

Kwan Yin

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Kwan Yin is the figure of compassion whom Blavatsky calls the Mother of Mercy and Knowledge. In her Theosophical cosmology the name also carries a meaning of Divine Voice, associated with Kwan-Shai-Yin and the Logos. Professor Iyer develops its inward and ethical significance through the voice of conscience and the vow to serve all beings. The devotional, cosmic and psychological meanings belong in relation, but each needs its own context.

This places Kwan Yin within the architecture of manifestation itself. H.P. Blavatsky connects her with the Logos, *Daiviprakriti*, *Mulaprakriti*, *Avalokiteshvara*, *Vach* and *Fohat*. She is the Mother, Wife and Daughter of the Logos — the *Shakti* or Energy, the essence of the three. She is not merely female in the ordinary biological sense. Esoterically, the highest principles are sexless and formless. Kwan Yin's feminine symbolism points to merciful receptivity, creative potency and compassionate mediation.

These correspondences are interpretations within the sources, not evidence that every religious tradition uses its symbols identically. Sacred speech in a cosmological account concerns the emergence of manifestation; conscience concerns the human capacity to respond inwardly to truth. Professor Iyer relates such levels through analogy. Following the analogy requires care: an ordinary sound is not thereby a cosmic creative act, and an inward impression should still be examined with discrimination.

Kwan Yin is also the Divine Voice. Kwan-Yin-Tien is called the melodious heaven of Sound, the abode of Kwan Yin. H.P. Blavatsky links this Voice with the *Verbum*, with Speech as the expression of thought, with *Bath-Kol*, the Daughter of the Divine Voice, and with *Vach*, the Hindu goddess of speech and the Word. Kwan Yin therefore belongs to the mystery of sacred utterance: the power of compassionate sound to call, soothe, bless and awaken.

Professor Iyer deepens this teaching by saying that there is something of Kwan Yin in every human being. There is an audible voice of compassion, tenderness and truth even in brutalized and aggressive natures. This element of pure tenderness is indestructible and coeval with life itself. This is one of the most hopeful teachings associated with Kwan Yin. It does not excuse cruelty or delusion, but it refuses to identify any being wholly with ignorance. Somewhere within every soul there remains a latent possibility of conscience and mercy.

This is why Kwan Yin is inseparable from Human Solidarity and Universal Brotherhood. If there is a latent Kwan Yin in every being, then no one is outside the field of possible awakening. The

task of the student is to serve the hidden tenderness in beings, even when the outer personality is difficult or disturbed. This is not sentimental indulgence. It is a disciplined refusal to despair of the spiritual possibility of any human being.

The Kwan Yin pledge is the ethical heart of the term. It is not a vague wish to be kind, but a movement of consciousness from self-concern to the welfare of all beings. Professor Iyer teaches that when the task involves self-forgetfulness and reaching out to all human beings, one's own progress becomes secondary. Consciousness becomes occupied with the larger welfare of the human race. The pledge transforms spiritual growth from private attainment into service.

A vow must germinate in silence and ripen through suffering. This does not glorify pain, but it recognizes that suffering can become creative when consecrated to a larger purpose. The Kwan Yin pledge has self-correction built into it, because it continually exposes self-deception. One cannot sincerely take such a pledge and remain absorbed in one's own drama. The vow cools the fever of self-importance by returning attention to the ubiquity of suffering and the possibility of service.

Kwan Yin is bound up with fire and water. She is connected with the primordial Light of the Logos, the pristine source of all creativity and the hidden power in every human being to produce a beneficent result. Yet when this light descends into human consciousness, it becomes like cool water. It soothes, sustains and extinguishes the flames of craving and personal agony. This cooling is not indifference. It is wisdom that reduces the destructive heat of self-concern and makes compassion possible.

Kwan Yin is rooted in Boundless Space. Because of this, her compassion is not merely personal sympathy stretched beyond its limits. It is attributeless compassion in Eternal Duration, the paradigm of vows and pledges taken by pilgrims throughout unrecorded history. At the ordinary level, latent Kwan Yin is conscience. In the developed disciple, it is *Chitkala*. At the highest level, it is *Nada*, the Voice of the Silence, the Soundless Sound reverberating in the *Anahata*, the deathless heart-centre.

