

# The Repentance Ritual of the Thousand-armed Guanyin

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In 1866 Samuel Beal published a translation entitled, “Confessional of Kuan-yin: An Attempt to Translate from the Chinese a Work Known as the Confessional Service of the Great Compassionate Kuan-yin, Possessing Thousand Hands and Thousand Eyes.”<sup>1</sup> Beal based his translation on a text given to him by a Chinese monk who performed this “confessional service” regularly, thereby attracting Beal’s attention.<sup>2</sup> However, in 1866 Beal was unable to determine the origin and history of this text, the immense importance attached to it in Chinese Buddhism, or to recognize the central function of the Great Compassion Dhāraṇī contained in it.

In 1987 the author of this paper spent some days in a Taiwanese Buddhist temple in the mountains of Fulong. As the resident monks and nuns explained, the most important part of their religious practice consisted in the continuous recitation of the Great Compassion Dhāraṇī also contained in the Repentance Ritual of the Thousand-Armed Guanyin, which is regularly performed at the temple. The repentance ritual is contained in a collection of texts for the Chan school, entitled “Daily Recitation for the Chan School”, published in 1834.<sup>3</sup> In Taiwan, Hongkong, and Singapore the ritual is publicly performed on the 19th day of the second, sixth, and ninth months of the lunar calendar.<sup>4</sup>

This paper has three objectives: (1) to outline the source and historical development of the ritual in Chinese Buddhism; (2) to delineate the dynamics of repentance; and (3) to see it against the religious background of Confucian ancestor worship, filial piety, and Buddhist belief in transformation, on which the importance given to this specific ritual is founded.

## 1. The Source and Historical Development of the Ritual

The original ritual was composed by the Tiantai monk, Zhili (960–1028), of the Song Dynasty who, according to his biography, performed it for twenty-

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<sup>1</sup> *JRAS*, N.S., Vol. II, pp. 403–25.

<sup>2</sup> Beal, *op. cit.*, p. 403, states that the work was presented to him by the priests of the Hai Chw’ang Temple in Honan.

<sup>3</sup> The text is reproduced in Kamata Shigeo, *Chūgoku no bukkyō girei*, Tokyo: Tōkyō Bunka Kenkyūsho, 1986, pp. 337–443. The ritual is found on pp. 384–7.

<sup>4</sup> Due to the influence of the Miaoshan legend, these dates are believed to be Guanyin’s birthday, enlightenment, and entry into religious practice, respectively.

one days in succession, and on another occasion for three years.<sup>5</sup> Zhili's text, entitled *Qian shouyen dapei xinzhu xingfa* [The Ritual of the Heart-Dhāraṇī of the Great Compassionate One with a Thousand Arms and Eyes],<sup>6</sup> is basically a commentary on the *Nilakaṇṭha-sūtra*,<sup>7</sup> translated by Bhagavad-dharma of the Tang Dynasty in AD 650. This commentary is presented in a ritual structure based on the *Fahua sanmei chanyi* [Lotus Repentance Ritual] by the Tiantai master Zhiyi (538–97) of the Sui.<sup>8</sup>

At this point it is necessary to give a short description of the content of the *Nilakaṇṭha-sūtra*. In this text, Guanyin teaches the Great Compassion Dhāraṇī and explains its numerous material and spiritual benefits. The recitation of the *dhāraṇī* will grant ten kinds of good birth and help to avoid ten kinds of violent death; it will cure all diseases, expel demons, extinguish delusive passions, and ultimately lead to Buddhahood. The text repeats in eight different instances the power of the *dhāraṇī* to extinguish sins and underlines the importance of repentance.<sup>9</sup> The central part of the text consists of the tenfold invocation, “*Namu guanshiyin pusa*”, followed by the Bodhisattva vow to obtain expedient means for the salvation of all suffering beings, and the Great Compassion Dhāraṇī. This part figures on its own in a Dunhuang manuscript entitled *Dabei qigong* [Invocation of the Great Compassionate One]<sup>10</sup> (dated AD 899) and also forms the central part of Zhili's repentance ritual. Even if the intention of the Dunhuang manuscript noted at the end of the text is simply stated as, “We pray that the merit of this recitation will encompass all sentient beings, so that all of us may reach Buddhahood together,” it is safe to suppose that the invocation of Guanyin combined with the recitation of the *dhāraṇī* was conceived of as an act of repentance, especially since the invocation of names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas is a central device in repentance rituals<sup>11</sup> and since the achievement of Buddhahood necessarily presupposes the cleansing of all defilements and sins.

The first clear proof of the recitation of the Great Compassion Dhāraṇī as an act of repentance is contained in the record of the daily religious practice of the Chan master Zhijue (904–76). Article 9 of this record says, “To recite the Great Compassion Dhāraṇī of the thousand-handed and thousand-eyed [Guanyin] six times every day, in order to repent for the sins of all sentient beings in the Dharma world which they commit with their six senses”; and

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<sup>5</sup> *Siming zunzhi jiao xing lu*, T. XLVI/1937, p. 919c22, 29, p. 920a.

<sup>6</sup> T. XLVI/1950.

<sup>7</sup> T. XX/1060.

<sup>8</sup> T. XLVI/1941, pp. 949b–955c. This ritual is described in Daniel Stevenson's, “The Four Samādhi in Early Tien-t'ai Buddhism”, in: Peter N. Gregory, ed., *Traditions of Meditation in Chinese Buddhism*, Studies in East Asian Buddhism, No. 4, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1986, pp. 64–72.

