

Creating a Sustainable Buddhist Feminist *Thealogy*:
Guanyin Devotion Among American Women

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of Religious Studies

at University of the West

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Theology

in Applied Buddhist Studies

by

Karen Gelinas

Fall 2018

APPROVAL PAGE FOR GRADUATE

Approved and recommended for acceptance as a dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Theology in Applied Buddhist Studies.

Karen Gelinas, Candidate

December 12, 2018

Creating a Sustainable Buddhist Feminist *Theology*: Guanyin Devotion Among American Women

APPROVED:

Jane Naomi Iwamura, Chair

December 12, 2018

Victor Gabriel, Committee Member

December 12, 2018

Jitsujo Gauthier, Committee Member

December 12, 2018

**I hereby declare that this dissertation has not been submitted
as an exercise for a degree at any other institution,
and that it is entirely my own work.**

© 2018

Karen Gelinas

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Acknowledgments

Dr. Jane Iwamura, I distinctly remember the day I sat in your office to turn in my final MA paper and you brightly said to me, “Karen, we are offering a new doctoral degree that would be perfect for you! It’s a ThD in Applied Buddhist Studies and will be a hybrid of Buddhist Chaplaincy and Religious Studies.” My first thought was “I can’t keep going to school, I need to get back to work...back to reality.” But, I was excited by the prospect and you encouraged me to continue, helping me understand the importance of such a unique degree and the significance of contemporary research. It is to you that I am so deeply grateful and honored to have had your graceful guidance as my committee chair for the last five years. You were the only one who truly understood the faceted dynamics of balancing life as a mom and trying to work on my dissertation, and I cannot begin to thank you enough, you are my role model.

To my other committee members, Dr. Victor Gabriel and Dr. Jitsujo Gauthier, thank you for approving my proposal from the beginning and for sharing your knowledge and insight with me. I have the utmost respect for both of you and the the hard work you do to uphold the Buddhist Chaplaincy department at University of the West.

Thank you to all my professors at University of the West from whom I have learned so much, especially Dr. Miroj Shakya. Your friendly smile and encouragement did not go unnoticed. Also, to my dissertation writing cohort, I admire all of you and have truly appreciated our weekly sessions where we could openly vent about the progress of our writing, or lack thereof, and continued support for one another. Thank you Margaret Meloni for your ongoing inspiration. I remember my very first class at

University of the West in 2011 and Dr. Locke told us to exchange phone numbers. He could see that I was nervous about being a resuming student and that I needed a friend. Thank you for your friendship and support, and I will continue to do the same for you.

I am also eternally grateful to the IBEF scholarship committee who generously helped fund my studies at University of the West. I do not know if I could have pursued such further study without your support.

Sandy Boucher, you pioneered the path for contemporary Guanyin practice, I thank for teaching me about her transformative, compassionate power, and for making yourself available to me for this study.

To all the women of this study, who trusted me with their stories, it is to you that I express my heartfelt gratitude. You are the ones who made this research come alive. You're shared love for Guanyin is both palpable and beautiful and I am honored to have the privilege to put your experiences into writing. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

Jason Tran, I could not have done this without your help. You were instrumental in helping me facilitate a Guanyin meditation workshop with transgender women. I am thankful for your friendship and our shared love of Guanyin. Continue to do all your wonderful work on the bodhisattva path.

Mallory Leitner, your friendship sustains me. There was never a conversation when you didn't ask me about my writing. I am in awe of the work you do to help others...you are a true bodhisattva.

To my parents, Ellie, Lance, Jay and Liz, and my sister, Jana. I cherish our unique, modern family and I thank you for always loving and supporting me.

Lastly, to my loves...Paul, Miles and Gracie. You continue to inspire me daily and without your undying support I could have never done this. Paul, you never let me quit. There were times when I tried so hard to convince you that I was done, but you would ignore me...literally, walk away from me. I thank you and I love you eternally. Miles and Gracie, I only hope that you always listen to your heart and trust that life's path will support you in everything you do. Thank you for always encouraging me to keep going...I love you.

Abstract

Creating a Sustainable Buddhist Feminist *Thealogy*: Guanyin Devotion Among American Women

By Karen Gelinas

This dissertation aims to highlight the significance of Guanyin as a vital Buddhist feminist *theological* resource. Guanyin devotion is gaining popularity among Buddhists in the U.S. She has become an especially powerful symbol of devotion for a wide range of American Buddhist women—convert and ethnic alike—as well as for a small group of transgender-identified women. The transformative qualities of the female deity allow an embodied access to the divine, one that is rooted in relationality and subjectivity.

Guanyin, is a manifestation of Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, who embodies both male and female gender identities. It was during the T'ang Dynasty (618-906) in China that Avalokitesvara began her feminization into Guanyin (also known as Quan Âm (Vietnamese), Kannon (Japanese), Guan-Eum (Korean). In female form, Guanyin's non-dual, reflexive qualities offer American Buddhists gender-specific identification through symbols and images that androcentric Buddhist sources do not.

In the construction of a “Buddhist Feminist *Thealogy*”, subjectivity and experience become primary sources of normativity. The reversal and substitution of primary patriarchal symbols, and the re-vision of androcentric interpretations of Buddhist texts are shown by changing “theology” to “*thealogy*”, therefore purposefully employing

new language that supports the spiritual feminine. Interviews and ethnographic observations with Guanyin devotees, such as the women who attend retreats led by Buddhist teacher Sandy Boucher, Buddhist women from various Asian American communities, and transgender individuals, were conducted in order to provide insight into the ‘lived’ realities of those for whom Guanyin is a primary resource in their spiritual practice. Buddhist texts, images and artwork depicting Guanyin will also be discussed as important source materials for understanding the perspective of the practitioner.

Guanyin devotion is part of a remythologizing movement in feminist spirituality. Through symbols and imagery, her transformative, compassionate, non-dualistic qualities open up to a world of inclusivity. These qualities are important for heterosexual women, as well as LGBTQ women and men, as Guanyin facilitates non-judgment, love and acceptance amidst patriarchal societal norms.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	ii
Abstract.....	vi
Table of Contents	viii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Defining Buddhist Feminist Theology.....	3
Feminist Theological Discourse	5
Feminist Theo/allogical Perspectives That are Key to My Study.....	8
<i>Theology</i>	14
Guanyin: Historical Context.....	17
Historical Textual Evidence of Guanyin in Mahayana Sutras and Legends.....	18
Guanyin: Contemporary Context in the U.S.	22
Methodology for the Study	27
Chapter Two: Discussion: <i>Theological</i> Reclamation of Women’s Spirituality:	
Finding a Home in Buddhist Feminism	32
Developing a Buddhist Feminist <i>Theological</i> Perspective: Buddhist Women’s	
Voices and Issues.....	35
Studies of Buddhist Women’s Practice	38
Acknowledging Appropriation.....	41
Talk with Sandy Boucher: “Appropriation, Privilege, Feminism and Guanyin”	46
Following Guanyin: Themes and Revelations	53
The Bodhisattva Ideal: Guanyin as Goddess	55
Embodied Spirituality: The Subjective Divine Feminine.....	58

Applied Buddhism: Conscious Action and Women's Leadership.....	61
Chapter Three: American Convert Buddhist Women: "Finding a Female Spiritual Companion"	65
View and Understanding of Guanyin	69
Spiritual Practice: Guanyin, Buddhism and Meditation.....	72
Feminism and Guanyin: Exploring the Connection	74
Guanyin's Special Powers of Healing and Salvation	77
Chapter Four: Asian American Buddhist Women: "She's Always Been There"	78
View and Understanding of Guanyin	82
Spiritual Practice: Guanyin, Buddhism and Meditation.....	85
Feminism and Guanyin: Exploring the Connection	90
Guanyin's Special Powers of Healing and Salvation	93
Chapter Five: Transgender Buddhist and non-Buddhist Women: "Guanyin the Trans-Bodhisattva"	94
View and Understanding of Guanyin	100
Spiritual Practice: Guanyin, Buddhism and Meditation.....	104
Feminism and Guanyin: Exploring the Connection	105
Guanyin's Special Powers of Healing and Salvation	106
Chapter Six: Moving Forward: Sustaining a Buddhist Feminist <i>Thealogy</i>	108
Significance and Future Study	109
Bibliography	112
Appendix A: University of the West IRB Approval	120
Appendix B: Interview Questions for Guanyin Study.....	142

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form.....	143
Appendix D: <i>The Wall Las Memorias</i> Workshop: Proposal and Outline (February 4, 2017)	147

Chapter One: Introduction

I met Guanyin when I was a very little girl, never knowing who she was. I recall being five years old and Guanyin lived among my grandmother's ivory collection. Among her small collection was a beautiful statue of an ancient Asian woman, possessing tranquil eyes and a soft smile. For me, she was the true star of the collection, and after my grandmother passed away, Guanyin came to live with us in our home. My mother placed her front and center on the bookshelf, and that is where she still remains to this day.

Forty years later I began to recognize that beautiful, soft smile carved in jade, hanging on gold chains around the necks of the many Asian women whom I share a community with. I realized this is the woman I grew up with but have never known, and that was the beginning of my fascination and love for Guanyin.

I also did not know that Guanyin touched the lives of other non-Asian women. One day while waiting in line to buy coffee I noticed the woman standing behind me was wearing a huge lavender jade and diamond Guanyin. I complimented her jewelry and she said, "...Guanyin is very special to me." A week later I met another woman who shared with me that Guanyin saved her life. It was at that time that I began my research journey, trying to find out what this Buddhist bodhisattva represented for the women who are devoted to her.

Vietnamese and Chinese women had deeply personal stories to tell me about Guanyin and my role as a trusted storyteller began. I also involved myself among a thriving group of predominantly caucasian women who meditate to Guanyin. I started to

listen and connect the stories shared with me from women who find the presence of a divine feminine in Guanyin. Continuing to reveal Guanyin's transformative feminine qualities, I saw how she could act as a feminist tool in our modern Buddhist society. My research led me to another group of women, transgender women, whom I believe Guanyin can act as a feminist symbol and spiritual aid. The transgender community has generally been dismissed by the traditional religious identities given from birth, and unable to be fully acknowledged as female. Guanyin is able to provide spiritual love for them and be supportive as a gender fluid icon. As a feminist spiritual symbol, Guanyin acts as a gender specific representation of women's collective identity. The stories are personal and specific, yet there is a broader voice, one that shows how contemporary feminism and Buddhism have merged onto one path.

I facilitated interviews, conversations and observations among three distinct groups of contemporary American Buddhists: Feminist convert women, Asian American women, and transgender women, who identify with the bodhisattva Guanyin. Historical research and methodology pertaining to Buddhism, Feminism, and Theology supports the project's aim, which is to reveal how Guanyin's supportive qualities of inclusivity, compassion and transformation provide spiritual strength and comfort for those who call upon her. For feminist convert women and Asian American Buddhist women Guanyin devotion is already prominent. She is the central highlight at women's retreats taught by Buddhist teacher Sandy Boucher, and venerated by Vietnamese and Chinese American women in temples and sacred spaces. For the transgender women subjects there are few identified Guanyin devotees. Part of this study was to facilitate a series of workshops to introduce transgender women to Guanyin's potential as a positive spiritual icon.

The importance of gender issues found in Buddhist Feminist Theology address the need for the reversal and substitution of primary patriarchal symbols, as well as the need for re-describing the androcentric interpretations of texts and the lessons of many Buddhist teachings. By changing the focus from “theology” to “*thealogy*” I am purposefully employing new language that supports the spiritual feminine, claiming that “Buddhist Feminist Thealogy” is a more useful concept in my analysis of women’s spiritual practice and connection to Guanyin, therefore showing how gender-specificity and personal subjectivity interact for these three groups of women.

Defining Buddhist Feminist Theology

Rita Gross was one of the first Buddhist scholars to identify the problem, stating, “...to limit its (Feminist Theology) discussions to European and North American women and Christian women is inexcusable.”¹ According to Gross, Buddhism, along with other major and non-major Western religions, has not had its proper representation within feminist theological circles. In *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*, Gross sets out to define the “feminist revalorization of Buddhism.” She states, “revalorization involves working with the categories and concepts of a traditional religion in the light of feminist values.” She describes her strategies for doing so by studying Buddhist history, analyzing key concepts of a Buddhist worldview from a feminist point of view, and connecting these

¹ Rita M. Gross, *A Garland of Feminist Reflections: Forty Years of Religious Exploration* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 75.

² Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and*

results to shape a feminist reconstruction of Buddhism.² A feminist theological perspective involves subjectivity, and therefore changes the way we may study and define Buddhist theology. Interestingly, Gross feels that because of the complications that gender issues produce in the study of religion, the best methodology would be to adhere to gender-neutral identification. In Gross' paper, "The Real Problem Regarding Buddhist Women and Gender Justice: Androcentric Models of Humanity," she claims that the root of the issue is the deep-seated, unconscious androcentrism that continues to permeate universal language and image norms. She proposes a solution based on the Four Noble Truths that would 'neutralize' clinging to masculine and feminine gender identity, which inherently causes suffering, greed and issues of enlightenment.³ Gross is equally uncomfortable with the current use of the "feminine principle" present in today's Buddhism. She feels that the attraction and attachment to such femininity and female-defined models perpetuates the gender dualities she so desperately seeks to erase. Gross states, "Gender essentialist discourse that divides human qualities into 'masculine' and 'feminine' qualities cannot be liberating, in my view, but easily brings the prison of gender roles in its wake almost immediately."⁴ In support of Gross' argument, caution to attach to certain symbols and practices is the ideal method for Buddhist practitioners, especially for the advanced practitioner whose 'grasp' of emptiness is highly developed. However, within the study of Buddhist Theology, it is crucial to define a feminist

² Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 3.

³ Rita Gross, "The Real Problem Regarding Buddhist Women and Gender Justice: Androcentric Models of Humanity," in *Sakyadhita 14th International Conference on Buddhist Women*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Sakyadhita, 2015), 271-275.

⁴ Gross, "The Real Problem Regarding Buddhist Women and Gender Justice," 275.

perspective, and using the subjective experiences of Buddhist women is an integral part of this development, acknowledging gender as vitally influential in the expression of such ‘experience’.

My view differs from Rita Gross’ “gender neutral” argument in that it relies directly on the experiences of women. Furthermore, these examples of women’s subjective experience will address the gender gap present in Buddhist Theology which continues to lean toward patriarchal perspectives. It is through my examination of Guanyin, a female Buddhist deity, and those who worship her, that the subjective power of today’s Buddhist feminist theo/alogy is revealed. A discussion of contemporary feminism in the United States and the feminist theological perspectives that are key to my study will be critical tools used in support of my argument.

Feminist Theological Discourse

“Contemporary Feminism” or “Third-Wave Feminism” will be the platform from which I will discuss and analyze the ways that the women of this dissertation project fit into the feminist argument I wish to make. Our present generation of feminism is unique and distinctly different from its earlier two waves. I believe that its foundation is in experience, both personal and shared, and will strengthen the stories of the women of whom this project is about.

A continual thread runs through the ‘waves’ of feminism in the United States. Beginning with the fight for the right to vote in the 19th century, to the political, social, gender and racial struggles of the 1960’s to the 1990’s, into our present day, third wave, “contemporary feminism”, upholding gender equality is the highest priority. The focus

of third wave feminism is to ensure that *all* women are included in this aim; its critical apparatus is a radical critique of patriarchal systems and symbols.

R. Claire Snyder asks, “What is Third-Wave Feminism?” in her work examining contributions from third wave feminist scholars. Snyder says that the third-wave’s distinction is that it “foregrounds personal narratives that illustrate an intersectional and multiperspectival version of feminism,” and as a “consequence of the rise of postmodernism, third-wavers embrace multivocality over synthesis and action over theoretical justification.” She concludes her definition stating, “...third-wave feminism emphasizes an inclusive and non-judgmental approach that refuses to police the boundaries of the feminist political.”⁵ Like second-wave feminism’s effort to liken women’s shared experiences with anti-patriarchy, third-wave feminism avoids essentializing such shared experiences and instead stresses the importance of the “personal story”.⁶

Distinctly different from the former two waves, some critics struggle with the ‘wave’ metaphor, instead offering the term “contemporary feminism” to better describe the current movement. In *Everywhere and Nowhere: Contemporary Feminism in the United States*, Jo Reger describes contemporary feminism as one that is tactically “cultural and often expressed in personal, situational and everyday actions.”⁷ Contemporary feminists, emphasize the work to be done within their community/ies, while still acknowledging the connection to the challenges overcome from the first and

⁵ R. Claire Snyder, “What Is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 34, no. 1 (2008): 175.

⁶ Snyder, “What Is Third-Wave Feminism?” 184.

⁷ Jo Reger, *Everywhere and Nowhere: Contemporary Feminism in the United States* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 131.

second waves of feminism, therefore embracing “the identity” of feminism.⁸ Reger confirms, for feminists, that this period of contemporary feminism is the “...result of experience, ideologies and identities forged by the time(s) they are living in...”⁹ She defines these as “social movement communities made up of a variety of organizational and interpersonal networks ranging from the national to the personal.”¹⁰

Feminist theology emerged from the second and third waves of feminism, finding its meaning through the voices of women and their religious experiences. In the 1960’s and 1970’s scholars like Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Valerie Saiving Goldstein began to rewrite patriarchal theology. They were committed to criticizing the portrayal of women in religious texts and helped to re-interpret women’s roles in religion. In *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward A Feminist Theology*, Rosemary Radford Ruether explains that feminist theology draws on women’s experiences, including experiences of the divine, oneself, community and the world.¹¹ Ruether’s contributions have led us to define the critical principle of Feminist Theology as “the promotion of the full humanity of women.”¹²

Feminist theologians used the voices of their feminist communities to help reshape theology, building upon equality, social justice and personal experience as ways of encountering religion. “The uniqueness of feminist theology lies not in its use of the criterion of experience but rather in its use of *women’s* experience, which has been

⁸ Reger, *Everywhere and Nowhere*, 194.

⁹ Reger, *Everywhere and Nowhere*, 8.

¹⁰ Reger, *Everywhere and Nowhere*, 23.

¹¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward A Feminist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1983), 12.

¹² Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 14.

almost entirely shut out of theological reflection in the past.”¹³ Engaging with Guanyin as a feminist model we can agree with Ruether when she said, “We need other clues and models as well, models drawn from women’s experience, from many times and cultures.”¹⁴ In the following section I will introduce the feminist theologies and methodologies that I have chosen to support my argument, showing how gender specific spirituality informs religious experience.

Feminist Theo/alological Perspectives That are Key to My Study

The feminist theologies and methodologies I draw from are rooted in both the second and third waves of the feminist movement. Additionally, “contemporary feminism” profoundly expresses the theological framework from which the project positions itself within. Feminist theories and theologies such as Judith Plaskow’s “Consciousness Raising Theology,” and Valerie Saiving Goldstein’s earliest works about the feminine perspective in religion introduce the idea of women’s religious experience as both meaningful and equal to men’s. Gloria L. Schaab and Winnie Tamm stress the importance of the ‘lived’, ‘bodied’ experiences of women that are shared socially and spiritually. Furthermore, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Cynthia Eller discusses the ‘tangible’ aspects of women’s spirituality to support this, pointing out the importance of accessibility to the feminine in both the Self and to the divine. Gendered experiences are shared through “confessional” modes as described by Susan David Bernstein, thus further supporting the importance of subjectivity and relationality as it pertains to this study.

¹³ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 13.

¹⁴ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 114.

“Consciousness Raising Theology,” as described by Judith Plaskow, is the means by which one connects experience to religion. “...this theology arises through consciousness-raising experience, this theology constantly needs to measure itself against and recapture the richness of feeling and insight gained through consciousness raising, finally becoming a continuation of it.”¹⁵ Consciousness raising theology upholds the primary tenet of women’s experience as a critical reinforcement of the subjective power of identity. Plaskow places the values of ‘womanhood’ and community as key components used in order to achieve this. Feminine attributes that actively influence our consciousness such as emotion, body awareness and communication, are prioritized in Feminist Theology.

Valerie Saiving Goldstein’s essay from 1960, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” was one of the earliest recognitions of the feminine perspective in religion, stating, “It is my contention that there are significant differences between masculine and feminine experience and that feminine experience reveals in a more emphatic fashion certain aspects of the human situation which are present but less obvious in the experience of men.”¹⁶

Gloria L. Schaab discusses ‘experience’ methodology used in feminist theology in her paper, “Feminist Theological Methodology: Toward A Kaleidoscopic Method.” She describes the difficulties that arise when we try to specifically define what that experience may (or may not) be, saying that “...those feminist theologians who claim

¹⁵ Judith Plaskow, “The Coming of Lilith: Toward a Feminist Theology,” in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, eds. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1992), 198.

¹⁶ Valerie Saiving Goldstein, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” *Journal of Religion* 40, no. 2 (April, 1960): 100-112.

‘women’s experience’ as a primary or sole normative principle-as well as a revelatory source-are confronted with a quandary of definition and applicability because of the particularity of women’s experiences.”¹⁷ Schaab’s kaleidoscope model for feminist theological methodology suggests, “The beauty of the kaleidoscope model is in its capacity to accommodate the variety of contours, sources, and strategies of feminist methodology and to accord to each its appropriate influence in the outcome of the process.”¹⁸ She openly expresses the challenges that arise within the model as the ‘fragments’ and ‘selected shards’ are combined and spun together to form a new vision. Tendencies to both universalize and particularize must be carefully considered and Schaab stresses conversation and dialogue as the key elements used in this model, supporting inclusive awareness of all its shapes, parts and colors.¹⁹

“Confessional” modes of feminist theory, defined by Susan David Bernstein in “Confessional Feminisms: Rhetorical Dimensions of First-Person Theorizing,” explain the necessary importance of ‘identity’ and ‘experience’ as expressions of “women’s experience.” “Confessing feminist theory offers a stylistic instance from which to complicate and address questions of subject positioning, yet personalizing feminist theory also provides an expedient frame for mere identity assertion.”²⁰ Using this model for Buddhist feminist theo/alogy is extremely valuable because it validates the necessity for shared experience to be expressed. “...confessional modes often reclaim a coherent,

¹⁷ Gloria L. Schaab, “Feminist Theological Methodology: Toward a Kaleidoscope Model,” *Theological Studies* 62 (2001): 349.

¹⁸ Schaab, “Feminist Theological Methodology,” 362.

¹⁹ Schaab, “Feminist Theological Methodology,” 363.

²⁰ Susan David Bernstein, “Confessional Feminisms: Rhetorical Dimensions of First-Person Theorizing,” in *Language and Liberation: Feminism, Philosophy, and Language*, eds. Christina Hendricks and Kelly Oliver (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999): 173-199.

unmediated self, a universalizing source of knowledge whose identity rests squarely on her gendered experiences.”²¹

Winnie Tamm’s, *Bodied Mindfulness: Women’s Spirits, Bodies and Places*, connects the ‘lived realities’ by women that are grounded in experience with theory.²² These ‘lived realities’, for Tamm, are perceived realities nevertheless, and she uses Buddhism’s concept of interdependence to stress the importance of mindfulness (spiritual consciousness) and compassion in the ways we approach the ‘lived realities’ of others. By embracing feminism as a compliment to masculine norms we become fully inclusive, thereby creating a “new humanism”. This male/female humanism is ‘normal’, steeped in historical consciousness, which is informed by body and brain awareness.²³ The real goal in religious studies is to convince those who may not see subjective experience as a valuable measure of normativity. “If we can expand our vocabulary to describe subjective states of consciousness in which perceptions and ontology (reality) are intrinsically connected, then it is possible to circumvent the dilemma of historical consciousness and normative consciousness.”²⁴

Tamm supports gender-specificity, explaining the importance of the gender-specific model creates balance between the “paradigm shift from patriarchal consciousness to one in which women’s bodies are taken to be one of two normal kinds of bodies which can be experienced from a web of social meanings constitute social-

²¹ Bernstein, “Confessional Feminisms,” 173-199.

²² Winnie Tamm, *Bodied Mindfulness: Women’s Spirits, Bodies and Places* (Ontario, Canada: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1995), 2-3.

