INTRODUCTION

As a result of our grasping to a "self-ego", defilement such as pride, jealousy, desire, ignorance, miserliness and hatred arise. Due to these wrong views and emotions, sentient beings perform negative actions that bind themselves to sufferings in samsara, which is the cycle of birth, aging, sickness and death.

All the Buddhas including Shakyamuni Buddha appear in this world to show us the path of release from this suffering. To reach the goal of Enlightenment, a practitioner needs to develop the wisdom and qualities of the Buddha. During the development stage, the aspiring Bodhisattva relies on the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas for their teachings, blessing, support and empowerment. Through the perfection of the six paramitas, these Great Beings or Bodhisattvas accumulate tremendous merits, compassion, wisdom and qualities, which enable them to help all sentient beings.

One of the most revered Bodhisattva in Tibet, China, Japan, Korea and the South East Asia is Arya Avalokiteshvara. He is known as Chenrezig to the Tibetans or Kuan Yin Pu Sa to the Chinese.

Avalokiteshvara's Miraculous Birth in the Pure Land of Padmawati

According to Mani Kabum text, in the pure land of Padmawati, there was a universal monarch called Zangpochog. This King wished for a son. He made many offerings to the Triple Gems to grant him his wish, and for each offering, he would send his servants to gather lotus flowers.

On one occasion, a servant found a giant lotus at the lake. The size of its petals was like vulture's wings and it was about to bloom. He rushed back to inform the King. The King felt that this is a sign that his wish for a son would be granted. He went with his entourage of ministers to the lake with many offerings. There they found a giant lotus blooming. Within its petals, there was a boy of about sixteen years old. His body was white colour and he was adorned with the physical marks of perfection of a Buddha. Lights were radiating from his body. The boy exclaimed, "I feel pity for all
the sentient beings who are suffering so much!"

The King and his entourage made many offerings and prostrations to the boy, and invited him to the palace. The King gave him the name "Lotus Borne" or "Essence of Lotus" because of his miraculous birth. He also consulted his master, Buddha Amitabha on this matter. The Buddha told the King that this boy is a manifestation of all the Buddhas. He is also the manifestation of the hearts of all the Buddhas. His name is Avalokiteshvara and he is to fulfill the purpose of all sentient beings as vast as space.

Avalokiteshvara's mission and manifestation of the six Buddhas in the six realms of beings

One full moon day, the King made great offerings to the Triple Gems and Avalokiteshvara. At that moment, Avalokiteshvara recollected his mission. He had to liberate all sentiments beings from their sufferings. With his great compassion, he gazed at the sentient beings within the three realms of the desire, form and formless. He saw their defilements and sufferings. He saw that "their desires are like the waterfall; their hatred is like a blazing fire; their ignorance shrouding them like clouds of darkness; their pride is as solid as the mountain, and their jealousy is as rapid as the wind. The chain of self or ego ties each and every sentient being to the cycle of birth and death. The sufferings they experienced are as if they have fallen into the blazing fire".

Great compassion arises and tears flowed from Avalokiteshvara's eyes. He made great offerings and prostration to the Buddhas of the ten directions and prayed for their guidance on how he could benefit all these suffering beings. The Buddhas responded in unison," If you wish to benefit all these sentient beings, you must be motivated by loving-kindness and compassion. Do not be tired of this work. Do not give up." Again he asked, "How shall I develop loving kindness and compassion?" Buddha Amitabha appeared to instruct Avalokiteshvara on the practice, and empowered him to fulfill his mission. With this blessing, Avalokiteshvara aspired further "from each and every pore of my body, may I manifest Buddhas and bodhisattvas according to the needs of all sentient beings. With these manifestations, may I liberate all sentient beings without leaving anyone behind. If I have self-clinging, may my head crack into pieces". Amitabha Buddha praised him, "Well done. The Buddhas of the ten directions and three times and I have also developed the same enlightened attitude as you. We have made this aspiration and attained Enlightenment. I will assist you". Buddha Amitabha blessed his aspiration and empowered him further.
Manifestation of Six Buddhas in the Six Realms

