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## Avalokiteśvara in Tibetan and Vietnamese Buddhist Traditions: An Overview

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### Introduction

*Avalokiteśvara* (Tib. sPyan ras gzigs dbang phyug) has a special *karmic* connection with Tibet and her people. Tibet is the country that is uniquely blessed by the compassionate deity *Avalokiteśvara*. The Tibetan devotees entrusted *Avalokiteśvara* as the chief tutorial deity and they used to recite the Six Syllable Mantra (Tib. Gzungs sngags yi ge drug ma) with the rosary on the daily basis ranging from the young one and the old one. Hence, *Aryāvalokiteśvara* ('Phags pa 'jig rten dbang phyug) is regarded as the deity exclusively connected to Tibet (*Bod kyi lha skal*) and the name mantra of *Avalokiteśvara*, the Six Syllable Mantra i.e. *Om ma ñi pad me hūng*<sup>1</sup> is the special mantra connected to Tibet (*Bod kyi chos skal or pha chos*). Under the sub-chapter, the Instruction of the Six Syllable Mantra (Tib. Yi ge drug pa'i zhal gdams kyi skor) i.e. *Om ma ñi pad me hūng*, the details of the Six Syllable Mantra of *Aryāvalokiteśvara* is described in *Mani Kabum*.

The law based on the Ten Virtuous actions (Tib. Lha chos dge ba bcu) and the Sixteen Pure Ethics of Human (Tib. Mi chos gtsang ma bcu drug) were established during the reign of Dharma King Songtsan Gampo (Wylie: Srong btsan sgam po, 617-698). With the royal support and patronage, led by Thonmi Sambhota along with his disciples Dharma Koṣa, Lhalung Dorjay Pal<sup>2</sup> and so forth, and the team of Indian Paṇḍita Kusara and Brahmin Śankara, Kashmiri Paṇḍita Tanu, Nepalese Paṇḍita Śīla Mañju, Chinese master Hvashang Mahādeva<sup>3</sup> has translated twenty one *Sūtras* and *Tantras* of *Avalokiteśvara* (Tib. sPyan ras gzigs kyi mdo rgyud nyi shu rtsa gcig) into Tibetan.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Gampo, Songtsan. "Yi ge drug pa'i zhal gdams kyi skor", *Ma ñi bka' 'bum*, Lhasa: Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, Vol. 1, 2011, Pp. 39-60.

<sup>2</sup> This should not be identified the same person as Lhalung Palgyi Dorjee, the one who assassinated the king Lang Darma (Wylie: gLang dar ma)

<sup>3</sup> Though bears the similar name, Hvashang Mahādeva is not the same as the one who participated in the Samye debate with Ācārya Kamalaśīla.

<sup>4</sup> The 21 texts as enumerated in *Chos 'byung mkhas pa'i dga' ston* (Pp. 182-183) as: 1) *za ma tog bkod pa*, 2) *phyag stong sphyan stong gi gzungs*, 3) *pad ma snying po'i mdo*, 4) *zhal bcu gcig pa'i mdo*, 5) *bcu gcig zhal gyi gzungs*, 6) *don yod zhags pa*, 7) *don zhags phyi ma*, 8) *pad ma mchog*, 9) *dbang bsgyur 'khor lo*, 10) *cho ga sngags kyi rgyud*, 11) *yid bzhin nor bu'i gzungs*, 12) *snying rje chen po mi bshol ba*, 13) *'od zer rnam bkod*, 14) *pad ma cod pan gyi rgyud*, 15) *yi ge drug pa'i mdo*, 16) *dam chos pad dkar*, 17) *puṇḍa ri ka'i mdo*, 18) *chu klung sna tshogs pa'i mdo*, 19) *snang ba rol ba'i mdo*, 20) *mtshan brgya rtsa brgyad pa*, 21) *mtshan rab yongs su bstan pa'i mdo*.

