

AVALOKITESVARA
Loka Nat Worship
in
Myanmar



A Gift of Dhamma

AVALOKITESVARA

Loka Nat Tha Worship

In

Myanmar

“(Most venerated and most popular Buddhist deity)”



Om Mani Padme Hum....



Bodhisatta Loka Nat
(Buddha Image on her Headdress is Amithaba Buddha)

Loka Nat, Loka Byu Ha Nat Tha in Myanmar; Kannon, Kanzeon in Japan; Chinese, Kuan Yin, Guanshiyin in Chinese; Tibetan, Spyan-ras-gzigs in Tabatan; Quan-am in Vietnamese

Introduction: Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisatta is the most revered Deity in Myanmar. Loka Nat is the only Mahayana Deity left in this Theravada country that Myanmar displays his image openly, not knowing that he is the Mahayana Deity appearing everywhere in the world in a variety of names: Avalokitesvara, Lokeshvara, Kuan Yin, Kuan Shih Yin and Kannon. *The younger generations got lost in the translation not knowing the name Loka Nat means one and the same for this Bodhisatta known in various part of the world as Avalokitesvara, Lokeshvara, Kuan Yin or Kannon.*

He is believed to guard over the world in the period between the Gotama Sasana and Mettreyya Buddha sasana. Based on Kyaikhtiyoe Cetiya's inscription, some believed that Loka Nat would bring peace and prosperity to the Goldenland of Myanmar.

Its historical origin has been lost due to artistic creativity Myanmar artist. The Myanmar historical record shows that the King Anawratha was known to embrace the worship of Avalokitesvara, Loka Nat. Even after the introduction of Theravada in Bagan, Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, Lokanatha, Loka Byuhar Nat, Kuan Yin, and Chenresig, had been and still is the most revered Mahayana deity, today.

The name Avalokitesvara has its root meaning as "he who hears the sounds of the world". The great vow of Avalokitesvara is to listen to the supplications, and cries for help from those in difficulty in the world and to provide them with aid. He takes many different forms....male, female, four-armed, thousand-armed, human, non-human, teacher, student...whatever expedient means are needed to help people most effectively. People in Myanmar believed that he brings peace and prosperity to the world.

Kuan Yin Bodhisattva, an emanation of Amida Buddha's compassion, is sometimes referred to in the West as the Goddess of Mercy. (Note: Avalokitesvara means "Kuan Yin" in Sanskrit, the language of early India, from an earlier time he was depicted as a male figure. "Kuan Yin" (Chinese); "Kannon" (Japanese)

The original Avalokitesvara is known by different names in different part of the world; he is known as Avalokitesvara in Mahayana Buddhism and is named as Lokeshvara in Thailand and Cambodia and Kuan Yin Pusa in China and Vietnam. In the early history of Myanmar, Bagan is believed to have been founded in the years 849-850 AD by the Myanmar, the Northern region of Myanmar followed the Mahayana Buddhism. Prior to and during the reign of Myanmar King Anawaratha, Myanmar as Mahayanist embraced the

worship of deities of which the popular deity is Avalokitesvara or Lawkanatha. It is believed then and continues until now that Bodhisatta Avalokitesvara brings peace and prosperity. Even after the acceptance of Theravada Buddhism from the South, King Anawaratha continued to worship the Bodhisatta Avalokitesvara (Lokanatha).

This is apparent from bronze statues depicting Bodhisatta Avalokitesvara and especially the "Lokanatha,"(Avalokitesvara) by the king Anawratha who continued to cast terracotta votive tablets with the image of Lokanatha, even after he embraced the Theravada doctrine.

The Benevolent Prince

The religion prevailing among the Myanmar before and during the early reign of Anawratha was some form of Mahayana Buddhism, which had probably found its way into the region from the Pala kingdom in Bengal.

