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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RECITING – KINH PHỔ MÔN (觀世音菩薩普門品): A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF FEARLESSNESS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF GREED, ANGER AND DELUSION THROUGH RECOLLECTION OF AVALOKITEŚVARA (QUÁN THẾ ÂM BỒ TÁT)'S NAME

Nguyen Thi Nhien Trang[1], Dr. Le Hong Linh[2]
[1]Research Scholar, Department of Buddhist Studies, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Guntur-522510, Andhra Pradesh, India
Centre of Mahayana Buddhist Studies, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Guntur-522510, Andhra Pradesh, India

Abstract

How should a reader recite when a scripture recited in a situation where frightened beings recite themselves? This article considers the question with the Vietnamese Universal Gateway chapter translated by Most Ven. Thích Trí Tịnh. Its starting point is the contrast from the merchants' invocation of Avalokiteśvara (觀世音菩薩 – Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát) to the three declarations about greed, anger, and delusion. The merchants' agents hear each other before reciting bodhisattva together, where an afflicted person is asked to keep in mind bodhisattva repeatedly and respectfully. Reading these two scenes in combination, it is argued that a difference exists in the timing and address of compassion-invoking speech. Fearlessness is presented as a blessing bestowed on the frightened, while conquer of affliction concerns habitual desire, hatred, or ignorance. The verses raise the complication that even attackers armed with pistols, axes, and sticks can acquire a good heart, as can others who inflict harm on people to whom harm will be done. It is contended that recitation enables a reader to occupy various positions in these scenes, including that of someone able to soothe another. This represents an ethical potential of the text. Yet the more devotional statement is more powerful: The Buddha gives salvation to the power of Avalokiteśvara (觀世音菩薩 – Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát), and the last section of the assembly's response is a prayer for awakening.
*Keywords: Avalokiteśvara, Lotus Sūtra, Kinh Phổ Môn, fearlessness, recitation, Buddhist ethics*1.

THE QUESTION OF BENEFIT

A merchant crossing a perilous road announces a message to his fellow travelers. The pledge is not made in regard to himself: he asks, "invoke that who gives fearlessness." They heed him, invoke Avalokiteśvara (觀世音菩薩 – Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát), and are safe. Even in just a few lines, in that Buddha talks about a person who is habitually enraged. There are no armed enemies and no colleagues to persuade here, and yet the person is brought before the same bodhisattva (PM, 2024, p. 12). Which notion of benefit can hold both answers to suffering? What strikes home mainly for someone reading aloud is that the reciter speaks aloud both the call for aid and the words that, in this case, enable a frightened traveler to cooperate in response. This chapter is one part of a text whose audiences have read its promises in worlds very different from the one in which they were written (Lopez & Stone, 2019). Accounts of encounters with Kuan-yin left behind stories that were understood by communities as expressions of the bodhisattva's response (Yü, 1998). Yü's more expansive investigation charts the significance of images, pilgrimage, and local stories in shaping the identity of that figure (Yü, 2001). These investigations suggest that we should listen with care to the language of aid that appears in the chapter. But they do not conclude the foreground question, of what is said to shift in each sentence of the Vietnamese version. We have to stop and listen to who is speaking, who is hearing, and what exactly is heard. And this enquiry separates recitation of the chapter, calling a name and remembering a person. A person can hear the account of the merchants without calling the name; same thing, a traveler can call the name without reciting the account. The texts separate hearing the name from calling it single-mindedly (PM, 2024, p. 10). Their verses associate hearing a name, seeing a form, and recollecting with words nearby (PM, 2024, p. 19). Recitation matters because it makes the acts available as an intelligibly linked set; its moral value depends on where the reader is directed to hear and say,

ISSN: 3107-6513

and the efficacy credited to calling on the name depends on the bodhisattva in the Buddha's account.