The first written record in Tibetan with regard to *Avalokiteśvara* is found in the *Mani Kabum* (Wylie: *Ma ni bka' 'bum*) and *Ka-chem Ka-kholma* (Wylie: *bKa' chems ka khol ma*) which are traditionally attributed to the first Buddhist emperor of Tibet, Songtsan Gampo who is regarded as the incarnation of *Avalokiteśvara*. It is recorded in the *Mani Kabum* that the *Avalokiteśvara* compassionately took birth in the human form as a king Songtsan Gampo for the sake of taming the red-faced carnivorous in Tibet.<sup>5</sup>

In the first volume of *Mani Kabum*, we find the legend of *Avalokiteśvara* with regard to how *Avalokiteśvara* benefits sentient beings after making a firm conviction and commitment to liberate the beings of six realms from the state of sufferings.

### Special Karmic Connection with Tibet

The legend narrated in the *Mani Kabum* regarding the origin of Tibetan race goes like this;<sup>6</sup>

Once *Avalokiteśvara* went to *Sukhāvati*

(Tib. *bDe ba can gyi zhing khams*) where *Amitābha* Buddha (Tib. *Sangs rgyas snang ba mtha' yas* or '*od dpag med*) was residing. *Amitābha* Buddha advised him to go to the land called Snow Land (referring to Tibet) where Śākyamuṇi Buddha has not visited physically, no Buddha teachings was spread, not blessed by Buddha. Tame the aggressive characters of this under privileged beings and rule this land. Then with a compassionate heart, *Avalokiteśvara* from his left palm radiate the light and out of which a monkey was emanated. For the sake of evolution of human race in Tibet, *Avalokiteśvara* asked this monkey whether he can go to Tibet and practice meditation. To this monkey replied, "Yes I can go to Tibet and practice meditation". So, after receiving a profound Buddha's teachings from *Avalokiteśvara*, he then miraculously proceed to Tibet. To cut the legend short, eventually the monkey got married with female ogress (manifested form of goddess Tara) and she gave birth to six children having the distinct character who were said to be born from the six realms. This is how the Tibetan race was evolved. Bonpo have their own version of the evolution of Tibetan race.

*Avalokiteśvara*) is regarded as the embodiment of compassionate deity of all the Buddha's of ten direction. He is manifested in the form of *Sambhogakāya Buddha* (Tib. *Longs spyod rdzogs pa'i sku*, Complete Enjoyment Body). His body having a white in colour with one face and four arms adorned with the *Amitābha* Buddha on the crown. There are about fifty distinct aspects or the manifestations of *Avalokiteśvara* according to Tibetan sources. The names and the characteristics of each form of *Avalokiteśvara* are found in the scriptures namely, i) *Bari brgya rtsa* describes nine aspects of *Avalokiteśvara*, ii) *sGrub thabs rgya mtsho* presents twenty aspects of *Avalokiteśvara*, iii) *Rin 'byung brgya rtsa* presents sixteen aspects of *Avalokiteśvara*, iv) *sNar thang brgya rtsa* presents four aspects of

<sup>5</sup> Gampo, Songtsan. *Ma ni bka' 'bum*, Lhasa: Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, Vol. 1, 2011, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, Pp. 267-270.

*Avalokiteśvara*.<sup>7</sup> These numbers are 49 in total excluding the *Avalokiteśvara* form having the similar aspects that are repeated.

*Avalokiteśvara* is variably depicted in different forms such as; One thousand arms and eyes with eleven-headed (Tib. sPyan ras gzigs phyag stong sphyan stong): This form of *Avalokiteśvara* possessed eleven head. The three chief faces are depicted in peaceful aspects, the three right faces are depicted in neither peace nor wrathful aspects (neutral), the three left faces are depicted in wrathful aspect, one head facing back is depicted in laughing expression and *Amitābha* Buddha image is adorned on the crown of *Avalokiteśvara*. He is the chief deity of the *Nyungney* Fasting practice which is belong to *kriya tantra* of Vajrayāna.

Four hand *Avalokiteśvara* (Tib. sPyan ras gzigs phyag bzhi pa): *Avalokiteśvara* with one head, four arms, the first two folded hands place in front of heart, the right hand holding the precious stone rosary, the left hand holding the stem of white lotus having eight leaves.

