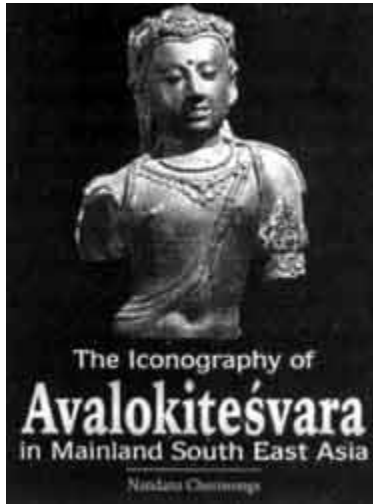


## Book Review

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### The Iconography of Avalokitesvara

It will not be an exaggeration to say that the religious veneration of Avalokitesvara is a "Cult in half of Asia". Iconographic evidence of the widespread popularity of this great Mahakarunika bodhisattva has been found abundantly in almost all over Buddhist Asia, Tibet, Central Asia, China, Japan and the mainland of South East Asia.

The book "*The Iconography of Avalokitesvara in Mainland South East Asia*" by Nandana Chutiwongs published by IGNCA is one of the finest books on the origin and development of Avalokitesvara worship in South East Asia. The book begins with the main features of the Cult in the land of its origin, i.e. India and then travels to other countries in the region.

Avalokitesvara is a Mahayana bodhisattva. His compassionate image has played an important role in popularizing Buddhism. Cultures have made different choices in representing him - illustrating the conceptions of the deification of kings, creation of talismanic images of deities and the empowerment of rulers - ideas that were very much prevalent in South East Asia.

The main traits of Avalokitesvara are his compassion for all, including even the sinners and his vow not to attain *Nirvana* until others attain salvation. The *Karandavyuhasutra* describes various qualities of Avalokitesvara in eloquent terms including his power of healing. "Hear, O Sons of a noble race. The Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, the Great Being is a lamp for the blind, a sunshade for those who are scorched by the great heat of the sun. He is a father and mother to the unfortunate and points to the way for *Nirvana* to those who descended to the hell". Avalokitesvara is described in the same passage as a great physician. His power of healing is confirmed by two statements in the Nepalese manuscripts stating: '*Simhaladvipe Arogasala Lokesvara*', and '*Simhaladvipe Arogasalah Lokanatha*'.

The cult of Avalokitesvara is a composite one, as he possesses traits not only of Buddha but also of the Vedic *Purusa*, Siva, Indra, Vishnu, Surya and several other gods. This has helped bridge to a great extent the gulf between Hinduism and Buddhism. As a cosmic figure, he is looked upon as Creator God. The *Karandavyuhasutra* says that various deities, like Indra, Varuna, Brahma and Sarasvati, have emanated from his body.

The volume is an exhaustive and laudable account of the Avalokitesvara cult and iconography in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, etc. Though the volume is loaded with facts the author has treated them lucidly, making the narration interesting.

The book has six broad chapters that discuss 1. The Cultural Relations Between India and South East Asia, 2. Avalokitesvara in the Homeland of Buddhism, with Sri Lanka in the appendix, 3. Avalokitesvara in Myanmar, 4. Avalokitesvara in Central Thailand with special reference to Dvaravai, 5. Avalokitesvara in Ancient Cambodia and 6. Avalokitesvara inampa. Each chapter has several subsections and extensive appendices that discuss various aspects of Avalokitesvara pertaining to iconography, posture etc.

While dealing with the Avalokitesvara Cult in diverse regions, the author has taken care to point out the artistic and cultural links between various countries. The countries discussed in the book are primarily Hinayana countries. Despite Avalokitesvara worship originating in the Mahayana sect, it gained

popularity in Hinayana countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia etc as early as 6<sup>th</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The reason probably was that while the Theravada doctrine is marked by an austere discipline, the Mahayana faith is comparatively free from rigidity and preached compassion and willingness to help all in times of their adversities. Avalokitesvara practiced *Upayakausalya* (skillfulness) in preaching the doctrine of Buddha. The worship of Avalokitesvara seems to have flourished in Sri Lanka and other South East Asian countries almost simultaneously.

Avalokitesvara and Maitreya seem to have been represented side by side in a relief slab from Pinduragala (in Sri Lanka) dating from about the 7<sup>th</sup> century. It is not impossible that the cult of Avalokitesvara was introduced in Sri Lanka by Gunabhadra or Faxian both ardent devotees of the Bodhisattva. Again, Xuanzang's account relates the story of a Sinhalese king who made a *vihara* for the deity at Bodhgaya.

There was a popular Natha cult in Sri Lanka which seems to have been absorbed or assimilated by Avalokitesvara. This epithet was applied also to Maitreya here. As the time passed the cult of Avalokitesvara gained in popularity in Sri Lanka this country produced some beautiful images of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara in stone and bronze.