To the people of Myanmar Lokanat is the symbol of peace and prosperity and his figures are displayed prominently in our art, culture and her Theravada religion. The role of the Lokanat as peacemaker is based on a fascinating legend handed down through the generations. (1)

The legend said, once upon a time, the Guardian Spirit of the universe, known as the Loka Byuha Nat or Lokanat was making the rounds of his domain, when he came upon the Kethayaza Chinthemin, King Lion, and the Flying Elephant locked in mortal combat. The fight had broken out over attempts to grab the lacy tender clouds which were the favorite food for both. Now both the lion and the elephant each wanted the food for his own and were ready to fight a mortal combat for it.

The Lokanat, in his supernatural power, foresaw that should the combat intensify and become more violent, then the entire earth would be set ablaze. Thus, to put an end to their hostility he instead plants love and amity between them, by starting to play a rhythmic beat on his small musical timing cymbals, sing in his melodious voice and dance to melody.

The two combatants hearing the soothing voice in song and seeing the graceful dance calmed down and stopped their fight. Thus, their resentment and animosity diminished and the fire of their wrath was extinguished.

The term Lokanat in popular usage today is also said to be derived from the name of a deity named Lokanahta, which is the combination of two Pali words, Loka, meaning people in general and Nahta, meaning heavenly being.

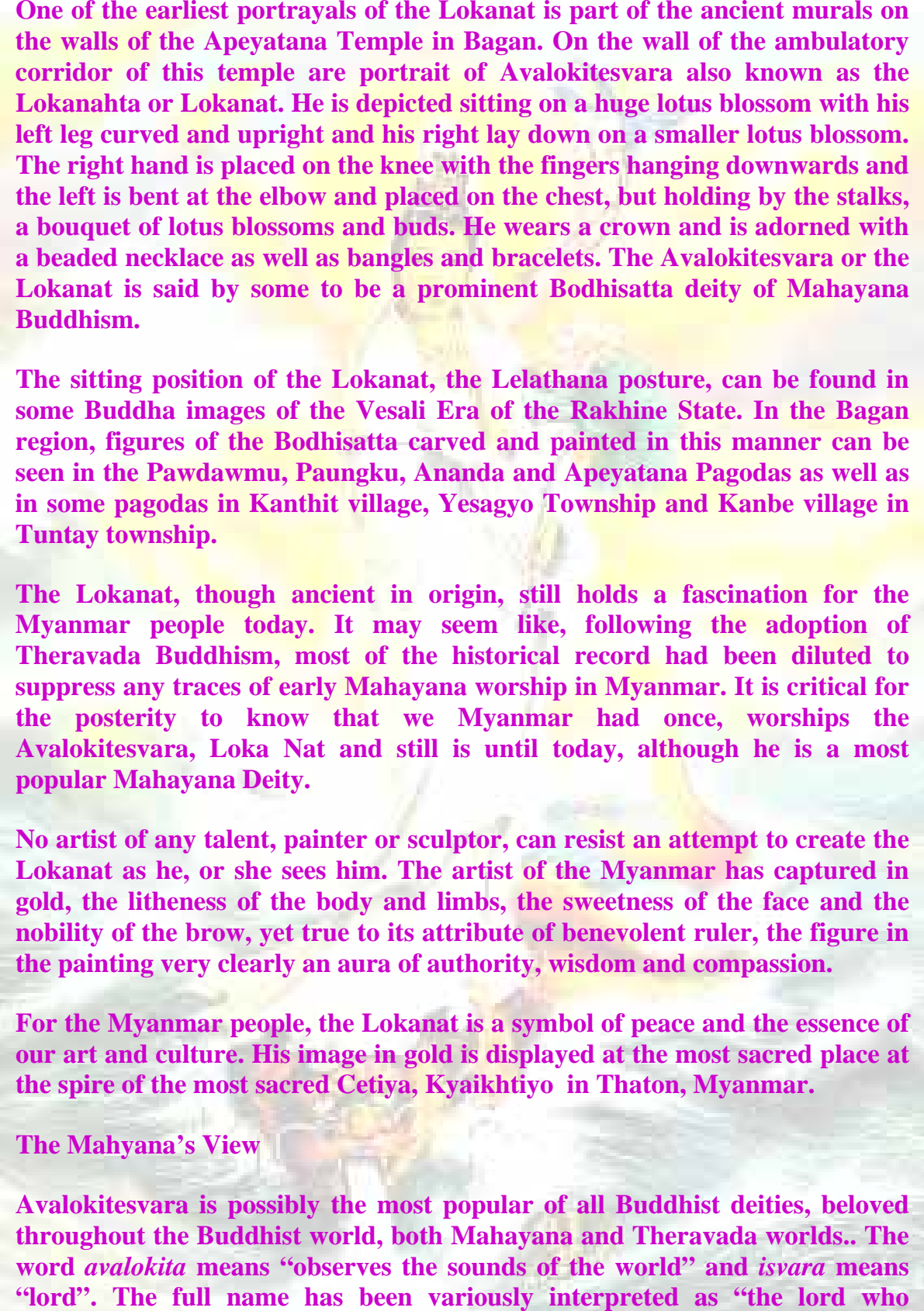
So the Lokanat was originally the title of the deity who is believed to keep eternal watch over the world. Later it came to denote a prince or a ruler whose benevolence and wisdom protected the people of the kingdom and bestowed good fortune. The renowned Buddhist monk Shin Maharahtathara, in Myanmar literature referred to King Saw Bramhadatt as Lokanat in his epic poem about Buridhatt, the future Buddha.