Manifestations of *Avalokiteśvara* is classified into Peaceful Aspect (Tib. Zhi ba) and Wrathful Aspect (Tib. Drag po). Peaceful Aspects are namely i) *Sems nyid ngal gso* (Relaxation of Mind), ii) *Don yod zhags pa* (Amoghapāśa), iii) *Lokeśvara*, ('Jig rten dbang phyug), iv) *Seng ge sgra* (the sound of lion), v) *Yid bzhin nor bu* (Cinta mani), vi) *Phyag bzhi pa* (the Four arms), vii) *Phyag stong sphyan stong* (the one thousand arms and eyes) etc. Wrathful Aspects are namely; i) *rTa mgrin* (Hayagrīva), ii) *'Khor lo bde mchog* (Cakrasaṃvara), iii) *mGon po legs ldan* (Bhavya nāth?) etc.<sup>8</sup>

*Avalokiteśvara* is regarded as one of the Eight Close Disciples of Gautama Buddha known as *Aṣṭopaputrāḥ* in Sanskrit and *Nye ba'i sras chen brgyad* in Tibetan.<sup>9</sup>

Epithets of *Avalokiteśvara* that are found in Tibetan scriptures are;

i) Gru 'dzin mgon, (the Protector of Potalaka)	ii) 'Jig rten mgon, (the Lord of Universe)
iii) 'Jig rten dbang phyug, (the God of Universe)	iv) sNying rje'i lha, (the God of Compassion)
v) Thugs rje chen po, (the Great Compassionate one)	vi) Phyag na pad mo, (Lotus in the hand)
bdag po, (the Lord of Potalaka)	vii) Gru 'dzin

<sup>7</sup> Thrinley, Dungkar Lobsang. *Dung dkar tshig mdzod chen mo*, Dharamsala: TCPP, 2004, p. 1303. (Reprinted)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 1304.

<sup>9</sup> the eight close disciples of Gautama Buddha are; i) Mañjuśrī ('Jam dpal dbyangs), ii) Vajrapāṇi (Phyag na rdo rje), iii) Avalokiteśvara (sPyan ras gzigs), iv) Kṣitigarbha (Sa yi snying po), v) Sarvanirvaraṇa Viskambhin (sGrib pa rnam sel), vi) Ākāśagarbha (Nam mkha'i snying po), vii) Maitreya (Byams pa), viii) Samantabhadra (Kun tu bzang po).

## Etymology of *Avalokiteśvara*

It is recorded in the *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*<sup>10</sup> that the compounded form *Avalokiteśvara* is made up of the two words *Avalokita* and *Īvara*, whose meanings, when taken separately, are quite clear, but, when considered as a compounded form its meaning is rather obscure. The interpretations vary from ‘Lord of what we see’; ‘Lord of the view’; to ‘Lord who is seen, or manifested or is everywhere visible’... *The Encyclopedia of Religion*<sup>11</sup> also says that the name *Avalokiteśvara* is a compound of Sanskrit *Avalokita* and *Īvara*, but its translations are rather different from the above one, running “The Lord of what is seen, the Lord who is seen” or “The Lord who surveys, gazing Lord”.

According to the *Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen*,<sup>12</sup> the literal meaning of the Sanskrit term ‘*Avalokiteshvara*’ or ‘*Avalokiteśvara*’ is the “Lord who looks down”, in which the last component of the name is taken to be *īshvara*, or “He who hears the sounds (outcries) of the world” or also the “Sound that illuminates the world”, in which the *svara* ‘sound’ is regarded as the final component of the name.

Kenneth K. S. Ch’en<sup>13</sup> says that, the word *Avalokiteśvara* consisted of two parts: *Avalokita*, a past participle meaning “seen” and *Īvara* meaning ‘lord’. Some of his representative translations are “The Lord of compassionate glances”, “The Lord who sees”, “One who sees with the eyes”<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, Har Dayal<sup>15</sup> has introduced different translations in the *Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature*<sup>16</sup> which also needs to be noticed. Some of them are: “Lord of compassionate glances”; “the Lord of the dead and the dying”; “the Lord who is seen from on high” (i.e. by Amitābha Buddha, as a small figure is often placed at the head of the statue of *Avalokiteśvara*) or “the Lord who looks from the high” (i.e. from the mountains, where he lives like Śiva); “the Lord who sees (the world with pity); “the Lord, who looks with eyes”... He also mentions the translations by Sanghavarman<sup>17</sup>, Dharmarakṣa<sup>18</sup>, and other early translators into Chinese as Kuan-shih-yin (illuminating the sounds of the world), and the translation by J. Edkins as “Kuan (looks on), shih (the ‘region’ of sufferers), and yin (whose voices of many tones, all acknowledging misery and asking salvation, touch the heart of the pitiful Bodhisattva)...