²³ Tamm, *Bodied Mindfulness*, 29.

²⁴ Tamm, *Bodied Mindfulness*, 35.

sexual democracy.”²⁵ Tomm says the issue with postmodernism's gender neutrality is that “language is treated independently of the body.”²⁶ There is no regard for the felt, sensational experience outside the text and this promotes a general, unidimensional, post-modern, essentialism. In the gender-specific model, experience is informed by expressive physical consciousness, therefore becoming multidimensional.²⁷ Tomm also suggests that the creation of ‘myth models’ are necessary symbolic representations. The importance of female symbols and imagery found in goddess theology and spirituality support an effort of “remythologizing”. “Remythologizing with goddess imagery is an important means by which the search for a new language to express women’s subjectivity can be facilitated.”²⁸

It is necessary for women to develop new symbols which would infuse the imaginary, and correspondingly, create a different symbolic system in which the myths or stories are expressed. Mythology, ontology, epistemology, ethics, and social theory and practice are inextricably intertwined. Language is their primary connecting thread. Goddess images provide strong symbols for women to redescribe themselves as embodied females.²⁹

Examples from Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz’s *mujerista* theology, show how when we use “our lived experience as the source of theology (*mujerista*), we are trying to validate our world, our reality, our values.” It is the idea “that who we are and what we do is revelatory of the divine.”³⁰ Her study of Hispanic women centrally places “religion in the

²⁵ Tomm, *Bodied Mindfulness*, 143.

²⁶ Tomm, *Bodied Mindfulness*, 154.

²⁷ Tomm, *Bodied Mindfulness*, 154.

²⁸ Tomm, *Bodied Mindfulness*, 160.

²⁹ Tomm, *Bodied Mindfulness*, 158.

³⁰ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha, In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology. A Hispanic Women’s Liberation Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 75.

day-to-day life...” of her subjects. Diaz stresses that the basis of understanding is relative to “what we know-ourselves, our everyday surroundings and experiences.”³¹

In *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, Cynthia Eller also supports gender-specific feminist spirituality versus gender neutral spiritual identification (proposed by Rita Gross). She explains that gender neutral spiritual experiences are experimental: however, gender-specific feminist spirituality “...is a religion that responds to women’s desire to be respected as the women they are, as the women they have been born and raised to be.” Most importantly, these experiences are ‘tangible’.³² Eller discusses the importance of goddess symbolism among spiritual feminists. She explains that identification with the goddess, the divine feminine, is tangible and that the non-dual expression of the goddess lives within us. “The primary symbolic function the goddess has for spiritual feminists is as female self-image. The goddess, the many goddesses, are external projections of a new, desirable internal conception of self.”³³ With respect to Buddhism and goddess symbolism, one could question how a non-theistic religion could properly utilize the divine feminine? Images such as Guanyin and Tara provide reassuring access to one’s intuitive self. Buddhism identifies such feminine incarnations as bodhisattvas, as opposed to goddesses; however, I wish to offer the following analysis of theology to show how Guanyin may act as a Buddhist goddess.

³¹ Díaz, *En La Lucha*, 73.

³² Cynthia Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993), 215.

³³ Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, 213.

Thealogy

Thealogy is a concept relating to any spiritual or religious practice of the Sacred Feminine, and it is rooted in reason, tradition, experience and intuition.³⁴ By using myth models like Guanyin, the goddess is venerated, and the symbolic, 'divine feminine' principle, is supported by *thealogical* praxis. Defined, thealogy is best understood as a concept. One that is concerned with the "beliefs, wisdom, embodied practices, questions, and values as they relate to any religious or spiritual practice, indigenous, contemporary principle of the Sacred Feminine."³⁵ Thealogical methods differ from theology's tendency to rely on doctrine and dogma, instead situating itself in reflexive experience and intuitive connection with the Divine Feminine.

The central difference between theology and thealogy is thealogy's wholly pluralistic ability to accept, contemplate, and embrace multiple and various religious orientations and their inherent ideological assumptions... Thus, thealogy is focused more on process that can transform rather than producing products that are immutable.³⁶

Thealogy better serves the causes and issues surrounding Buddhist Feminist Theology. Focus on practice and experience are core values in both Buddhism and thealogy, and the natural, humanistic, compassionate platforms from which both disciplines rely so heavily on, supports this relationship. Additionally, the divine feminine represented in goddess thealogy is not Christian, which allows for easier

³⁴ Patricia 'Iolana' and Angela Hope, "Thealogy: Mapping a Fluid and Expanding Field," *Goddess Thealogy: An International Journal for the Study of the Divine Feminine* 1, no. 1.1 (December 2011): 13.

³⁵ 'Iolana' and Hope, "Thealogy," 9.

³⁶ 'Iolana' and Hope, "Thealogy," 16.

analysis and comparison with Buddhism. Carol Christ, who first coined the naming of “Thealogy” during the 1970’s second wave of feminism, defines it as a religion that is symbolic and earthly. Christ explains, “When I do theology, or rather thea-ology, reflection on the meaning of Goddess, I do not turn to the Christian tradition as source or norm. My thealogy is rooted rather in my own experience and that of other women.” “For me spirituality is about experiencing our connections to the life force within all living things.”³⁷ In goddess spirituality and thealogy the dualistic tendencies of theology are replaced, and the embodied consciousness with the feminine divine principle fully supports interconnectedness. Carol Christ relates this to what she calls “The Last Dualism.” She says, “...the language of the Goddess assures us that neither life nor death can separate us from the love of the Mother, the Source of Life, who takes us back into her body at death.”³⁸ Interestingly, Christ explains that in the goddess movement, deities like Guanyin are present, yet there is still no fully ‘hybridized’ recognition of non-Western symbols and images within Thealogy.³⁹

In “Whose History Are We Writing? Reading Feminist Texts with a Hermeneutic of Suspicion,” (written in 2004) Christ makes a crucial point to mention that feminist thealogy and goddess feminism is/was struggling to gain worthy recognition among the academy. She expressed “...why Goddess feminism, one of the few religions in the world created and led by women, seems to be the only religion that Christian feminist theologians, gender theorists, and feminist post colonialists alike feel justified in

³⁷ Carol P. Christ, Ellen M. Umansky, and Anne E. Carr, eds., “Roundtable Discussion: What Are The Sources Of My Theology?” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 120-121.

³⁸ Carol P. Christ, “The Last Dualism: Life and Death in Goddess Feminist Thealogy,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 27, no.1 (2011): 145.

³⁹ Christ shares this view with Rita Gross.

dismissing out of hand and even treating with contempt?”⁴⁰ It is also important to note that in my current research there were very limited, if at all, references to Buddhism, or other Asian and non-Western religions with regard to feminist theology.⁴¹ Cynthia Eller touches on the issue, explaining that feminist spirituality, which theology and goddess studies belong to, is ‘broadly defined’ and is viewed ‘outside’ traditional religions. She and Christ both point out feminist spirituality has been centered in parts of Europe, the United States and Canada, primarily English speaking countries, and has predominantly attracted white, lesbian, middle class, educated women. Eller also mentions that the movement is ‘separatist’, meaning that men may be excluded, often intentionally, or allowed to participate only as guests.⁴²

Goddess Theology: An International Journal for the Study of the Divine

Feminine, editors, Patricia ‘Iolana’ and Angela Hope, feel the future of theology is groundbreaking, stating, “As much of Western religious understandings and practices have tended to subordinate the Sacred Feminine, theology allows for academics, contemplatives, and practitioners alike to put forth their scholastic contributions on the nature of the Goddess as She relates to the human condition and how She can effect change in the world today.”⁴³

⁴⁰ Carol P. Christ, “Whose History Are We Writing? Reading Feminist Texts with a Hermeneutic of Suspicion,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20, no. 2 (2004): 82.

⁴¹ Alice A. Keefe’s paper, “Visions of Interconnectedness in Engaged Buddhism and Feminist Theology,” discusses the shared similarities between Buddhism and Feminism’s desire for non-duality and interdependence.

⁴² Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, 7, 18.

⁴³ ‘Iolana’ and Hope, “*Theology*,” 1.

Thealogy's roots in the sacred feminine support the ways in which Guanyin, the compassionate goddess, acts in the lives of the three groups of women used in this dissertation project. The feminist web of inclusivity and community is a tenet of thealogy, steeped in both shared and individual experience informed by gender identity, thus leaning toward a deeper understanding of our Selves.

Guanyin: Historical Context

In China, she is known as Guanyin, Kuan Yin, or Kwan Yin. In Vietnam, she is Quan Am. She is also Kwan Im in Thailand and Indonesia, as well as Kannon in Japan, and Gwan-eum in Korea.⁴⁴ Guanyin is the transformation of Avalokitesvara bodhisattva who as a woman embodies the all merciful, compassion of one who hears the cries of the world. She herself was saved from darkness and tragic loss as explained in the many stories about her. The Chinese name Kuan-shih-yin is derived from the translation of the Sanskrit word Avalokitesvara by Kumarajiva in 406.⁴⁵ Kumarajiva's translation of the *Lotus Sutra* is the most popular version in China that describes the attributes of Kuan-shih-yin in the sutra. Calling upon Kuan-shih-yin bodhisattva, Kumarajiva states "...that when anyone meets danger, he/she should call the name of and take refuge in the bodhisattva. As the bodhisattva perceives the sound, the person will receive deliverance."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ I have chosen to use "Guanyin" to reflect current academic spelling standards.

⁴⁵ Chun-Fang Yu, *Kuan Yin The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2001), 38.

⁴⁶ Yu, *Kuan Yin The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*, 39.

Avalokitesvara was originally viewed as gender-neutral; however, male characteristics of the bodhisattva were quite common in India, Southeast Asia, Tibet and China.⁴⁷ During the T'ang Dynasty (618-906) to the early part of the Sung Dynasty (960-1279), Guanyin undergoes a gender transformation and her depiction as a female bodhisattva becomes more prevalent.

Historical Textual Evidence of Guanyin in Mahayana Sutras and Legends

Female features of Guanyin as a manifestation of Avalokitesvara that support gender fluidity, salvation and unconditional compassion for all, are found in both the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Surangama Sutra*. Aligning with the findings of my study, these sources help to bring the major themes of Buddhist Feminist Theology forward.⁴⁸

In chapter twenty-five of the *Universal Gate* chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, Guanyin is defined as the “Perceiver of the World’s Sounds” able to take on different forms.⁴⁹ In the text, the bodhisattva is referred to as “he”, yet also able to “assume thirty-three different forms”. In the form of a female bodhisattva, Guanyin “manifests” herself to be

⁴⁷ Yu, *Kuan Yin The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*, 294.

⁴⁸ *It is important to note that interpretations of these sutras may vary depending on the cultural and social context from which they are being translated. For example, in Tibet or Nepal Avalokitesvara remains male and never manifests into a female regardless of the text due to the dominant patriarchy still in place. The popular Chinese and Vietnamese interpretations of the sutras are the foundational support of my study.

⁴⁹ Burton Watson, trans., *The Lotus Sutra* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993), 301.

“anywhere in the world to save people from danger and suffering.”⁵⁰ The ability to transform into the being of those who call upon her is evidenced in the following section of the *Universal Gate* chapter:

*Inexhaustible Intent, this Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds has succeeded in acquiring benefits such as these and, taking on a variety of different forms, goes about among the lands saving living beings.*⁵¹

*If living beings encounter weariness or peril, immeasurable suffering pressing them down, the power of the Perceiver of Sounds' wonderful wisdom can save them from the sufferings of the world. He is endowed with transcendental powers and widely practices the expedient means of wisdom. Throughout the lands in the ten directions there is no region where he does not manifest himself.*⁵²

These examples from the *Lotus Sutra* support the overarching themes found in the study of transformation and gender fluidity for the sake of eternal enlightenment.

Another example of this can be found in the "Twenty-Five Sages" chapter of the *Surangama Sutra*. *(Sanskrit. Avalokiteśvara, Chinese. Guanshiyin 觀世音. The name can be interpreted as Avalokita-īśvara (The Sovereign Who Contemplates the World) or as Avalokita-svara (the One Who Hears the Cries of the World). Both alternatives, in their Chinese translations, are present in the Chinese Buddhist tradition; Guanzizai 觀自在 renders Avalokita-īśvara, and Guanshiyin 觀世音, often shortened to Guanyin 觀音, renders Avalokita-svara. The Chinese text of the Śūraṅgama Sūtra uses the name Guanshiyin).⁵³

⁵⁰ Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, 335.

⁵¹ Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, 302.

⁵² Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, 305.

⁵³ Hsuan Hua, *Surangama Sutra: Text, Commentaries, and Articles*, trans. by Heng Sure et al. (Ukiah, CA: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2009), 234.

In the chapter “The Bodhisattva Who Hears the Cries of the World” states, “I was then able to go to all the lands and appear in thirty-two forms that respond to what beings require.”⁵⁴ In verses 1-32 examples of Guanyin’s various forms are explained. Specifically, verses 7 and 8 both show how Guanyin’s bodily transformation is used to aid those who seek freedom and compassion.

[7] *“To beings who wish for a body that has the freedom and ease to roam throughout the ten directions, I will appear as the lord of the Heaven of Delight in Creating, and I will instruct them in the Dharma that will lead them to fulfillment of their wish.*

[8] *“To beings who wish for a body that has the freedom and ease to fly through space, I will appear as the lord of the Heaven of Pleasure Derived from What Others Create. I will instruct these gods in the Dharma that will lead them to fulfillment of their wish.”*⁵⁵

In this chapter of the “Twenty-Five Sages”, Guanyin tells the Buddha “World-Honored One, because I have broken through to enlightenment and have reached the final destination of the Supreme Path, I have also mastered four immeasurably efficacious and wondrous powers.”⁵⁶

*...Due to my practice of listening and contemplating, I broke free of the six kinds of sense-object such that I was no more obstructed by them than a sound is obstructed by a low wall. Therefore I have the wondrous power to appear in various forms, each of them reciting various mantras. Because these forms and these mantras have the power to deliver beings from danger, I am known in countless lands throughout the ten directions as one who causes beings to have nothing to fear.”*⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Hua, *Surangama Sutra: Text, Commentaries, and Articles*, 237.

⁵⁵ Hua, *Surangama Sutra: Text, Commentaries, and Articles*, 237.

⁵⁶ Hua, *Surangama Sutra: Text, Commentaries, and Articles*, 245.

⁵⁷ Hua, *Surangama Sutra: Text, Commentaries, and Articles*, 246.

One story that supports Guanyin's feminization in China is found in the popular legend of the Chinese Princess Miao-shan. Here, Guanyin, personified as Miao-shan, becomes female and her Chinese feminization is prompted by the saintliness of Princess Miao-shan. In the story, Miao-shan, the third daughter of King Miao-chuang, does not want to marry, but instead she is interested in pursuing a Buddhist path. This angers her father greatly, but she follows her heart and goes to live at the Buddhist nunnery, White Sparrow. In retaliation, he burns down the nunnery, killing five hundred nuns, and orders Miao-shan to be executed. Despite his revenge, she was saved by the gods and did not die, and instead, Miao-shan meditated for nine years and gained enlightenment. Her father, whom she had not spoken to, became very ill and the only remedy to heal him was to take medicine made from the eyes and hands of a person who never felt anger. Miao-shan was the only one who could heal her father, and she willingly sacrificed her eyes and hands. Later, after he was well he asked to thank the person who did this for him and he recognized the person as his own daughter Miao-shan and eventually the king converted to Buddhism to show his remorse and gratitude. Miao-shan's selfless sacrifice as a gesture to heal others signifies the ultimate way of a bodhisattva and her image is often seen as a figure with a thousand hands and eyes.⁵⁸ This story of Miao-shan gives great significance to the feminine aspects attributed with a bodhisattva in biographical form and is among many other stories supporting the goddess Guanyin as a female bodhisattva in China.

⁵⁸ Yu, *Kuan Yin The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*, 293-294.

Chun-Fang Yu suggests in her book, *Kuan Yin The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*, that Guanyin's gender transformation was made possible because of an overall renewed interest in Chinese goddesses such as Ma-tsu, and the Unborn Mother. She states that previous goddess worship had left an "empty space" for Guanyin to fill, suggesting, "because there were no strong goddesses around, Guanyin could undergo a sexual transformation."⁵⁹ We are able to use this history of Guanyin's beginnings to help understand the powerful and unique qualities that are associated with the female bodhisattva. Guanyin gained increasing popularity in China and Vietnam, and is often associated with refuge, compassion and non-judgment.

These historical texts directly uphold Guanyin's overwhelming reflexive ability to adapt, mimic and fully identify with those who call upon her, moreover, showing support of the relationship between Guanyin and the women of this project.

An exploration of Guanyin's symbolic significance into the 21st Century continues to uphold such characteristics and personal meaning for those who worship her. For this dissertation project, Guanyin's influence among American women will be analyzed through a feminist lens in order to reorient the importance of such a unique female deity in our contemporary society.

Guanyin: Contemporary Context in the U.S.

I have chosen three specific groups of American women to focus my project on: Convert Buddhist women, Asian American Buddhist women, and transgender women. In many ways the women who comprise these subject groups are different in ways of

⁵⁹ Yu, *Kuan Yin The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*, 413.

privilege, assimilation and social acceptance. On the surface they may differ in how they utilize Guanyin in their spiritual practices, however Guanyin's significance and meaning was a common thread among them. The following literature review will explain how each group relates to Guanyin and supports a Buddhist Feminist Theology.

Convert Buddhist Women: Jeff Wilson has written about Guanyin's growing popularity among convert Buddhists in America in his paper, "Deeply Female and Universally Human': The Rise of Kuan-yin Worship in America." In it he discusses the difference between cultural and convert Buddhists' interests in bodhisattvas. Wilson explains that early convert Buddhists in the 1960's and 1970's were anti-bodhisattva and anti-ritual, and focused more on individual meditation. Gradually, however, the observance and inclusion of Buddhist bodhisattvas and rituals have been incorporated into convert practice. Wilson says as Zen Buddhism established itself among Western practitioners, exposure to Kuan-yin was inevitable. "After all, Kuan-yin was part of the ritual life of Zen that, even if in attenuated form, was transmitted along with the meditation practices."⁶⁰ He explains that Kuan-yin's popularity among convert Buddhists is quite obvious. "The first is gender: among a constellation of male buddhas, bodhisattvas, and arhats, Kuan-yin stands out as a *female* bodhisattva. She thus attracts the attention of many convert Buddhist women, particularly those who are actively looking for feminist or at least overtly woman-friendly approaches to Buddhism."⁶¹

Wilson describes Kuan-yin's characteristics of active compassion and her transformative

⁶⁰ Jeff Wilson, "Deeply Female and Universally Human': The Rise of Kuan-yin Worship in America," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 23, no. 3 (October, 2008): 285-306.

⁶¹ Wilson, "Deeply Female and Universally Human," 285-306.

qualities, as well as her accessibility, as the other reasons why she is so popular among convert Buddhists.⁶²

Asian American Buddhist Women: The importance of Guanyin for Asian American Buddhist women, specifically Vietnamese (and Chinese), is the primary connection to traditional culture and national family ties. The Vietnamese people were forced to leave Vietnam during the war, mostly on boats, where the practice of Buddhism was oppressed, however Buddhism remains the most popular religion for Vietnamese Americans. In Vietnam, as well as in the United States, there has been a Buddhist renaissance. In Vietnam, goddess worship had been associated with providing “spiritual solutions in the face of massive hardship,” and the worship of Quan Am (Vietnamese spelling) for example, offers practitioners in Vietnam and in America sources of national identification. For so many Vietnamese, the “Questions of origins, survivals, identity, function, structure and reproduction, all of them familiar concerns in the intellectual history of the anthropology of religion, have been turned consistently to the relationship between these religious symbols and the nation.”⁶³ Individual practitioners may not identify their refugee experience with a sea voyage like that of the boat people, but overall emphasis is placed on the special connection to a Vietnam that was left behind. By keeping Quan Am close Vietnamese Buddhists can immediately access their faith. Whether worship takes place at home or in the temple, closeness and accessibility to the goddess is key. Because Quan Am takes on the personified aspects of the worshipper it is not a requirement for her devotees to attend temple services. This is a deeply intimate

⁶² Wilson, “Deeply Female and Universally Human,” 285-306.

⁶³ Philip Taylor, "The Goddess, the Ethnologist, the Folklorist and the Cadre: Situating Exegesis of Vietnam's Folk Religion in Time and Place," *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 14, no. 3 (2003): 383-401.

relationship between the devotee and the deity given the transformative qualities Quan Am.⁶⁴

Transgender Identified Women: Cathryn Bailey has written about how Guanyin, the bodhisattva of compassion, acts as a feminist icon for transgender people. Her work is relevant to the study of Guanyin as it offers another representation of the feminine Buddhist ideal, directly addressing the needs of gender transformation, always acting as compassionate and nonjudgmental. Bailey's research shows how Guanyin's image, as being both male and female at times, transcends gender tension altogether. Moreover, she discusses how Guanyin's "potential to help circumvent some pressing theoretical issues in feminism, both because she/he is as an icon and because of the particular qualities she/he has."⁶⁵ Bailey draws on pragmatism as a means to relate feminism and Buddhism, stating, "Pragmatism effectively addresses this need for a balance between universalism and relativism at issue for both Buddhism and feminist ethics."⁶⁶ Personal interaction with Buddhist doctrine or the Feminist movement is informed by the situational and experiential information interpreted by the individual, and an image or icon like Guanyin offers easy accessibility in support of this relationship. Bailey explains that both Buddhism and pragmatism are "non-essentialist" allowing for what is 'real' in terms of self and gender to be unfixed.⁶⁷ For transgender people,

⁶⁴ In 2014, I conducted a series of interviews with Vietnamese American women who directly credit Quan Am with their salvation and happiness. They shared deeply personal stories of how Quan Am provides them with a sense of safety and protection in marriages and tense personal relationships. Among this group of women, Buddhist feminism is the result of liberation and experience.

⁶⁵ Cathryn Bailey, "Embracing the Icon: The Feminist Potential of the Trans Bodhisattva, Kuan Yin," *Hypatia* 24, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 178-196.

⁶⁶ Bailey, "Embracing the Icon," 178-196.

⁶⁷ Bailey, "Embracing the Icon," 178-196.

Guanyin's own trans/bisexual gender may mirror their own definition of a male/female icon and role model, as "...she/he is not simply an androgynous character, but one who never having determinately slipped from male to female, might also slip back, or linger tranquilly (or unnervingly) in between."⁶⁸ The trans, non-dual qualities of Guanyin apply to all of us, "...both universal and particular, stable and ever-shifting..."⁶⁹

Patrick S. Cheng reinforces Bailey's ideas about Guanyin's importance for LGBTQ individuals, stating "Guanyin affirms three aspects in the life of queer people that are often missing from traditional images of the divine: (1) queer compassion; (2) queer sexuality; and (3) gender fluidity."⁷⁰ Cheng, who is a gay Chinese Christian minister and scholar describes the beneficial relationship between the individual (in this case transgender identified women) and the divine (Guanyin), that has not been represented in patriarchal religious structures. "Traditional Christian teachings have done little to allow queer people to see gender fluidity as a characteristic of the divine." "By contrast Guanyin is characterized by gender fluidity at the very core of her being."⁷¹ "Guanyin might serve as a symbol of salvation and wholeness for queer Asian people of faith..."⁷²

Hsiao-Lan Hu explores this idea in the chapter, "Queering Avalokitesvara," from *This-Worldly Nibbanna: A Buddhist-Feminist Social Ethic for Peacemaking in the Global Community*. Hu discusses how the teachings of "non-self" are easier to understand with feminism as a companion. She explains that gender cannot be "undone" in its simplest

⁶⁸ Bailey, "Embracing the Icon," 178-196.

⁶⁹ Bailey, "Embracing the Icon," 178-196.

⁷⁰ Patrick S. Cheng, "Kuan Yin: Mirror of the Queer Asian Christ," *Patrick S. Cheng*, published 2003, <http://www.patrickcheng.net>, 1.

⁷¹ Cheng, "Kuan Yin: Mirror of the Queer Asian Christ," 8.