The Voice of the Silence gives the decisive question: "Can there be bliss when all that lives must suffer? Shalt thou be saved and hear the whole world cry?" This is the Bodhisattva current at the heart of Kwan Yin. Enlightenment cannot be hoarded as private light. The true servant of the Heart Doctrine learns to hear the world's cry without despair and to respond without vanity.

Kwan Yin therefore helps *Manas* turn toward *Buddhi*. *Manas* can analyze suffering, explain it or defend against it. *Buddhi* hears suffering from within the unity of life. When *Manas* turns toward *Buddhi*, thought becomes merciful and compassion becomes intelligent. The human being begins

to become self-determining and self-conscious in relation to the evolutionary process, choosing not merely what to think, but what kind of presence to become.

Kwan Yin also teaches stewardship of speech and listening. Human language can heat the psycho-mental atmosphere, intensify conflict and scatter consciousness. Speech aligned with Kwan Yin is born from silence, deep thought and true feeling. Listening aligned with Kwan Yin hears beneath complaint, anger and fear for the hidden life beneath confusion. In family, friendship, work and solitude, this listening cools rather than inflames.

This gives the term its quiet ordinary-life usefulness. The angry word can become a truthful pause. The hot memory can be cooled before it becomes retaliation. The wish to be understood can become the willingness to understand. These small acts are not sentimental. They are trainings in the Divine Voice, ways of making compassion educable and usable.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception can begin when a complaint is heard without immediately preparing a defence. A colleague who sounds accusing may also be describing an obstacle that has been overlooked. Listening does not require accepting every accusation. It allows the practical difficulty to be distinguished from the anger surrounding it. A response can then address what is true, clarify what is mistaken, and leave less needless hurt behind. The cooling action comes from attention joined to honesty.

The transmutation of suffering is not the denial of suffering. Personal grief can become tenderness toward the grief of others. Shame can become humility. One's own need for mercy can become a more exact mercy toward another. In this way suffering is not wasted; it becomes a teacher, a purifier of speech and a cooling stream through which the heart learns not to close.

The cooling stream remains a useful image of Kwan Yin's compassionate voice. It suggests a response that can enter an inflamed situation without adding another source of heat. We can begin by listening accurately, speaking truth without needless injury, and letting another person's difficulty matter. Such work honours the possibility of conscience within every human being and makes our own attention more available to the shared life it serves.

Glossary

Adam Kadmon — The archetypal or Heavenly Man in Kabbalistic symbolism; invoked in the quotation as a correspondence to the Logos.

Anahata — Unstruck; in Professor Iyer's passage, the deathless heart-centre associated with the Soundless Sound.

Androgynous — Having masculine and feminine aspects in one symbolic form; used in Blavatsky's account of the Logos.

Anthropomorphism — Representing a spiritual or metaphysical principle in the form of a human person; anthropomorphized is the related verb.

Attribute — A quality assigned to something; in these essays, any predicate that would limit the Absolute if applied literally.

Avalokiteshvara — The Buddhist figure of compassion identified in Blavatsky's cited cosmology with Kwan-Shai-Yin and the Logos.

Bath-Kol — The Daughter of the Voice; a Hebrew term used by Professor Iyer in a comparison concerning a merciful inward response.

Bodhisattva — A being on the path of awakening and compassion. The sources distinguish human, metaphysical and hierarchical uses of the term.

Brahma Vach — The sacred Word; Professor Iyer's expression emphasizing the living relation of wisdom, thought, silence and speech.

Buddhi — The spiritual soul or vehicle of *Atman*, associated with intuitive discernment and the illumination of *Manas*.

Chitkala — A ray or spark of consciousness; Professor Iyer associates it here with the developed disciple's inward perception.

Coeval — Of the same duration or origin; the quotation describes tenderness as inseparable from life itself.

Correspondence — A meaningful relation between principles or levels, especially between human and cosmic constitution; resemblance alone does not establish identity.

Cosmology — An account of the structure and principles of the universe.