The very concept of a deity as gentle peacemaker seemed to have captured the innovative imagination of creativity, by artists. Myanmar sculptors and painters have fantasized greatly in their portrayals of many celestial beings and deities, but the figure of the Lokanat is different and special. He is always portrayed in a sitting position, slightly different from the original posture of Avalokitesvara, on a pedestal with a lotus-shaped platform. His posture is singular, sitting with one knee raised and the other laid down flat in a curved position with his feet clutching the musical timer cymbals. The hands are raised in a dance choreography with the delicacy and grace and suppleness of a bird's wing in flight; the face is a study of serenity, yet the upward tilt of the chin brings to it a touch of light and joy. It is no wonder that for us, the Lokanat figure has become synonymous with peace joy and artistry.

The Lokanat is the favorite subject of Myanmar's sculpture and painting. In fact many will say that the Lokanat is the logo of the visual arts in Myanmar. Its graceful figure is also frequently seen adorning the Myanmar traditional saing-waing (traditional orchestra), for he is regarded the patron of the performing arts as well. In fact, the Lokanat stands for peace and harmony, happiness and joy and all that is right and good. The figure is often placed in a prayer chamber or throne room. A Lokanat figure has been placed in the foreground of the Thihathana Throne now on display at the National Museum.

The lotus leaf pedestal of the Lokanat represents a leaf struggling out of the grip of the murky depths of a pond to emerge fresh and green on the water's surface, and the entwining vines are like wavelets lapping at the edges. For the Myanmar people, a lotus leaf signifies peace and purity, an escape from the frailty of mundane life into the sunlight of wisdom and truth. This is in complete harmony with the celestial figure which stands for peace and serenity.

It is said that Mahayana Buddhists pay homage to the Lokanat as a deity who watches over the universe, and some others believe that if one takes refuge in the Lokanat, one will be free of all dangers and will be rewarded with untold wealth and happiness.



One of the earliest portrayals of the Lokanat is part of the ancient murals on the walls of the Apeyatana Temple in Bagan. On the wall of the ambulatory corridor of this temple are portrait of Avalokitesvara also known as the Lokanahta or Lokanat. He is depicted sitting on a huge lotus blossom with his left leg curved and upright and his right lay down on a smaller lotus blossom. The right hand is placed on the knee with the fingers hanging downwards and the left is bent at the elbow and placed on the chest, but holding by the stalks, a bouquet of lotus blossoms and buds. He wears a crown and is adorned with a beaded necklace as well as bangles and bracelets. The Avalokitesvara or the Lokanat is said by some to be a prominent Bodhisatta deity of Mahayana Buddhism.