⁷² Cheng, "Kuan Yin: Mirror of the Queer Asian Christ," 4.

form, because it was not created in a simple form.⁷³ She compares gender identity to class identity, in that they are both conditional and lack “Self-Essence.”⁷⁴

My analysis of Guanyin practice among American convert Buddhist women, Asian American Buddhist women, and transgender women shows how the bodhisattva acts as a life-giving feminist symbol. Analyzing these cases of spiritual identification and ritual practice, I seek to articulate how Guanyin provides a feminist perspective, both anti-patriarchal and maternal. Such anti-patriarchal and maternal qualities provide spiritual support for the women discussed here that are not available through the worship of male Buddhist deities. All three groups are defined by liberation from patriarchal norms and the desire to connect with the sacred feminine. The feminist lens that I use to connect and support this thesis is rooted in subjective and experiential feminist theory and methodology. Additionally, I wish to connect the ideas and theories of theology to further support my analysis of how Guanyin can act as a feminist Buddhist ideal for women of diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, it is my argument that Buddhist Feminist Theology finds its home in embodied spirituality.

Methodology for the Study

For the study, I utilized a qualitative/narrative, praxis-oriented approach to my methodology. I modeled this methodology similar to that of Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz’s *Mujerista* theology, a process that connects me to my subjects organically, through shared

⁷³ Hsiao-Lan Hu, *This-Worldly Nibbanna: A Buddhist-Feminist Social Ethic for Peacemaking in the Global Community* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011), 75.

⁷⁴ Hu, *This-Worldly Nibbanna*, 82.

struggle and membership of the same community. Isasi-Diaz says that our role as theologians is to “articulate” and “...record what the community is saying so the community can benefit from it in the future, so that it may be shared with other communities of struggle, and so that one day those voices may be an intrinsic element of the societal norm.”⁷⁵ My study explores women’s collective identities as both members of the same and different communities, combined with their shared experiences, creating a unique kaleidoscopic lens from which I could organize the data. As Isasi-Diaz says, “Because the theological articulations which we write are but a moment in the praxis of the community, such an articulation must always be open, in flux, welcoming revision.”⁷⁶ This methodological model allows for future interviews with new subjects and continued conversations in a combined story-telling and research approach.

Through interviews, participant observation and engaged research from the transgender workshop I co-facilitated, I was able to analyze and apply the data gathered from the subjects to support my thesis. Over the course of two years, I conducted interviews with twelve women in California, using a combination of personal recruitment and the “snowball” sampling method to enlist volunteers.⁷⁷

The participating women represented three groups: convert Buddhist women, Asian American Buddhist women, and transgender women, whom all had exposure to Guanyin. Among them, four women were interviewed in the convert Buddhist group, five women interviewed in the Asian American Buddhist group, and three women

⁷⁵ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, “Mujeristas: A Name of Our Own,” *The Christian Century* 106, no. 18 (May 24, 1989): 561.

⁷⁶ Isasi-Diaz, “Mujeristas: A Name of Our Own,” 562.

⁷⁷ “Snowball Sampling Technique,” *Oregon State University*, Published September 14, 2010, <https://research.oregonstate.edu/irb/policies-and-guidance-investigators/guidance/snowball-sampling>.

interviewed in the transgender women's group. Prior to the study, my interview questions were approved by University of the West's IRB department (see Appendices B).

I scheduled time to meet with the subjects either in person or via Skype, which involved travel to different areas in California, but primarily within the greater Los Angeles area, and all participants signed "Informed Consent Waivers" (see Appendices C). In addition, I used pseudonyms to protect their identities and asked for permission to share images of them and representations of their practice spaces.

There were some limitations due to the overall size of the study group, the locale being solely based in California, and the participant's varying degrees of exposure to Guanyin. The Asian American women were primarily Vietnamese American, with the exception of one who was Chinese American, born in Singapore. These women were the most prolific among the volunteers. This was contributed to the accessibility I had to them on the University of the West campus, a Buddhist founded university that attracts a large population of lay and monastic Buddhist practitioners. Also, their prior knowledge and personal connection to Guanyin is culturally rooted and tied to Vietnam, therefore they were the most articulate about bodhisattva qualities and devotion. For future study, a broader pool of Asian American women with a variety of cultural backgrounds would most likely allow for a more expansive analysis of personal experiences and outcomes.

The convert Buddhist women were randomly recruited by word of mouth and through workshops led by Sandy Boucher in California and were also very comfortable sharing their knowledge and experiences with Guanyin. I was able to travel to Northern California and Ridgecrest, CA to conduct two of the interviews, but otherwise they were limited to Southern California. It was somewhat challenging to find convert Buddhist

women who were available to be interviewed due to the limits of accessibility and their willingness to volunteer.

The smallest group were the transgender women who volunteered for the study as an extension of a one day meditation workshop held in Los Angeles, CA, and as a result had the least prior knowledge of Guanyin. Further workshops would have allowed for more opportunities to pool a larger participant group for the study as well as more liason connections with outreach LGBTQ organizations.

The format of the dissertation follows a linear six-chapter structure. In Chapter One: *Introduction*, the academic literature and historical research in support of my thesis is highlighted, laying a scholarly foundation from which I have been able to build my argument. Analyzing the feminist theoretical influences that reinforce both the need and sustainability of women's spirituality, Buddhist Feminism and Thealogy merge onto one path.

In Chapter Two: *Theological Reclamation of Women's Spirituality: Finding a Home in Buddhist Feminism*, I draw on the primary academic theories of theology versus thealogy to show the benefits of replacing androcentric interpretations with gender specific experience to define Buddhist Feminism. Additionally, Chapter Two discusses the need for more female Buddhist teachers and examines various contemporary Buddhist women's practices, as well as the implications of cultural and religious appropriation and privilege as it relates to Buddhism. Finally, Chapter Two discusses the overarching themes shared among the participants that were revealed during the study: 1)The Bodhisattva Ideal: Guanyin as Goddess, 2)Embodied Spirituality: The Subjective Divine Feminine, and 3)Applied Buddhism: Conscious Action and Women's Leadership.

In sequence, Chapter Three: *American Convert Buddhist Women: "Finding A Female Spiritual Companion"*, Chapter Four: *Asian American Buddhist Women: "She's Always Been There"* and Chapter Five: *Transgender Buddhist and non-Buddhist Women: "Guanyin the Trans-Bodhisattva"*, reflect the data collected from the interviews and follow an identical format: *Introduction to the subjects and their responses to the interview questions.

Chapter Six: *Moving Forward: Sustaining A Buddhist Feminist Theology*, culminates and reinstates my argument and future academic goals...furthering the necessary promotion and *theological* study of Buddhist Feminism.

Chapter Two: Discussion: *Theological* Reclamation of Women's Spirituality: Finding a Home in Buddhist Feminism

"Our theologies emerge from the texture of our lives, they're rooted in our experiences of our bodies, or our communities, and our histories." (Judith Plaskow)

It has often been considered problematic to suggest Theology as a productive means to discuss Buddhism, moreover Buddhist Feminism. Numerous scholars have weighed in as to whether it is even appropriate to attach such notions of a Western God view with that of Buddhism, which clearly has none. It is controversial indeed, and I am aware of the sensitivities and tensions that are provoked when Buddhism is partnered with Theology. I do not intend to dispel the accuracy of a Buddhist Theological partnership, but only to express that I feel Theology, without an emphasis on Christianity or God, works well to accompany Buddhist Feminism and the focus of my study.

Most critics of "Buddhist Theology" are concerned with the rightly assumed comparisons to Christian Theology. Buddhist scholar Richard Payne says, "To use the phrase 'Buddhist Theology' necessarily creates the implicit assumption that the entity so identified will be concerned with and share certain critically important characteristics with 'Christian Theology'."⁷⁸ He adds, "...Since theology is by cultural fiat a Christian project, a Buddhist theology will always remain imitative, that is second rate,

⁷⁸ Richard K. Payne, "Why 'Buddhist Theology' Is Not A Good Idea: Keynote Address for the Fifteenth Biennial Conference of the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies," *The Pureland, New Series*, no. 27 (2012-2013): 47.

derivative.”⁷⁹ In *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, contributors such as Rita Gross and John Makransky see the value of syncing Buddhism with Theology. They argue that Buddhist-Theology combined, supports the scholarly study of Buddhism’s “legitimacy” in academia and the importance of “self-identification” among its practitioners, but the issue continues to cause speculation and rejection.⁸⁰

It is here that we come to a crossroads in the study of Buddhist Theology, specifically Buddhist Feminist Theology. If we extract any notion of Christian leanings found in Theology and replace it with a non-Christian Theological lens we are better equipped to accept Buddhism and Theology in combination.

Theologian, Patricia ‘Iolana’s study “Divine Immanence: A Psychodynamic Study in Women’s Experience of Goddess,” explains how Theology differs from Theology, showing how it functions successfully in its inclusive approach to religion and spirituality.

While seemingly inclusive in scope, theology often has a focal handicap - it is monotheistic in its thinking, examining God from a narrow and monocular lens often concretised by its own dogma, as often exclusivist and hampered by truth claims. Theology, on the otherhand, is pluralistic, syncretistic and inclusive. It is fluid and comprehensive, able to contain many different belief systems and ways of being.⁸¹

Theology advocates for a subjective, experience based expression of faith and devotion.

“It marks an important paradigmatic shift away from the monolithic patriarchal Father

⁷⁹ Payne, “Why ‘Buddhist Theology’ Is Not A Good Idea,” 56.

⁸⁰ Payne, “Why ‘Buddhist Theology’ Is Not A Good Idea,” 56.

⁸¹ Patricia ‘Iolana, “Divine Immanence: A Psychodynamic Study in Women’s Experience of Goddess,” *Claremont Journal of Religion* 1, no. 1 (January 2012): 90 .

God towards the Divine Feminine - a shift away from organized religion towards a personal religion.”⁸²

Buddhism’s aim to achieve non-dualities is echoed by Sarah Nicholson in her article “Neither God Nor Goddess: Why Women Need an Archetype of the Self.” The ‘one’ or the ‘other’ approach becomes problematic with Goddess vs. God. She acknowledges the importance for women to be represented in female form, but proposes “A uniquely female archetype of the Self.” One that “Represents the journey of woman as heroine, her process of individuation, and finally her immanently incarnated revelation of divinity.”⁸³ “The female archetype of the Self would represent both the journey of woman, and the culmination of her journey in which she immanently reveals divinity in her female form.” Nicholson remarks the importance of establishing such an archetype of the Self requires historical, mythical and religious references in order to “establish a genealogy of spiritual heroines of the past, and a contemporary one.”⁸⁴

In *Religious Imagination and the Body: A Feminist Analysis*, Paula M. Cooley discusses the ways theology and thealogy “evoke” rather than “explain” religion. “In contrast to explanation, evocation requires a more self-conscious involvement in the making of itself. In other words, theologians and thealogians work specifically with the central symbols of their traditions, the deities characteristic of each.” She stresses the importance of such symbols in the “evocational” experience from those whom they relate with. Feminist theology and thealogy utilize “imaginative construction” and “the

⁸² Iolana’ “Divine Immanence,” 104.

⁸³ Sarah Nicholson, “Neither God Nor Goddess: Why Women Need an Archetype of the Self,” *Journal of Integral Theory and Practice* 7, no. 2 (2012): 27.

⁸⁴ Nicholson, “Neither God Nor Goddess,” 27.

construction of the deity.” Moreover, Cooley sees the significance of the body as part of this “imaginative construction of religious symbols.”⁸⁵

Carol Christ uses “process thinking” to describe such relative truths as valid, saying “There are no absolute truths in life, in religion, or in philosophy.” “Understanding relative truths is a process of embodied, embedded knowing.” Christ’s questioning of this desire to create infallible theological truths has contributed to “...An inability to accept limitation and vulnerability that also begins with rejection of the body.”⁸⁶

Developing a Buddhist Feminist *Theological* Perspective: Buddhist Women’s Voices and Issues

Before we are able to describe a new Buddhist feminist theo/alogy it is necessary to discuss the issues contemporary Buddhist women face. Perspective, analysis and interpretation of the feminine Buddhist theo/alogical future relies on the experiences, stories, practice, dedication and equality of lay and monastic Buddhist women. In our contemporary world, issues of equality and female ordination are not new. Among Theravadan and Tibetan lineages, male dominance maintains its hold on monastic rules and authority. Rita Gross, who pioneered the path for Buddhist feminism, criticizes the support of these communities as coming from both the passivity and encouragement of the lay Buddhist. “The informal male dominance in Buddhist monasticism stems from

⁸⁵ Paula M. Cooley, *Religious Imagination and the Body* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 127.

⁸⁶ Carol Christ, *She Who Changes: Re-Imagining The Divine In The World* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 169.

popular gender stereotypes in androcentric and patriarchal societies and is partly due to the androcentrism of the lay Buddhist matrix in which the monastic institutions exist.”⁸⁷ Tremendous work is currently being done to provide awareness, education and change for female Buddhist monastics throughout the world. Individuals and organizations have dedicated their efforts toward giving women equal opportunities awarded to men in order to achieve maximum liberation, enlightenment, and ordination. Awareness and education lie at the root of such change and resistance to progress tends to fall into the cultural and textual interpretations of Buddhist history.

Education is a key component needed to implement the proper shift in this gender dysfunction. By upholding a commitment to educate female monastics, the Buddhist community will have to listen to the feminine voice of the dharma. Gross suggests that both male and female monastics should be educated and trained together, thus supporting gender equality. With response to the rules of segregation in order to limit sexual desire, Gross says, “If they learn to encounter each other as human beings, fellow monastics and meditators, such conditioned responses start to diminish.”⁸⁸ Women teachers, both lay and monastic, who are well versed in the dharma will most definitely produce the subjective feminine perspective of Buddhism that is not expressed by the male Buddhist.

The need for more women teachers, who are accessible as both lay and monastic authorities of the dharma, addresses the diverse needs of Buddhist practitioners and students. Women teachers can offer the Buddhist feminist perspective in Buddhist theo/alogy, creating a solid voice and viewpoint that has not been popularly represented.

⁸⁷ Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 245.

⁸⁸ Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 249.

This benefit is one that reaches all people, and “While it is important to emphasize the importance of such role models for women, it is also important to understand that men, too, need to learn from the example and presence of women teachers.”⁸⁹ The ongoing need for female teachers as lineage holders is not only necessary in order to gain equality, but it is an important aspect of the living manifestation of the divine feminine. If we aim toward living our daily lives with the bodhisattva ideal, we surely need to have both male and female examples, symbols and imagery to draw from.

In *The Religious Imagination of American Women*, Mary Farrell Bednarowski states that more Buddhist women teachers are necessary for equality and accessibility to enlightenment. Equal access to the divine is “something new emerging among American Buddhist women...” and acts as an “obligation” in support of gender equality.⁹⁰ Although written sixteen years ago, the concept may no longer be new, but the issue still remains.

Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Tsultrim Allione, also reinforces the need for more women teachers, remarking, “Western women are also conditioned by limited examples of truly spiritual women as role models...we must articulate our experiences with very few resources from which we can draw inspiration, and in which we can recognize ourselves.”⁹¹

⁸⁹ Rita Gross, “Where Are the Women in the Refuge Tree? Teacher, Student, and Gender in Buddhism,” in *Religious Feminism and The Future of the Planet: A Buddhist-Christian Conversation*, Rita Gross and Rosemary Ruether (New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 2001), 72.

⁹⁰ Mary Farrell Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999), 62.

⁹¹ Tsultrim Allione, “The Feminine Principle in Tibetan Buddhism,” in *Buddhist Women on the Edge: Contemporary Perspectives from the Western Frontier*, Marianne Dresser, ed. (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1996), 108.

The issues surrounding the ideas and interests of Buddhist feminist theologians are vast and uniquely critical. Issues of androcentric language, ordination and enlightenment equality, experience, practice, and the need for more female teachers are some of the issues that contribute to my examination of how we can begin to create a more concrete and viable picture of what Buddhist feminist theo/alogy should look like moving into the future. I believe that once some of these obstacles are no longer dominating our efforts, we will be able to concentrate on developing and producing a sustainable, contemporary Buddhist feminist theo/alogy.

Studies of Buddhist Women's Practice

Among the multitude of biographical essays and interviews of, and about, Buddhist women, there are very few formal academic studies of American Buddhist women's practice. Of them is Sharon A. Suh's ethnographic study of Korean Buddhist women in Los Angeles. Suh concludes that "...religion is a highly gendered phenomenon that results in distinctly male and female forms of worship and constructions of identity."⁹² The Korean women whom she studied use their practice "as a formula for overcoming suffering..." therefore becoming "agents in their self-transformation".⁹³ For them the temple is the center of their worship as well as a place of community and cultural connection. Their Buddhist practice helps to develop self-esteem, especially for those

⁹² Sharon Suh, *Being Buddhist in a Christian World: Gender and Community in a Korean American Temple* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2004), 4-5.

⁹³ Suh, *Being Buddhist in a Christian World*, 57.

who may be new immigrants, as well as “finding oneself” through the Buddhist doctrines.⁹⁴

Another ethnographic study of Buddhist women’s practice is Carolyn Chen’s study of Taiwanese immigrant women in Southern California who converted to either Buddhism or Christianity. For these immigrant women, Chen observed that their religious involvement allowed them the ability to negotiate expected traditional familial expectations and duties as daughter-in-laws, yet without ‘compromising’ the “integrity of the nuclear family.”⁹⁵ She also notes that the women of her study were very happy about finding peace and a true sense of self, which they admit they did not have prior to their conversion. Like the women in Sharon Suh’s study, the Taiwanese immigrant women find “religious language gives voice to their experiences and offers a vocabulary to declare a new kind of gendered self.”⁹⁶

Like Asian American Buddhist women, convert American Buddhist women practice in co-ed sanghas. Some follow very traditional temple worship practice, others choosing to practice less formally, frequenting meditation sittings and dharma talks. For many convert Buddhist women, ‘women centered’ practices and retreats have become popular and grew out of the response to patriarchal sexism found in many of the traditional Buddhist teachings. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Tibetan Buddhist nun and religious studies scholar, writes “Many women have been seeking opportunities to meet

⁹⁴ Suh, *Being Buddhist in a Christian World*, 131.

⁹⁵ Carolyn Chen, “A Self of One’s Own: Taiwanese Immigrant Women and Religious Conversion,” *Gender and Society* 19, no. 3 (June, 2005): 352.

⁹⁶ Chen, “A Self of One’s Own,” 354.

with other women practitioners...to learn from their experiences.”⁹⁷ Karma Lekshe is one of the founders of Sakyadhita, an international organization dedicated to creating an alliance of Buddhist women, uniting all Buddhist women; lay, monastic, convert and cultural. The national chapter, Sakyadhita USA, membership is made up of Buddhist women living in the U.S. Members of Sakyadhita USA cooperate to help women develop their potential as scholars, practitioners, teachers, counselors, artists, community organizers, and compassionate social activists.⁹⁸ Although the majority of its members are convert (primarily caucasian) Buddhists, the intention is to attract a more diverse population of women practitioners.

The practices of Buddhist women in the United States help to inform the Buddhist feminist theo/theological movement. We are able to understand *why* women practice and *how* their practices have helped them develop a ‘sense of self’. Buddhist women are drawn to spiritual communities and sanghas that help them identify as both independent and engaged practitioners of the dharma.

Buddhist Feminist Theology investigates this realm of spiritual and social experience influenced by the experiences of women and engaged Buddhism. Both Buddhism and feminism emphasize experience (practice) over doctrine, supporting ongoing transformation and growth, and focus on community and liberation helps to uphold these shared values.

⁹⁷ Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed., *Buddhism Through American Women’s Eyes* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1995), 12.

⁹⁸ “About Sakyadhita USA,” Sakyadhita, <http://www.sakyadhitaua.org/pages/about.html>.

Acknowledging Appropriation

This project would be remiss if it did not acknowledge that some degree of cultural and religious appropriation is present. Convert Buddhist women in America are engaging in traditions and practices that they were not born into, and are often criticized for not practicing properly. Acts of appropriation are common in American culture, often loosely adopted without formal transmission. It is important to recognize that some cultural Buddhists may feel sensitive and protective of their ancient faith traditions, rituals and observances. In Kim Tran's article, "4 Signs You're Culturally Appropriating Buddhism-And Why It's Important Not To", she makes the point that "Buddhism is complex, comprised of countless teachings and challenging practices."⁹⁹ Tran shares her experiences of borrowed Buddhism and how much of what she sees has "no awareness, no connection and no depth." With respect to consumerism Tran is making it clear that just because Buddhist prayer flags, or singing bowls are cool and pretty, it is still an act of appropriation, or mis-appropriation, when someone uses them for house decoration. She stresses her concern and is offended at such widespread borrowing. "We must engage with Buddhism the same way we would a Judeo Christian religion like Catholicism or Christianity. Failing to provide either with a basic level of reverence is deeply disrespectful and honestly, downright racist."¹⁰⁰ Kim Tran's article clearly expresses the negative sentiment of cultural appropriation in the West; lacking a direct

⁹⁹ Kim Tran, "4 Signs You're Culturally Appropriating Buddhism-And Why It's Important Not To," *Everyday Feminism*, June 21, 2016, <http://everydayfeminism.com/2016/07/culturally-appropriating-buddhism/>.

¹⁰⁰ Tran, "4 Signs You're Culturally Appropriating Buddhism-And Why It's Important Not To."

connection and ‘reverence’ to the original sources of such sacred traditions like Buddhism.

Fannie Hsu’s article, “We’ve Been Here All Along,” reinforces Kim Tran’s sentiments, expressing the problems that arise among “white” American Buddhism’s appropriation of Asian and Asian American Buddhism. Hsu’s biggest concern is that “white Buddhists” are acting like “white supremacists” when they act with authority and superiority over historical practices and traditions of Asian Buddhism. “The assertion of white authority goes hand in hand with the mainstream erasure of the contributions of Asian and Asian American Buddhists in the development of Buddhism in the U.S.”¹⁰¹ Hsu suggests using the Five Precepts as a guide to reflect and deepen our Buddhist practice. For example, employing the precept not to steal, “should be understood as both not taking what is not yours or what is not freely given *and* as actively practicing dana, or generosity.”¹⁰² Hsu goes on to express that as long as “white Buddhists” do not act with false authority over the ancient teachings originating in Asia, and give proper credit and dana to “express gratitude”, then the “suffering” of cultural appropriation can be alleviated.¹⁰³

It is possible to accept some degree of cultural and religious/spiritual appropriation as a useful expression of Buddhism if done with conscious care and consideration. In *Feminism’s New Age: Gender, Appropriation, and the Afterlife of Essentialism*, Karlyn Crowley asks, “Is appropriation always bad? Is it actually stealing, or can appropriation have a mutually beneficial outcome?” Crowley argues that “...These

¹⁰¹ Fannie Hsu, “We’ve Been Here All Along,” *Buddhadharma: The Practitioners Quarterly*, Winter, 2016, 28.

¹⁰² Hsu, “We’ve Been Here All Along,” 30.

¹⁰³ Hsu, “We’ve Been Here All Along,” 30.

acts are not simply theft, as they also involve affection, incarnation, and reattribution.”¹⁰⁴

In her study of New Age culture, Crowley discusses how women “turn within in order to then turn out” by participating in communities that “may defy the norms of traditional religious community.”¹⁰⁵ For the convert white women and transgender women of this dissertation project, Buddhist spiritual appropriation lends itself to “a more powerful spiritual gender identity (that) is found in the superior spirituality and indigenous traditions of women of color.”¹⁰⁶ “That never means that racial appropriation is ‘okay’ but it does mean that white women simultaneously obtain ‘gendered satisfactions from these New Age appropriations, and it is more fruitful to understand than to simply reject them.”¹⁰⁷

Brad Warner’s article, “Is White Buddhism Cultural Appropriation?” points out that Buddhism in the West has been encouraged and supported by cultural Asian Buddhists. White, Black, Middle Eastern, and Asians born in the West, etc., study and practice Buddhism with an open invitation. Warner states this is what the historical Buddha encouraged as well, and to call “White Buddhism” cultural appropriation then all of what we now call Buddhism can be called “cultural appropriation.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Karlyn Crowley, *Feminism’s New Age: Gender, Appropriation, and the Afterlife of Essentialism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011), 9-10.

