

## **Who really is Guanyin? by Piya Tan**

Throughout my life, I have had a number of personal experiences of Guanyin. Such Guanyin encounters strongly reinforce my faith in Dharma-moved compassion. Of course, I am not alone in such experiences. In fact, in one of my public talks, a Catholic woman came up to me and privately confessed to me that although she was brought up as Christian, she kept having visions and dreams of Guanyin. What shall I do? She asks. Sadhu! I said, you have the best of two worlds!

Compassion has many manifestations and appears to everyone at the right time. Let me begin with the more mundane ones. Once as a monk, I was caught in a heavy downpour, and invoked Guanyin to stop the rain so that I could return to my vihara. The rain fell heavier! I thought I had lost my faith. Then a car drove up to me, and the driver asked, Would you like a lift back? While in the dry car, I reflected: one puny human wanted the whole sky to stop raining just for him to cross the road, but Guanyin was wiser in his compassion!

On another occasion, I was buying books in a Buddhist bookshop, and had selected quite a pile of books, left on the cashier's counter. I was still browsing for more books, when, in the corner of my eye, I noticed a woman in white (like a vegetarian lay practitioner), came in and walked out. When I finally went to the counter to pay for the books, the cashier said that they all have been paid for by the lady in white! And she did not know who that white lady was!

Another encounter. After giving a talk at a Malaysian university, I was driven back to the vihara by one of my students. Halfway along the dark highway (it was about 11 pm), the car suddenly stalled! My student had forgotten to top up the petrol. So we are stuck by the lonely highway with vehicles zooming by. It is understandable that no one stopped, seeing a group of young people with a bald man dressed in a blanket (I was still a monk then).

Then someone on a Honda Cub stopped and we told him of our predicament. He said he would try to help us, and scooted off. Half an hour passed, and we also forgotten about this passerby. And then a bike stopped by again: it was the same man and he handed us a container of petrol! Before we could pay him or even thank him, he scooted off again into the night.

One of my most dramatic encounters with Guanyin was when I was running a Buddhist retreat for a group of NUS medical students (in the 1980s) in the Pahang National Park, Malaysia. We were on a jungle walk at Lata Berkoh, and came to a nearly dry river bed, narrowed down to a channel of powerful rushing water just too wide for anyone of us to jump across. So I told those students who could swim to push a fallen tree trunk across it so that we could walk across on it.

Once in the water, the trunk was immediately dragged by the currents into the deep pool downriver, along with all the four boys! Three of them swam back to safety, but the fourth was seen clinging to the trunk. The trunk rolled over a couple of times, and the boy disappeared into the water, both slowly moving farther away.

Standing on the bank, I could only helplessly watch and invoke Guanyin while the other boys jumped in again to save him.

After the boy was brought to safety, I spoke to him, telling him how I had feared for his life. Then he told me a remarkable thing: he said that he actually felt very peaceful under the water, and did not feel like coming up again! He felt just like letting go of everything. Then a radiant lady in white appeared above him (in the water) with outstretched hands. And he found himself on the water surface again!

These are encounters of faith, and are not easy to explain in words. But I often like to say that if you give compassion a chance in your life, you will be well rewarded by it. Compassion has no religion, no race, and no borders: it is boundless. Its presence reflects our being at our spiritual best, reminding us that we are capable of spiritual liberation. For Guanyin is that great compassion in our hearts. (I tell the God-believers who attend my classes that “this is the Kingdom of God within us.”)

It is not important for us to have such dramatic experiences. In fact, if such experiences are misunderstood, we can feel proud or self-righteous about them. We should be humbled by them, and be reminded of the uncertainty and frailty of life, and not to take others (especially our near and dear ones) for granted.

For me, these are now memories, but powerful and happy memories that serve as great starters for the cultivation of lovingkindness. I invite you forget about all the pains that others have done to you, but to remember all the happy and precious moments you have encountered. These happy memories, not the negative ones, will best heal and help you become a better person.

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