Avalokiteshvara then radiated six lights from his body to the six realms of beings. Each light manifested as one Buddha. The six Buddhas are:

1. Buddha Gyajin in the gods realm to subdue the pride of all gods and relieve their suffering;
2. Buddha Thagzangri in the demi-gods realm to subdue their jealousy and relieve their suffering of constant fighting and warfare;
3. Buddha Shakyamuni in the human realm to subdue their desire and relieve them from birth, old age, sickness and death;
4. Buddha Sangye Rabten in the animals realm to subdue their defilement of ignorance, and relieve their suffering of being hunted, eaten and tortured;
5. Buddha Namkhazod in the hungry ghost realm to subdue their defilement of miserliness, and relieve their suffering of hunger and thirst;
6. Buddha Chokyi Gyalpo in the hell realm to subdue the defilement of hatred, and relieve the suffering of extreme hot and cold and other intense sufferings.

Countless sentient beings were thus liberated.

Manifestation of the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara and the Six-Syllable Mantra

After some time, Avalokiteshvara thought that he would have reduced significantly the number of suffering sentient beings. When he gazed with his wisdom eye from Mount Meru, he was disappointed to find that the numbers had not decreased. He radiated his lights to the six realms another three times to liberate the sentient beings. When he checked again, he was disappointed. With despair, he thought, "Truly as what the Tathagatha has spoken, space is infinite; so like-wise sentient beings are also infinite. I have liberated so many beings and yet their numbers have not decreased. Samsara has no end. I must liberate myself."

With this degenerate thought, he broke his bodhisattva vow. His head cracked into a hundred pieces. With great repentance, he cried to Buddha Amitabha and all the Buddhas for help, "I have not accomplished my purpose and sentient beings' purpose, please help me". Buddha Amitabha appeared, collected the hundred pieces of cracked skull, and transformed them into eleven heads. He blessed ten of them with peaceful appearances and one with wrathful appearance in order to subdue those who could not be subdued by peaceful means.

Buddha Amitabha then instructed, "There is no beginning to samsara. There is also no end to samsara. You must benefit sentient beings until samsara ends." (note 1)

Avalokiteshvara requested "If I need to benefit all the sentient beings until samsara ends, may I have one thousand arms, and one thousand eyes. May these one thousand arms manifest as a thousand universal monarchs, and the one thousand eyes manifest as a thousand Buddhas". Buddha Amitabha granted him his wish with one thousand arms and one thousand eyes, each eye in the palm of each hand.
Amitabha Buddha then further instructed him "If you want to relieve the suffering of the six realms, you must propagate the Six-Syllable Mantra "OM MANI NI PAD ME HUM" which will stop the rebirth and sufferings of the beings of the six realms. Each of the syllabuses will eliminate the cause and condition to be reborn in one of the respective six realms. "OM" will eliminate the cause and condition to be born in the gods' realm. "MA" will eliminate the cause and condition to be born in the demi-gods realm. "NI" will eliminate the cause and condition to be born in the human realm. "PAD" will eliminate the cause and condition to be born in the animal realm, "ME" will eliminate the cause and condition to be born in the hungry ghost realm. "HUM" will eliminate the cause and condition to be born in the hell realm. You must engage, keep, recite and absorb this. This will empty the six realms."

The Coming of Avalokiteshvara into this World

Amitabha Buddha manifested the six syllables of "Om Mani Padme Hum" in the form of light, which came into this world to Mount Potala. He also instructed Avalokiteshvara to go there to liberate all the sentient beings. Heralding Avalokiteshvara's coming, the whole world was filled with wondrous signs and brilliant lights, which surpassed the sun and moon.

During that time, Shakyamuni Buddha was giving a teaching at Mount Malaya. One of the Bodhisattva noticed the brilliant lights. He kneeled down and asked the Buddha for the reason. Shakyamuni Buddha replied, "From here to the West beyond the countless universes, there is a place called Padmawati. At that place, there is a Buddha known as Amitabha, and he has a Bodhisattva called Avalokiteshvara. This Bodhisattva has come to this world to Mount Potala where he will benefit countless sentient beings. He is the most perfect amongst all the bodhisattvas. He manifests one thousand Buddhas pervading the whole universe in order to liberate all sentient beings."