¹⁰⁵ Crowley, *Feminism’s New Age: Gender, Appropriation, and the Afterlife of Essentialism*, 38.

¹⁰⁶ Crowley, *Feminism’s New Age: Gender, Appropriation, and the Afterlife of Essentialism*, 163-164.

¹⁰⁷ Crowley, *Feminism’s New Age: Gender, Appropriation, and the Afterlife of Essentialism*, 10.

¹⁰⁸ Brad Warner, “Is White Buddhism Cultural Appropriation?” *Hardcore Zen*, August 15, 2016, <http://hardcorezen.info/is-white-buddhism-cultural-appropriation/4752>.

In “Two Buddhisms, Three Buddhisms, and Racism,” Wakoh Shannon Hickey analyzes various taxonomies and categories that scholars have produced to define groups of Buddhists in America. She struggles with the term “ethnic” Buddhists, which is often used in its comparison to “convert” Buddhists. “It is problematic to lump together diverse Asian ethnic and cultural groups as if they were homogenous. They are not. To suggest that they are risks the possibility of racial essentializing.”¹⁰⁹ Her analysis begins with a look at the underlying issues of racism and privilege. Privilege, Hickey describes, is often the unconscious, inherited experience of those who have it. In her discussion of privilege vs. racism in American Buddhism she is careful to point out that racism reinforces “dominance” and “unequal access to power and resources” whereas privilege is a “characteristic of *systems* of dominance into which we are born, and condition us all our lives. It is usually exercised unconsciously and unintentionally.”¹¹⁰ The real problem arises when suggested taxonomies and categories of American Buddhists use “ethnic” to mean the opposite of “white”. This disregards Latino, African American, Pacific Islander Buddhists or any other mixed racial identities. Hickey cautions us to not use implications of race or ethnicity to describe Buddhist practitioners in America. She sees ethnicity as an important aspect of who people are, but strongly urges the use of self-reflexive methods with relation to privilege when we are categorizing Buddhist groups.

I think Hickey’s suggestions work well with regard to the sensitivities surrounding appropriation. Most important is identifying groups of Buddhists by *how* they practice and what lineages they affiliate with. Some groups are made up of mixed

¹⁰⁹ Wakoh Shannon Hickey, “Two Buddhisms, Three Buddhisms, and Racism,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 11 (2010): 13-14.

¹¹⁰ Hickey, “Two Buddhisms, Three Buddhisms, and Racism,” 3.

ethnicities, practice an eclectic style of traditions and meet informally in someone's home such as many meditation groups. Others may study the dharma with an ordained teacher or monastic at a temple which may likely have affiliations with a master or lineage in Asia. She suggests attributing "denominations" when we are referring to specific Buddhist groups and lineages. Appropriating Buddhism need not always be negative as long as those who are borrowing are self-conscious, reflective, and maintain a sensitivity to racism and privilege in America.

"Both scholars and practitioners of Buddhism in the United States must attend carefully to these issues, and we can do so without defining practitioners in simplistic, racialized terms. Even the terms 'cultural' or 'heritage' or 'diaspora' Buddhists are less racializing than 'ethnic' Buddhists, as that phrase is typically used."¹¹¹ Hickey's conclusion which states, "Any scholarly attempt to describe groups should at least consider how members describe themselves. Our descriptions must be nuanced to account for exceptions, parallels, blends, and developmental processes."¹¹² encourages the highest degree of sensitivity of appropriation and pushes us to always consider the experiences and perspectives of those we are appropriating.

Wanting to discuss the topic of appropriation further I asked Buddhist teacher Sandy Boucher to reflect on the subject. We discussed if there are acceptable ways to address the issues of privilege and how to "appropriate" or "borrow" Buddhism respectfully? In addition, I also asked her to share her views on feminism, women's spiritual practices, and her relationship with Guanyin as relevant to my study.

¹¹¹ Hickey, "Two Buddhisms, Three Buddhisms, and Racism," 14.

¹¹² Hickey, "Two Buddhisms, Three Buddhisms, and Racism," 20.

Talk with Sandy Boucher: “Appropriation, Privilege, Feminism and Guanyin”

Sandy’s work has inspired and informed me personally and has greatly influenced this dissertation project. Her discovery of Guanyin so many years ago has shaped both American Buddhism and has provided a deep look into the divine feminine. She has graciously made herself available to me as a teacher and has been supportive of this project from its inception.

I first met Sandy in 2015 at a day long Guanyin retreat in Ridgecrest, CA. There were approximately twenty women in attendance and she lead us through a series of meditation practices, self-reflective writing activities, dance and movement exercises to experience the benefits of calling upon Guanyin as a spiritual guide. Only a few of the women had previous knowledge of Guanyin, but by then end of the day it felt like we all knew her, like a new best friend and sister. The second workshop I attended with Sandy was at Spirit Rock, a well known retreat center, in Woodacre, CA in 2016. Again Sandy led us on a day long journey into the feminine divine with Guanyin as our guide. I feel incredibly blessed to know Sandy and for her willingness to share her deep knowledge of the transformative power of Guanyin.

I recently met with Sandy at her home in Oakland in June, 2017. We sat in her lovely garden surrounded by large oaks and drank homemade iced tea while we talked. I wanted to discuss my project, the workshops she is teaching, and her personal insights into Buddhist practice among women. Right away Sandy was eager to discuss white privilege and appropriation, sharing reflections from her recent LGBTQ workshop at Spirit Rock. She said she immediately utilized a method of “invitation” and

“engagement” as means to address privilege and a way to support inclusivity in the sangha. “You must include everybody, and it feels beautiful.” “I learned to do this at East Bay Meditation Center in a program called “White and Awakening”. It’s about our privilege as white people and how we act in the world. You have to address this, you have to name it, and if you name it then it’s workable, but if you don’t, and you’re unconscious, then you’re in trouble.”

We continued to discuss the issues and sensitivities related to appropriation and Sandy very clearly stated, “After all Buddhism is a world religion, it is not a tribal religion, so when people say you’re doing this Eastern religion, I say forget it, where did Christianity start? Here? No, I don’t think so, not in California.” “World religions spread out, but this is not to say that we shouldn’t honor, and I very much honor, and am engaged in traditional Buddhism, but it moves...the West is the only place where you have a smorgasbord of lineages in Buddhism.” Sandy’s approach to addressing privilege and appropriation aligns with her entire philosophical outlook on humanity and the ways she is able to incorporate Guanyin’s bodhisattva qualities into her daily life.



(Sandy in her garden, Oakland, CA: taken June, 2017)

She sees conflict as an opportunity to fully engage in compassion and credits this to her relationship with Guanyin. Sandy said Guanyin's "fierce compassion" is a useful tool to help deal with what she feels is an attack on women right now. As a young woman Sandy was very active in the Women's Liberation movement, reflecting that she had the same passion and anger as those who are currently fighting for the Black Lives Matter

movement. She said her anger has now transformed into compassionate action, which she credits Rita Gross with teaching her.

You have this anger and its not to be rejected, it's a source of energy and you transform that anger into action, action that will change the situation, and it changes into a wholesome direction which doesn't harm you. If I am out there furious and ranting I'm messing myself up, I'm hurting myself because its abusive, that's like Guanyin's compassion, it's a fierce compassion. There's a sword of compassion that is so appropriate these days, it's cutting through all of that, even one's own anger and getting to the truth of the matter, getting to what is really going on here, what is the pattern, the abusive thing that's happening? And then, because you're not all freaked out by your own anger then you can think about things in a rational way, and say "What might we do?" That's why Guanyin is so important to me because she engaged...her whole thing is to engage and bring compassion to the world, in a way that is most appropriate. It's not about being nice at all, it's about what is appropriate here, what is useful, what will bring us in a wholesome direction? And allow every being to develop in the way that is meant for them to develop. Human beings, and other beings...



(Sandy Teaching a Guanyin Retreat at Spirit Rock, Woodacre, CA: taken October 2016)

“That’s really what Buddhism has to offer in any kind of social justice setting where people get upset and do and say things that are very harmful, it’s a way of holding that, particularly people who meditate with Guanyin have that to offer to the world.”

I asked Sandy to share her thoughts about Buddhist women’s practice and the need for more women teachers. She said it was vital for her to have a female teacher when she first began practicing Buddhism. “You know the entree for me had to be with a woman teacher...and not just an ordinary woman teacher, very eccentric, very different

from other people (Sandy's first teacher was Ruth Dennison who founded Dhamma Dena)." In Ruth's methods and teachings there was a strong emphasis on the body, and although Sandy does not feel that Buddhist practice necessarily needs to be gendered on its highest level, it is the "socio/cultural" engagements with Buddhism that connect us with a gender; and therefore require a gendered representation of Buddhism. She feels the only way to have an egalitarian Buddhist community is for women to be leaders and teachers. It is extremely important for women to be able to look up and see a woman at the front of the room. In an article written in 1997 for *Lion's Roar*, Sandy remarked:

Female spiritual teachers in the Buddhist tradition have and continue to offer the teachings in innovative and often recognizably female-oriented ways. Women may take a more psychological approach to teaching, adapting their message to the twentieth-century, psychologically-oriented consciousness of their students. Women teachers may be more accepting of the expression of emotion by their students.¹¹³

"When I think about everybody in the sangha, people of color, disabled people, those with gender dysphoria, lesbians, homosexuals, all kinds of people including people who have environmental illnesses...it seems to me that is the direction in which Buddhism is going (inclusivity) and what I notice is that women are very much at the forefront of making that happen, and I think Guanyin is part of that."

Finally, I wanted to know how Sandy first began teaching others about Guanyin's compassion. She said that at first she was just studying and reading about Guanyin in the 80's, collecting information to write a book about her. In 1996, she was diagnosed with serious colon cancer and that was when she really moved closer to Guanyin, listening to a

¹¹³ Sandy Boucher, "The Dance of Gender: A Woman's Guide to American Buddhism," *Lion's Roar*, July 1, 1997, 7.

recorded chant in the hospital during her chemo treatment. Eventually, it was Guanyin that brought Sandy to teach, write and facilitate retreats. “It was Guanyin who made me into a Buddhist teacher and every retreat I do even if it’s not about Guanyin she’s always there, she’s always on the altar.”

Our talk concluded with Sandy sharing her favorite story of Princess Miao-shan and Guanyin’s incredible bodhisattva capabilities of transformation and compassion. She said at first, as a feminist, it was difficult to reconcile Guanyin’s bodily self sacrifice to offer others’ freedom, but on a deeper level it is about humanity. Sandy said, “It is about giving what is beyond is easy, and what we don’t know.” “You need to step away from is this idea, this inbred concept of ‘what women do’ is sacrifice...this is what human beings do, men do, when it’s the right thing to do. Guanyin’s power...we can gender it, but we also know that she can appear as male, or animal.”

My conversation with Sandy Boucher touched on many of the concerns that were shared by the women I interviewed. Although I did not formally ask my subjects about politics, action and female leadership, it was brought forward in many of the interviews. A shared concern for the future of the country, as well as suggestions for change were also discussed. The importance of compassionate activism influenced by Guanyin, and the placement of women front and center was a common goal for everyone.



(Sandy with her Guanyin collection: taken June, 2017)

Following Guanyin: Themes and Revelations

In my analysis of the interviews, consistent themes emerged among all three groups of women, although the means by which these characteristics are facilitated in the particular experiences of the women interviewed varies. Some of the women view Guanyin's qualities as general models to live by, whereas others discussed how such attributes function in very specific ways. Each story shares a communal affection for Guanyin, expressing the many ways she has aided in life changing transformations,

provided unwavering protection from trauma, and has offered unconditional maternal love. What is most beautiful are the individualized experiences that have led to this loving relationship with Guanyin. Later, I will discuss how these themes function individually for the women interviewed in the Data Chapters 3, 4 and 5. Following are the universal themes that surfaced from the stories shared with me.

Bodhisattva qualities and concepts, such as compassion, salvation, healing, protection, and acceptance were definitely most prominent. Additionally, all three groups of women identified an *Embodied Spirituality* that is expressed by faith; faith in Buddhist practice, and faith in a divine feminine that exists both within themselves and in the worship of Guanyin. Within this embodied spirituality Guanyin acts as both a mirror of one's female strength as well as an external source of unconditional spiritual love to be wrapped in.

Another prominent theme for all three groups was the application of Buddhist principles and practices. Applied Buddhism, as it functions for the women of the study, is used as a daily reminder to be a better person. Moreover, Applied Buddhism helps women find ways to approach the current political climate, of which they expressed as a major concern. Among their suggestions of how Buddhist principles and practices can be transmitted was a common desire for more women teachers and leaders. They see female leadership in Buddhist settings upholding and promoting "Interconnectedness" and "Conscious Action" in today's society.

In this Discussion Chapter I will connect the highlighted themes that were most obvious among all three groups of women giving supporting examples from the collected data: They are **1)The Bodhisattva Ideal: Guanyin as Goddess, 2)Embodied**

Spirituality: The Subjective Divine Feminine, and 3) Applied Buddhism: Conscious Action and Women's Leadership.

A feminist voice is undoubtedly present, sometimes boldly upfront, at other times a gentle mention. Guanyin's own mythical journey itself is an example of personal strength, paving the way for women to trust in their own power. The idea that Guanyin is not only a bodhisattva meant to serve and protect, but that she materializes as a goddess was expressed by all three groups; supporting my argument that Buddhist Feminist *Theology* finds its home in 'embodied spirituality'.

The Bodhisattva Ideal: Guanyin as Goddess

How are the application of bodhisattva qualities transmitted through Guanyin into the lives of the women of this study? In "Delivering the Last Blade of grass: aspects of the *bodhisattva* ideal in the Mahayana," Harry Oldmeadow writes:

The *bodhisattva* is one who voluntarily renounces the right to enter *nirvana*, who, under certain inextinguishable vows, undergoes countless rebirths in the samsaric realm in order to devote his/her energies, in a spirit of boundless compassion, to the deliverance of all beings down to the "last blade of grass". The *bodhisattva* is committed to the practice of the six *paramitas* (perfections), particularly the all-encompassing ideal of *prajna* (wisdom). The *bodhisattva* advanced on the path becomes an exemplar of sacrificial heroism and moral idealism as well as an aspirant to complete enlightenment.¹¹⁴ The fully-fledged *bodhisattva* is simultaneously fully enlightened and boundlessly compassionate. The compassionate aspect of the *bodhisattvas* is stressed not because they are in any sense deficient in wisdom but because their cosmic function is to highlight and to radiate this dimension of wisdom-awareness.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Harry Oldmeadow, "Delivering the Last Blade of Grass: Aspects of the Bodhisattva Ideal in the Mahayana," *Asian Philosophy* 7, no. 3 (Nov. 1997): 183.

¹¹⁵ Oldmeadow, "Delivering the Last Blade of Grass," 186.

All the women of this study believe that Guanyin's bodhisattva model of compassion has transformed their lives. From transitions of gender, monastic renunciation and female empowerment, to the healing of old psychological and emotional scars, the ability to love one's self is fully realized. The power of such reflexive compassion is "this dimension of wisdom-awareness" that these women all share. They understand the importance of love and forgiveness as ways of interpreting the many paths life has exposed them to. Compassionate 'wisdom awareness' has enabled these women to move toward a more heightened spiritual ground, one where they are able to share the 'bodhisattva ideal' with others.

All three groups said that Guanyin's unconditional maternal love is what matters most and the bodhisattva ideal is a vital representation of motherly love and 'boundless compassion'. They identify Guanyin's bodhisattva qualities like those of a goddess, as she portrays the role of the divine feminine, showing her strength as a loving healer from pain and trauma.

The Asian American Buddhist women feel that Guanyin's motherly love is like the love from a sister or best friend. Guanyin is so intimately integrated into their families that she actively functions in the events and happenings of their daily lives. Their bond with her begins culturally, yet strengthened as it becomes validated by deep emotional experiences. "Guanyin is a very compassionate goddess, a 'goddess of mercy' ...she has loving kindness, she helps people who are in need, who are in trouble, who have sorrows, who have pain...she is a goddess for the people." Vietnamese women see Guanyin as a "spiritual mother" who they pray to whenever they have problems, big or small, calling on Guanyin for help, "she's like the mom", because the Buddha is too

busy. They grew up praying to Guanyin, sharing their feelings with her like a best friend. “She is always with me, she is always here” and “We think she is part of our family...”

Sometimes in my life I hesitate (doing) something, I worry (about) something, and I want to accomplish something, and suddenly she comes in my mind. Even though I am not wanting (her) she just comes into my mind and when I think of her I feel relief, and I just feel “she is always with me, she is always here”. I feel very connected to her and from that thinking I feel the problem is solved, “I can do it” and I have more strength just from thinking of her in my mind. I think other people think the same as me, because we think (Guanyin) is a part of our family in our culture, she’s just here always.

They see Guanyin as the “universe’s compassionate nature” and their “protector”, especially in moments of stress or suffering. When one feels sadness and needs to cry, Guanyin comforts them. Also present is an understanding of the bodhisattva notion of ‘wisdom awareness’ as Guanyin’s compassion is balanced with “intellect and ambition”. As described, “The heart and mind is the same...the body is like a diamond with many facets; the mind is one facet and the heart is another.”

Examples of Guanyin’s boundless maternal love and ultimate compassion was also strongly felt among the convert Buddhist women’s group. Guanyin is like a “great mother”, like a “female Buddha; a goddess,” and an example for all women. They see Guanyin’s strength as a mother figure; caring and nurturing, as the same as a warrior goddess who is able to transform. The bodhisattva qualities in Guanyin stress the importance of selflessness with personal balance. Guanyin’s ability to reincarnate in “countless forms”, knowing she will not “sacrifice” herself, provides an overarching example of this. Guanyin’s unconditional compassion and support in their journeys to heal past traumas provides a maternal warm presence, like a spiritual “hug”.

For the transgender women, Guanyin's motherly compassion and her ability to alleviate suffering were also vitally important. Interestingly, the theme of selflessness and sacrifice took on a different meaning for this group. Unlike the previous description of Guanyin, able to guide others on the bodhisattva path without giving up a sense of one's Self, the transgender women relate to Guanyin's sacrifices as similar to the sacrifices they have made to live in their new bodies. "As a trans person you have to sacrifice the life you once believed, or were taught to live...you embrace a new life...and resurrect this new life." Guanyin's unconditional love and acceptance are very important for these women who face different challenges than the women of the other two groups. "You can understand how accepting and inclusive Guanyin is because she, or he, truly represents what our soul is...it's light, pure light."

Embodied Spirituality: The Subjective Divine Feminine

The Goddess is the intelligent, embodied love that is in all beings, and it is not an omnipotent power, and it's not a power to control or determine, but it's a power that's in us, and also outside of us, that speaks within us, it's as close to us as our own breath and our own bodies, and is always inspiring us to be the best that we can be; to be more loving, to be more understanding, and to create a more harmonious world so that as many beings as possible and as many human beings as possible can experience joy in their lives.¹¹⁶ (Carol Christ)

Embodied spirituality and its relationship with the subjective, divine feminine runs deep among all the women interviewed. Obvious differences in interpretation, based

¹¹⁶ Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, "Goddess and God in the World: Conversations in Embodied Theology: *Voices of the Sacred Feminine; Conversations to Re-Shape Our World*," interview by Karen Tate, December 1, 2016, <http://www.blogtalkradio.com/voicesofthesacredfeminine/2016/12/01/goddess-god-in-the-world-wcarol-christ-judith-plaskow>.

on the subjective, experiential ways in which they identify with its meaning, provide very rich ideas about womanhood, feminism and spirituality. Most exciting was the response from the transgender women's group who see Guanyin's gender fluidity as an important physical and spiritual symbol in their embodied identities, calling her their "Superhero".

Guanyin's ability to change gender proves her inclusivity, supporting the differences among us, free from judgment. "If in one life she is a man and in the next life she is a woman, and we are not supposed to judge transgender people, then he or she truly represents what our soul really is." They all expressed strong opinions of feminism and gender equality, especially with regard to career and job opportunities. It is important for them to be able to do whatever they want without being judged for choosing the body they have. "It's like taking control over my life... you can't say a trans person can't do this...no, I *can* do this because I embody both masculinity and femininity...and because I am me."

The convert Buddhist women were the most articulate about how Guanyin's powerful divine feminine qualities are actively reinforced in their views of themselves and of other women. Guanyin and Tara are utilized as vehicles of self-compassion and in experiences of embodied expression. Guanyin is viewed as one of the first feminists, crediting this to her rebirth as a woman; having the capacity and wisdom of a great mother and healer, in spite of the hardships being a female. As a useful feminist symbol, Guanyin helps these women relate to other women in the world. "My definition of feminism...I feel like women are here like the personification of nature and through them we can experience the inner realms." Feminine spirituality is deeply embedded in their lives and the ways they interact with both humans and animals. Women are the physical

and emotional vessels of the earth's gifts, through which Guanyin and Buddhist values are modes of that expression.

For some of the women their experiences with Guanyin have been intensely emotional and physical. The embodiment of Guanyin's spiritual energy expressed in their personal journeys becomes a tool in their desire to let go of the past. Here, the subjective divine feminine is at work, providing aid on an emotional and psychological path toward healing.

Embodied spirituality and the subjective divine feminine is a prominent theme for the Asian American women as well. Their faith and devotion is the embodied manifestation of Guanyin found within themselves. They describe Guanyin almost like their alter ego, reflexive in her commitment to always 'being there' with them. Communicating with Guanyin daily, like chanting the Lotus Sutra, brings Guanyin's profound presence into their daily lives, and becomes part of their identity. For one subject, Guanyin has helped her love her body again after a long period of shame and insecurity, helping her find her feminist voice.

Relationships with Guanyin help keep them spiritually and culturally connected to their mothers, aunts, sisters and grandmothers. Guanyin's powerful influence in their lives is 'passed on', showing how women can find strength through their compassionate wisdom. "Feminism means we can be gentle and strong at the same time...being strong you are able to give love, you are able to help others, and I think femininity has a lot to do with love." "When I see Guanyin I see there is a lot of love in her, a lot of generosity, a lot of kindness...her strong femininity...I hope I can project that."

Applied Buddhism: Conscious Action and Women's Leadership

“Applied Buddhism means that Buddhism can be applied in every circumstance in order to bring understanding and solutions to problems in our world. Applied Buddhism offers concrete ways to relieve suffering and bring peace and happiness in every situation.”¹¹⁷

(Thich Nhat Hanh)

Applied Buddhism begins with oneself. It is how we bring our attention inward through meditation and mindfulness, sharing this awareness in our daily intentions and interactions. It is the everydayness of Buddhism which is transmitted from the core teachings. We engage with Buddhism by listening to dharma talks, reading books, attending temple engagements, and involving ourselves with formal and informal sanghas. What is learned from practicing Buddhism is manifested in how we view the world, and it is from there that we try to right wrongs and create more love and peace. The function of Buddhist core values integrated into the daily lives of the women of whom this project is about is expressed through their devotion to Guanyin; yet even more broadly, Buddhist values inform how they interact with the world. They consciously navigate their relationships with an identified awareness of basic Buddhist principles, being careful not to take for granted the preciousness of our interconnectedness. Simple acts of kindness and compassion, being a good person, and doing the right thing are held very dear to every woman I spoke with. They realize the benefits of employing such actions in both their personal relationships and in the ways that they can promote change in the world.

¹¹⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh, “What is Applied Buddhism?” *The Mindfulness Bell*, Winter/Spring 2015, <https://www.mindfulnessbell.org/archive/2016/02/what-is-applied-buddhism>.

For both the convert Buddhist women and the transgender women this means taking a stand against unfair politics and supporting human rights causes. They expressed hope in the 2016 Presidential female candidate Hillary Clinton, stating, “Buddhism is a way we can bring reason to the current situations in the world and domestically. The good thing is that it is bringing people into consciousness and they have to participate, they can’t sit on the sidelines anymore.” Also, commenting that Buddhist women are at the forefront of healing the planet. Compassion is what keeps these women going in this crazy political climate, with the example from one woman who credits Guanyin and the Buddhist value of “non-judgement” with her ability to “come out” as openly gay.