<sup>10</sup> G.P. Malalasekera, *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Ceylon: the Government Press, 1996, Vol. II, p. 407

<sup>11</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1987, Vol. II, p. 11

<sup>12</sup> Michael H. Kohn, *Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen*, (tr.), Boston: Shampala Publication, p. 14

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth K.S. Chen is the author of *Chinese Transformation of Buddhism*

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth K. S. Ch’en, *Buddhism in China*, USA: Princeton University Press, 1964, p. 346

<sup>15</sup> Lala Har Dayal: (October 14, 1884, Delhi, India - March 4, 1939, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) was a Hindu revolutionary and co-founder of the Ghadar Party.

<sup>16</sup> Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975 (reprints), p. 47

<sup>17</sup> Sanghavarman (in Chinese named Zhang-Kai) was an Indian by birth. As a young man he renounced society and was well-known and respected for his morality (Vinaya) and virtue. He was particularly knowledgeable in the Tripitaka and specialised in the Saṃ yuktābhīdharmahṛ dayaśāstra

<sup>18</sup> Dharmarakṣa was one of the greatest translators of Mahayana Buddhist scriptures into Chinese. Scriptural catalogues describe him as of Yuezhi origin. His family lived at Dunhuang, where he was born around 230 CE. At the age of eight, he adopted the name of his master, an Indian monk named Zhu Gaozuo.

## 2) Epithet of Avalokiteśvara

a) **In Tibetan:** Sarat Chandra Das in his *Tibetan-English Dictionary*<sup>19</sup> considers *Avalokiteśvara* or *Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva* (sPyan ras gzigs byang chub sems dpa') as the 4<sup>th</sup> Dhyani Bodhisattva *Avalokiteśvara*, the patron saint of Tibet, the vice-regent of the Dhyani Buddha Amitabha. He is incarnated perpetually in each successive Dalai Lama of Lhasa. His colloquial name in Tibet is Chenrezig and the images of this being generally represent him as having eleven faces, each different coloured, and with from 6 to 1000 arms. In Mongolia he is styled *Niduber Udzkehi*. His other Tibetan names are: ('Jig rten dbang phyug, (the Lord of the World), 'Jig rten mgon po (the Protector of the World), Thugs rje chen po (the Great Compassion), Gru 'dzin mgon (the Owner of the Ship), Phyag na pad mo (the Holder of a Lotus), sNying rje'i lha (the God of Compassion), bCu gcig zhal (Eleven Faces).

b) **In Chinese:** The translation of *Avalokiteśvara* is also a matter of controversy. According to Lokesh Chandra<sup>20</sup>, six different names of *Avalokiteśvara* can be found in the Chinese Buddhist Literature. The chronology of the six Chinese names with their Sanskrit equivalent forms has been showed as follow: (1) K'o-lou-hsuan *A-lo-śva*; (2) K'uei-Yin *Avalokita-svara*; (3) Kuan-shih-yin *Avalokita-loka-svara*; (4) Kuang-shih-yin (no Sanskrit form, but according to his writing, this form was translated by Dharmarakṣa from the *Saddhamapundarīka-sūtra*; hence, its Sanskrit form may be supposed to be *Avalokiteśvara*, (5) Kuan-yin *Avalokita-svara*, and (6) Kuan-tzu-tsai *Avalokiteśvara*.<sup>21</sup>

