajamas, she laid on her back to sleep, telling her thoughts to wake her if she started to roll over, which might injure this beautiful creature. Several times she woke during the night as her shoulder started to turn against the mattress but her heart awoke her. In the morning her smooth green friend remained resting quietly in the bottom of her shirt pocket.

They maintained what seemed to her an ongoing friendship for weeks, as he taught her to remain perfectly still even in her sleep. It was her first yoga. She fed him ant eggs until she could free him to glide through the fragrant grass. An initiation from so small a creature in so big a world, Greenie slid away beneath the tree, always to remain in Miao Shan's heart. Having learned something about controlling the mind and how precious stillness could be.

There are many stories of Miao Shan's relationships with reptiles and other creatures whose hearts stayed closest to the ground, an energy transference from ancient India's mystical *nagas*—the energy channels through the human body and the living earth—often represented as the great cobras protectively hooding deities such as Shiva. And of course the most spiritually energetic of them all, with whom Miao Shan had a lifelong relationship, were the benevolent South Sea dragons.

After her transmigration into the celestial bodhisattva Kuan Yin, it was rumored that she often came to people as animals in their dreams to encourage them to be emissaries of her compassionate protection of the earth. She

occasionally appeared as a golden snake—frightening at first but then endearing—to demonstrate the fear of nature and eventually the love of its boundless beauty. The theme of fear mutating into love was a very common teaching she provided to many. She also came at times as a tiger or panther to demonstrate the possibility of loving-kindness gentling the wilderness between the heart and the mind, surrendering all that limits further entrance into what lies beyond.

As Miao Shan approached her teens, she could be heard in her room reciting a beloved *gatha*, slightly chanting or singing a hymn. Her father, despising his daughter's absorption in spiritual matters, indeed a sovereign with considerable blood on his hands, feared, seeing her tending the forest animals, said derisively she might "go native" if she didn't soon marry "a strong military man." He wanted sons, his other two daughters having disappointingly given birth to "only" females, and he wanted an heir to the throne soon!

Her father, trying to break Miao Shan to his will, forced her to do what he considered "slave work," to clean out the slop of the stables, which the richer members of his court had considered foul abuse but for her was a blessing. Miao Shan loved horses. And to further get her to do his bidding, to marry as he insisted even though it was against her better sense, he pushed her into the kitchen to work with the actual slaves (prisoners of war and discarded concubines). But her removal from the luxuries of the palace, rather than filling her with the intended self-pity, instead

cultivated in her a profound empathy for her abused co-workers, another level of kinship with those in distress whom she did all she could to support.

Her concern for the kitchen and stable workers, helping as she might with their work, and listening to the sorrows of those “beneath” her, only reinforced the king’s rage that she was in severe need of “a strong man who would make her obedient to her high office.” He felt too that Miao Shan might as well be dead if she would not accede to his demands, his last chance of procuring a male heir to maintain his lineage. But this was not to be, as she went against the common social fascism that daughters were to be married off to suit the father’s alliances and sons were to die in battle. And he pondered what more might be done to bend her to his determination.



Miao Shan awoke one morning after a dream of celestials beckoning her to come close, embracing her. She experienced what she had always known, that this infinite love of inborn divinity was the enormity given her to distribute to a suffering world. Overcome by ecstasy, she could have floated free to heaven realms, but felt she could not leave the earth alone any more than one would abandon a helpless child.

She knew the monastic life was her only option. Though others, dazed with desire, wished for romance, it seemed to her that she naturally longed for the deep silence that convened with the spirit. While her sisters

fantasized about young captains and tall princes, she wondered about the nature of the bodhisattva's heart. She did not need to choose further.

Miao Shan didn't think in terms of happiness but of the fulfillment she experienced while helping others, and retreated into the bowels of the palace, where she met slaves and workwomen alike who toiled under the threat of violence if they did not perform to the pleasure of the guards and especially her father. Though reticent at first, her honesty and kindness allowed her to work with the ailing workwomen in the dark kitchen at the stoves and cooking pits. Bringing to the weak and ill each day whatever medicines and ointments, food and tonics she could gather. Then having to sneak back up to her room late at night to wash the soot off her face and bathe before dawn. She also found it strengthened her heart to work in the stables when she got the chance, close to the animals and workers she so admired. Each day her resolve grew stronger to become a renunciant and live the life of one who commits to the perfection of the spirit.

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