The Asian American women also act in accord with Buddhist values and principles daily, and are very aware of their karmic contributions to the world. Although more passive than the others to get involved in political activities, the Asian American women expressed serious concern about the need for more women teachers and leaders in Buddhist sanghas.

All the women interviewed have some form of a meditation practice related to their engagement with Applied Buddhism. The Asian American women were the most dedicated to a traditional daily meditation practice. They are all fully committed to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha as a way of life, reflecting both cultural bonds and monastic vows. The convert Buddhist women and the transgender women are also very invested in their practice, yet their approach toward meditation and involvement with sanghas is quite customized. Each of them shared how they find time to meditate daily even if it is

just for a few minutes, either chanting with a prerecorded mantra, sitting silently or walking in nature.

“Buddhism is a way of life, it’s not a religion...for me it’s how to practice upon compassion. Hearing other people and taking in their suffering, you know it’s not only us, it’s feeling the connectedness of all us.” Guanyin acts as their ‘good conscience’, saying ‘don’t do that’, keeping them “within the boundaries of good, acceptable conduct and behavior.” All the women have an understanding of how attachment causes suffering in this life and the value of acceptance and karma. Furthermore, commenting on how we experience life in these physical bodies for just a short time:

I’m living in this world full of senses, but to me I remember that world without senses, and how impactful it is on my life and my previous lives, and my future lives, you know...there’s a world out there that all of this does not matter, all these fineries. We spend so much time focusing on our skin, our body, our gathering of wealth, gathering power, comfort, feeling pleasurable, being happy. It’s nothing once we shed it off...do you know how lonely of an experience it is? It’s not lonely, but it’s not loneliness. You need to get used to that sense of loneliness because you are in it alone once you get out of this body.

Issues within the sangha affecting Buddhist nuns and the need for more women teachers was a concern for everyone, reinforcing that women need to be more visible as leaders and teachers in both the U.S. and in Asian countries. Also, Buddhist nuns, both young and old need more support. The younger nuns need help with their education and the older nuns are not supported at the end of their lives, having no family or sangha to care for them. “You know we left family, and we have no connection to our family, so how can family help us? Because we all sacrifice our lives for the practice, for the betterment of other people, but when we are old it’s really hard.”

These universal themes surfaced from the initial data collected in the interviews. In the following three chapters each group of subjects is introduced, followed by their responses to my interview questions. Each chapter follows the exact structure of the interview questions.¹¹⁸ A short biography of each subject is given, followed by responses to their **1) View and Understanding of Guanyin, 2) Spiritual Practice: Guanyin, Buddhism and Meditation, 3) Feminism and Guanyin: Exploring The Connection and 4) Guanyin's Special Powers of Healing and Salvation.**

¹¹⁸ Appendix B

Chapter Three: American Convert Buddhist Women: “Finding a Female Spiritual Companion”

Chapter three looks into the lived experiences and stories of American convert Buddhist women who “found” Guanyin as spiritual resource in their adult lives. Guanyin acts as an accompaniment to each of their different Buddhist practices, playing an important role in their feminist and spiritual identities.

My first interview was with a stay at home mother of four children. She eagerly approached me years ago when a mutual friend shared that I was researching Guanyin, and she wanted me to know that she had a “story” to tell me about how Guanyin has helped her heal from years of emotional trauma. Next, I conducted a virtual interview with a woman from San Francisco who answered a search I had put out to the California Institute for Integral Studies community board. She too, was eager to share stories of her experiences with Guanyin and spiritual practices with me. The third interview was with a woman whom I have known for quite some time but never knew she had a connection to Guanyin. Her story uniquely connects many aspects of what it means to living in our current social and political world and the support of knowing Guanyin. Lastly, I interviewed an older woman who is an artist and activist. Her initial introduction to Guanyin was through a dear friend, whom has since passed away, and was a student of Sandy Boucher. Following, are the stories these women shared with me about Guanyin. There is a strong theme of compassion and feminism that flows throughout, yet each one is deeply personal, like the stories shared by the Asian American women.

*All of their names have been changed in order to provide anonymity, although some of them did not request it.

Kristin

Kristin is forty-four years old. She does not identify with any specific religious background. She is a stay at home mother of four young children and lives in an affluent neighborhood in the San Fernando Valley. She was very open with me about the emotional trauma she experienced as a child. Kristin's relationship with Guanyin began fourteen years ago during a shamanic healing session. Guanyin symbolizes intense emotional love and support for Kristin and she has been able to heal some very deep pain from her past with Guanyin's compassion. Kristin is beginning to apprentice with her Shaman so she can facilitate healing journeys similar to the ones she has found so helpful in her own life. (Kristin did not want to be photographed)

Vanessa

Vanessa is thirty-one years old. She is a PhD. student at CIIS (California Institute for Integral Studies) in San Francisco studying East/West Psychology. She is also a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist practicing in Oakland, CA. Vanessa does not identify with any religious background. For our interview she wanted me to know that she identifies more with Tara, but feels that Guanyin is a manifestation of the same source, Avalokitesvara, so many of her responses are reflective of both Tara and Guanyin. Vanessa had studied previously with Thich Nhat Hanh, but identifies with the Tibetan schools of Buddhism more now, especially Tantric practices. Vanessa was

extremely comfortable and articulate in her explanation of the relationships between the divine feminine, her spiritual practice and the healing of her body from early sexual abuse.

Sara

Sara is fifty-eight years old. She is a paralegal and co-founder of Animazonia Wildlife Rescue. She was raised Catholic although she no longer identifies with or practices it. Sara has lived in shared communal spaces in Los Angeles since 1981, and now shares a home in the foothills of the San Gabriel mountains with four women. Their home acts as a space of creative intention, filled with beautiful artwork and goddess images. She first encountered Guanyin in the 1980's and says she immediately connected with her. Sara identifies with Guanyin as a bodhisattva of compassion for both humans and animals. She also finds strength in Guanyin as a goddess of transformation, sharing her experiences of helping others during transitions from living to dying. Sara's life is shaped by the interconnectedness of all living things and feels that women are the personification of nature through which men are able to learn from.



(Sara: submitted to me 2018)

Paula

Paula is seventy two years old and lives in Ridgecrest, CA. She is a retired building consultant and a prolific artist. Paula has been practicing Buddhism and meditation for over fifty years and recalls having Buddha and Guanyin statues in her childhood home in New Mexico, collected by her mother, although she never had any religious connection to them. I had met Paula previously at a Guanyin retreat led by Sandy Boucher held in Ridgecrest and it was there that she shared with me her initial introduction to Guanyin was through her dear friend that had recently passed away. Paula's interview was the last one I conducted due to the distance and some health issues she was recovering from. I was invited to her art studio where we talked about Guanyin, her Buddhist practice and feminism. Most interesting, however, was Paula's openness about her deeply personal conflicts with her own gender identity. She was not aware that part of my study related to transgender women, and I did not know that she has struggled her entire life with gender identity issues. Paula credits Guanyin's compassion and androgyny as instrumental in her acceptance of herself and the body she has chosen to live in.



(Paula in her studio, Guanyin ceramic print: taken May, 2018)

View and Understanding of Guanyin

For Sara, Paula and Kristin, Guanyin's compassion is what they feel the strongest connection to, describing her motherly qualities as a means to feel real love and protection. Sara feels that Guanyin represents ultimate compassion and the ability to care for something outside of ourselves, which for her, is how to achieve real happiness. Sara said, "Guanyin is an example for everyone to look to when people lose heart or lose hope," and that Guanyin is a great mother, a goddess and an example for all women.

I first encountered Guanyin in the 80's. When I learned about Guanyin I felt connected with her. I could see how in my own life, how if others were suffering, that I would stay for them, I would be there for them and I think I pattern my life

after that, in caring for people, for caring for animals. I think in modern day times one thing that I have learned about Guanyin and her compassion and caring for others is that there is a balance; sacrificing one's self and caring for others, and somehow I think she would appreciate us finding that balance. By being selfless without the detriment of losing that balance, we have to stay strong and we have to take care of ourselves so that we can do the work, and the work is hard, it's (tears)...it's like being there 100%. For me, a lot of my Guanyin experiences have been with people or animals going through a death cycle and what I learned is that my job wasn't to save them, but my job was to support them on that journey. In the past I would have thought of saving everything, but I think that puts so much pressure and worry, and all those kinds of emotions come in when you're looking at 'saving' the thing...the animal, the person; but when I switched that thinking and learned that I just need to be there and take them through that path, that was a good learning experience for me because that's when I learned not to sacrifice myself for others.

Sara's studies of the goddess show her commitment to the power and strength that women offer to the natural world and to our current global society. She sees Guanyin as both an ultimate nurturer and a strong feminist warrior. Sara believes Guanyin is a role model for all women.

Guanyin's story is a very touching story, her upbringing and her perspective on things is something that I really identify with. She took situations that others would look at as horrible and unbearable, and she was able to see the brighter side of things. She was able to transform those experiences, so I feel like for me I do see things on the bright side. I have actually studied the goddess quite a bit and the warrior aspects of them, and I think the main thing about Guanyin was the mother image, the caring nurturer, but she was able to achieve also what women warrior figures do because she was able to transform things. I have also identified with the strength of Artemis and other goddess images that are more seen as standing up for women and their rights.

Paula sees Guanyin's compassionate qualities as a model for showing compassion to all sentient beings, making this her vow to live by. She strongly identifies with the androgynous aspects of Guanyin as symbols of what she sees in her own self, embodying both male and female characteristics. "Guanyin has always been important to me. I saw

the amorphic, androgynous qualities and the compassion and that is what humanity is...you have to be compassionate.”

Kristin said that Guanyin is a “compassionate mother” who provides her with support, strength and unconditional love. She described her first encounter with Guanyin which happened during her first shamanic healing session. She was laying down in front of an unlit fireplace when Guanyin appeared to her. Kristin said to her shaman, “I’m with Guanyin” and then the fire lit by itself. This happened two more times and she knew that Guanyin was going to be there for her to create a safe space to help heal from the deep emotional trauma she was dealing with from her past.

For Kristin, Guanyin is a reminder that she is not alone, and never has been. Most recently, she described another encounter she had with Guanyin during another healing session. “I felt embodied by her. Shamanic work is very intense, but there is joy in this work as you go through the pain...to reach such beauty and love.” She went on to describe the feeling of Guanyin’s love that was “being pumped into my veins.” It was like “an umbilical cord to the earth and I was being filled with such joy and love and pride that I could go through that, to walk through that, and be a person who shows up with compassion every day of my life and not be angry or resentful, I really try to walk with forgiveness and love.”

Like Kristin, Vanessa’s first encounter with Guanyin came at a difficult time in her life. She describes Guanyin and Tara’s malleable qualities as what has been most helpful in her healing from past trauma. She uses Guanyin and Tara as vehicles of embodied expressions of self compassion. Vanessa credits her continued relationship with these deities with how their different forms have supported her at different stages in

her life. “In my personal work she shows up in the different forms, and when I was really working with my relationship to anger, I had a big red Tara up on my wall, and I think right now I see her in the form of green Tara and what it means to be seeded in compassion and what it means to be action in the world.”,

Guanyin and Tara are manifestations of the divine feminine for Vanessa. She feels like Guanyin acts as a “role model” as well as a “protector”, acknowledging the many gender tensions and manifestations that Guanyin experienced. She referenced the story about Guanyin where she is to be reborn as a man, but refuses and is reborn as a woman. “It is harder to be in a woman’s body. So in that way I define her as one of the first feminists.” “In my relationship with the divine feminine, she is the archetype that I identify with most personally.”

Spiritual Practice: Guanyin, Buddhism and Meditation

All the women I interviewed have some kind of spiritual practice that is unique, combining different styles of meditation and self study. They use their spiritual practice as a time to go inward, set intentions for themselves, their loved ones and the world. Paula has multiple altar spaces in her art studio and meditates wherever she finds it most useful...at the doctor’s office, in line at the store or at home. She also belongs to a local sangha that meets weekly. Vanessa and Kristin have altar spaces where they light candles and meditate. Sara uses crystal singing bowls and goes on nature walks to sacralize her spiritual practice. Vanessa was very open about how she uses her body to connect to the divine feminine. She has Sanskrit and other sacred languages tattooed on her body and said that her practice with her body helps with her facilitate healing with clients in her

private practice. Kristin's meditation practice involves listening to binary beats that shut down the mind to change brain waves. During these sessions she is able to "feel 'real love' consciously." "I try to incorporate meditation every day I wake up, every day I light a candle and set my intention, whether it's having more patience, or this last work I did with my shaman I was given my spirit guides who told me to show up for myself every day." Vanessa said that Buddhism is the first Eastern philosophy she encountered in college.

I studied with Thich Nhat Hanh for a while, who I adored. I love the dharma and I love the teachings of the dharma and I think I identify with the Tibetan schools of Buddhism more than anything else at this point. I definitely have a shamanistic, ecoistic flavor to my spiritual practice, and I identify with Tantra more than anything else. Some things I don't identify with Buddhism, at least for me, what I felt like were life negating and that all life is suffering and our job is to detach from that as much as possible, that was not helpful to me as a way for me to heal my body.

Sara identifies with Buddhism in its interconnected relationship with all beings and through the teachings of peace and compassion. She stressed the importance of female leadership in local and global politics and ways of conscious action to make positive changes in the world.

For me it's a voice of reason amongst all of the craziness that's out there and I think Buddhism uses a softer hand, a Gandhi approach of 'taking care of' instead of 'making war on', and I was very excited about the possibility of a woman president because a woman would be much more cognisant of sending people to war. They are mothers and grandmothers and they are thinking about the individual and how precious life is. I really feel that Buddhism is a way that we can bring reason to the current situations in the world and domestically. I think if Buddhists joined together with other like minded groups who are championing for nature, and peace in general...if that could happen, even energetically, sending out that kind of message then I think we could start to heal...things are in such a state of disarray right now. I feel very encouraged by the fact that there is real focus

(referred to Sakyadhita USA: 2017 Buddhist Women's Conference) happening. The good thing is that it is bringing people into consciousness and they have to participate and they can't sit on the sidelines anymore.

Paula often meditates before visiting a friend in need, reciting a mantra inspired by Guanyin's 'Thousand Eyes and Thousand Ears' story, "May I see what I need to see, may I do what I need to do, and say what I need to say...and not do or say what I should not, and just listen. You can't solve other people's problems...you have to be a thousand arms." Paula practices Guanyin meditations to alleviate the current suffering in the world and refers to the current presidency as a "constitutional crisis".



(One of Paula's many altars: taken May, 2018)

Feminism and Guanyin: Exploring the Connection

During our interviews I asked them if they felt there was a special connection between Guanyin and women, and they unanimously responded that Guanyin's feminine love enables them to walk through life feeling fully supported as women. Kristen feels that Guanyin gives women the courage to let go of societal stereotypes. She said the

unconditional love from Guanyin guides her to love herself and not to be so hard on herself.

If I only did this...or if I only did that...but she just loves us and strengthens that love for ourselves. It gives us the courage to let go of what we should be and just be what we are and that's so important because we have the societal guidelines of what we should look like and who we should be and this mold we should fit into and KY gives us the courage to let go of that and just be what we are, which is beautiful; the ability to give birth and sustain it on us is nothing short of miraculous, that's beauty and love right there, that we are enough, as we are.

Vanessa sees the connection on many different levels. She thinks Guanyin and Tara's choice to take rebirth as a woman, to be a role model, a mother, and a healer proves their spiritual power. Guanyin "embodies an enlightened expression of women's wisdom and women's capacity in the world." Vanessa feels that feminism is hugely meaningful in her life, both personally and in her work as a therapist, where she primarily works with women who have survived sexual abuse. She sees feminism as an "embodied expression" of what women are and ways they define themselves. Vanessa says feminism changed her life. She had always felt "this perpetual dance with culture's implications" of doing "too much", or being "too angry". When she dove into feminist literature she finally felt sane, and sees her role as a therapist more as "supporting women in coming to know themselves."

Sara also feels that Guanyin expresses women's innate ability to multi-task by caring for others, themselves, children, and animals. Sara said that feminism is how she relates to the world. She defines feminism as women's role in the world in which they are the "personification of nature" for others to learn from. Women can access the "inner realms" of the natural world that men cannot.

I feel like a woman is always trying to achieve balance. Women are always torn in so many different directions that it takes a lot to try to pull balance together, and in that desire to achieve balance I think it makes us very conscious of everything around us and how do we bring all that to where we are? We can still maintain spirituality, our connectedness to the earth, because we are the ones who are connected to the earth, and if we're not centered and connected to the earth then no one else can be...we are that vessel for men to become more connected. So I think that's really the whole definition of feminism. It interests me how women are seen in the world and how women have become so oppressed in so many societies. In almost all societies I think men were afraid of a woman's power and so that oppression has always made women feel that they are not valuable. Now that women are understanding that more...that we are the source of life. We really need to be in that position and we can heal the earth if we do that, if we bring it together and use a feminine approach. That is Buddhism, it is to use a feminine approach to healing of the planet, and I think women can be at the forefront of doing that, and you see more women leaders taking over countries, strong women...it's becoming more common.

Paula's relationship with Guanyin and feminism is about activism and gender equality. She has fought for women's rights as much as she has against war. "I feel very strongly that women have been overlooked, they have been run over." She has had a career in building construction her whole life, a male dominated field, and has experienced gender discrimination and pay inequality first hand.

Paula strongly believes that Guanyin has changed her life and at the age of seventy two has only recently realized that there is a thriving transgender community. "I wish I had the courage to do this when I was younger." But now with grandchildren and great-grandchildren she said she would not change a thing. "They all accept me as I am and they know I have a very strong male side...and that's just how it is."

*Because Paula openly shared this aspect of her life with me I asked her if she wanted to share any wisdom or advice with transgender women, using Guanyin as a vehicle of her insight:

I guess the wisdom I have is whatever body you have, honor it. If you want to go through the change, fine, if you don't want to go through the change, that's fine too. To honor the body you have and accept it...that was my hardest thing and it wasn't until now when I made a vow to honor who I am and to never get mad. I was a woman who worked in a man's world my whole career and I refused to wear heels and I don't own a dress. If people can't accept this I'm sorry...look the other way. I feel that for so many of the transgender people, especially my age, you have a very hard time in the world. You're beaten into this world of "Where are your heels, where are your nylons?" I don't know what I would have done. In my world it's being compassionate and Sandy Boucher taught me this..the path you walk on is the person you are.

Guanyin's Special Powers of Healing and Salvation

Transformation and healing seemed to be important aspects of Guanyin's abilities for Kristen and Sarah. For Kristen, Guanyin is experienced quite viscerally as she enters her body and physical space. "She showed up. The universe said you're not alone and you never have been. She showed up to rage with me."

Sarah sees these aspects of Guanyin more as universal gifts we can use to heal the planet. "Whatever level of healing, whether it's physical or emotional we can work toward healing each other...then we are doing her work."

Vanessa shared that her supernatural experiences with Guanyin and Tara were facilitated with plant medicine. She was able to notice being held in Tara's lap which she described as a "cellular memory" feeling "supported and safe".

Chapter Four: Asian American Buddhist Women: "She's Always Been There"

My interviews with Asian American women were deeply insightful. I was surprised they were willing to share with me so much information from their pasts, openly sharing very personal stories and cultural hardships that strengthened their bonds with Guanyin. I interviewed two Vietnamese Buddhist nuns who follow a Mahayana tradition. Each of them were extremely knowledgeable about the spiritual characteristics of Guanyin, and their interactions with her were quite intense. I also interviewed two lay women, both middle aged, one from Singapore and the other from Vietnam. Interestingly, these women also felt a strong connection to Guanyin yet they do not identify with her as their sole spiritual guide. Lastly, I interviewed an older Vietnamese woman in her seventies who speaks very little English. She answered the interview questions, but depended on her husband to validate her responses. I will introduce each of these women, giving some background to orient the personality of the subjects, followed by samples of the dialogue that came from our interviews.

*All of their names have been changed in order to provide anonymity, although some of them did not request it.

Venerable H

Venerable H is forty-two years old. She was born in Vietnam and fled the communist regime of the 1970's with her family when she was nine. Moving to the United States, her family settled in New York and lived in the Bronx. Venerable H studied and attended a NY State University, receiving a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology. She then went on to become a stockbroker on Wall St. and at twenty-eight years old she became a Buddhist nun. She is currently a graduate student at University of the West pursuing a Master's degree in Buddhist Psychology. Venerable H received her Master of Divinity degree in Buddhist Chaplaincy from University of the West in 2014.

Venerable H is extremely articulate and analytical. She is confident, fun and outspoken. She describes herself as a "spicy, vivacious nun" and attributes this to finally knowing who she really is, having learned from all her life experiences. Venerable H is currently raising a ten year old novice monk whose parents left him as a baby at her temple. She is very honest about the challenges of becoming a 'mother' at this point in her life, including balancing school and monastic life.

Venerable N

Venerable N is thirty-one years old. She is from Vietnam and is a PhD student in Religious Studies at University of the West, with an emphasis in Buddhism. She has been a Buddhist nun since she was very young, leaving home at the age of nine to live in the temple, and has been a Guanyin devotee her whole life. Venerable N is a very dedicated student and monastic. She explained to me how important it is for her to study different lineages and traditions of Buddhism. She is from the Mahayana tradition but

studied Theravada Buddhism in India to experience the original teachings from Buddhist lineages. She has also practiced Vipassana and Tibetan teachings, wanting to see the “connections” and “differences” among the various traditions with a “very open heart and mind.” Venerable N shared with me her desire to support elderly nuns either in Vietnam or in the U.S. She is very concerned about who will take care of them as they age and as their health declines many of them are no longer connected to their birth families. She sees this becoming her life’s work and passion once she finishes her degree.

Patricia

Patricia is forty-four years old. She identifies as Chinese-American and was born in Singapore. She is a business student at University of the West and works part-time as a secretary. Patricia’s religious faith is both Buddhist and Christian, however she regards Guanyin as her “number one”, followed by the Buddha. She was introduced to Guanyin by her maternal grandmother who was Buddhist and a Guanyin devotee. Patricia is studious and conscientious. She has a lovely, gentle demeanor and attributes her dedication to being a compassionate person to her close relationship with her grandmother.

Lisa

Lisa did not want to share her age with me, but I can approximate that she is in her early to mid fifties. She is from Vietnam and was raised Buddhist. Lisa is a PhD candidate in Buddhist Studies at University of the West where she also received her Master’s degree in Religious Studies. Lisa also practices real estate in a primarily Asian

enclave of Southern California. For our interview Lisa had requested to see the questions prior to our meeting and had prepared her responses beforehand. Lisa is very organized and professional, yet she exudes a motherly sweetness. She has two grown daughters and says that they don't know any specific bodhisattvas or deities. Lisa focuses more on her meditation practice. She is extremely proud of her meditation room in her home where she meditates for an hour daily. Lisa said that her Buddhist practice has been pivotal in shaping her attitude about her life today and she calls on Guanyin when she cannot solve her problems.

Vivian

Vivian is seventy-three years old and has been married for forty eight years. She has lived in the U.S. since her twenties but speaks very little English. For this reason, she had her husband and nephew translate. Vivian lives in a predominantly Vietnamese neighborhood of Southern California. She has been a homemaker and mother her whole life, and has three grown children. She is hoping to have grandchildren soon which would make her very happy. Vivian's husband *Gary* was eager to share his story about Guanyin with me so we began our interview with him. Unlike Vivian, Gary was not shy and talking with him first broke the ice. Although he knew my study was focused on women's experiences he needed me to know how important Guanyin was to him. Gary came to the U.S. from Vietnam on a refugee boat and credits Guanyin with saving his life. He experienced Guanyin's healing power when he was very sick as a young child as well as his protector along the rough seas as he fled Vietnam. His devotion to Guanyin is palpable and passionate. Today, Gary is a prominent leader in the Vietnamese Buddhist

community in Santa Ana, CA. It was evident that Vivian's account of Guanyin is influenced by her husband's experience which is why I felt it was important to include both of them. After Gary shared his story with me I shifted the focus to Vivian of which Gary was very supportive. Answering the questions were difficult for Vivian without deferring to her husband. Both Gary and the translator encouraged her to try to think for herself which was visibly challenging. At times she looked for her answers to come from her husband, but he would not answer for her.

