

She Who Hears the Cries of the World

SEARCHING FOR GUAN YIN

By Sarah E. Truman

White Pine Press 2011; 220 pp., \$16 (paper)

BRINGING ZEN HOME

The Healing Heart of Japanese Women's Rituals

By Paula Arai

University of Hawaii Press 2011; 261 pp., \$52 (cloth)

REVIEWED BY JOAN SUTHERLAND

THE BODHISATTVA of compassion, known as Guan Yin in China and Kannon or Kanzeon in Japan, is a hugely popular figure around the world, and not only among Buddhists. Though she's had a number of gender transformations, appearing as feminine, masculine, and androgynous, it's the feminine embodiment of mercy that has inspired the most heartfelt devotion, particularly from women. Two recent books show what different forms that devotion can take.

The Mahayana tradition speaks of two complementary attitudes we can adopt in our lives: host and guest. Pilgrims, for example, take up the way of the guest, traveling from place to place and receiving what happens as teachings; they are sometimes called "clouds-and-water" because they are always moving, always changing. The teachers they visit sit in the position of hosts, welcoming all; in China, they often have the word "mountain" in their names, indicating steadfastness. In the old stories, it's in the meeting of host and guest that awakening often blooms—when someone sees the place where abiding nowhere like clouds and water and abiding deeply like a mountain are the same.

In her memoir *Searching for Guan Yin*, Sarah Truman represents herself as the archetypal guest. Since her childhood in Toronto, she has felt a strong connection to China and Guan Yin, and a revelation during meditation prompts her to go to China to see for herself "what Guan Yin is and is not and what China is and is not." She spends two years there, working as an editor and teacher in Nanjing, and making pilgrimages to places around China associated with the bodhisattva.

Truman is searching for the particular image in which Guan Yin

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has appeared to her for years in dreams and visualizations. She's aware of the underlying paradox: If the bodhisattva of compassion can take any form, in any place and time, to aid those who call on her, why come all the way to China to look for her? "I could come up with a logical explanation that I didn't need to come here," she says. "I could have found Guan Yin at home or not found her at home. But this isn't a logical equation—this is my life."

Here's a pilgrim's tale from a privileged Western perspective: Something calls from far away, and the pilgrim takes for granted the importance of the quest ("this is my life") and has the resources to make the journey. Once, when she's laughing in public, a Chinese woman asks her what's so funny. "My life," she replies. "You are lucky," the other woman says, "many people do not have very funny lives." Crashing into the reality of modern China, Truman is candid about the contradictions: she visits sacred sites and wishes she didn't have to share the experience with groups of Chinese tourists, who keep her up all night in the guesthouses with their smoking and card playing. "What am I doing looking for an image in the People's Republic of China and then getting upset by reality?" she asks.

The book is strung on a series of questions like this, which evolve with time and experience. The lone adventurer initially so often annoyed with what she finds eventually has a dream intimating how much more there is to Guan Yin than her personal experience:

We fall asleep somewhere in the blue night. I dream of Guan Yin. She is standing before me on the plains with a full moon overhead. I walk toward her. I'm so excited to see her. She opens her arms as if to embrace me. But her arms continue to open, wider and wider, until she holds the entire earth within them. I am one of countless things floating in her arms. Her arms continue to expand until she holds the entire galaxy, then the entire universe. Nothing exists outside of her. Nothing.

In the same way, Truman comes to see that she can't impose her own template on compassion. In Tibet, she is unsettled by the images of Chenrezig, a form of Guan Yin who is depicted as male and with eleven heads and a thousand arms—an eye in each palm. But she realizes that these images are revealing the fiercer side of compassion. "If I think of compassion as doing whatever it takes to relieve someone from suffering, that might not always manifest itself in willow branches and purple bamboo groves," she says. "Some illusions might take a sword or flames to cut through."

Over time, Truman understands that she'll have to embrace the formlessness of Guan Yin. The turning point comes when she revisits a shop filled with bodhisattva heads that have been removed from statues. The previous year she gazed at them, upset, wanting to rescue and preserve them. This year the heads gaze back, mocking her. "What are you looking at? We don't mean anything." Their beatific smiles turn sinister, and suddenly everything around her is laughing. Truman is having a glimpse of the winter of emptiness when meaning falls away, which can be terrifying. Fortunately, just at that moment a Taiwanese businesswoman named Lily appears, bringing the spring of emptiness with her. Lily is a thoroughly modern woman who speaks of Guan Yin as supersonic, as a wave and a vibration. Winter to spring, formlessness changes from a bleak absence to a presence pregnant with possibility.

Finally, Truman comes to understand that, as she puts it, Guan Yin is a verb rather than a noun, and her name is a directive: to perceive the world with ease. "She's not a being—she's a way of being." As Truman leaves China, she realizes she has to take responsibility for her own mind and actions—to be Guan Yin rather than look for her. The whole search has been a matter of letting go, emptying space inside herself and then watching to see what fills it. The most important thing she's learned, she says, is about being present, because that's where Guan Yin is. The guest is beginning to understand the possibilities of being a host.