TEXT, TRANSLATION AND METHOD

Primary text the only primary is the Universal Gateway chapter in Kinh Phổ Môn, English edition by Thích Trí Tịnh, published by Đạo Tràng Liên Hoa in 2024. Hereafter PM. The chapter the chapter starts on page 10 with Vô Tận Ý's question and ends on page 24 with the assembly's wish. The phrase translated asthe prayer before the chapter and the mantras beginning after the last paragraph of the chapter is part of the praises in the service of the chapter (PM 2024 pp (PM, 2024, pp. 9–10, 24). 9–10, 24). In Vietnamese sources the chapter reflects the words of the edition. My English language uses "reciting" to refer to speaking the chapter aloud, either alone or with others, but not simply reading it silently. I translate niệm in its immediate context as "remember", "call to mind" or, when people speak together, "invoke".

But there is a reason to name the object of the recitation. When it comes to Fujii's study of Nichiren Buddhism, it is the title of the Lotus Sūtra (Fujii, 2023). For the merchants' scene it is the name of the bodhisattva chanted by the party (PM, 2024, p. 12). Eubanks's work on medieval Japanese textual culture illuminates how the relationship between a scripture and the body of its believers can become a theme for Buddhist stories (Eubanks, 2011). Her historical materials suggest a question here: whose words roll out of a reader's mouth? They do not provide proof about how a particular Vietnamese community recites. My point is about what the edition offers up to the reader.

The method involves following the narrative twice. The first reading identifies the grammatical subject of each act and the recipient of its benefit. The second reading examines whether the verses maintain or modify these relationships. For example, the prose frees the party from an attack, while one verse alters the attackers' disposition themselves (PM 2024 pp (PM, 2024, pp. 12, 20). 12, 20). A philosophical interpretation must account for this difference. Research on moral phenomenology enables inquiry into how a situation appears to an agent before the agent decides what to do (Garfield, 2022, pp. 29–42). Studies supporting this approach also recognize the specific Buddhist traditions from which their arguments emerge (Simonds, 2021). I apply that question selectively. It sheds light on the change in an attacker's perspective, but a broken weapon, a broken chain, or a safe landing still represent changes in the narrated world (PM 2024 pp (PM, 2024, pp. 10–11, 20). 10–11, 20).

WHO GIVES FEARLESSNESS?

The first question in Vô Tận Ý is about a name: "Ngài Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát do nhơn duyên gì mà tên là Quán Thế Âm?" [Through what causes and conditions is the bodhisattva named Quán Thế Âm?] (PM, 2024, p. 10). With the answer – "people in peril" -we recognize one calling out the name as others also take help. Names are comprehensible, if at all, for the circumstances in which they are invoked, and the immediate distinctive detail of the first maritime story is the mismatch of numbers – one person calling out the name as others escape (PM, 2024, p. 11).

On the road now the resolution again rests with one individual, but all speak. "Chớ có sợ sệt!" [Don't be afraid!] we hear to other traders (PM, 2024, p. 12). An imperative alone might have been a rebuke. The traveller turns this into a reassurance by endowing it with an explanation of why they may be at ease and words they may join in as a group. The traveller doesn't dictate that the road is safe and that they shouldn't be scared. Their fear is so just that they may boast speech. The group join in with the mandated words, "Nam Mô Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát" [Pay homage to Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (觀世音菩薩 – Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát)] (PM, 2024, p. 12). They recite twice, once as the person who encourages others to speak, second as the person who receives encouragement.

Later the Buddha gives Avalokiteśvara (觀世音菩薩 – Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát) the name "Thí Vô Úy" [Giver of Fearlessness] (PM, 2024, p. 17). The verb of giving is significant. It would be no problem for the man of penury to receive an assurance that he could hardly have invented unaided. In the same way, the man unprotected by any good deed might give the assurance he receives. The merchant illustrates the second; he takes the bodhisattva's role without eliding it. The Buddha explicitly attributes the group's deliverance to the bodhisattva's strength (PM, 2024, p. 12). Miracle collections of the past reveal how seriously devotees took the threat of being answered (Yü, 1998). It would be no explanation to tell of the merchants' recovery of gravity alone.

ISSN: **3107-6513**

The former prisoner adds an additional test. The prose gives us a guilty candidate as well as an innocent one (PM, 2024, p. 11). The chance of rescue itself is before any determination of the sufferer's deserts. Breaking out of shackles does not determine guilt, nor does it provide any obligation to another person. A weaker version of the moral import is strong enough: the sufferer does not need to demonstrate initial innocence to the writer's judgment to be within the reach of compassion. Verse turns to chains again, placing close again the body and the fracture of body and the capacity to grow free again (PM, 2024, p. 20).