The sitting position of the Lokanat, the Lelathana posture, can be found in some Buddha images of the Vesali Era of the Rakhine State. In the Bagan region, figures of the Bodhisatta carved and painted in this manner can be seen in the Pawdawmu, Paungku, Ananda and Apeyatana Pagodas as well as in some pagodas in Kanthit village, Yesagyio Township and Kanbe village in Tuntay township.

The Lokanat, though ancient in origin, still holds a fascination for the Myanmar people today. It may seem like, following the adoption of Theravada Buddhism, most of the historical record had been diluted to suppress any traces of early Mahayana worship in Myanmar. It is critical for the posterity to know that we Myanmar had once, worships the Avalokitesvara, Loka Nat and still is until today, although he is a most popular Mahayana Deity.

No artist of any talent, painter or sculptor, can resist an attempt to create the Lokanat as he, or she sees him. The artist of the Myanmar has captured in gold, the liveness of the body and limbs, the sweetness of the face and the nobility of the brow, yet true to its attribute of benevolent ruler, the figure in the painting very clearly an aura of authority, wisdom and compassion.

For the Myanmar people, the Lokanat is a symbol of peace and the essence of our art and culture. His image in gold is displayed at the most sacred place at the spire of the most sacred Cetiya, Kyaikhtiyo in Thaton, Myanmar.

The Mahayana's View

Avalokitesvara is possibly the most popular of all Buddhist deities, beloved throughout the Buddhist world, both Mahayana and Theravada worlds.. The word *avalokita* means “observes the sounds of the world” and *isvara* means “lord”. The full name has been variously interpreted as “the lord who

hears/looks in every direction” and “the lord of hearing the deepest”. The great vow of Avalokitesvara is to listen to the supplications from those in difficulty in the world and to delay his own Buddhahood until he has helped every being on earth achieving enlightenment. Therefore, he is treated as the embodiment of all the Buddha’s’ compassion, the lord of infinite compassion in Mahayana Buddhism.

Avalokitesvara is also an emanation of Amitabha’s compassion and with Amitabha’s figure represented in his headdress. He guards the world in the interval between the departure of the historical Buddha, Sakyamuni, and the appearance of the future Buddha, Mettreyya. Based on scriptures of the Pure Land school that were translated into Chinese between the 3rd and 5th centuries, the Pure Land sect practitioner look to rebirth in the Western Paradise of the Buddha Amitabha, Avalokitesvara forms part of a ruling triad, along with Amitabha and the bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta. Images of the three are often placed together in temples.

According to the Chinese Tantric (Mi-tsung) school from Tang Dynasty, Avalokitesvara’s ability to assume innumerable forms that has led to thirty-three major representations. The following nine representations are the most famous ones. Among them the first seven has later become the famous Seven Avalokitesvara in Japanese Tantric (Shingon) school:

- (1) Sahasrabhuja (Senju), the 1,000 armed figure;
- (2) Ekadasamuhka (Ju-ichi-men), the 11 faced with 2-or 4-handed figure;
- (3) Cintamani cakra (Nyo-i-rin), the seated figure, with 6 arms, holding the wish-fulfilling jewel.
- (4) Amoghapasa (Fuku-kenjaku), the one with lasso and net, a form popular with the Tendai sect;
- (5) Hayagriva (Ba-to), the one with a fierce face and a horse's head in the hairdress;
- (6) Cundi (Jun-tei), the seated figure with 18 arms, the mother goddess;
- (7) Aryavalokitesvara (Sho), the sacred, simple form;
- (8) Palasambari (Ye-I), the one with leaf clothes, with 2 or 4 arms;

(9) Pandurarasini (Bai-I), the one with white clothes, with 2 arms;

Avalokitesvara's worship was introduced into China (as *Kuan-yin*) as early as the 1st century AD. Representations of the bodhisattva in China prior to the Sung dynasty (960–1126) were masculine in appearance. Later images displayed attributes of both genders is believed to be accordance with the Lotus Sutra where Avalokitesvara has the ability of assuming whatever form is required to relieve suffering and also has the power to grant children. Also because this bodhisattva is considered a mother-goddess, the representation in China has further interpreted in all female form around the 12th century. However soft contours of the body seen in statues and paintings have been intentionally combined with a visible moustache to emphasize the absence of sexual identity. The sacred site of Kuan-yin is the island of Pu-To (Mountain) near Ning-Po City (associated with the traditional mountain residence of the bodhisattva Potala).

