



In Buddhism, all beings are believed to have the potential to achieve Buddhahood. Buddhahood is achieved by entering Nirvāṇa (the end of the cycle of re-birth) through the attainment of enlightenment and is the result of a lifetime of meditation, study and good deeds. Enlightenment is not sought by most Buddhists, whose practice of the Buddhist path leads purely to better rebirth in the next life.

A bodhisattva is an 'enlightened being', or one destined to become a Buddha, who chooses to stay in the world of suffering to help other beings attain enlightenment. In order to achieve this end, the bodhisattva carries out unselfish acts and gives away the karmic merit that he gains from these good deeds to other beings.

Avalokiteśvara is a bodhisattva known in Chinese as 'Guanyin' 观音. In Indian sculptures this figure was originally male, but in China later became a beautiful female figure. Avalokiteśvara is the embodiment of compassion and the principal assistant of Amitābha. Amitābha Buddha is a Buddha who reigns over the Western Paradise or Pure Land, into which all may be reborn if they recite his name during their lifetimes on earth.



The name Avalokiteśvara can be translated as 'He who looks down on the World' or 'He who hears the cries of the World'. This bodhisattva is first mentioned in *The Lotus Sūtra* in which Avalokiteśvara is able to take any form in order to come to the aid of humans. He is often depicted helping those in trouble. His compassion, and his conviction and ability to help all sentient beings without prejudice is seen as an embodiment of the great compassion of Buddhahood itself.



Child's painting of Avalokiteśvara. 1919,0101,0.157\*.  
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This image of Avalokiteśvara was probably painted by a child between the 9th and 10th centuries AD, and was discovered in the hidden Library Cave at Dunhuang by Sir Aurel Stein at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Avalokiteśvara has a large following throughout Asia and has inspired the largest number of representations of all the Buddhist figures. The simplest is that of a bodhisattva holding a lotus. Avalokiteśvara is also commonly depicted with a red lotus symbolising love and compassion, and often wears the image of Amitābha in his headdress or crown. The hand gesture or mudrā most often associated with Avalokiteśvara is that of charity or gift giving (varada mudrā) where the Buddha's hand is lowered and extended downwards with the palm facing outwards.

In Tibet, Avalokiteśvara is often pictured with many arms and heads. This depiction relates to the Buddhist belief in Avalokiteśvara's ability to hear and reach out to all the suffering beings in the world. By the twelfth century, Avalokiteśvara was taken to be the patron deity of Tibet, known as Chenrezig. Since the seventeenth century, the Dalai Lama has been commonly recognised as the incarnation of Avalokiteśvara.

**Which, if any, of these symbols did you notice in the child's painting of Avalokiteśvara from the British Museum overleaf and the image below?**



The Thousand-armed, Thousand-eyed Avalokiteśvara. 1919,0101,0.35  
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