The stories of the women to whom Paula Arai introduces us in *Bringing Zen Home: The Healing Heart of Japanese Women's Rituals* begin where Sarah Truman leaves off. Due to varying combinations of choice and the powerful norms of Japanese culture, they take on the role of host: caring for children, grandchildren, and aging parents; tending their family altars; supporting each other in their shared religious practices. These practices, including strong relationships with Kannon, provide them with crucial support to live their not-very-funny lives well, and also to create small oases of guest-hood in a sometimes overwhelming landscape of hosting.

The women are connected with Aichi Senmon Nisodo in Nagoya, the major Japanese training center for Soto Zen nuns. A few are monastics, while most are laywomen who come to the convent to receive teachings, take part in ceremonies, and practice various arts. For these laywomen, however, most of their religious life occurs at home, and is what Arai calls domestic Zen, or "healing in the midst of a mess." The head of the convent, Aoyama Shundo Roshi, emphasizes the importance of supporting laywomen because each one supports so many other people. Most of the women lived through World War II, and most have experienced significant trauma and illness. Before Arai spoke with them, few other people had ever listened to them recount their painful experiences.

Perhaps it's not surprising, then, that the focus of their religious lives is healing—but healing in a very particular sense, grounded in their understanding of Buddhist teachings. As Arai explains it, suffering comes from the mistaken sense that a person is unrelated—separate, alone, and unsupported. This leads to loneliness, accompanied by fear and craving for things that cannot be. Healing is experienced as a peace that doesn't shatter in the presence of difficult events or delusional thoughts, and which is the result of a heartfelt experience of interrelatedness: each of us is integral to an all-encompassing network in which compassionate support is constantly being given and received.

Prayer, for example, is less a matter of a petition to a specific figure than a request sent out through the net of interconnectivity. At the same time, there's a strong awareness of listening for and receiving the prayers of others. In this way each woman becomes Kanzeon, whose name means "Perceive the Sounds of the World," or as it is frequently translated "She Who Hears the Cries of the World." The aim is to have Kanzeon's heart, the heart of compassion that accepts everything. You help your heart grow bigger so that everything will fit—even the things you don't like or agree with. According to Gyokko Sensei, one of the women featured in *Bringing Zen Home*, "With Kanzeon you see the world not through the eyes, but through your heart-mind. Then, everything will appear differently. Look deep from the heart-mind... All things in the universe communicate through the heart-mind."

In contrast, rejection of outer circumstances or inner states creates negativity, which enslaves a tremendous amount of energy and calcifies into bitterness in the heart. If painful emotions and illnesses are seen as buddhas, too, it becomes possible to "forgive" them and even develop an intimacy with them. "Healing from grief does not mean that grief will stop," Arai says. "On the contrary, healing involves expecting and preparing for the changing seasons of grief."

Healing is a way of "holding your heart," an orientation toward life rather than a rigid program of belief and behavior. It's a constant improvisation aimed at retraining the self toward harmony with the way things are, which is interrelated and impermanent. It's a point of view that "expects change and encourages you to see yourself as part of something big." These women are perfectly comfortable both adopting traditions and adapting them

to their needs. For example, it's customary for married women to tend a family altar for their husband's ancestors, but they've enlarged tradition by setting up second altars for their own ancestors. Meditation isn't an important part of their practice, but rituals are. Arai says that "the types of practices found in domestic Zen are done amidst the sound of water running for the laundry, dishes, and baths. Adding [sacred] water to the rice the family will eat for dinner is seen as much of a key ingredient in nurturing the family as are soy sauce and seasoning."

In addition to tending their family altars, the women chant, copy sutras and images of figures like Kannon, ingest sacred symbols and sacred water for healing, join in communal ceremonies at the temple, meet together in small groups for rituals, go on pilgrimage, and participate in arts like calligraphy, flower arranging, and the way of tea. In times of crisis they chant *Nenpi Kannon Riki* ("I call on the power of Kannon"). On many different levels, they find the refuge of the guest in these practices. For example, everything in the universe is seen as a buddha, but the ancestors on their family altars are "personal buddhas" to whom they can bring their whole selves. Gyokko Sensei explains, "I don't feel that they will just take care of my problems. I feel that they will look with warm affection. I do pray they help things go in a good direction." In Japan it's customary when someone returns home to call out "I'm home!" and whoever is in the house replies, "Your return home is welcomed!" Honda-san always calls out in this way when she returns home, even though she lives alone. She's speaking to the personal buddhas on her altar, and she hears their welcoming reply in her heart.

It's glorious to hear all the voices in *Bringing Zen Home* and *Searching for Guan Yin*—to feel the common yearnings, the different responses to them, and the ways that host and guest can blend into each other. These women's prayers, their outer and inner pilgrimages, and their understandings have entered the vast net of interconnectedness, and we have the pleasure of receiving their communications, heart-mind to heart-mind. ♦