View and Understanding of Guanyin

The Asian American women whom I interviewed all share a common belief that Guanyin is someone you pray to when you are in need and she will always be there. She is the one who will provide mercy, safety and compassion. Culturally, Guanyin is integrated into their identities from very early on. As young children they were all taught to pray to Guanyin. She is the one who will listen to your suffering, cries, pain and fear. Not only is Guanyin the manifestation of a bodhisattva, she is also the tie to Asian familial traditions kept alive through worship and practice. Lisa explained that many Vietnamese people consider Guanyin to be like a "spiritual mother" who they turn to when they have problems. She said that just by praying to Guanyin she feels like everything will turn out fine. "My family, like most Vietnamese families, everybody prays to her, she is respected among Vietnamese families, and I am one of those people. I remember when I was young and when I fell in love I prayed to her. My family believed in central worship like most Vietnamese people, but they think of her most when they got stuck in their problems."

For the two Buddhist nuns, Guanyin is deeply embedded in their spiritual identity and the bodhisattva vows they have taken are like the ones they see expressed in Guanyin, praying and chanting to her daily. Venerable H expressed how Guanyin is part of who she is...

She's my inner light, she's my compassionate nature, she's part of the universe's compassionate nature that I'm connected with. She's part of me, she is part of the universe, but part of me as well." "She is an example of insight, you know. I chant to her every day, to the Universal Gate chapter of the Lotus Sutra and I try to read into the text and understand the meaning." "I try to see what the different insights we can attain in following in her footsteps and setting her as an example.

Venerable H reflects on Guanyin's qualities as ones she strives to achieve in herself, always asking "What kind of insight do I need to develop, what kind of strength do I need strengthening in? Things like that to be more like her."

Venerable N also feels that Guanyin is inseparable from her. She said Guanyin is "always with me, she is always here". Guanyin is part of what she identifies with as her family; her monastic family and her Vietnamese family.

Sometimes I feel like she's more close to me than my parents because as a Buddhist nun I left home since I was a little kid. At that time I was nine years old and I left the house and I started staying at the temple. The connection with the family was not very strong, but I felt very connected to the life in the temple, so that's why I kept asking my mom to let me go. Finally, I was in the temple and I felt like I was more connected to Guanyin than Sakyamuni Buddha, more than my parents, more than my master. You know even with a best friend we cannot share everything and sometimes when you have a problem a best friend is not right there, so I think Guanyin is right there, and I just keep thinking about her I feel more confident, yeah, like I have more energy to go forward. And in Mahayana Buddhism we have a lot of Buddhist (bodhisattvas?) but to me she's the one I think of first, she's my number one.

For Vivian, who practices Huynh Phu' So¹¹⁹, Buddhism which originated in Vietnam, Guanyin is the one who will keep you safe from suffering. Although Vivian was the oldest of the group of women interviewed she has a very progressive view of spirituality. She sees all religions as being on the same path, resulting in one universal teaching of love and goodness. She used the metaphor of the mountains and how they go upwards like all religions, eventually becoming one (heaven or enlightenment). She said the Buddha is too busy so you need to call on Guanyin, “she’s like the mom.”



(Vivian and Gary in front of their home altar: taken 2017)

¹¹⁹ Thang Hai, “Characteristics of Hoa Hao Buddhism,” *Phat Giao Hoa Hao*, published 2005, <https://hoahao.org/a2414/4-characteristics-of-hoa-hao-buddhism>.

Patricia's experience with Guanyin came from her maternal grandmother who was Buddhist. Her grandmother had prayed to Guanyin for a baby for many, many years but did not become pregnant. She continued to pray to Guanyin for ten years when Patricia's mother was given to her to adopt. She believed Guanyin sent her the baby, and soon thereafter she became pregnant with a boy. Patricia feels that Guanyin is for the people, "You know she's very compassionate in the way that she has loving kindness, she helps people who are in need, who are in trouble, who have sorrows, who have pain. I see that in her." "She is a goddess for the people!" Patricia's close relationship with her grandmother makes her feel connected to Guanyin. "When I see Guanyin I think about my grandma, and when I see my grandma I think about Guanyin. You know that's how I feel when I see Guanyin, she reminds me of all the good things a goddess should have and she reminds me of all the good things that my grandmother had and all the love that she's given me."

Spiritual Practice: Guanyin, Buddhism and Meditation

For the Asian American women I interviewed their spiritual practice is prominent. For both Venerables, Vivian and Lisa, their identification as Buddhist women is reflected in a daily practice consisting of meditation and chanting sutras. Patricia identifies more as 'multi-faith' with an emphasis on Guanyin, and does not really have a daily practice. Vivian said she meditates while doing chores around the house. "There's no right or wrong way to meditate. Meditation is watering the plants or cooking. When you're doing something with a clear mind and not thinking about anything or anyone." Lisa has

a meditation room in her home where she meditates for an hour daily. She also belongs to a meditation group that meets at a temple in Riverside, where she has been a guest lecturer.

Venerable H and Venerable N both have home altars with statues of the Buddha, Guanyin, Tara and dedicate at least one hour daily to meditation and chanting. They both explained their Buddhist practice to me as part of who they are, feeling compassion and connectedness all the time. Venerable H said, “It’s always how to improve relationships, and then you know we believe in the Buddhafield, establishing family ties and relational ties, harmony, universal peace and harmony.”

My Buddhism is very simple, it’s how I live it, how apply it to my daily life to attain that serenity and happiness, and so I don’t try to force my beliefs onto other people, I really don’t believe in that, so I just think it’s wrong if I do that. So how do I practice? I guess just looking to see where I can improve. If I’m not patient enough, then I try to be more patient, if I’m not compassionate enough, then I try to practice more compassion. I get feedback on how people interact with me. I gauge from what they think, if something triggers in them positively, then I need to say or focus that I am doing well with that, or if not, and I’m not getting a good reaction, then I need to focus on that. And so it’s very interactive and it’s very proactive. So that’s how I practice my Buddhism by gauging those around my environment, by introspection as well because others may say something about me and if I don’t see it then I just need to file that corner to be smoother. I’m not a saint, sometimes we walk and we just stumble along and from stumbling we learn how to balance ourselves. It’s from stumbling, from making mistakes. I make mistakes, so many mistakes in my life, but I use them as my life learning tools.

Venerable H feels that meditation is vital. It allows her to be introspective, making space for insight and change. Without meditation she says “I won’t have the insight to be of help to others, or to myself.” Meditation helps her improve her focus, concentration and memory, to take a pause, breathe and do a body scan. Venerable H has dedicated her entire living room as her altar space. She has statues of the Buddha,

Guanyin, Green Tara and other bodhisattvas that have been given to her. Her favorite sutras are the Universal Gate Sutra, the Great Compassion Sutra and the Heart Sutra. She incorporates these and other mantras into her daily ritual. “For me, when I do anything I always have “Om Mani Padme Hum” in my mind. I just recite it for no reason, when I’m driving I just automatically chant or sing to it and it brings me such peace.”



(Venerable H’s Home Altar: submitted 2018)

Venerable N also practices an “open-minded” Buddhism. She said her time studying in India exposed her to different different traditions and she sometimes follows some of the Theravada aspects she learned.

When I was there I went to the Vipassana center and I even went to the Tibetan center. I wanted to see how they were connected and the differences between different traditions. Whenever I come into different traditions I come with a very open mind and a very open heart, and to see what can I learn from their practice. And whenever I come to learn a new practice or tradition I will just forget

everything and think of a new beginning; I am learning and practicing something with the whole of my heart, a fresh mind and always thinking that I am a beginner. I come into that tradition and after some time with that practice I might figure out that I can apply this to my practice and to collaborate it into what I have already from my previous tradition. I think that it has helped me to move forward and if it is something I feel not connected to I just forget it, maybe it's not connected to me, but it may help other people so it's ok. ...

Venerable N's favorite sutra is the Mahakaruna Dharani, "The Great Compassion" Dharani.¹²⁰ She loves to chant the Dharani every evening and when she is not home she will leave a recording of it on during the day. She said it's in her subconscious, the peace it brings her. In her family home in Vietnam they have a Guanyin altar. "Not Sakyamuni Buddha, but yes Quan Am is the main one." They feel that Quan Am (Guanyin) is closer like a friend or neighbor. She said that when she prays to Guanyin, she is praying to the Buddha and bodhisattvas, because they are all the manifestations of the dharma.

¹²⁰ Lee Kane, "The Great Dharani Sutra," *Buddha Weekly*, accessed January 25, 2018, <https://buddhaweb.com/great-compassion-mantra-purification-healing-protection-maha-karuna-dharani-sutra-benefiting-beings/>.



(Venerable N's Home Altar: submitted 2017)



(Venerable N in front of her home altar: submitted 2017)

Lisa also chants daily, reciting the Heart Sutra. She feels that her meditation practice helps calm her so she can face her problems. She turns to Guanyin when she feels “stuck” and by praying to her she knows that everything will turn out fine.



(Lisa's Home Altar: submitted 2017)

Feminism and Guanyin: Exploring the Connection

When we discussed the connection between Guanyin and feminism all the women except for Vivian were able to articulate and identify their perspectives. Vivian did not understand what ‘feminism’ means other than saying that Guanyin is a woman.

Patricia believes that Guanyin really understands women, as if she is a representative for all women. Guanyin blesses women as mothers who bring children into the world. She feels that Guanyin has helped shape who she is today as a woman in addition to the influences of her grandmother and mother. “I don’t think I’d be who I am today, without them I would have a huge part of me missing. I wouldn’t be as kind or

compassionate, or trying to be compassionate to others. Without Guanyin's influence on my grandma and on my mom, without them, without Guanyin I would not have had that."

Lisa feels that feminism is more prominent in America than in Asian countries and sees the need for more visible female teachers. She says that being an Asian American woman with two daughters she needs to show them how to be strong, and to be equal to men. She sees Guanyin as a spiritual mother.

Venerable N identifies with Guanyin as a woman, more specifically as a Vietnamese woman. Guanyin is like a mother and a sister for Vietnamese women, she is part of the family. She said that she is constantly reminded of the difficulties of being a woman and part of her work as a nun is to help create a better life for women. She shared that being a Buddhist nun is difficult. The younger nuns face certain obstacles and the senior nuns have no one to take care of them. "You know we left our families, so how can our families help us when we are old?" "The sangha is our family. I am always thinking how can we support the young nuns in their studies? To have knowledge and the ability to be independent, and for the senior nuns to have a place to retire and get medical treatment when they are ill, and somewhere for them to pass away."

Venerable H says that Guanyin's great love is what she is most connected to. Guanyin represents compassion, patience, understanding, sensibility, sensitivity and resiliency. "Those are female qualities yes, because they are inside me and I identify myself emotionally, sexually, mentally, spiritually and physically." For Venerable H, Guanyin is her "conscience", keeping her within the boundaries of good, acceptable conduct and behavior. She recognizes Guanyin's fluidity, able to change and adapt to help those in need, as a role model for her own desire to be fluid, flexible and adaptable.

For Venerable H, feminism means asserting your voice. She shared with me a very personal story of how she was able to overcome not having a feminist voice as a young woman and how when she became a nun she finally found her true self.

When I was young, as a female, and because I was Asian, I was not given a voice. I could not form an opinion...it's kind of hard to believe. And also at age ten I was made to hate my body because this Cambodian man in his twenties took advantage me. You know I never knew of my genitals until that incident, and afterwards I have never hated my body more. I hated my body and I hated feeling like a female. I wasn't raped but I was assaulted. (tears) And so for me feminism means reclaiming my body, my voice, my personality, my soul. Staking a claim and saying 'I am a person', I am not an invisible person, not a mute person, right? I am not a brain dead person, I am a person, my thoughts have values. My body has values, so feminism means reclaiming my body, and gaining a personality.

Venerable H's experience as a lay woman for so long shapes a very unique perspective from which she sees herself. She is extremely self-reflective, analytical and honest about her sexuality as a young woman and the way she views her body today.

Before becoming a nun I was very claustrophobic in my body, I hated my skin, I hated my face, I hated everything about me. But you know in retrospect I was a hot girl, I was a size 0, I looked good. When I became a nun and took my own vows and I didn't have to rely on my physical appearance, I became at ease with being myself. That's when this confidence set in and that's when all these thoughts came out, and now I'm so vivacious because of all those experiences...I'm a spicy girl/nun now because of those experiences you know. It was painful to go through it, but in a way I'm thankful. Just finding myself... I think the best thing that I did for myself was becoming a nun. People around me thought I was crazy. I had a spiritual calling where it was an out of body experience.

Guanyin's Special Powers of Healing and Salvation

Venerable H feels Guanyin's special power was when she revealed herself to her during her out of body episode at the temple. "She was my calling." Venerable H is acutely aware that she is currently living in a world of "senses" knowing this is only temporary and that her future lives are conditioned by spiritual karma. She said that she is no longer scared to experience transition into her next life because she was able to feel that "void" when she was unconscious and Guanyin came to her.

Vivian said that Guanyin is the "higher power" able to sense everything, and Patricia feels that Guanyin's power is above this earthly realm, "It's just amazing, just beyond, she's way up there." "It's her whole aura, it's so powerful...as a human being we can only hope to emulate (her), to follow her ways, to try to be the best we can, but we can never replace her...she's irreplaceable."

Chapter Five: Transgender Buddhist and non-Buddhist Women: "Guanyin the Trans-Bodhisattva"

Chapter five is the outcome of a workshop I co-facilitated with Jason Tran called “Transition Into the New Year: A Meditation Workshop on Finding Compassion, Inner Peace and Love”, with a transgender support group that meets weekly as part of an outreach program at *The Wall Las Memorias Project* in Los Angeles. We had six participants for the workshop, yet only three volunteered to be interviewed. Two of them had previous knowledge of Guanyin and one had never heard of her before. All of the three participants are male transitioned to female.

*All of their names have been changed in order to provide anonymity, although some of them did not request it.

Following are my reflections of the day...

Very excited and eager to set up I arrived a little before 9:00 to meet Jessica. I brought meditation cushions, blankets, pastries, fruit, altar offerings, and gifts. Jessica arrived promptly and began setting up the projector and whiteboard, moving the furniture around to open up the space. She also set up a sign in table with name tags that had “Genderbread” pictures to write our names and preferred gender pronouns. I set up pastries and coffee in the kitchen, then helped her. We gathered pink camellias from the

backyard to decorate the altar and the front porchsteps, and added candles too.



(Workshop at *The Wall Las Memorias*: taken February 4, 2017)

The participants trickled in slowly, saying hello to each other and getting settled with coffee and food. Jessica gracefully introduced herself to the group as coordinator for transgender outreach and groups at *The Wall*. I introduced myself next, explaining my connection to Jessica and Jason, my dissertation project, my love for Guanyin and how she appeared in my life. Jason introduced himself and told the group how he met Jessica seven years ago when he was coordinating a fashion show through APAIT¹²¹ and FIDM¹²², where she was a student.

¹²¹ APAIT (Asian Pacific AIDS Intervention Team: Los Angeles, CA).

¹²² FIDM (Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising: Los Angeles, CA).

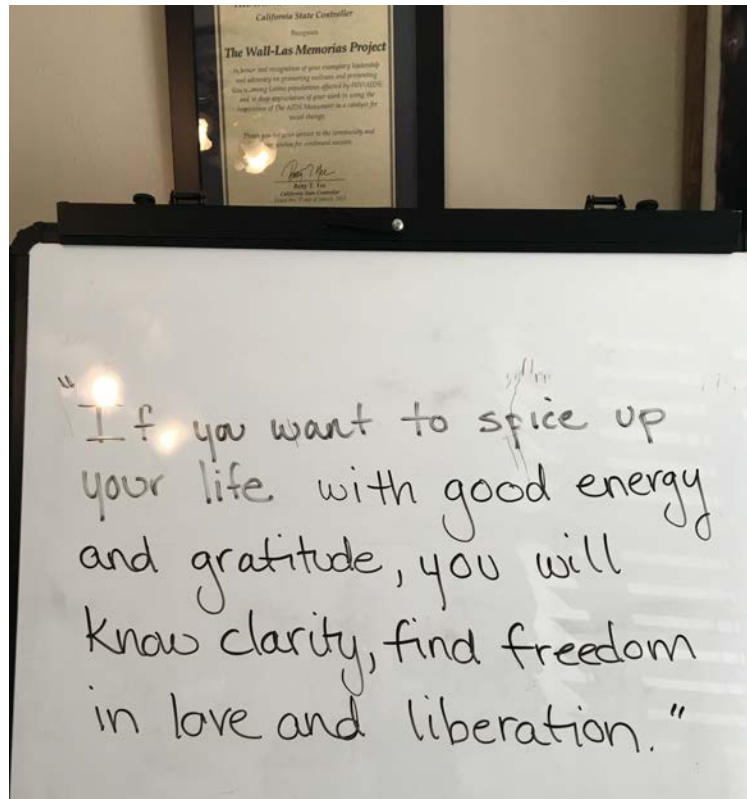
We then asked everyone to introduce themselves by their first names and preferred pronouns. Jason explained that we are new to the pronoun identities so please excuse us if we make any mistakes. Among the participants, the preferred pronouns were: 2- She/Her, 2-They/Them, 1- Him/He, 1- No pronoun. Next, we discussed ground rules and asked for input. The group was very comfortable with this practice as it is protocol for all group events at *The Wall*. They unanimously agreed on: **Anonymity, Safe Space, Don't Interrupt, Agree to Disagree, Don't Disclose Outside of this Space if it Will Cause Harm.** Each of us then went around the room and shared one word to express why we came today: **Meditate better, Open to new ideas, Curious about Guanyin, Always want to improve myself...**



(Shared Objects Altar: taken February 4, 2017)

Jason and I then began our presentation. We shared Guanyin's historical background and some of the legends and myths describing her dynamic qualities. We talked about Compassion, Love, Inclusivity, Non-Judgement and Transformation. I explained that Guanyin is the incarnation of Avalokitesvara who was a male bodhisattva originally from India who transitioned into a female upon her popularity in China in the 5/6th Century. Almost immediately, comparisons were made about Guanyin and the Virgin Mary. The group discussed the maternal similarities, noticing how they both wear long, flowing robes and share a soft gaze and sweet smile.

Our Group Mantra: Jason and I explained what a mantra is and how we can gather all our intentions to create one together. I wrote down words on the whiteboard as the group came up with ideas: gratitude, love, energy, light, spice up your life, compassion, understanding...I began creating sentences to encourage them to say to me what they wanted and this is what we ended up with, ***“If you want to spice up your life with good energy and gratitude, then you will know clarity (and) find freedom in love and liberation.”*** Everyone seemed to love this activity and it felt like people were starting to warm up and relax.



(Group Mantra: taken February 4, 2017)

We then began the guided meditation: It was a pre-recorded Guanyin meditation and it was very good. I would have liked to have led it but I think it was fine considering it was our first time doing this. I did a quick scan and everyone appeared to be very present and fully meditated! After the meditation we closed our time together by sharing a group blessing, followed by a catered vegan lunch.

During lunch they all started chatting about life, friends, modeling, trans issues and such while I observed. I didn't want to break up their discussion so I decided a group interview would be more organic. I chimed in after a bit and asked if I could just start my interview questions and everyone agreed. One of the participants had to leave at lunch. Two others did not share, so there were three whom I interviewed.

Jessica

Jessica is twenty-five years old, she grew up in Southern California and is of Hispanic descent. Her current identifying pronouns are “Them/Their” but says that is very flexible and may change her pronouns again. Jessica works at *The Wall Las Memorias* where she coordinates their trans outreach program. She helped me organize the workshop and without her help to recruit participants I would not have had such wonderful support. I met with her the month prior to propose the workshop idea and she introduced me to the director of *The Wall* who was extremely supportive of our project, allowing us use their space. Jessica is also a model and actress and previously studied fashion design at FIDM in Los Angeles. She grew up Catholic and Christian and sees many similarities between Guanyin and the Virgin Mary. Jessica loves meditation and studying spirituality which she says gives her inner strength. She finds Buddhism’s tenet of “non-violence” inspiring and tries to follow a path of peace, love and compassion as her personal mantra.

Jasmine

“Jasmine” is Jason Tran’s transgender name which she chose to use for the interview. In this role Jasmine was solely a participant and I was the interviewer.

*“Jason” was my co-facilitator for the workshop only.

Jasmine is thirty-one years old and grew up in Orange County. Jasmine is Vietnamese American and was raised in a Buddhist household. At the time of the workshop Jasmine did not have a chosen pronoun, explaining that it changes all the time. For this study,

with Jasmine's permission, I am going to reference her as "her/she". Jasmine's Vietnamese Buddhism reveres Guanyin equal to, if not more important than, the Buddha and she feels a very strong connection to her. Jasmine uses Guanyin as a daily reminder of the power of compassion, both for herself and others. She also credits Guanyin as her strength and courage to 'come out' as homosexual to her family.

Maxine

Maxine is a twenty-five year old student living and working in Los Angeles. She came to Los Angeles from the East Coast five years ago to pursue a modeling career and was very candid about her struggles as a transgender African American woman trying to get modeling agency representation. She did not have any prior knowledge of Guanyin but was very interested in learning more about her compassionate qualities and meditation. Maxine boldly expressed her views of feminism and gender equality when we discussed connections to Guanyin.

View and Understanding of Guanyin

Of the three women interviewed, Jasmine had the most prior knowledge of Guanyin because of her Vietnamese Buddhist background. Jessica knew a little bit about Guanyin and Maxine had never heard of her before the workshop. The mythological story of Princess Miao Shan being carried to the celestial realms by a tiger, releasing her

from her physical body to become Guanyin that Jason shared resonated with all three of them and they referenced it often throughout the interview.¹²³

I began by asking, “What first comes to mind when you think of Guanyin?” Jessica said Guanyin makes her think of the color purple because it signifies the mixture of blue and pink, referring to the stereotypical color identities we give to male and female. For her, Guanyin’s ability to transition between male and female was very important. Theme: merging of male and female When I asked “Why is Guanyin important to you?” Jessica answered, “...I think as a trans person I feel like we, or I’ll say I, we go through this transformation of one to the other obviously, but there’s also like a mental transition of understanding and compassion towards yourself and toward the world...” “Allowing yourself to sacrifice things in your life, whether internal or external, and it’s like the way Guanyin had to sacrifice herself to the tiger to save a person.” “You know, as a trans person you have to sacrifice the life that you believed, or you were taught to live, and you embrace a new life. So it’s like you feed your past life to this new one, and you kind of resurrect a new life.”

Transition is an important theme for Jessica as she moves from male to female. When we did the workshop she was awaiting a date for her reassignment surgery which she has since had. She is proud of the changes and she looks stunningly beautiful, but she candidly shares the emotional stress that she has experienced. It was helpful for her to talk about the loss of her ‘old self’ and the fear of her unknown ‘new self’ during the interview. The entire experience of letting go of the body she has lived in for so long, the

¹²³ Daniela Schenker, *Kuan Yin: Accessing the Power of the Divine Feminine* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, Inc., 2007), 19.

body that family members and friends identify with, continues to inspire Jessica to have deep compassion for herself daily.



(Jessica: submitted 2017)

For Maxine, she related to Guanyin like she does with the Mother Mary. She was touched by Guanyin's selflessness, and felt Guanyin, like Mary, embodies the essence of a mother. "...She is someone who sees someone else in pain and has to alleviate it, and will do whatever she can to do so..."

Jasmine sees Guanyin as the ultimate representation of compassion.

I can't say that word enough, the word compassion. Compassion is where we are in our life right now, as well as the political climate, and what we need right now is compassion. Compassion is to release judgements of yourself and others, and

focus on the love and light that is within everybody. So I truly believe there is good in everybody, deep down there's a light, and that is what Guanyin represents for me. How can I find that light for myself? That compassion? And for others?