Apart from the learned Theravada monks, Sri Lanka produced some great Mahayana teachers. It is said that the great Indian Tantric guru. Vajrabodhi visited Sri Lanka before he went to China. Again it is believed that Amoghavajra who was a disciple of Vajrabodhi, and enjoyed great reputation as a Tantrik teacher in China, was an inhabitant of Sri Lanka.

Like Sri Lanka, Myanmar too received Buddhism from India as early as the 3rd century B.C. The tradition goes that Asoka sent venerable Sona and Uttara to *Suvarnabhumi* to preach Buddhist doctrines there. According to the majority of scholars, *Suvarnabhumi* represents lower Myanmar. The Mahasanghikas and Theravadins made Myanmar an important stronghold of Buddhism during the 2<sup>nd</sup> - 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries A.D. Chinese sources also seem to refer to the existence of Buddhism at Linyang during this period. Lin-yang excavations at Beikthan and Halin seem to bring to light remains of monuments of Buddhist character ascribable to 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. However excavations at Hmawza (probably old Prome) have yielded gold leaves of *Paticca Samutpada* (c 500 A.D.)

The Pagan period ushered in a new era in the worship of Avalokitesvara cult when he came to be worshiped as an independent deity. During this time various cultural influences including the use of Sanskrit and Nagari script came to Myanmar. Though a devout Theravadin king Aniruddha was a great patron of the Avalokitesvara cult. He venerated Avalokitesvara under the name of Lokanatha. The art of Pagan betrays extensive Eastern Indian impact.

By the 7<sup>th</sup> century Dvaravati (Central Thailand) became one of the major South East Asian kingdoms and it maintained good diplomatic relations with China. Buddha images predominate the cultural remains of Dvaravati. They represent features of Andhradesa and Sri Lankan influences mixed with a considerable amount of late Gupta and post Gupta influences from north India and Maharashtra. Though Dvaravati was predominantly a Theravada region, Mahayana concepts developed here. They came perhaps from India in the 7th century along with Indian artistic influences. Mahayana faith witnessed great popularity during the next few centuries. Dvaravati produced some interesting Avalokitesvara figures during the 8<sup>th</sup> - 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. The description of the 'Banaspati motif' in the art of Dvaravati in the Appendix of the book constitutes an interesting feature (see pp. 159-60, 208-10 of the book). The motif showing Buddha standing on the head of an eagle or *garuda* (?) is accompanied by Avalokitesvara one side and another bodhisattva on other side. The motif, popularly known as Banaspati motif seems to be an amalgamation of Buddhist and Vaishnavite ideas. Siva supporting Buddha on his head from Thailand is another interesting motif. These two motifs point to superiority of Buddha over the Hindu gods, like Siva, Vishnu, etc. Buddhism came to Champa sometime during the 5<sup>th</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. Buddha from Dong-Duong is a very fine specimen of art.

Avalokitesvara worship prevailed in Cambodia as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. He is evoked under various names in Cambodian inscriptions such as Vrah Kamrateu, Sri Avalokitesvara, Avalokitesa, Avalokita, etc. These names occur in the Angkor Period. An isolated image of the god was produced in Cambodia in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Cambodia has yielded some interesting Avalokitesvara figures during the ninth-tenth century A.D. The volume concentrates on the varied iconographic features of the Avalokitesvara figures of South East Asia and provides illustrations of some rare specimens. The author has included almost all the countries of the region in the illustrations also, In all there are 119 illustrations. Notes on each of them are given in a separate list.

Some of the rare and interesting illustrations of the deity are: Vajradharama Lokesvara from Tiriya (bronze) 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D; Avalokitesvara in Bussan collection, Paris early 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D; bronze with standing Amitabha; Avalokitesvara from a relic chamber in a mound north of Yindai Kkwin river Hmawza, Sri Ksetra period, 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D; Relief carvings on a monolithic votive shrine from Thma Puok, end of 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D; carvings on a stele from Thailand, end of 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D; Radiating Avalokitesvara, Prasat Prah Thkol, 12<sup>th</sup> - and 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D; Avalokitesvara from Paunggu temple, Pagan, 11<sup>th</sup> century, Avalokitesvara from central Vietnam, 9<sup>th</sup> century; Avalokitesvara head from Tra-kieu, 10<sup>th</sup> century and Avalokitesvara as an attendant figure 9<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.

The book presents a holistic study of Avalokitesvara cult and it will be of great use to students and scholars. It is undoubtedly a major contribution in the field of Avalokitesvara studies.

Book reviewed by **Dr. Radha Banerjee**, IGNC.

**The Iconography of Avalokitesvara in Mainland South East Asia** by Nandana Chutiwongs. Publisher IGNC. Co-publisher Aryan Books International. 2002, PP. 384 plus illustrations Contains Bibliography and Index. Price Rs. 25000/-)