In the presentation of Yu Chun-fang<sup>22</sup>, there were five Chinese names of *Avalokiteśvara*. The names of the Bodhisattva have appeared in the chronological order as (1) Kuan-yin (2) Kuang-shih-yin (3) Kuan-shih-yin (4) Kuan-shih-tzu-yin and (5) Kuan-tzu-tsai.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, the two names, 'Kuan-yin' and 'Kuan-shih-yin' have probably been the best known and most popular ones not only in the field of believers but also in that of researchers. 'Kuan-yin' is often considered by both as a short or brief name of the Kuan-shih-yin translated from the Sanskrit form of *Avalokiteśvara*.

c) **In Vietnamese:** Almost all Buddhist terms have been preserved in Hán Việt (the Vietnamese transliteration of Chinese language). Since Vietnamese language and Chinese (verbal) language are so entwined, if we try to separate them it may create more confusion. So most of the translations of

<sup>19</sup> Sarat Chandra Das, *Tibetan-English Dictionary*, New Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 2001, p. 806

<sup>20</sup> Lokesh Chandra is a contemporary scholar of Buddhism and the Indian arts. He is the son of the famous Sanskrit scholar Raghu Vira. He has also served as a member of the Indian Rajya Sabha, Vice-President of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, and Chairman of the Indian Council of Historical Research. In 2006 he was recognized with India's Padma Bhushan award. He has to his credit over 360 works and text editions. Among them are classics like his "Tibetan-Sanskrit Dictionary", "Materials for a History of Tibetan Literature", "Buddhist Iconography of Tibet", and his "Dictionary of Buddhist Art" in about 20 volumes.

<sup>21</sup> Lokesh Chandra, *The Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara*, India: IGNC/abhinav, 1988, pp. 20-21

<sup>22</sup> Chün-Fang Yü was born in China and educated in Taiwan, graduating from Tunghai University with a major in English Literature and minor in Chinese philosophy. She received a MA degree from Smith College in English Literature and a Ph.D. from Columbia University in Religion, specializing in Chinese Buddhism. She taught at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey from 1972 to 2004 when she returned to Columbia. She is the Sheng Yen Professor in Chinese Buddhist Studies, a faculty member in both Religion and EALAC.

<sup>23</sup> Yu Chun-Fang, "Ambiguity of Avalokiteśvara and the Scriptural Sources for the Cult of Kuan-yin in China", *Chung hwa Buddhist Journal*, No. 10 (1997), p. 421

*Avalokiteśvara* into Vietnamese language have also been preserved in Hán Việt such as Quán Âm Quán Thế Âm Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát Quán Tự Tại Bồ Tát Quán Thế Âm Tự Tại Phật Mẫu Quán Âm Nam Hải and other pure Vietnamese translations: Mẹ Cứu Khổ Cứu Nạn, Mẹ Hiền Quan Âm, Mẹ...

According to the differences in culture, tradition, geography, history, and the entrance time of Buddhism of different countries, there are many different legends about *Avalokiteśvara*. In Tibetan tradition, *Avalokiteśvara* was born from a lotus in the form of a Holy Boy; but in Vietnamese tradition, *Avalokiteśvara* was born as a girl who faced many challenges and finally attained Bodhisattvahood at the end of her life.

### Legend of *Avalokiteśvara* in Vietnamese Tradition

In Vietnam, **Quan Âm Thị Kính** is seen as the incarnation of *Avalokiteśvara*, the Bodhisattva who has a commitment to listen to the miserable cries of all sentient beings in order to help them to dispel all of their suffering.

The legend of Quan Âm Thị Kính in Vietnam has been handed down from generation to generation among the common people through the art of Chèo (Vietnamese traditional opera), Cải Lương (reformed theatre), drama, poetry and prose story. The author and time of composition of Quan Âm Thị Kính's poetry are unknown. However, its first printed copy in Vietnamese script was published by Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh in 1911. This version includes 788 lines of verse in six-eight meter, and a letter written by Kính Tâm for her parents.

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#### **Summary of the Legend:**

Once upon a time, there was a person who had spent nine consecutive life time being a virtuous monk and excellent practitioner but had not yet attained Buddhahood. In his tenth life, in order to test his mind, Lord Shakyamuni Buddha caused him to be born as a daughter of Mãng family in a country of Cao Ly. They named her as Thị Kính. Growing up, she became talented, beautiful and virtuous. Upon reaching marrying age, her parents married her to a very handsome, studious boy named Sùng Thiện Sĩ. They were a nice couple; they lived together in harmony, respect and love.