Daiviprakriti — The Light of the Logos; divine primordial light in the Theosophical account of manifestation.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception — Widening the frame of understanding to include more relations, perspectives, and responsibilities.

Elemental forces — Forces of Nature associated with subtle lives in the Theosophical account quoted here.

Eswara — A spelling of *Ishvara*, the Lord; used in the quotation concerning *Daiviprakriti* and the Logos.

Eternal Duration — A metaphysical conception beyond measured time and successive events.

Fohat — The dynamic power linking cosmic ideation with manifested life; Fohatic means pertaining to this power.

Heart Doctrine — The teaching of inward realization joined to compassion, distinguished from a merely external grasp of spiritual forms.

Human Solidarity — Shared human dignity and interdependence, expressed through considerate responsibility for others.

Ideation — The activity or formative power of thought; in the sources, also the spiritual patterns underlying manifestation.

Initiation — A deepening of spiritual knowledge and corresponding capacities, distinguished from an outward ceremony alone.

Kwan Yin — The figure of compassion called the Mother of Mercy and Knowledge; also the Divine Voice in the Theosophical symbolism discussed here.

Kwan Yin pledge — The bodhisattvic commitment described by Professor Iyer, directed toward the welfare and liberation of all beings.

Kwan-Shai-Yin — The Logos in Blavatsky's symbolic account, identified there with *Avalokiteshvara* and related to Kwan Yin.

Kwan-Yin-Tien — The melodious heaven of sound in Blavatsky's quoted cosmological symbolism.

Latency — A condition in which a possibility or power is present without differentiated expression; latent is the related adjective.

Life-atoms — In the quoted Theosophical account, subtle living units through which beneficent influence is described.

Logos — The spiritual principle of divine ideation and manifestation; the sources distinguish its unmanifest and active aspects.

Manas — The thinking principle or self-conscious mind; its higher individuality and lower personal ray are distinguished. Manasic means pertaining to *Manas*.

Manifestation — The expression of reality through differentiated forms, relations, and conditions.

Metaphysics — Inquiry into the fundamental principles and relations of reality beyond immediate appearances.

Mulaprakriti — Pre-cosmic root-substance or root-nature; the veil through which the Absolute is approached and the ground of differentiated nature.

Nada — Spiritual sound; associated with the Soundless Sound in *The Voice of the Silence*.

Noumenon — An underlying reality or intelligible ground distinguished from its appearance; noumena is the plural and noumenal the adjective.

Ontology — Inquiry into being and reality; ontological distinctions concern what something is and its mode of existence.

Parabrahm — The unconditioned, Secondless Reality, also written Parabrahman or *Parabrahmam*; distinguished from every relational expression within manifestation.

Personality — The temporary personal constitution, memories, and roles of a particular life, distinguished from the enduring individuality.

Primordial — Belonging to the earliest or underlying level of manifestation in the metaphysical account.

Psychic — Pertaining to personal and subtle awareness shaped by impressions and desire; not by itself equivalent to spiritual wisdom.

Renunciation — Relinquishment of selfish claims or attachment, so that thought and action can serve a wider purpose.

Sakti — A spelling of *Shakti*, power or energy; in the quotation, the feminine potency associated with the manifested Logos.

Sephira — A singular divine emanation or potency in Kabbalistic symbolism; the quotation uses it in a comparison with feminine creative power.

Tathagata — A title of the Buddha; the cited passage speaks of awakened predecessors as exemplars of compassion.

Tetragrammaton — The four-letter divine name of Hebrew tradition; invoked in the quoted symbolic comparison.

Theogony — An account of the origin and relations of divine beings or principles.

Tsong-Kha-Pa — The Tibetan Buddhist reformer named in Professor Iyer's comparison of the cosmic Kwan Yin with the figure of a compassionate nun.

Ubiquity — Presence everywhere; used of suffering in the quoted discussion of the vow.

Universal Brotherhood — The spiritual kinship of beings, expressed ethically through care extending beyond personal or sectarian boundaries.

Vach — The Word or spiritual speech; related in the quotations to the Logos and *Brahma Vach*.

Vedanta — A family of Indian philosophical traditions drawing upon the *Upanishads*; the essays identify Professor Iyer's particular Theosophical interpretation.