Kuan-yin's worship probably reached Japan (called *Kannon*) by way of Korea soon after Buddhism was first introduced into the country from the mid-7th century. The worship of the bodhisattva was never confined to any one sect and continues to be widespread throughout Japan.

This bodhisattva was introduced into Tibet (called *Chenresig*- With a Pitying Look) in the 7th century, where he quickly became the most popular figure and successively reincarnated in each Dalai Lama. The most famous Tibetan mantras – “om mani padme hum”, translated as “the jewel in the lotus”, is credited with Avalokitesvara’s introduction to Tibet. In Tibet his images are frequently placed on hilltops. In Mongolia Avalokitesvara is called Nidü-ber üjegci (He Who Looks With the Eyes). The title used for him in Indochina and Thailand is Lokeshvara (Lord of the World).

Om Mani Padme Huum

Avalokitesvara is a Bodhisattva who represents compassion, and his mantra also symbolize that quality. Avalokitesvara means "The Lord Who Looks Down (in compassion)" There are various forms of Avalokitesvara (Chenrezig in Tibetan). The four-armed form is shown here. There is also a 1000-armed form -- the many arms symbolizing compassion in action. And in the far east, Avalokitesvara turned into the female Bodhisattva, Kuan Yin.

Om, has only a mystical meaning -- suggesting primordial reality. Mani means jewel, while Padme means lotus. Hum, like Om, has no conceptual meaning. Overall, the mantra is suggestive of the bringing together of the qualities of wisdom (the lotus) and compassion (the jewel). Just as the lotus

can exist in muddy water without being soiled, so wisdom can exist in an impure world without becoming contaminated..

This mantra is very widely chanted in Tibet, and not only chanted but carved onto stones, printed onto flags, and embossed onto prayer wheels. The illustration below shows the mantra's six syllables, which from left to right are: Om Ma Ni Pa Dme Hum.

Highly Revered Deity in Theravada Tradition

Lokesvara, Avalokitesvara or Loka Nat was highly revered in high esteem in the Theravada tradition that in the Kyaikhtiyoe Cetiya inscription it wishes that Catulokapala Deva (Deva of the four kings), Lokabyuha Nat Tha (Loka Nat, Sasana Saung Nat, Avalokitesvara or Lokesvara) Devas and Brahmas (Brahma who forewarn the impending danger to living beings) will rejoice in the undertaking of this renovation. There were ten images in gold enshrined at the spire of Kyaikhtiyoe Cetiya in Myanmar.