One night, Thiện Sĩ was reading and Thị Kính was sitting doing sewing nearby him. Then, Thiện Sĩ felt tired, lying down, reclining his head on his wife's thigh and fell asleep. Loving him, Thị Kính kept quiet for him to sleep. Looking at his handsome face, she saw that on his chin there was a hair which was not growing in its correct place. So, with a knife in her hand, she decided to trim the hair. Suddenly, Thiện Sĩ woke up, and seeing his wife putting a knife near his neck, he thought that she wanted to kill him, therefore, he was startled by fear into jumping aside, holding her hands and shouted loudly. His mother came, after hearing her son and she also thought that her daughter-in-law wanted to kill her son. Thị Kính tried to explain but they did not listen to her. They kept insisting that Thị Kính planned to murder her husband with a knife. They asked her parents to come and asked them take

<sup>24</sup> Vietnamese source: Tại Việt nam, sự tích **Quan Âm Thị Kính** được lưu truyền trong dân gian Việt Nam từ lâu qua nghệ thuật hát chèo, cải lương, kịch, truyện thơ và truyện văn xuôi. vở chèo Quan Âm Thị Kính ra đời trước, sau đó mới tới truyện thơ rồi chuyển thể qua kịch ảnh. Truyện thơ Quan Âm Thị Kính chưa biết đã được sáng tác vào năm nào và do ai sáng tác, chỉ biết bản in đầu tiên bằng chữ quốc ngữ do Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh ấn hành năm 1911. Bản này gồm có 788 câu thơ lục bát và một lá thư của Kính Tâm viết cho cha mẹ. (*Quan Âm Thị Kính-Wikipedia tiếng Việt.htm*)

her home. Thị Kính could not make anyone believe her, so she resigned herself to her fate and returned home with her parents.

Staying with her own parents, she was always sorrowful; she had no one to share her unjust suffering. After thinking for long time with a determined mind, she decided to leave home for life in a monastery. Thinking that her parents may not allow her to leave, she therefore disguised herself as a man and left home at night with a sincere heart seeking for Truth.

She came to Vân Từ monastery and requested to be allowed to a monk. The Master did not know that she was a girl, allowed her to stay in the monastery, ordained her a Buddhist monk and gave her a Dhamma name: Kính Tâm. From that time, Kính Tâm tried to be a good monk and gained solaced for her suffering by practicing the Dhamma. After enjoying the monastic life for a short time, another misfortune again happened to her...

In the village, there was a wealthy man whose daughter was named Thị Mầu. Thị Mầu went to the monastery to pray where she met Kính Tâm. Upon meeting Kính Tâm she thought he was a handsome, gentle and good man. She tried to express her feelings to Kính Tâm but Kính Tâm ignored her. After being refused, she was very angry so she came home and had a sexual relationship with a man named Lục Điền, who was her domestic helper. Unexpectedly, she became pregnant. According to tradition, she would be punished by the villagers; so, she shifted the blame onto Kính Tâm. Therefore, the villagers beat Kính Tâm very badly. Kính Tâm could not reveal herself, so had to bear the merciless torture.

Being touched with sympathy at the sight of Kính Tâm's suffering, the Master of the monastery requested the villagers to allow him to pay a fine for Kính Tâm instead of continuing the beating. He brought Kính Tâm back his monastery. He loved Kính Tâm but to avoid giving the monastery a bad reputation, he let Kính Tâm stay separately in a small hut nearby.

After one month, Thị Mầu gave birth to a son. Her father forced her to give the baby to Kính Tâm (because he believed that Kính Tâm would be the baby's father). While Kính Tâm was chanting, Thị Mầu brought the son and put the boy outside Kính Tâm's small hut and then left. Hearing the cry of the unfortunate baby, out of compassion, Kính Tâm took the infant and looked after the baby wholeheartedly as if he was her own.