Verbum — Latin for Word; used as a designation of the Logos, the manifesting spiritual intelligence.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I, p. 136, explanatory note.

"Esotericism ignores both sexes. Its highest Deity is sexless as it is formless, neither Father nor Mother ; and its first manifested beings, celestial and terrestrial alike, become only gradually androgynous and finally separate into distinct sexes."

Meditation thought: Blavatsky distinguishes the formless from the symbolic polarities of manifestation. This cautions us against treating cosmic principles as enlarged versions of ordinary human identities.

2. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I, p. 136.

"The Mother of Mercy and Knowledge is called "the triple" of Kwan-Shai-Yin because in her correlations, metaphysical and cosmical, she is the "Mother, the Wife and the Daughter" of the Logos, just as in the later theological translations she became "the Father, Son and (the female) Holy Ghost" — the *Sakti* or Energy — the Essence of the three. Thus in the Esotericism of the Vedantins, *Daiviprakriti*, the Light manifested through *Eswara*, the Logos, is at one and the same time the Mother and also the Daughter of the Logos or *Verbum* of *Parabrahmam*; while in that of the trans-Himalayan teachings it is—in the hierarchy of allegorical and metaphysical theogony—"the Mother" or abstract, ideal matter, *Mulaprakriti*, the Root of Nature."

Meditation thought: Blavatsky distinguishes aspects within a symbolic unity. Study the relation she proposes without reducing its several names to interchangeable labels for an imagined person.

3. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I, p. 137.

"Kwan-Yin-Tien means the "melodious heaven of Sound," the abode of Kwan-Yin, or the "Divine Voice" literally. This "Voice" is a synonym of the *Verbum* or the Word: "Speech," as the expression of thought. Thus may be traced the connection with, and even the origin of the Hebrew *Bath-Kol*, the "daughter of the Divine Voice," or *Verbum*, or the male and female Logos, the "Heavenly Man" or Adam Kadmon, who is at the same time *Sephira*. The latter was surely anticipated by the Hindu *Vach*, the goddess of Speech, or of the Word."

Meditation thought: The heaven of sound is a cosmological symbol. Let its beauty invite inquiry into ordered manifestation rather than a search for unusual auditory experiences.

4. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I, p. 72.

“Kwan-Shai-Yin is identical with, and an equivalent of the Sanskrit *Avalokiteshwara*, and as such he is an androgynous deity, like the Tetragrammaton and all the Logoi of antiquity. It is only by some sects in China that he is anthropomorphized and represented with female attributes, when, under his female aspect, he becomes Kwan-Yin, the goddess of mercy, called the “Divine Voice.””

Meditation thought: The correspondence belongs to Blavatsky’s interpretive account. Precision about that setting makes comparison more illuminating and prevents a symbol from becoming a universal historical assertion.

5. R.N. Iyer, “The Light of the Logos”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I, p. 51.

“In such comparisons there is a deeply suggestive analogy between Kwan Yin as the Divine Voice, the Mother of Mercy and Knowledge, and Kwan Yin, the noble nun in the time of *Tsong-Kha-Pa*. Kwan Yin’s great pledge of renunciation and service is the spontaneous expression of an exalted state of consciousness, of pure compassion which in Buddhist metaphysics lies at the very heart of all reality, the cosmic Kwan Yin that is the same as *Brahma Vach*.”

Meditation thought: Analogies connect levels without erasing their differences. The student can welcome a wider pattern while asking carefully what each part of the comparison means.

6. R.N. Iyer, “The Light of the Logos”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I, p. 51.

“The symbolism of Kwan Yin enshrines cosmic truths which are dimly mirrored in human life everywhere. There is something of Kwan Yin in every human being. There is that audible voice of compassion, of tenderness and truth even in the most brutalized and aggressive of natures. This precious element of pure tenderness is indestructible. It is coeval with the whole of life, and without it there would be no life whatsoever.”

Meditation thought: The possibility of tenderness persists beneath obscuration. Recognizing that possibility can sustain hope while leaving responsibility for harmful conduct fully intact.