The Teachings of the Six-Syllable Mantra by Shakyamuni Buddha

On one occasion, Shakyamuni Buddha was dwelling at the monastery of Anathapindika, in Jeta Grove, near Sravasti with his entourage of disciples. He introduced this remarkable bodhisattva and the Six-Syllable Mantra to the assembly. A Bodhisattva by the name of Sarvanivaranavishkambhin made a request to the Exalted One. The Bodhisattva paid homage and cried, "For the benefits of the beings in the six realms, please advice me how I may obtain this Great Mantra that is the wisdom of all the Buddhas, which will cut the roots of the samsara. May Buddha please bestow me this teaching. I offer the whole universe as Mandala. To whoever who wishes to write this Six-syllable Mantra, I offer my blood as ink, my bones as pen and skin as paper. Please, Lord Buddha, grant me this teaching of the Six-syllable mantra.

Shakyamuni Buddha then gave the teaching, "This is the most beneficial mantra. Even I made this aspiration to all the million Buddhas and subsequently received this teaching from Amitabha Buddha."
The Benefits of the Six-Syllable Mantra

The merits of the Six-Syllable Mantra are immeasurable and cannot be fully described even by the Buddhas of the three times. Some of these benefits are:

1. Whoever keeps this mantra, his body will transform into the vajra body, his bones will transform into the relics of the Buddha and his ordinary mind will transform into the wisdom of the Buddhas.

2. Whoever recites the mantra for even one time will obtain immeasurable wisdom. He will be born as a universal monarch. He will achieve the irreversible stage of the Bodhisattva and finally attain Enlightenment.

3. If this mantra is carved onto rocks and mountains, and human or non-human beings come into contact and sees the mantra, he will develop the cause to be a bodhisattva in the next life, thereby relieving his sufferings.

It is said that the sand of the Ganges and the drops of water in the ocean can be counted but not the merits from the recitation of this Six-Syllable Mantra.

The Six-Syllable Mantra is the speech manifestation and the wisdom energy of all the Buddhas. It purifies our impure perception of sound. It is also a means to protect our mind from its deluded thoughts. It cuts off one's ignorance and opens up one's wisdom. It augments immeasurable blessings and peacefulness can be obtained. It can save and alleviate beings from hundreds and thousands of suffering and difficulties.

This may sound inconceivable to some people. The Bodhisattva, however, has made great aspiration and accumulated countless merits, wisdom and skilful means to help sentient beings. He has the "hook" to liberate beings. If we have the sincerity and deep faith in him and exercise effort in our practice of Dharma, we are likened to having "a solid and unbroken ring." With our ring of faith, Avalokiteshvara will be able to "fish" us out of our sufferings.

Therefore, we should respectfully bring Avalokiteshvara to mind, and sincerely and clearly recite the Six-Syllable-Mantra. All our worldly and beyond worldly needs will be fulfilled.
Avalokiteshvara in Tibet

At one time, Lha Thathori Nyentsen, a Tibetan King, was residing in the Yumbu Lhakhang Palace. A casket fell from the sky upon the palace roof. It opened and revealed the Sutra of The Rites of Renunciation and Fulfillment (spang-skong phyag-brgya-pa’imdo), a mould engraved with the Dharani of the Wish-fulfilling Gem (Cintamanidharani), the Sutra of the Cornucopia of Avalokiteshvara’s Attributes (Aryakaranda-sutra), the Six-Syllable Mantra, and a golden Stupa. The king did not know what they were, but understood them to be auspicious. The king had a visionary dream that the meaning of the "auspicious objects" would be understood after five generations.

The fifth monarch after Lha Thatori was King Songtsen Gampo. He married the Nepalese princess Bhrikuti and the Chinese Tang princess Wen-Cheng. Each of them brought a statue of Shakyamuni Buddha to Tibet and introduced the Buddhist culture to the country. The King felt the importance to bring the Buddhas' Teachings to his people. He sent Thonmi Sambhota to India to study grammar and writing. Thonmi Sambhota later invented the Tibetan alphabets and grammar based on the Sanskrit. The first Buddhist text that was translated from Sanskrit to Tibetan language is the Twenty-One sutras and tantras of Avalokiteshvara. Subsequently, many other important Buddha teachings were also translated.