GREED, ANGER AND DELUSION

The change to affliction does not shift the speaker. The road is clear, but the Buddha continues: "Nếu có chúng sanh nhiều tham lam, thường cung kính niệm Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát, liền hết tham lam." [If beings are much given to greed and regularly remember Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (觀世音菩薩 – Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát) with reverence, their greed immediately ceases.] (PM, 2024, p. 12). Two words of time do different work. Thường modifies the way in which this remembering occurs on successive occasions. Liền modifies the Buddha's directness in proclaiming the result. Nothing indicates any timeline for improvement. To say it that greed is gradually reduced by small steps would discard liền. To say that a single utterance is enough would discard thường.

The distinction between wanting something and being governed by greed is in particular important here. The chapter knows merchants who carry valuables and passengers seeking jewels (PM, 2024, pp. 10–12). It later describes a costly necklace willingly offered to the bodhisattva (PM, 2024, pp. 17–18). Possession alone because of this cannot identify the affliction. A person given to greed encounters value chiefly as something to secure for oneself. Reverent recollection introduces a different object of sustained interest: a figure whose distinction consists in what can be given to others. This is my reconstruction of the ethical connection. The explicit explanation in the passage is the bodhisattva's power (PM, 2024, p. 12). Garfield's account of ethical change as a change in how a person experiences the world helps articulate the reconstruction (Garfield, 2022, pp. 29–42).

The second sentence states, "Nếu ngườI nhiều giận hờn, thường cung kính niệm Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát, liền hết giận hờn." [If a person is often filled with anger and resentment and regularly reveres Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (觀世音菩薩 – Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát) in remembrance, that anger and resentment will immediately cease.] (PM, 2024, p. 12). The term giận hờn can also refer to a grievance that one continues to harbor. Someone who feels wronged may recognize a genuine injustice but come to view the wrongdoer merely as deserving of suffering. The verses envision precisely the opposite transformation occurring in armed attackers (PM, 2024, p. 20). McRae identifies different moments within the experience of angersome when intervention is possible and others when it is much more difficult (McRae, 2012, pp. 365–366). This distinction helps clarify why habitual remembrance carries ethical importance, even though one cannot simply will a feeling to arise or disappear on demand. The chapter offers a firmer assurance about the cessation of anger than this philosophical comparison alone can provide.

"Nếu ngườI nhiều ngu si, thường cung kính niệm Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát, liền hết ngu si." [If a person is greatly given to delusion and regularly reveres Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (觀世音菩薩 – Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát), that delusion immediately ceases.] (PM, 2024, p. 12). The challenge here is epistemic: how can reverence alter what someone understands? The verse links the bodhisattva's regard with both wisdom and compassion within the same stanza (PM, 2024, p. 22). This juxtaposition suggests a possible explanation. To see an enemy only as a threat is to overlook something knowable about that being, including the potential for a change of intention. Devotion focuses attention on one whose regard can encompass that possibility. This interpretation addresses a specific failure of understanding. The Vietnamese term ngu si alone does not establish a full theory of ignorance.

WHAT CHANGES WHEN PROSE BECOMES VERSE?

"Do sức niệm Quán Âm" [Through the power of recollecting Quán Âm] happens repeatedly over various dangerous situations (PM, 2024, pp. 19–21). By the time the reader begins to get used to the line, the next is unexpected: fire becomes a pond, a fall does no