7. R.N. Iyer, “The Light of the Logos”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I, p. 53.

“While it is deeply uncomfortable for serene and wise souls to be in the presence of such disturbed natures, nonetheless out of unremitting devotion to the Kwan Yin in every soul, they continue ceaselessly in the sacrificial task of transferring the higher life-atoms to all in need. Once one can reach out to the noumenal intelligent causes radiating the elemental forces of Nature and generating the endless streams of subtle lives, one is touched by the fire of cosmic ideation.”

Meditation thought: The passage presents a Theosophical account of beneficent influence. Its ethical direction is selfless care; it does not warrant claims about one’s own unseen powers.

8. R.N. Iyer, "The Pledge of Kwan Yin", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 163.

"As the task also involves self-forgetfulness and reaching out to all human beings, a point must surely come when the very thought of one's own progress or lack of it in relation to the pledge will shrink into insignificance simply because one's consciousness becomes so occupied with the greater growth, the larger welfare of the human race. If a person thought this out carefully, he or she could safeguard against the greatest danger, ignoring which is the mark of immaturity: the cold forgetfulness that arises from the initial unwisdom or psychic heat in taking a vow."

Meditation thought: The welfare of humanity can displace anxiety about personal advancement. A useful task offers a concrete place to practise that change of emphasis.

9. R.N. Iyer, "The Pledge of Kwan Yin", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, pp. 163–164.

"A vow is sacred; it must germinate in silence. It invokes sacred speech, but it must ripen through suffering. Where the vow involves a recognition of the ubiquity of human suffering and where one chooses to make one's own suffering meaningful and creative for a larger purpose, the vow has self-correction built into it. Those who have received this great teaching and have been inspired by the very highest ideal, will be wise to take the Kwan Yin pledge at some level."

Meditation thought: A vow carries a means of self-correction when it remains directed toward suffering beings. Let renewed attention to their needs expose and soften self-absorption.

10. R.N. Iyer, "The Pledge of Kwan Yin", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 164.

"Kwan Yin in its metaphysical meaning is bound up with fire and water. Kwan Yin is connected with the primordial Light of the Logos, which is the paradigm and the pristine source of all creativity in the cosmos, of the hidden power in every human being to produce a result that is beneficent. If Kwan Yin is ontologically connected with light, but is also compared to the ocean, what then is the meaning of the textual reference to extinguishing the flames of agony? This is a metaphysical paradox."

Meditation thought: Fire and water illuminate different levels of the symbol. The creative light is understood ethically through a response that cools destructive agitation.

11. R.N. Iyer, "The Pledge of Kwan Yin", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 164.

"Kwan Yin is rooted in Boundless Space and therefore involves noumenal existence at so high a level of attributeless compassion in Eternal Duration that it is the paradigm of all the vows and pledges taken by vast numbers of pilgrims throughout unrecorded history. It is also called *Bath-Kol*, the Daughter of the Voice, in the Hebrew tradition, that which when sought within the inmost sanctuary bestows a merciful response within the human heart. There is a latent Kwan Yin in every human being. It is the voice of conscience at the commonest level. It is the *Chitkala* of the developed disciple. At the highest level it is *Nada*, the Voice of the Silence, the

Soundless Sound, that which is comprehended in initiation, and ceaselessly reverberates in the *Anahata*, the deathless centre of the human body, transformed into a divine temple.”

Meditation thought: The passage distinguishes conscience, discipleship and initiation. Honour the ordinary voice of conscience without confusing every inward impression with the highest realization it names.

12. H.P. Blavatsky, “The Seven Portals”, *The Voice of the Silence*, p. 54.

“Now bend thy head and listen well, O Bodhisattva—Compassion speaks and saith: “Can there be bliss when all that lives must suffer? Shalt thou be saved and hear the whole world cry?” Now thou hast heard that which was said. Thou shalt attain the seventh step and cross the gate of final knowledge but only to wed woe—if thou would’st be *Tathagata*, follow upon thy predecessor’s steps, remain unselfish till the endless end.”

Meditation thought: Compassion enters the decision about bliss. Listening to the world’s cry means seeking a response that is truthful, useful and willing to remain.