Day after day, regardless of the villagers, Kính Tâm carried the baby everywhere in the village to beg for milk to feed him. After three years, the child was growing bigger and looking very handsome and as well behaved as his foster-father. However after taking care of the baby continuously for three years, Kính Tâm became very weak. After writing a letter to her parents and giving careful advice to the child, Kính Tâm died of exhaustion. While crying near the dead body of his foster-father, the boy remembered his foster-father's advice; he went to the monastery to inform the Master of his foster-father's death and took the letter to Kính Tâm's parents. After the letter had been opened, everybody knew that Kính Tâm was a woman. Her dead body was checked and it was confirmed. After the news was disclosed, everybody realised that she was neither a lady who wanted to kill her husband nor a monk who had a sexual relationship with Thị Mầu. Everybody regretted that they had misunderstood her. The more they regretted their actions, the more they respected her for her great patience. Thị Mầu and the whole family; Thiện Sĩ (Thị Kính's husband) and his parents all came to the monastery and attended Kính Tâm's funeral ceremony. The Master set up

an altar to offer gifts and prayers to Heaven for Kính Tâm's liberation. While the ceremony was being performed, an iridescent cloud descended slowly from the sky and stopped in front of the altar. Lord Sakyamuni Buddha appeared and declared that Kính Tâm was a great practitioner who would attain Enlightenment and become Avalokitesvara (Quan Âm Thị Kính) to help all sentient beings to dispel their suffering.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *A legend in Vietnamese:* Ngày xưa ngày xưa, có một người trai đã nhiều kiếp, kiếp nào từ bé đến lớn cũng giữ mình đức hạnh và thành bậc chân tu Cứ luân hồi chuyển kiếp như vậy liên tiếp đến 9 lần, nhưng chưa kiếp nào được thành Phật. Đến kiếp thứ 10, Đức Thích Ca muốn thử lòng, bắt vào đầu thai làm con gái một nhà họ Mãng ở nước Cao Ly. Họ Mãng đặt tên nàng là Thị Kính. Lớn lên, nàng tài sắc nét na lại hiếu thảo hết lòng. Khi đến tuổi lấy chồng, nàng được bố mẹ gả cho thư sinh Sùng Thiện Sĩ. Sùng Thiện Sĩ rất đẹp trai, chăm học. Hai vợ chồng thật là trai tài gái sắc ăn ở với nhau rất mực kính ái và hòa thuận. Một đêm, Thiện Sĩ ngồi đọc sách, Thị Kính ngồi may bên cạnh. Thiện Sĩ bỗng thấy mệt mỏi, bèn ngã lưng xuống giường, kê đầu lên gối vợ chuyện trò rồi thiếp ngủ. Thị Kính thương chồng học mệt nên lặng yên cho chồng ngủ. Nàng ngắm nhìn khuôn mặt tuấn tú của chồng, bỗng nhận ra ở cằm chồng có một sợi râu mọc ngược. Sẵn con dao nhíp trong thúng khâu đựng đồ may, Thị Kính liền cầm lên kê vào cằm chồng định tỉa sợi râu Bỗng Thiện Sĩ chợt tỉnh, nhìn thấy vợ cầm dao kê vào cổ mình, nghi vợ chủ trương làm hại, chàng hoảng hốt vùng dậy nắm lấy cổ tay Thị Kính và hét toáng lên. Giữa lúc đó, ông bà Họ Sùng nghe tiếng cãi nhau, vội lại hỏi nguyên do. Nghe con trai kể, ông bà tin ngay, khẳng khái đổ tội cho Thị Kính toan giết chồng rồi lập tức cho mời ông bà họ Mãng sang