(Jasmine: submitted 2017)

Jasmine went on to share how important Guanyin is to her family, on both her mother and father's sides. She said she was told many stories about Guanyin as a child and the family has always prayed to her when they are in pain or they need help. "Guanyin plays a really big part in how we interact with each other as well." Jasmine continued to share how she was able to find the courage to 'come out' of the closet to her family from Guanyin, and that she used their faith in Guanyin to guide them to accept

her. “She represented somebody who didn’t judge and so I used that against my family in a lot of ways.” She said, “I was like hey wait a minute, you all believe in her and she is somebody who doesn’t judge, and you have told me to pray to her when I sin; so I used her compassion as an example.” She said her family slowly began to accept that she is gay, realizing that Buddhism and faith in Guanyin does not state that you cannot be gay. Jasmine loves the story of Guanyin’s transformation into a tiger because it symbolizes ‘selflessness’ and for her this means being authentic, real love and knowing how to truly give.

Spiritual Practice: Guanyin, Buddhism and Meditation

Jessica said that she feels like what people believe in is all the same and that we just have different backgrounds and expressions. Guanyin is just another expression, like connecting with the Virgin Mary, with God and all the different religious and spiritual entities. “I feel like they all share the same characteristics, which is love, compassion, understanding and sacrifice.” She said, I was raised to believe that God is compassionate and loving, and that as a child of God you were created in their image.” For Jessica, Guanyin is unique in her journey, “...Going from one to another and guiding people on their journeys, learning different traits, or skills, or whatever you want to call it.” Guanyin’s spiritual example of transition supports her, as they are same experiences that she has had to face.

I asked them what do they think about Buddhism and if they meditate? Maxine said she likes to light candles and meditate in her room where she feels safe, asking for guidance for herself or others. Jessica said the ocean is her sacred space and is where she

chooses to meditate on Sundays, and that God or whatever entity is listening is in the waves. “When I meditate I just think...give love and find peace.”

Jasmine has an altar in her room with pictures of ancestors, incense and offerings of fruit and prays to Guanyin and the Buddha every day. She explained how Buddhism is not only a religion but a way of life and that you can be a Christian and practice Buddhism, “Not conforming to, or that I have to believe in the Buddha or in monks, or that I have to go to the temple, or to be vegan...it’s really a way of life and it is what you take out of it.” She said, “...That’s really the essence of what the Buddha wanted...That’s exactly what it is, it’s a way of life...for me.”

Jessica said that learning about Buddhism’s views of suffering and non-violence has been very meaningful. “It’s all about perception...like you're gonna suffer but you can make that your own suffering and empower yourself so that you can overcome that suffering, whether it’s good or bad.” “Like how you see things in your world, especially with how things are going with politics.”

Feminism and Guanyin: Exploring the Connection

I asked them if they felt there was a special connection between women, Guanyin and feminism? Jasmine replied with an affirmative “Yes!” She said Guanyin represents the “feminine” in her life, “I mean feminine in the way of not being afraid of exploring that feminine side without any judgement. She is like the Mother Mary in the Buddhist world. I remember my aunts and my mom using Guanyin as a guide throughout their lives. I’ve always known her as this female superhero sort of feminist symbol, she’s fierce (snap snap fingers).”

Jessica expressed how Guanyin's duality, being both feminine and masculine, upholds the feminist values of equality. "Because so many women have been suppressed for so many centuries, and if you're a woman you have to cook and clean and wash and stay at home and be pretty (stereotyping), but Guanyin is someone that is selfless, and is beautiful and feminine, but she doesn't sit back and watch men do all that she can do as well." Jessica said that being a trans person she definitely relates to being a feminist.

As a trans person you give up a lot, but you also gain a lot when you transition. You give up a lot when you transition as well, but after the transition process is over there are certain things you learn to give up to attain other things as you go through this journey. For me, it's like taking control over my life, and being a feminist you can say...I can do this because I embody both masculinity and femininity, and because I am me...and I can do whatever I want...I have that mindset...as long as you have the will to be able to do it.

Maxine responded by saying, "I think Chrissy Teigen said it best, 'Feminism means you can do whatever the fuck you want to do' and I thought that was brilliant." Maxine stressed how important it is for women to feel like they can choose to have a career, or raise children and not be judged. "If you believe in equal rights, well then you're a feminist." Jasmine agreed saying, "I'm a feminist, I've always been a feminist at heart. I've identified more with the feminine side, I've always believed in equal rights and equal pay between women and men. So again, Guanyin represents feminism to me and right now more than ever we should be proud to be feminists. Girl power!" Jasmine also said Beyonce represents feminism in her life!

Guanyin's Special Powers of Healing and Salvation

I asked all three of them if they felt Guanyin had any special energies or power and they unanimously agreed that Guanyin's ability to heal, protect and transform was

central. During the meditation Jessica said she felt “a warm feeling” in her heart as she got into connecting with Guanyin and she could feel Guanyin as a “powerful guide.”

Jasmine said she prays to Guanyin for healing, protection, and mercy. She shared one of her favorite Guanyin stories about a woman who was going to be burned for a sin that she didn't commit and she immediately prayed to Guanyin. Just before she was going to die Guanyin appeared to her and took her soul to an enlightened place far away so she would not have to go back to Earth and repeat her sins, her karmic path. Jasmine said, “....That's one of her special powers, to see that you're in pain, release you from that pain and anything else that makes you feel less than what you truly are.” “So for me, she's always been that protector...when I got into a car accident it was definitely Guanyin or something up there that was my little (hands to heart)...protecting me.”

Chapter Six: Moving Forward: Sustaining a Buddhist Feminist

Thealogy

The intention of this project was to show how Guanyin devotion acts as life giving spiritual resource for three distinctly diverse groups of women who engage in various forms of Buddhist practice. By purposefully introducing and replacing traditional androcentric theological concepts and interpretations of Buddhism with thealogy the subjective, experiential feminine viewpoint is offered. Within this thealogical scope Buddhism and Feminism intersect, offering new ways of looking at how various women practice, teach and interpret the dharma. Most importantly, Buddhist Feminist Thealogy is defined as gender specific spirituality, or embodied spirituality. It is based on lived, subjective experiences and shared stories, helping women create spiritual communities and support other women as leaders. This new self-image is reinforced through Guanyin's feminine qualities. She is their universal mother, best friend and saviour. She is both a bodhisattva and a goddess, providing ultimate compassion and love. Guanyin is the symbol of the reflexive, subjective divine at work seeing ourselves in her, whilst she helps to alleviate our suffering.

The data from the interviews revealed the importance of Guanyin's compassion. Not to be oversimplified, the concept and meaning of compassion holds tremendous importance for all the women of this study. They believe that without Guanyin's compassion their lives would not be the same, which is clearly evident in their stories. Everyone shared an experience of deep suffering that was transformed by their exposure

to Guanyin and it was during my very last interview with Paula that the importance of this came full circle and the intersection among all three subject groups had synthesized.

Because of the travel distance and Paula's health issues the interview had been delayed and was the last one I conducted. I knew she was a longtime convert Buddhist and Guanyin devotee, and would offer great insight into the project. What I did not know was that Paula had severely struggled with her gender identity as a child, sharing with me how she considered suicide when she was told she could not be a man. I don't think she, or I, could have predicted such an emotional crossroads as when we discussed the ways she was able to overcome this. When Paula and I met five years prior at a Guanyin retreat there was never any discussion about her childhood or her gender conflicts, and it is quite possible that she was not aware that transgender women were going to be part of my study. Through her Buddhist practice and devotion to Guanyin she has been able to overcome her disappointment and anger, accepting herself as a masculine-female by living in what Paula calls the "androgynous" space of male and female neutrality. She credits Guanyin's compassionate, goddess wisdom for helping her accept herself as a woman, and to be able to love herself. Paula's story is like the others, based on gendered, subjective experience, steeped in Guanyin's compassionate love, non-judgement and transformation, yet surprisingly unique in that she belongs to two of the subject groups.

Significance and Future Study

The orientation of my research directly places Buddhist Feminist Theology in what is most usefully named "contemporary feminism". The scope of subjective experience, rooted in women's spirituality offers new methods of interaction with

Buddhism; furthermore, opening pathways and personal connections with Buddhist Feminism.

Earlier scholarship of women's spirituality by women like Rosemary Ruether and Judith Plaskow successfully introduced the necessary feminine perspective, providing contrast with established patriarchal interpretations of the divine. Followed by Rita Gross' academic contributions as the first Buddhist scholar to bring the issue of feminism forward in her analysis of the deficit in Buddhism's androcentric viewpoints, interpretations and methods of practice. Theories of embodied spirituality defined by Winnie Tamm, Carol Christ, and Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz helped to conceptualize new ways of identifying and interpreting faith, providing useful models from which I have been able to position the lens of this dissertation project.

As expressed by all three subject groups of the study the need for more female role models in contemporary Buddhism is essential. Women who teach and lead, both academically and in the community, represent the faces and voices from whom other Buddhist women want to learn from. These opportunities may compliment teachings and insight from male leaders, but most important is the chance to personally identify with a mentor, image, or deity, like Guanyin.

As we look toward sustaining a Buddhist Feminist Theology it is important to recognize the issue of cultural and religious appropriation as it relates to convert Buddhist women borrowing ancient Asian practices. As suggested by Shannon Wakoh Hickey, the best way to approach this is to identify Buddhist practices and practitioners by lineages and schools, therefore, minimizing the tendency to categorize Buddhisms by culture.

This dissertation project facilitated the initial conversation about Guanyin, the beautiful bodhisattva who changes lives, yet I know there are so many more stories to be told. The power of the divine feminine that lives within us, embodied by our awareness, which informs and impacts others is what has inspired me, and will continue to do so as the conversation continues.

Bibliography

- Arai, Paula. *Bringing Zen Home: The Healing Heart of Japanese Women's Rituals*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2011.
- Bailey, Cathryn. "Embracing the Icon: The Feminist Potential of the Trans Bodhisattva, Kuan Yin." *Hypatia* 24, no. 3 (2009): 178-96.
- Bednarowski, Mary Farrell. *The Religious Imagination of American Women*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999.
- Blofeld, John. *Bodhisattva of Compassion: The Mystical Tradition of Kuan Yin*. Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 1978.
- . *Compassion Yoga: The Mystical Cult of Kuan Yin*. London, England: Allen & Unwin, 1977.
- Boucher, Sandy. "Appreciating the Lineage of Buddhist Feminist Scholars" *Feminist Theologies*. 2007.
- . "The Dance of Gender: A Woman's Guide to American Buddhism." *Lion's Roar*, (July 1, 1997): 7.
- . *Discovering Kwan Yin, Buddhist Goddess of Compassion*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1999.
- . *She Appears! Encounters with Kwan Yin, Goddess of Compassion*. Goddess Ink, 2014.
- . *Turning the Wheel: American Women Creating the New Buddhism*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993.
- Byrne, J. "Why I Am Not a Buddhist Feminist: A Critical Examination of 'Buddhist Feminism'." *Feminist Theology* 21, no. 2 (2012): 180-94.
- Cabezón, José Ignacio. *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992.
- Chen, Carolyn. "A Self of One's Own: Taiwanese Immigrant Women and Religious Conversion." *Gender and Society* 19, no. 3 (June, 2005): 336-357.
- Cheng, Patrick S. *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*. New York, NY: Seabury Books, 2011.

- . *Rainbow Theology: Bridging Race, Sexuality, and Spirit*. New York, NY: Seabury Books, 2013.
- . "Kuan Yin: Mirror of the Queer Asian Christ." *Patrick S. Cheng*. Published 2003. <http://www.patrickcheng.net>.
- Chennery, Carolyn. "Destroying the Binary: Transgenderism in Buddhism." Paper presented at the Religious Studies Student Organization Undergraduate Research Conference, December 9, 2015.
- Christ, Carol P. "The Last Dualism: Life and Death in Goddess Feminist Theology." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 27, no. 1 (2011): 129-45.
- . *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997.
- . *She Who Changes: Re-Imagining The Divine In The World*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- . "Whose History Are We Writing? Reading Feminist Texts with a Hermeneutic of Suspicion." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20, no. 2 (2004): 59-82.
- Christ, Carol P., and Judith Plaskow. *Goddess And God In The World: Conversations in Embodied Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016.
- . "Goddess and God in the World: Conversations in Embodied Theology: *Voices of the Sacred Feminine; Conversations to Re-Shape Our World*." Interview by Karen Tate, December 1, 2016. <http://www.blogtalkradio.com/voicesofthesacredfeminine/2016/12/01/goddess-god-in-the-world-wcarol-christ-judith-plaskow>.
- . *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1979.
- Christ, Carol P., Ellen M. Umansky, and Anne E. Carr. "Roundtable Discussion: What Are the Sources of My Theology?" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1, no. 1 (1985): 119-31.
- Conner, Randy P., David Hatfield Sparks and Mariya Sparks. *Cassell's Encyclopedia of Queer Myth, Symbol, And Spirit*. London, England: The Bath Press, 1997.
- Cooey, Paula M. *Religious Imagination and the Body: A Feminist Analysis*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Crowley, Karlyn. *Feminisms New Age: Gender, Appropriation, and the Afterlife of Essentialism*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011.

- Culpepper, Emily Erwin. "Philosophia: Feminist Methodology for Constructing a Female Train of Thought." Paper presented at American Academy of Religion, November 26, 1986.
- Da, Costa J. "From Feminist Theologian to Theologian: The Life and Work of Carol P. Christ." *Feminist Theology* 14, no. 3 (2006): 311-26.
- Dhammika, Shravasti. "Transgendered People and Buddhism." *Shravasti Dhammika Weblog*. December 16, 2009.
<http://sdhammika.blogspot.com/2009/12/transgendered-people-and-buddhism.html>.
- Dresser, Marianne. *Buddhist Women on the Edge: Contemporary Perspectives from the Western Frontier*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1996.
- Fernandes, Leela. *Transforming Feminist Practice: Non-violence, Social Justice, and the Possibilities of a Spiritualized Feminism*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 2003.
- Findly, Ellison Banks. *Women's Buddhism, Buddhism's Women: Tradition, Revision, Renewal*. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000.
- Goldstein, Valerie Saiving. "The Human Situation: A Feminine View." *The Journal of Religion* 40, no. 2 (1960): 100-12.
- Gross, Rita M. *Beyond Androcentrism: New Essays on Women and Religion*. Missoula, MT: Scholars Press for the American Academy of Religion, 1977.
- Gross, Rita M. *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996.
- . *A Garland of Feminist Reflections : Forty Years of Religious Exploration*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009.
- . *Soaring and Settling : Buddhist Perspectives on Contemporary Social and Religious Issues*. New York, NY: Continuum, 1998.
- Gross, Rita M., Carol P. Christ, Grace G. Burford, Amina Wadud, Yvonne Chireau, Susan Sered, Judith Simmer-Brown, C. S'thembile West, Naomi R. Goldenberg, and Susan E. Shapiro. "Roundtable: Feminist Theology and Religious Diversity: Feminist Theology: Religiously Diverse Neighborhood or Christian Ghetto?" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 16, no. 2 (2000): 73-131.

- Gross, Rita M., and Rosemary Radford Ruether. *Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet: A Christian-Buddhist Conversation*. New York, NY: Continuum, 2001.
- Hai, Thang. "Characteristics of Hoa Hao Buddhism." *Phat Giao Hoa Hao*. Published 2005. <https://hoahao.org/a2414/4-characteristics-of-hoa-hao-buddhism>.
- Hanh, Thich Nhat. "What is Applied Buddhism?" *The Mindfulness Bell*, Winter/Spring 2015, <https://www.mindfulnessbell.org/archive/2016/02/what-is-applied-buddhism>.
- Hewitt, Marsha A. "Ideology Critique, Feminism, and the Study of Religion." *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 11, no.1 (January 01, 1999): 47-63.
- Hickey, Wakoh Shannon. "Two Buddhisms, Three Buddhisms, and Racism." *Journal of Global Studies* 11 (2010): 1-25.
- Hope, Angela and Patricia 'Iolana'. "Theology: Mapping a Fluid and Expanding Field." *Goddess Theology: An International Journal for the Study of the Divine Feminine* 1, no. 1 (December, 2011): 11-17.
- Hopkinson, Deborah, Michele Hill, and Eileen Kiera. *Not Mixing Up Buddhism: Essays on Women and Buddhist Practice*. Fredonia, NY: White Pine Press, 1986.
- Hsu, Fannie. "We've Been Here All Along." *Buddhadharma: The Practitioner's Quarterly* (Winter, 2016): 24-31.
- Hu, Hsiao-lan. *This Worldly Nibbana: A Buddhist-Feminist Social Ethic for Peacemaking in the Global Community*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011.
- Hua, Hsuan. *Surangama Sutra: Text, Commentaries, and Articles*. Translated by Heng Sure, Jin Yan, Jin Yong, Jin Jing, Jin Hai, Ron Epstein, David Rounds, Joey Wei, Fulin Chang, and Laura Lin. Ukiah, CA: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2009.
- 'Iolana, Patricia. "Divine Immanence: A Psychodynamic Study in Women's Experience of Goddess." *Claremont Journal of Religion* 1, no. 1 (January 2012): 86-107.
- Isasi-Diaz, Ada Maria. *En La Lucha: In the Struggle. Elaborating a Mujerista Theology. A Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993.
- . "Mujeristas: A Name of Our Own." *The Christian Century* 106, no. 18 (May 24, 1989): 560-562.

- Jackson, Roger R., and John J. Makransky. *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*. London, England: Routledge Curzon, 2000.
- Jones, Robert P. and Daniel Cox. "America's Changing Religious Identity." Findings from the 2016 American Values Atlas. *Public Religion Research Institute Survey Reports*, Washington, September 6, 2017, <https://www.ppri.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/>.
- Karafin, Brian. "World as Lover, World as Self." *Buddhist - Christian Studies* 18 (1998): 247-51.
- Keefe, Alice A. "Visions of Interconnectedness in Engaged Buddhism and Feminist Theology." *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 17 (1997): 61-76.
- Keller, Rosemary Skinner, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Marie Cantlon. *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006.
- Kim, Nami. "'My/Our' Comfort Not At The Expense Of 'Somebody Else's': Toward a Critical Global Feminist Theology." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 21, no. 2 (2005): 75-160.
- King, Karen L. *Women and Goddess Traditions: In Antiquity and Today*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997.
- Klein, Anne C. *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen Buddhists, Feminists, and the Art of the Self*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995.
- . "Presence with a Difference: Buddhists and Feminists on Subjectivity." *Hypatia* 9, no. 4 (1994): 112-30.
- Koppedray, Kay. "Feminist Applications of Buddhist Thought." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 23 no. 1 (2007): 121-40.
- Lopez, Donald S. *Buddhism in Practice*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995.
- Loy, David, and International Buddhist-Christian Dialogue Conference. *Healing Deconstruction: Postmodern Thought in Buddhism and Christianity*. Proceedings. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1996.
- Mair, Victor H., and John Blofeld. "Bodhisattva of Compassion: The Mystical Tradition of Kuan Yin." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 39, no. 1 (1979): 161.
- Maitra, Keya. "The Questions of Identity and Agency in Feminism without Borders: A Mindful Response." *Hypatia* 28, no. 2 (2013): 360-76.

- Miller, Andrea. *Buddha's Daughters: Teachings from Women Who Are Shaping Buddhism in the West*. Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2014.
- Moulaison, Jane Barter. "'Our Bodies, Our Selves?' The Body as Source in Feminist Theology." *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60, no. 3 (2007): 341.
- Nicholson, Linda J. *Feminism/postmodernism*. NY, New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Nicholson, Sarah. "Neither God Nor Goddess: Why Women Need an Archetype of the Self." *Journal of Integral Theory and Practice* 7, no. 2 (2012): 19-29.
- Oldmeadow, Harry. "Delivering the Last Blade of Grass: Aspects of the Bodhisattva Ideal in the Mahayana." *Asian Philosophy* 7, no. 3 (Nov 1997): 181-194.
- Palmer, Martin, Jay Ramsey and Man Ho-Kwok. *The Kuan Yin Chronicles: The Myths and Prophecies of the Chinese Goddess of Compassion*. Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing Co., 2009.
- Park, Pauline. "Transgender Identities and Spiritual Traditions in Asia and the Pacific: Lessons for LGBT/Queer API's." Paper presented at the Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, CA, April 2, 2013 (accessed October 20, 2015).
- Payne, Richard K. "Why 'Buddhist Theology' Is Not A Good Idea." Keynote Address for the Fifteenth Biennial Conference of the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies." *The Pure Land, New Series* no. 27 (2012-2-13): 37-73.
- Plaskow, Judith, and Carol P. Christ. *Weaving the Visions : New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1989.
- Prebish, Charles S., and Kenneth Ken'ichi Tanaka. *The Faces of Buddhism in America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998.
- Reger, Jo. *Everywhere and Nowhere: Contemporary Feminism in the United States*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Reis-Habito, Maria. "The Bodhisattva Guanyin and the Virgin Mary." *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 13 (1993): 61-69.
- Richardson, Laurel, Verta A. Taylor, and Nancy Whittier. *Feminist Frontiers*. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2004.
- Rigoglioso, Marguerite. "Envisioning a Spiritualized Feminist The*logical Tradition: Being the Change We Want to See." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1 (2011): 105-149.

- . *Virgin Mother Goddesses of Antiquity*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Feminist Theologies: Legacy and Prospect*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007.
- Saiving, Valerie. "Androcentrism in Religious Studies." *The Journal of Religion* 56, no. 2 (1976): 177-97.
- Schaab, Gloria L. "Feminist Theological Methodology: Toward a Kaleidoscopic Model." *Theological Studies* 62, no. 2 (June 2001): 341-65.
- Schenker, Daniela. *Kuan Yin: Accessing the Power of the Divine Feminine*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True, Inc., 2007.
- Snyder, R. Claire. "What Is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 34, no. 1 (2008): 175-196.
- Storhoff, Gary, and John Whalen-Bridge. *American Buddhism as a Way of Life*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010.
- Stuttaford, Genevieve. "Nonfiction -- The Feminine Face of God: The Unfolding of the Sacred in Women by Sherry Ruth Anderson and Patricia Hopkins." *Publishers Weekly* 238, no. 31 (1991): 41.
- Suh, Sharon A. *Being Buddhist in a Christian World: Gender and Community in a Korean American Temple*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2004.
- Tracy, David. "Traditions of Spiritual Practice and the Practice of Theology." *Theology Today* 55, no. 2 (July 1998): 235-41.
- Tran, Kim. "4 Signs You're Culturally Appropriating Buddhism-And Why It's Important Not To." *Everyday Feminism*, June 21, 2016, <http://everydayfeminism.com/2016/07/culturally-appropriating-buddhism/>.
- Tsomo, Karma Lekshe. *Buddhism Through American Women's Eyes*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1995.
- Watson, Burton, translator. *The Lotus Sutra*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Wilson, Jeff. "'Deeply Female and Universally Human': The Rise of Kuan-yin Worship in America." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 23, no. 3 (2008): 285-306.
- Yang, Larry. "Coming Home To Who We Are: Buddhist Spiritual Practice and Transformation." *Tikkun* 25, no. 4 (July/August 2010): 47-48.

Yü, Chün-fang. *Kuan-yin : The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

***Sakyadhita International Conference, June 2015**
The Future of Buddhist Feminism (panel)

“Emergent Buddhist Women’s Leadership: Competing Feminist Views at the Intersection of the Sacred & the Profane”, *Carol L. Winkelman*.

“The Real Problem Regarding Buddhist Women & Gender Justice: Gender-Neutral Models of Humanity”, *Rita Gross*.

“Sakyadhita and the Emergence of Buddhist Feminist Awareness”, *Eunsu Cho*.