The King and his people engaged in the practice of Avalokiteshvara. The scriptures of the teachings were collected and hidden in separate treasures. The accomplished masters Ngodrup, Lord Nyang and the teacher Shakya-O later recovered these treasures. The treasures are renowned as the Collected Works of the King concerning the Mantra “Om Mani Padme Hum” (mani bka-bum).

Many past and living great masters in Tibet propagate the teachings of Avalokiteshvara to their devotees. There are a number of sadhanas composed by such great masters who had personally received the teachings from the deity in the course of their practice. Many Tibetan practitioners follow these methods of practice to accomplish the state of Avalokiteshvara and liberate themselves from the sufferings of Samsara. They also lead others to this perfect path.

Many monasteries and nunneries also conduct yearly purification retreats (Nyungne), Grand recitations of the Mantra for the ordained and lay people. The masters also encourage the casting of the Six-Syllable Mantra on prayer wheels, etc to create merits. The Tibetans believe that all these actions will support them in the progress of their spiritual path. They believe that Avalokiteshvara is their savior and protector, while King Songtsen Gampo was an emanation of Avalokiteshvara, and his two consorts were emanations of the two Taras.
Avalokiteshvara in China

Although Buddhism came to China since the Eastern Han dynasty, it became very widespread and influential in the country only during the period of Tang dynasty. Many followers of the religion made pilgrimage to India to learn from the source of the Teachings. The most famous of these Tang pilgrims is Master Hsuan-Tsang. It was recorded that during his journey to India, he lost his way in the desert but managed to find his way out by calling upon the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara for assistance.

In Chinese Buddhism, there are two main schools concerning the teaching and practice of Avalokiteshvara. The Tien Tai School teaches the Saddharma-pundarika Sutra or Lotus Sutra. In one of the chapters of "Pu Men Pin", Shakyamuni Buddha related that this Bodhisattva has the ability to manifest everywhere and in any form in order to save beings from sufferings. He readily responds to those who are facing dangers such as dangers caused by the weapons, fetters, fire, demons, cliffs and water. The Buddha also related that if there is a woman who desires to have a child, then she should pray to the bodhisattva with reverence and respect, and in due time she will give birth to a child of her choice endowed with blessings, virtues and wisdom.

The other is the Jing Tu (Pure Land) School, which propagate the teaching of the Amitabha Sutra. According to the text, Amitabha Buddha has created a Buddha Pure Land out of his boundless compassion and love for all sentient beings. He vows that anyone who has absolute faith in him and the Pure Land will be reborn there. In that Pure Land, Avalokiteshvara who is his assistant is ever ready to go anywhere to lead the faithful to the land of purity and bliss. The simplicity of this teaching appeal and touch the heart of those who are seeking for peace and happiness. With the spread of this school of practice, Amitabha Buddha and Avalokiteshvara become even more popular.

There is a Chinese Saying, "Amitabha in every place; Kuan-Yin in every house".

The worship of this Bodhisattva is now very much merged with the Chinese tradition and beliefs. This can be evidenced from the change of the gender of the Bodhisattva from male to female. The paintings from Dun-huang portrayed the Bodhisattva as a male with a moustache. He is also sometimes depicted with eleven heads, a thousand eyes and a thousand hands. However, after this period the Bodhisattva is shown as a female clad in white called Pay-Yi Kuan Yin. It is possible to justify such a change for the Mahayana sutras teach that a Bodhisattva could assume any form and shape to assist sentient beings.
Great Practitioners of Avalokiteshvara

The biographies of great masters are always a continual source of inspiration. Their enlightened activities benefit countless beings. We introduced here two such great masters who had practised the Avalokiteshvara's teachings and attained Enlightenment.