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harm, a sword snaps. Repetition gives a steady verbal line for the reader, but highlights other kinds of relief. Literary form is important for an interpretation of recitation: a reader can memorize a line to say next without yet knowing what rescue it points to. The line-by-line analyses of the Lotus treat literary devices as part of their religious argument (Lopez & Stone, 2019).One stanza begins with armed robbers surrounding their victim. It concludes with the line "Đều liền sanh lòng lành." [They all immediately give rise to goodwill.] (PM, 2024, p. 20). The attackers are the most natural grammatical subject, considering the previous line about those who carry knives. In this interpretation, the endangered person's release involves others ceasing to wish harm. The attackers also experience a change: they leave the encounter with a different intention. This shift complicates a clear separation between external rescue and internal transformation. The victim's external rescue and the assailants' internal change describe the same event from different perspectives. Moral phenomenology offers terminology for the change in how another being is perceived (Garfield, 2022, pp. 29–42). The verse situates its occasion in the recollection of Quán Âm (PM, 2024, p. 20).The next page defies facile generalisation. The poem in the double stanzas on curses and poisons ends "Trở hạI nơI ngườI hại." [The harm returns upon the one who would inflict it.] (PM, 2024, p. 21). Here we hear no report of a change of heart. The two results form a ceiling on the assertion that compassion in this chapter can always lead to rapprochement. One poem envisions the aggressor revising his benefactions; the other maintains the moral depravity of intending injurious harm. The practitioner may hope to elicit the first outcome, but nowhere is the second outcome there to tell him to give inducements to harm. As in the first poem, the technique produces a result and no victim is counselled to heal the enemy. (PM, 2024, pp. 20–21).

The sound of the language changes through the rest of the verses. The one who suffers first utters the name; next, voices summon Quán Âm, the sound of the tide (PM 2024 pp (PM, 2024, pp. 10, 23). 10, 23). Then "Cho nên thường phảI niệm." [Because of this one should keep in mind?] (PM, 2024, p. 23). There is one voice raising the cry of one in peril, and another voice that is worthy of calling on repeatedly. Reading aloud allows the devotee to hear these accounts. My work on embodied scriptural reading explains why voice is such a matter worth calling attention to (Eubanks, 2011). Only observation and testimony could make claims about how a given listener receives the voice.

WHAT THE GIFT OF A NECKLACE ADDS

Vô Tận Ý inquires about the ways the bodhisattva teaches and interacts with the world. The response lists various forms through which a listener might be reached, including those of a monk or nun, as well as a boy or girl (PM, 2024, pp. 14–17). Here, the ability to respond suitably is more important than a single visible identity. Yü records how the bodhisattva's gendered depictions evolved in Chinese settings (Yü, 2001). The Vietnamese passage addresses a more immediate concern. A being approached in a familiar form has the opportunity to listen. Compassion considers the recipient's situation even when the teaching given remains the Dharma.

An apparent interruption occurs. Vô Tận Ý removes an expensive necklace and offers it to Avalokiteśvara (觀世音菩薩 – Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát), who at first refuses (PM, 2024, p. 17). If the discussion ended there, it might imply that freedom from greed is simply about rejecting wealth. Yet, the Buddha asks Avalokiteśvara (觀世音菩薩 – Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát) to accept the necklace out of care for the assembly. The bodhisattva accepts the necklace, divides it, and makes two offerings (PM, 2024, p. 18). Receiving can itself be an act of generosity when it honors the giver and enables the gift to extend further. Ethically, what matters is who benefits from the act of receiving. The same object can be a possession, a relinquishment, and a new offering without altering its material value.

This time it has a bearing on the previous statement about greed. The statement on greed declares that it is over, but it never characterizes what the old miser will do next (PM, 2024, p. 12). The necklace informs us about what a different stance toward a valuable thing might be (PM, 2024, pp. 17–18). It does not treat Vô Tận Ý as a reformed miser. Philosophically, a link between the episodes is possible without making the latter a narrative case. The way is guided by an insight shared by research on the moral experience of Buddhism: shifts in perceptual attention matter no less than an act denoted by a classification (Garfield, 2022, pp. 29–42; Simonds, 2021).

ISSN: **3107-6513**

Harder still is after these episodes. The chapter offers a woman a child who reveres Avalokiteśvara (觀世音菩薩 – Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát) and promises a boy and girl different valued goods (PM, 2024, p. 13). A holistic reading must make space for goods in people's existing aspirations, even when attributing these generally gendered notions of value. The text never suggests that a request for a child is greed and does not require each petition to state its desired good in the same way. The extension from a desired child to offered necklace clarifies why "benefit" can generally be captured as moral self-cultivation. The scripture reaches out to someone's desire before beginning to list the many ways the bodhisattva can look (PM, 2024, pp. 13–16).