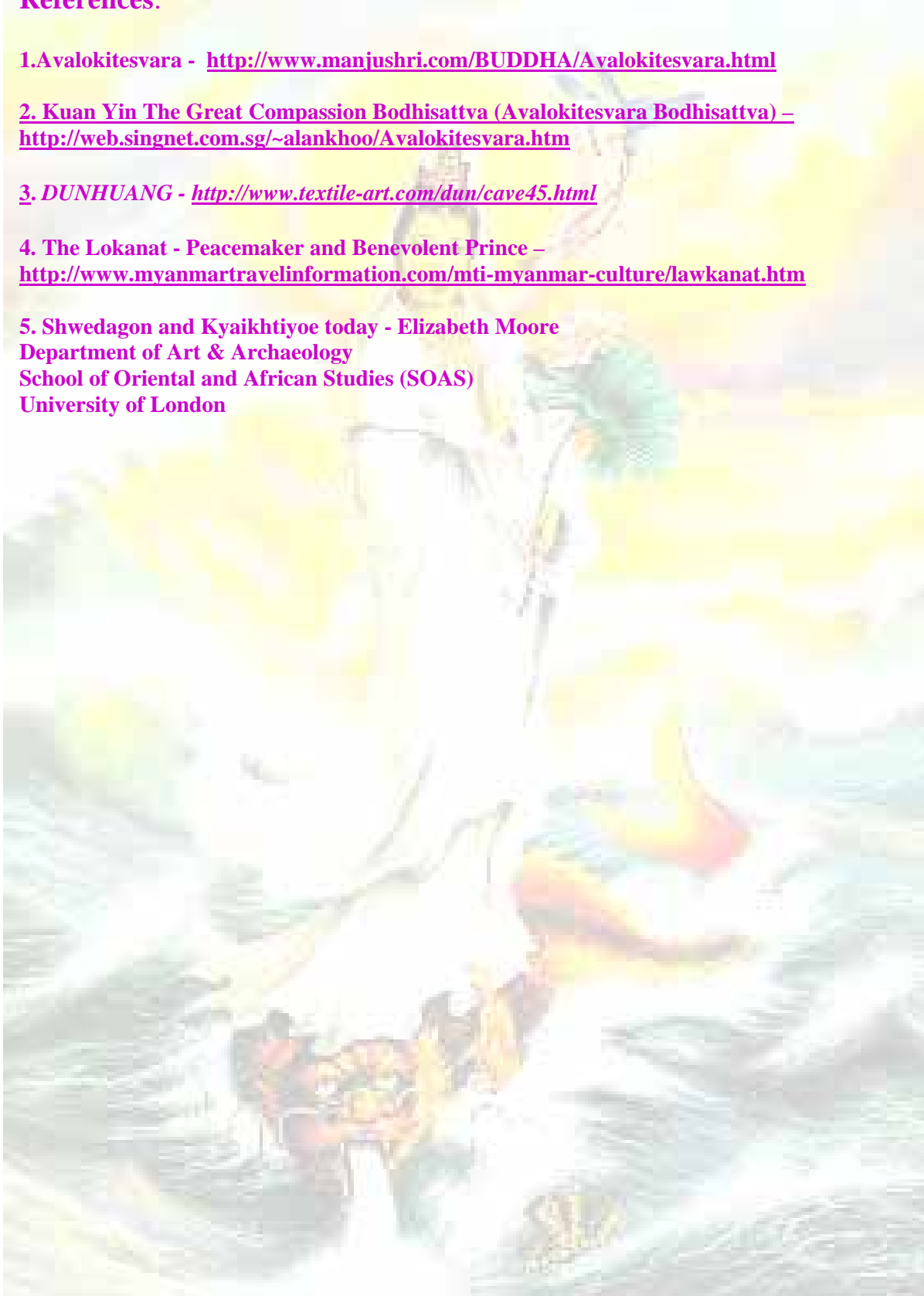
1. *Kakusandha*
2. *Konagamana*
3. *Kassapa*
4. *Gotama Buddha protected by Mucalinda Naga*
5. *Two hermits receiving hair relics from the Buddha*
6. *Mettreyya Buddha*
7. *Tissa Ya The (Thitta Yate)*
8. *Shin Thiwali (Sivali Thera)*
9. *Shin Upagote (Upagoa Thera)*
10. *Sakka – Thagyar Min – The king of Deva.*

May all beings be happy.
May they be joyous and live in safety.
All living beings, whether weak or strong,
in high or middle or low realms of existence,
small or great, visible or invisible,
near or far, born or to be born,
Let no one deceive another, nor despise any being in any state;
Let none by anger or hatred wish harm to another.
Even as a mother at the risk of her life watches over
and protects her only child,
so with a boundless mind should one cherish all living things,
suffusing love over the entire world, above, below,
and all around, without limit;
so let one cultivate an infinite good will toward the whole world.”

—Lord Buddha, The Metta Sutta

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Quan Shih Yin Pusa
(The Background Water Mark)

Sadhu ! Sadhu ! Sadhu !