One of the great masters is Gelomba Palmo (or Bhikkuni Lakshmi) who lived in the tenth or eleventh centuries C.E. She was born in a royal family of an Indian Kingdom, and was ordained in her youth. She received many teachings from the great masters of her time and practiced diligently. Due to the ripening of her past karma, she contracted leprosy and was cast into the forest by the people. She had a vision of King Indrabodhi (note 2) who advised her to practice Avalokiteshvara.

She recited the mantras of Avalokiteshvara and subsequently performed the continuous Nyungne retreat before the image of Avalokiteshvara. Through devotion and diligence in her practice, she was able to recover from leprosy. She also developed great love and compassion for all beings. She became an enlightened nun and guided many disciples in the practice of Avalokiteshvara.

She was credited for passing down the practice of Nyungne retreat, a very effective practice for purification and developing loving-kindness and compassion for all beings.

Another great practitioner of Avalokiteshvara is Thangton Gyalpo (1385-1509). He was born in upper Tsang in Tibet. One day, while he was practising the Six-Syllable Mantra, the sublime Avalokiteshvara appeared before him to guide and empower him.

Through his diligent practice, he became a realized being. Based on his practice and achievement, he wrote the sadhana "For the Benefits of Beings as Vast as Space" to guide others in the practice of Avalokiteshvara. This text is found in all the Tibetan schools of Buddhism.

He was able to recall his previous life as Gelong Padma Karpo (or Bhikkhu White Lotus). During that lifetime, from the age of 20 to 80 years old he consistently practiced the Avalokiteshvara Nyungne Retreat. He could even remember how he had supplicated to this great Bodhisattva. This supplication was recorded in the Buddhist prayers and passed down to this day.

After, he was enlightened; he also recovered many concealed treasures of the doctrines, and introduced the Buddha teachings to many people. He produced uncountable images, books and stupas representing the Buddha's body, speech and mind. He built more than a hundred ferry-crossings and iron suspension bridges to benefit the people. In order to encourage virtuous conduct in the people and to support the cost of the construction works, he depicted the lives of past bodhisattvas, religious kings, and others in folk operas. All his activities were inconceivable in his time.
Conclusion

According to the Buddha Teachings, it is extremely difficult for one to receive the teachings of Avalokiteshvara and the Six-Syllable Mantra. However, due to our accumulated merits, we are able to learn about Avalokiteshvara, his development process, his great mission and his accomplishments. We also learn about the inconceivable merits of the Mantra, we should rejoice and cherish this.

If we recite this Mantra, which liberates all the beings from samsara, we will be able to purify our misdeeds, clear our obscurations and perfect our Bodhicitta. Thus we should:

Take the Arya Avalokiteshvara as our Yidam (deity),
Recite the Six Syllables as the essence mantra,
Be free from the fear of going to the lower realms.

With this I complete my short article on the Arya Avalokiteshvara and the Six-Syllable Mantra with a stanza from the Thirty-Seven Practices of A Bodhisattva:

Due to the virtue arising from this, may all sentient beings

By means of the supreme and conventional Bodhicittas,

Become the Protector Avalokiteshvara who does not abide in the

Extremes of cyclic existence and solitary salvation.

DEDICATION OF MERITS

As it is said, "The Buddha Dharma has no owner except for those who persevere in it."

May the merit from this gift of Buddha Dharma be shared by all beings.
May all those who have the affinity with Arya Avalokiteshvara
be able to come into contact with his teachings,
and may all develop his great compassion
and love for all beings.

May all be able to follow his footsteps to Complete Enlightenment.

Note 1 - Gampopa in Jewel Ornament of Liberation states that "no end" means it takes a very long period to liberate all the beings but it does not mean it cannot be done forever. From the ordinary being's point of view, samsara - the cycle of birth and death is too long for us to see where it begins and where it ends. However, to all the Buddhas or the Enlightened Beings samsara is just an illusion, and the illusion does not have an identity of existing or not existing. Everyone can clear this illusion, as it does not contain any truth in it. In this context, it means "Avalokiteshvara must benefit all the sentient beings until all of them are liberated."

Note 2 - King Indra Bodhi is the first person who received Vajrayana teachings from Buddha and he is also one of the 84 saints.