

On *Avalokitasvara* (觀世音) and *Avalokiteśvara* (觀自在)
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The scriptures of early Buddhism were transmitted in various colloquial languages, e.g. Pāli. Probably, many of the early Mahāyāna scriptures were transmitted originally in such languages as well, e.g. Gāndhārī, which were later “translated” gradually into (Buddhist) Sanskrit.

The name of the popular Mahāyāna Bodhisattva, *Avalokiteśvara*, appears as *Avalokitasvara* (“One Who Beholds/Observes Sounds”?) in the older Sanskrit fragments of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra* from Central Asia, dating probably to the 5th or 6th century. In the corresponding portions of the Gilgit manuscripts, dating probably to the 7th century, the so-called “Kashagar” manuscript (actually from Khotan), dating probably to the 8th century and the Nepalese manuscripts, dating from the 11th century onwards, we find the form *Avalokiteśvara* instead. When we turn our attention to the Chinese translations of this Bodhisattva’s name, we can, in fact, trace the change from *Avalokitasvara* to *Avalokiteśvara*. From the second century until the beginning of the fourth, his name was rendered as *kuiyin* 闕音 (“Sound-Observer”), *jianyinsheng* 見音聲 (“[One Who] Sees Sounds”), *guangshiyin* 光世音 (“Sounds of the World of Light”) and *guanshiyin* 觀世音 (“[One Who] Observes Sounds of the World”). From the last one, a shortened form was coined in order to fit the verses, namely *guanyin* 觀音 (“[One Who] Observes Sounds”), which became very popular throughout East Asia. All of these forms, containing *yin* 音 (“sound”), correspond with the older Indic form *Avalokitasvara* (“One Who Beholds/Observes Sound”?), which has *svara* (“sound”) at its end. From the sixth century onwards, totally different forms started appearing. Firstly, *guanshizizai* 觀世自在 (“[One Who has] Sovereignty for Observing the World”), a mixture of the old name *guanshiyin* 觀世音 together with a new element *zizai* 自在, after which Xuanzang 玄奘 made another new translation, namely *guanzizai* 觀自在 (“[One Who has] Sovereignty for Observing”). These two new forms, containing *zizai* 自在 (“master of one’s self” = Skt. *īśvara*), correspond clearly to the Sanskrit *Avalokiteśvara*.

From these facts, it is clear that the form *Avalokitasvara* is more authentic. However, as sound is not to be beheld, this name is also strange in Sanskrit.

In the *Samantamukha-parivarta* (普門品) of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra*, or the Lotus Sutra, the powers of the Bodhisattva are described in detail. However, the descriptions of the Bodhisattva, who is said to rescue people in danger, differ totally between the prose portion and the verses. Namely, in the former, people in danger are rescued by “calling upon” him or by “pronouncing his name”, while in the verse part, they are delivered by “thinking of” him. The contrast is, in short, as follows: in the prose part, his name and powers are related to *svara* (“sound, voice”), while, in the verses, they are related to *smara* (“the action of thinking of”).

In Gāndhārī, *svara* means both “sound” (= Sanskrit *svara*) and “thinking, memory” (= Sanskrit *smara*). Therefore, probably, *Avalokitasvara* had been understood in Gāndhārī as “One Who Observes Thinking” as in the *Samantamukha-parivarta* verses. However, much later on, when this colloquial language was replaced by Sanskrit, *svara* was no longer understood to mean “thinking; memory” and people began to regard the name literally as “One Who Observes Sound” as can be found in the prose part of the same chapter.

If we think about the compound *Avalokitasvara*, “One Who Observes Thinking” may be a more reasonable interpretation of the name, as sounds or voices are not to be beheld. Also, when we consider the “Pensive” *Avalokitasvara* images from Gandhāra, the name “One Who Observes Thinking” is much more suitable than “One Who Observes Sounds”.

keywords: *Avalokitasvara*, *Avalokiteśvara*, *Samantamukha-parivarta*, *guanshiyin* 觀世音, *guanyin* 觀音, *guanzizai* 觀自在, Gāndhārī, Pensive Bodhisattva