trách móc và trả lại con. Thị Kính không biết giải tỏa sao được nỗi lòng oan khổ của mình, nàng cắn răng chịu tội nhục từ giã nhà họ Sùng để về nhà cha mẹ. Về ở với cha mẹ, Thị Kính lúc nào cũng sầu phiền. Nỗi oan khổ chẳng còn biết cùng ai thổ lộ, Nàng bèn quyết tâm đi tu để trước là báo đáp ân sâu của cha mẹ, sau là tẩy rửa nỗi oan khiên. Nghĩ rằng, nếu trình thưa với cha mẹ ý định của mình thì cha mẹ không cho đi nên đang đêm, nàng cải trang thành nam tử và trốn khỏi nhà với tấm chân thành của người tìm chân lý. Sư Phụ chùa Vân Tự không biết là gái bèn nhận cho làm tiểu, đặt tên là Kính Tâm. Từ đó Kính Tâm nương náu cửa thiền, lòng vui với đạo nên khuấy khỏa được sầu phiền. Tu hành chưa được bao lâu thì một tai vạ lại đến với Kính Tâm. Trong làng có Thị Mầu, con gái của một phú ông, đi lễ chùa, thấy Kính Tâm đẹp trai, hiền lành thì đem lòng yêu trộm. Đã có lần Thị Mầu nói rõ lòng mình với Kính Tâm nhưng thị vô cùng thất vọng vì Kính Tâm vẫn cứ thản nhiên. Bị từ chối, Thị Mầu bèn dan díu với một người đầy tớ trong nhà, không ngờ thị mang thai và bị làng phạt vạ. Thị Mầu bèn đổ tội cho tiểu Kính Tâm. Vì thế tiểu Kính Tâm bị làng đòi đến tra khảo. Nàng không biết biện bạch ra sao để gỡ mối oan này nên đành cam chịu sự đánh đập tàn nhẫn. Sư cụ thấy tiểu bị đánh đòn đau, thương tình, kêu xin với làng nộp phạt. Vì sợ ô danh chốn thiền môn nên dù thương xót Kính Tâm, Sư Cụ cũng phải để Kính Tâm ra ở mái Tam Quan chứ không được ở trong chùa nữa. Đủ ngày tháng, Thị Mầu sanh một đứa con trai. Phú ông bắt thị đem đứa bé trả cho cha là Kính Tâm. Kính Tâm đang tụng kinh, nghe tiếng trẻ khóc, nhìn ra thì thấy Thị Mầu đem bỏ đó rồi đi. Động lòng từ bi, nàng ra ẵm lấy đứa bé và chăm lo nuôi nấng hết lòng. Ngày ngày nàng phải bế nó đi xin sữa ở đầu làng cuối xóm chịu bao nhiêu tiếng cười chê. Sau ba năm, đứa bé đã khôn lớn, vẻ mặt rất khôi ngô, tính nết ngoan ngoãn giống hệt cha nuôi. Ròng rã nuôi con suốt ba năm trời khiến cho sức khoẻ của Kính Tâm trở nên rất yếu. Sau khi viết thư để lại cho cha mẹ và dặn dò con thơ một cách cặn kẽ, Kính Tâm qua đời vì đã cạn sức tàn hơi. Đứa bé đang than khóc bên xác cha nuôi thật là bi thảm, chợt nhớ lời cha dặn, vội lên chùa báo cho Sư Cụ biết. Sư vĩ được Cụ sai ra khâm liệm thì hài mới hay Kính Tâm là đàn bà. Tin này tung ra, cả làng đổ đến chùa đông như hội. Nỗi oan tình của Thị Kính được sáng tỏ và khi lá thư của nàng về đến quê thì ai nấy cũng đều biết bà không phải là gái giết chồng, cũng không phải là một vị Tăng có quan hệ tình dục với Thị Mầu. Cả nhà của Thị Mầu và gia đình của Thiện Sĩ đều đến Chùa để dự tang lễ. Mọi người đều hối hận vì đã hiểu lầm Nàng. Càng hối hận bao nhiêu họ càng kính phục đức tính đại nhân nhục của nàng bấy nhiêu. Sư phụ lập trai đàn cúng dường cầu nguyện cho Nàng được siêu thoát. Giữa lúc cử hành đàn chay, một đám mây ngũ sắc, giữa trời từ từ hạ xuống trước đàn lễ. Đức Thích Ca Mâu Ni hiện ra, Ngài nhận thấy Kính Tâm là người tu hành đắc đạo nên thọ ký cho làm Bồ Tát Quan Âm cứu độ hết thảy chúng sanh thoát khỏi cảnh đau khổ lầm than.



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