Appendix A: University of the West IRB Approval



**University of the West Institutional Review Board
Request for Approval of Research
APPLICATION PROTOCOL SUBMISSION CHECKLIST (v: 3/18/14)**

**PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT AND DATA COLLECTION MAY NOT BEGIN
UNTIL THE IRB PROVIDES FORMAL WRITTEN APPROVAL OF THE
STUDY.**

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY:

Title of Study:

Creating A Sustainable Buddhist Feminist *Thealogy*:
Guanyin Devotion Among American Women

**Principal Investigator (PI) Karen
Gelinas**

The following is a list of what must be included for your protocol to be considered complete and to initiate the review process. You must submit this completed checklist with your protocol. **Incomplete protocols will not be reviewed.** Please answer all questions. **Check each item that has been completed; use N/A if an item is not applicable.**

<input type="checkbox"/>	IRB Request for Approval of Research, Application Protocol Form (all questions answered or N/A indicated)
--------------------------	--

<input type="checkbox"/>	Principal Investigator Signature
--------------------------	---

	Faculty Sponsor Signature (required for student research)
--	--

Appendices (include as part of electronic protocol file. Place this material after the IRB Application Protocol Form):

	Written recruitment notices , advertisements, etc. for soliciting participants
--	---

	Copies of all measures, forms, stimuli, interview materials , etc. except those in common use (e.g. intelligence tests, MMPI, Rorschach, Child Behavior Checklist, Beck Depression Inventory, NEO, 16PF). Single copies of copyrighted instruments or a list of questions contained in copyrighted instruments may be included, in accord with the Fair Use Doctrine.
--	--

	CONSENT FORM(S) designed for your participant population. Consent forms are usually optional for Level 1 research. <u>UNLESS THE IRB GRANTS A WAIVER OF SOME OR ALL ELEMENTS OF CONSENT, CONSENT FORMS SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING</u> (<i>check each box to indicate that this information is contained in your consent form or indicate NA if not applicable to your study</i>):
x	1. State that study involves research.
x	2. Identify individual(s) conducting the research, their highest degree earned, and their university or agency affiliation.
x	3. Describe briefly the purpose of the study.
x	4. Describe briefly procedures to be followed.
na	5. Describe alternative treatments that the participant might pursue (if relevant).
na	6. Describe measures/instruments to be completed.
x	7. Give length of time required to participate in the study.
na	8. Describe compensation or reward for participating (and requirements for receiving this).
x	9. Specify that participants have the right to refuse to participate, decline to answer questions, and withdraw at any time from the study without penalty.
x	10. Describe how confidentiality will be maintained (include who will have access to the data, when and how raw data will be destroyed).
x	11. Describe audio-recording or video-recording (if relevant); including information on storage, transcription, and destruction of such materials.
na	12. Describe limits to confidentiality (e.g., reporting requirements for child, dependent adult, or elder abuse).
x	13. Identify reasonably foreseeable risks and benefits (if any) to participants in the study.
na	14. For foreseeable risks, indicate how negative reactions to the research will be handled, whether treatment will be provided, who will be financially responsible for any needed intervention/treatment.
x	15. Identify individuals responsible for the study (e.g., the researcher, faculty sponsor for students) and how to contact them (e.g., phone numbers, email addresses).
na	16. Identify how to contact the IRB office for general questions about rights of

	research participants.
na	17. For medical experiments, include a copy of the “Experimental Participant’s Bill of Rights” (see <i>Systemwide Guidelines for the Protection of Human Participants in Research</i> , section “Providing Information Needed for Informed Consent” for details).
x	18. Specify that participants may request a summary of the aggregate results of the study once the study has been completed if they wish.
x	19. Specify that the participant has received a copy of the consent form.
x	20. Include a signature and date space for the participant, parent or guardian.
x	21. Include a signature and date space for the researcher.
na	Assent form(s) , if participants include minors or adults who do not have the capacity to give their own consent.
na	Letter(s) of authorization/approval to collect data from administratively responsible person(s), if the study will be conducted in an institution, school, or agency setting, on agency letterhead. NOTE: If you will secure your authorization letter(s) after the protocol has been reviewed by the UWest IRB, please note this in your application protocol. In these cases, the IRB may approve your study, but you may not begin recruiting participants or collecting data at an external site until you have filed your approval letter from the site with the IRB.



**University of the West Institutional Review Board
Request for Approval of Research
IRB Application Protocol Form – (v: 3/18/14)**

Written approval of this research by the IRB is required **PRIOR** to initiating the research (e.g., recruiting participants or collecting **ANY** data in all but archival studies). Submit this Application Protocol to your campus IRB with the **Application Protocol Submission Checklist** and supporting materials. Include required appendices as part of this document.

Date: <p style="text-align: center;">August 30, 2016</p>

Title of Study <p style="text-align: center;">Creating A Sustainable Buddhist Feminist <i>Theology:</i> Guanyin Devotion Among American Women</p>

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR (PI)

Name: Karen Gelinas	Title: ThD. Graduate Student
Department: Religious Studies	Campus: University of the West
Mailing Address:	Email Address: Karen.Gelinas@uwest.edu
Phone Number:	Student ID (if applicable): 11001065

CO-INVESTIGATORS

Name: Jason Tran	Title: APAIT staff
Mailing Address:	Email Address:

Name:	Title:
--------------	---------------

Mailing Address:	Email Address:

NOTE: If additional investigators are included, please list them below, including name, title, mailing address, and e-mail address.

Jason Tran
jasontran1986@gmail.com

For all research in which the Principal Investigator (PI) is a student, please also complete the following:

UWest Faculty Sponsor/Project Chairperson: Dr. Jane Iwamura	Title: Dept. Chair, Religious Studies
Program, School, and Campus: UWEST	Email Address: Janei@uwest.edu

Is this a revision of a previously reviewed protocol?

Yes	
No	x

Type of research proposed (Check all that apply):

	Pilot
x	Student
	Faculty
	Staff

Level of risk to human participants in proposed research (Check that which is relevant):

x	1 – NO RISK (<i>No Risk</i> means that the study has no social, psychological or physical danger to participants; see <i>Systematic Guidelines for the Protection of Human Participants in Research</i> for details).
	2 – MINIMAL RISK (<i>Minimal Risk</i> means that the probability of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater than those ordinarily encountered during the performance of routine physical, psychological, or educational examinations or tests).
	3 – MODERATE RISK (<i>Moderate Risk</i> means that the risk to participants is beyond what would normally be experienced in typical daily life. The study may involve intrusive questions or procedures or use protected populations (e.g., infants, prisoners, etc.)).
	4 – HIGH RISK (<i>High Risk</i> means that participants may be exposed to risk that may have lasting psychological or physical consequences).

NOTE: Levels 3 and 4 must be reviewed by the full IRB Committee.

Does the research focus on or seek to enroll participants from any of the following vulnerable categories? If so, check ALL that apply. If none apply, check the final box only.

	Chronic physical or mental condition
	Cognitively impaired
	Current and/or former patients of investigator(s) or faculty sponsor
	Institutionalized (e.g., hospitalized, hospice, assisted living, residential treatment)
	Limited or non-readers
	Mentally ill
	Military personnel to be recruited for the study by military personnel
	Minors
	Poor/uninsured
	Pregnant women
	Prisoners
	Terminally ill
	Wards of the state (e.g., foster children)
	Students or employees of PI, study staff, or research sponsor
	Students to be recruited in their educational setting (e.g., in class or at school)
	Others vulnerable to coercion (Specify)
x	The research does NOT focus on or seek to enroll participants from vulnerable categories

Is the research funded in whole or in part by an outside agency (e.g., a grant or contract) or have you applied for funding?

x	No
	Yes , the research has been funded
	Yes , proposal is under review by outside agency

If yes, list sponsoring agency: _____

Grant/award number (if funded): _____

Principal Investigator of grant/contract: _____

Is any special expertise above and beyond that represented on the IRB required to evaluate this protocol? (e.g., prisoners [need prison representative to review]; medical review [for medically-related invasive procedures or interventions])

x	No
	Yes

If yes, please explain: _____

Statement of Investigator(s):

The signature(s) of the investigator(s) indicates agreement with the following:

This research will be conducted in accordance with procedures described in this protocol and approved by the IRB, university policies which govern research with human participants, and applicable laws in the state and country in which the research is conducted.

Signatures: (An electronic signature is acceptable for protocols submitted in electronic form).

Principal Investigator: _____ **Date:** _____

Student investigators must also obtain the signature of a faculty sponsor/chairperson before the protocol can be submitted. An email from the faculty sponsor's UWest email to the research office (e.g., the office that accepts IRB protocols for your campus address) is acceptable as an alternative. This email must contain the statement below along with the title of the research and the PI's name.

I have read and reviewed this application for completeness and accuracy, and I approve it as submitted.

Signature of UWest Faculty Sponsor: _____

Date: _____

Instructions: Please provide information on each of the following. If the question is not applicable to your study, enter “NA” or “not applicable” as your answer.

I. STUDY OVERVIEW

What is the purpose of the research? Provide a brief (1 page or less) synopsis of the specific aims of the research and why the topic is important.

My study consists of three distinct groups of contemporary American women: convert Buddhist women, Asian American women, and transgender women, who identify with the bodhisattva Guanyin. Through this dissertation project I will conduct interviews utilizing a qualitative/narrative methodological approach. I will also facilitate conversations among small groups of the participants, and observe how they interact with Guanyin. The project’s aim is to reveal how Guanyin’s supportive qualities of inclusivity, compassion and transformation provide spiritual strength and comfort for those who call upon her and how gender-specificity and personal subjectivity interact for these three groups of women.

* In addition, another highlight of this study is to facilitate a series of workshops to introduce transgender women to Guanyin’s potential as a positive spiritual icon. I will work in conjunction with an outreach group in Los Angeles to facilitate a series of Guanyin meditation workshops to acquaint transgender women with the benefits of Guanyin’s compassion.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ The workshops will take place at *The Wall: Las Memorias*, Los Angeles, CA.

--

II. PARTICIPANTS

II.A. How many participants do you plan to recruit? Please indicate (a) the planned sample size, and (b) the minimum and maximum number in your study.

For one year, I will conduct both individual and group interviews with thirty women who acknowledge Guanyin as a central part of their Buddhist practice. I anticipate the majority (20-25) of the interviews will be with the women I meet at the retreats and the

temples. The interviews with transgender women will be less (5-10), due to a lack of exposure and popularity regarding Guanyin devotion.

NOTE: If the number increases by more than 15% above your maximum, you will need to amend your study prior to increasing enrollment size.

II.B. Age range of participants: 20-75 years of age

II.C. Inclusion criteria for participation in the research.

Any woman from the three defined groups of the study that would like to share their personal encounter with Guanyin. They do not need to be Buddhist.

II.D. Exclusion criteria for participation in the research.

NOTE: List circumstances that will exclude someone from participation, not just the absence of inclusion criteria.

NA

II.E. If you plan to enroll any members of vulnerable populations (see above), provide rationale for studying them.

The transgender women whom I hope to work with are not identified ‘at risk’.

However, I do not know if being part of my study will affect their ‘vulnerability’. I foresee the workshops to be beneficial and positive, therefore there should be minimal risk to the volunteers.

II.F. Describe how you will ensure that selection of participants is equitable in light of the purposes of the research and the setting in which the research will be concluded. Equity means that the opportunity to participate is available to all persons who meet the criteria for inclusion and that individuals are not excluded based on gender, ethnicity, etc., except when such exclusion is essential in light of the purpose of the research.

The transgender women who volunteer for the study may have multiple gender identities. They may participate regardless of stating they are exclusively ‘female’.

--

III. RESEARCH PROCEDURES

III.A. Describe your recruitment procedures, including any initial screening to ensure participant eligibility (attach scripts, ads, etc. in appendices).

<p>All interviewees will be personally invited by me to join in a dialogue about Guanyin devotion, and will be fully voluntary. I will ask for volunteers among the subjects, who will also help introduce me to others who would like to share their “stories”, utilizing the snowball method.</p>

III.B. Will the participant be audio or video recorded?

	No
x	Yes (Specific permission must be included in the consent form; do not use a separate consent for recording. Be sure to address storage, transcription, and destruction of such materials in your application and consent form).

III.C. Describe what the participant will be asked to do. Briefly outline your procedures from entry (after recruitment and screening for inclusion) to completion of the study. Include inducements offered to participants, methods of assessment, methods of assignment to group, and procedures. Be explicit in the description of any physical, psychological, occupational, or social stressors; drugs, ingested substances; experimental conditions; aversive stimuli; or any deprivations that are planned.

<p>The interviews will be very casual conversations, audio recorded, and transcribed. A set of questions will guide our dialogue, but they are not necessarily ‘fixed’ questions.</p>

My interviewing process is modeled after Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz's style used in *En la Lucha, In the Struggle: Elaborating a mujerista theology*. Isasi-Diaz constructed her questions so that her subjects could "reflect on their own experience and articulate it in their own words."¹²⁵

III.D. Describe types and content of your measures. Include interview, questionnaire, and/or survey questions (multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, etc.). Attach copies of demographic or biographical forms, and structured interviews, and any measures that are **NOT** in common use (common use measures include WISC, MMPI, BDI, NEO, CBCL, 16 PF, etc.) as appendices. For copyrighted measures, provide either a copy of the measure (this is permitted under the fair use doctrine) or a list of items/stimuli and the rating scale. For archival studies, describe the specific information you will retrieve from existing records.

Appendices B: Interview Questions
[Interview Questions for Guanyin study.docx](#)

¹²⁵ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *In la Lucha, In the Struggle: Elaborating a mujerista theology. A Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 76.

III.E. How long will participation take? (Describe approximate time commitment)

Minimum: 15-30 minutes
Maximum: 2-3 hours

III.F. Describe what will happen at the end of participants' involvement in your study. Describe any follow-up contact you plan to have with participants. If your study requires debriefing, please describe the process, including the approximate time between completing the study procedures and debriefing.

Once the interviews have been transcribed, organized and integrated into my dissertation I will share my work with the participants if they are interested. I plan to stay in contact with any/all who wish to.

III.G. If the study involves a treatment or intervention to ameliorate or to prevent a physical, educational, occupational, or psychological difficulty, please explain how that treatment will differ from standard care that participants would ordinarily receive.

NA

--

III.H. Describe the setting(s) in which you will conduct the study (e.g., school, business, clinic, internet). If you will collect data in an organization other than UWest (e.g., school, business, clinic), describe how and from whom you will obtain permission to use the site. Note that you must provide the IRB with a letter indicating an appropriate authority at the site has granted permission to gather data BEFORE initiating data collection at that site.

The interviews will take place at retreats led by Buddhist teacher Sandy Boucher, at local Buddhist temples and settings, at the clinic for transgender clients, and through organic meetings with women who identify with Guanyin but do not attend public dharma talks, retreats, or temples.

III.I. Will you conduct any part of the study outside the United States of America?

x	No
	Yes (List country/countries):

If yes, describe research regulations or laws relevant to the conduct of research in the country in which the research will be done, and how you will comply with them.

--

IV. RISKS AND BENEFITS

IV.A. What are the potential risks and benefits of participating for the individual participant?

NOTE: The contributions of the research to science and participant compensation are not considered benefits to the individual.

Appendix B: Interview questions explain the goals of the study as a new approach to

the study of Humanistic Buddhism.

IV.B. Describe the steps you will take to minimize risk (if the study entails risk).

There is very minimal risk involved; however, if a participant experiences negative emotions regarding spirituality, then I will refer them to private counseling services.

IV.C. Greater than minimal risk research also requires investigators to describe how they will respond to research-related injury or negative events. For greater than minimal risk studies (level 3 or 4), please complete the following two items (IV.C.1 and IV.C.2). If not applicable (i.e., your study entails minimal risk or less), indicate NA or “not applicable.”

IV.C.1. Explain how the potential benefits from conducting the research for participants and for the field (including knowledge gained) outweigh the risks.

This dissertation project’s aim is to offer an alternative approach to both the study and practice of Buddhism. By looking at Buddhism through a feminist lens, new interpretations and expressions are offered. These feminist contributions help balance the world of humanistic Buddhism and act in a partnership with the established male perspectives already in place. I hope the project can influence others to research and study the feminist perspective in other practical and scholarly disciplines where it has been underrepresented, for the voices and experiences of women are different from their male counterparts and deserve significant recognition and representation in the pursuit of equality.

--

IV.C.2. Provide a detailed explanation of steps you will take to deal with any negative events that occur as a result of the participant's involvement in the research. Specifically indicate who will be responsible for costs incurred via research-related event or injury. Remember to include this information in the consent form as well.

NA

V. CONSENT PROCEDURES

Attach all consent forms (and assent forms, if required) as appendices.

V.A. Describe how the consent process (and, for minors, the assent process) will be conducted (e.g., who will conduct the consent process and what will this process entail; who will provide consent (participants, parents or guardians of minors)).

I, Karen Gelinas, will provide the Informed Consent forms to the volunteers.
--

V.B. Describe steps you will take to prevent coercion.

NA

V.C. Please indicate the language(s) of the participants you plan to enroll. Consent forms and other participant materials must be in language easily understood by the participant.

x	English
x	Other language(s) Specify: Vietnamese and Chinese

V.D. If you are enrolling non-English speaking participants, please explain how you will ensure that (a) participants receive appropriate information about what participation in the research entails, (b) how you will ensure that the consent form is clear and understandable to participants, (c) how translations of research materials will be done to

ensure clarity and correctness (professional translators, back translation, use of indigenous informants, etc.).

If necessary, I will use a translator to explain the purpose of the study to the participants and to translate their responses into English.

VI. CONFIDENTIALITY

VI.A. Are the data completely anonymous? (Anonymous means that it is impossible for anyone, including the researcher, to link a specific individual with his/her data)

x	No
	Yes

VI.B. What provisions will be made to safeguard the confidentiality of the data?

Include provisions for de-identifying research records, ensuring that internet data cannot be linked to specific participants, obtaining a Certificate of Confidentiality for sensitive information, etc.

The names of the participants will be changed and the audio recordings will be destroyed after they are transcribed.

* Upon consent, the subjects are invited to volunteer to be photographed for the study. The photographs will be included in the final dissertation project.

VI.C. Who will have access to the data?

Karen Gelinas, Dr. Iwamura, Dr. Gabriel, Dr. Gauthier

VI.D. What will be done with the data (including audio or video recordings) when the study is completed? How long will the raw data be kept? Who will destroy any data that can be linked to specific participants, when, and how?

I, Karen Gelinas, will be responsible for destroying the audio recordings after they are transcribed.

--

VLE. Will you be accessing participants' educational or medical records?

x	No
	Yes

If yes, describe how you will comply with FERPA or HIPPA regulations if data are not completely anonymous.

--

**SPECIAL ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS FOR STUDIES WITH PREGNANT
WOMEN**

If you plan to enroll pregnant women, **complete the following (otherwise leave blank):**

The IRB reviews research according to the requirements of Federal Regulation 45 CFR 46. One section of that regulation (45 CFR 46.204 (h), (i), (j)) requires the IRB to make specific determinations whenever pregnant women are enrolled in research. If you plan to enroll pregnant women, you must assure the board of the following by signing in the space provided below:

- No individuals involved in the research will offer any inducements, monetary or otherwise, to terminate a pregnancy;
- Individuals engaged in conducting the research will have no part in any decisions as to the timing, method, or procedures used to terminate a pregnancy; and
- Individuals engaged in conducting the research will have no part in determining the viability of a neonate.

Signature of Principal Investigator: _____

Date: _____

http://drive.google.com/open?id=1hgEQ9kUQW1t1I-LvGCSbaoFjec0rUWu-qKsS_qn-VVs

Signature of Faculty Sponsor (for student research):

Date: _____

APPEND ALL ADDITIONAL MATERIALS BELOW (consent forms, measures, site approval letters, etc.) as part of this file.

Appendix B: Interview Questions: [Interview Questions for Guanyin study.docx](#)

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form: [INFORMED CONSENT FORM](#)

Appendix B: Interview Questions for Guanyin Study

GENERAL BACKGROUND

Name:

Age:

Occupation:

Ethnicity

Religious background:

VIEW & UNDERSTANDING OF GUANYIN

1. What first comes to your mind when you think of Guanyin?
2. Who is Guanyin?
3. Is she important to you?
 - a. Why?
 - b. What is her meaning for you?
 - c. Devotion to other bodhisattvas or religious figures?
4. Stories about Guanyin? (mythic & personal)

PRACTICE

5. Is Guanyin special to your family?
 - a. Are they devoted to her? How do you pay homage to her?
 - b. Have you worshipped her your whole life?
 - c. Do your children know who Guanyin is?
6. Place of devotion....sacred space...objects (material culture) –
7. Time of devotion? (daily, seasonal...)
8. Tell me how you identify with Buddhism?
 - a. How would you describe your practice?
9. Do you think meditation is helpful, and if so, how do you incorporate meditation into your life?
10. Altar space – describe and photograph?
11. Select passage (e.g., Lotus Sutra, Guanyin mantra) - response

OTHER QUESTIONS

12. Is there a special connection between Guanyin and women?
 - a. Why?
 - b. How?
13. Do you think your life is different because of Guanyin?
14. Tell me about feminism in your life? What meaning does feminism have to you?
15. Does Guanyin have any special powers? (healing, salvation, transformative?)

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Researcher

My name is Karen Gelinas, and I am a graduate student at University of the West in Rosemead, CA. I am conducting qualitative research that will help inform my doctoral dissertation project titled, “Creating A Sustainable Buddhist Feminist *Theology*: Guanyin Devotion Among American Women.”

Details of the Study

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. This form details the purpose of this study, a description of the involvement required and your rights as a participant.

The purpose of this study is:

- To show how Guanyin, the female bodhisattva of compassion, supports women as a spiritual tool and aid. I will focus on the specific ways that women identify with Guanyin that are subjective and based on personal experience.

The benefits/risks of the research will be:

- Participate in a study that will offer insight into spiritual alternatives to traditional patriarchal practices.

- There is minimal risk involved in participating in the study.
- Studies about spirituality may bring up negative emotions. In case you experience anxiety or emotional discomfort, a list of resources for confidential counseling will be provided.

Methods of the Study

The methods that will be used to meet this purpose include:

- One on One Interviews (15-30 minutes)
- Our discussion will be audio taped to help me accurately capture your insights in your own words. The tapes will only be heard by me for the purpose of this study. If you feel uncomfortable with the recorder, you may ask that it be turned off at any time.
- You are encouraged to ask questions or raise concerns at any time about the nature of the study or the methods I am using. Please contact me at anytime at the e-mail address or telephone number listed below.
- Small group workshops and discussions
- Observation

- Photograph subjects (with consent)
- You also have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime. In the event you choose to withdraw from the study all information you provide (including tapes) will be destroyed and omitted from the final paper.
- Insights gathered by you and other participants will be used in writing a qualitative research analysis, which will be included in my final doctoral dissertation project for University of the West. Though direct quotes from you may be used in the paper, your name and other identifying information will be kept anonymous. After all interviews have been gathered and transcribed, you may request a copy of the final dissertation once it has been approved by UWEST.

By signing below you agree that you have read and understood the above information, and would be interested in participating in this study.

(Signature) (Date)

Contact Information: Karen Gelinas

Karen.Gelinas@uwest.edu

818-926-1174

Appendix D: *The Wall Las Memorias* Workshop: Proposal and Outline (February 4, 2017)

Title: "Transition Into the New Year: A Meditation Workshop on Finding Compassion, Inner Peace and Love Through the Teachings of the Goddess Guanyin"

10:00 Gather, Sit in Group Circle, Introductions

- Hold hands and set our intention for our time together (Karen/Jason)
- Explain my project and how I met Jason at APAIT (Karen)
- Who is Guanyin and our relationship with her (Jason)
- Tell the legend/story about Guanyin in the village (Jason)

10:45 Personal Blessings on the Altar (15 min.)

- invite participants to share a personal offering to our group altar
- photo, charm, object from nature, memento, etc.

Break... (5-10 min.)

11:15 Group Discussion

- Share stories about Guanyin
- Create a group "Mantra" (Karen will write it on poster paper)
- Recite our mantra together

12:00 Guided Meditation (10 min.)

-recite mantra to self during meditation

12:15 Invite participants to come up to the altar and share the importance and meaning of their offering if they would like...

12:30 Closing Blessing (Karen and Jason)

Lunch... Vegan lunch provided by The Loving Hut

*Invite participants to be interviewed for Karen's study after lunch (*voluntary and anonymous)