THE REACH AND LIMITS OF RECITATION

A devotional obstacle now needs addressing. If giving ethical importance to the merchant's speech is simply authorising rescue to come from humankind, at the cost of Avalokiteśvara (觀世音菩薩 – Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát), here is an exact answer. 'The merchant makes it clear whose power they can trust. Their confession appears after his speech; their deliverance appears after their confession' (PM, 2024, p. 12). They are compatible because they respond to different questions. 'Who offers the party the opportunity to act together? A fellow-traveller. Who does the Buddha credit with their deliverance?... Avalokiteśvara (觀世音菩薩 – Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát).' The words of the fellow-traveller has their ethics, within a story of deliverance more readily characterised as devotional. The studies of the bodhisattva cult confirm the value of maintaining this attribution (Yü, 1998, 2001). Another objection urges to the contrary. If the immediately freeing of the anger can be won with remembering to the name, what is there for a reader of the words to do on the next day? The repeated thường of the text and the later request to remember of that regularly prohibits treating an invocation from the past as an alternative to similar attention in the present (PM 2024 pp (PM, 2024, pp. 12, 23). 12, 23). Still, the promise of immediacy seems preserved. One way of reading the conjunction involves tell a difference between a disposition to longantennam over an elapsed duration of time and a single event of an old grievance to no longer choosing a person's reactions (McRae, 2012, pp. 365–366). The scripture leaves undecided for the volume of these events is preliminary the strike that it celebrates.

And so what can a modern reader apply from the text? Imagine a reader with a traveller in distress. While the merchant's example presents a hypothetical question to the companion it can be asked in real terms: what can I say truthfully to allow this person to face this instant? It is significant that the merchant's words come from in-between danger to a shared suffering (PM, 2024, pp. 11–12). Even look to a reader returning to the speaker: it is proposed that calling the line where attackers gain good will allows the reader to envisage an adversary with another intention (PM, 2024, p. 20). These are ethic demands of the scenes, but an intertextual analysis cannot determine the frequency with which chanting results in each. It would also be unhelpful to suggest that no devotion was shown when a sufferer continued to be distressed (PM, 2024, p. 11).

The narration's last gesture has the most complete answer. The hearers "đều phátâm Vô Thượng Chánh Đẳng Chánh Giác" [all establish the intent for undistinguished perfectly-shown non-hesitating enlightenment] (PM, 2024, p. 24). Hearing instantiates aspiration in people who've just heard what Avalokiteśvara (觀世音菩薩 – Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát) can do. Their imagining extends far beyond the common fear of death. Framed by the promise of lives of immeasurable merit for holding the name (PM, 2024, pp. 13–14), this ending presents benefit as a widening of what a hearer can come to hope for. The narration leaves them at the beginning of that process.

CONCLUSION

Reciting Kinh Phổ Môn becomes not only a riddle of oratorical excellence. It is a philosophical riddle, which begins to be unraveled at the moment when the traders' utterance is absorbed under that of the Buddha for greed, hatred, and delusion. A danger demands an utterance in unison. Suchness of a pervading habit demands reverent remembrance of occasions (PM, 2024, p. 12). The verses furnish a paradigmatic occasion where these currents converge: whoever menaces perish when knives are wielded by individuals who gain goodwill (PM, 2024, p. 20). The chapter's conception of compassion is demanding: it leaves space for the moral future of the occasioning individual of the fear and the safety of the fearful individual.

ISSN: **3107-6513**

A person who recites the entire chapter aloud expresses a frightened individual, a comforting companion, and a teacher who inquires how people might receive help. This variety of roles is the unique contribution of reading the chapter aloud to the question addressed here. Calling out a name in danger seeks a response. Revisiting the story of that call also enables a reader to recognize when someone else needs another person to speak first. The authority behind both possibilities is the same figure whom the chapter identifies as the Giver of Fearlessness (PM, 2024, p. 17). The chapter's final image depicts listeners forming their own aspiration (PM, 2024, p. 24).

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