

A Legend of Avalokitesvara

The Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara looked down into the many hells and saw that they were filled with suffering beings.

A great vow spontaneously arose in his heart. "I will liberate all beings from the sufferings of the hells." He said. And so through countless ages he labored, descending into and emptying hell after hell, until the unimaginable task was at last done.

The great Bodhisattva ceased then from his eons of heroic exertion. He wiped the glistening diamonds of beaded sweat from his brow, and, looking down into the now empty, silent hells, smiled. It was done. Here and there a curling wisp of smoke still rose up. Now and then, in some vast cavern far below, faint echoes sounded as a loose brick shifted in a pile of rubble. But on the raging fires had been quenched and the great iron cauldrons were quiet. Sweet silence flowed through the dark halls. Even the demons were gone for they too, in the end, had been released, liberated to the heavens, by the mighty efforts of the Compassionate One.

But what was this? Suddenly, there came a wailing scream, then another, and another. Flames leapt, clouds of smoke whirled, blood-filled cauldrons bubbled madly. The radiant smile faded from the Bodhisattva's face. Once again the hells were entirely filled. In less than an instant all was exactly as before.

The heart of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara filled with sorrow. Suddenly, his head split into many heads. His arms shattered into many arms. The one thousand heads looked in all directions to see the sufferings of every being. The one thousand arms were enough to reach into any realm, to save those in need.

Rolling up his one thousand sleeves, the great Bodhisattva settled down once more to the unending task.