<sup>9</sup> T. 1060, pp. 106b22, 107a21, 107a23, 109a9, 109a23, 109a27, 111b29.

<sup>10</sup> T. LXXXV/2843.

<sup>11</sup> For the act of invoking the name of the Buddha, see *Hōbōgirin*, Fasc. 3 (1974), p. 209b.

In the evening, to light incense for all sentient beings of the ten directions, to recite the Prajñā Dhāraṇī and the Great Compassion Dhāraṇī. To pray for them to understand their own mind to be as perfect and clear as Prajñā.<sup>12</sup>

The commonly used repentance ritual that we are interested in here is not the original text composed by Zhili, but an abbreviation and simplification of this rather long and technical text by Master Huashan Lüshi Tudi (1600–79) of the Qing dynasty.<sup>13</sup> The Qing edition retains the title of Zhili's text, but is commonly known and referred to as *Dabei chanfa*, “The Repentance Ritual of the Great Compassionate One”.

The introduction to the text first of all gives the name of Zhili with the comment, “He began with the composition of the ritual.” Then follows the name of Tudi, who “corrected the text and edited it anew”. Finally we find the name of Shuxian, who “improved the presentation and checked the print”.<sup>14</sup> The appendix to the ritual states that Shuxian corrected and first printed the text in AD 1795, and that he re-edited the text in AD 1819, “after having compared several texts”.<sup>15</sup> Since Shuxian's appendix to the text also contains a number of commentaries on the thousand-armed Guanyin, written by monks of the Yuan dynasty (1274–1368), it is possible to imagine that the repentance ritual in some simplified form may already have been popular under the Yuan.

## 2. The Dynamics of Repentance

So far we have outlined the origin and development of the repentance ritual. Now let us look at the dynamics of repentance by asking the following three questions: (1) what is the nature of sin according to this Mahāyāna text?; (2) what is the repentance process?; and (3) what are the different levels of understanding attached to this process?

(1) The text clearly states that the origin of sin is ignorance about the emptiness of being: “Since time without beginning we have been ignorant about the nature of all *dharma*s, which is empty and quiet. That is the reason why we create evil everywhere.”<sup>16</sup> As a result of this basic ignorance “we and all living beings, because of our prejudiced views, internally compare ourselves with others in a self-interested way; externally, we acquire bad friends and do not rejoice in the happiness of others”. The text goes on to

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<sup>12</sup> *Zhijue chanshi zixing zhuan*, ZZ. (new revised, 90-volume edition) 63, 1232, pp. 162b10–11.

<sup>13</sup> *Qianshou qianyan dabei xinzhou xingfa*, ZZ. 74, 1480, pp. 542c–546b.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 546a2–4.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, *loc. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 544c19.

say that even if the bad actions committed by body, speech, and mind (*san ye*) are not always clearly visible, our evil mind (*exin*) is constantly active and hides from us the mistakes committed in the past. That is why we are deluded into thinking that the law of cause and effect is non-existent.<sup>17</sup> The bad actions committed by body, speech, and mind and the six senses (*liu gen*) prevent us from seeing all the Buddhas. Because we do not know the wonderful principle (of emptiness) we do not realize the necessity of emancipation and submit ourselves to existence in *samsāra*. In a later part, the text specifies the kinds of grave sin that lead to suffering in the present existence and rebirth as hungry ghosts, animals or humans, namely the slandering of human beings and the Buddhist teaching, the breaking of religious vows and of fasting, the destruction of religious items and temples, the stealing of monks' property, the sullyng of the pure way of the Brahman, etc. It reminds us again of the root of all sin, which is the perversion of the fundamental *dharma* of equality into an eccentric way of thinking, into a distinction between self and other.<sup>18</sup>

(1) Now, after having thus diagnosed the root of sin, we proceed to the question of the dynamics of repentance, of liberation from the delusive and evil patterns of mind. The notion of the absolute emptiness of all existence is distinctive of the Mahāyāna school of Buddhism and the link between the notion of emptiness and the theory and practice of repentance is an important innovation of this school. The Tiantai master Zhiyi wrote a lengthy commentary on this link. In his work on the stages of meditation, Zhiyi enumerates three forms of repentance: (1) by actions (*zuofa chanhui*), (2) by contemplation of the signs of a Buddha or Bodhisattva (*guanxiang chanhui*), and (3) by the contemplation of the unborn (*guanwusheng chanhui*).<sup>19</sup> Elements of these three forms are to be found in Zhili's repentance ritual of the thousand-armed Guanyin. It proceeds as follows:

1. Invocation of Guanshiyin and prostration before the Three Jewels.
2. Offering of incense, prayer.
3. Recitation of the marks and the salvific powers of Guanshiyin.
4. Prostrations before the Buddha Sakyamuni and all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas mentioned in the *sūtra*.
5. Recitation of Guanshiyin's tenfold vow and the Great Compassion Dhāraṇī in the *sūtra*.
6. Prostration, acknowledgement of the origin and activity of sin.
7. Repentance, description, and praise of the way of liberation from sin.

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 544c6–10.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 544c16.

<sup>19</sup> T. XLVI/1916, p. 486b–c, summarized in Kuo Li-ying, *La confession et les actes de contrition dans le bouddhisme chinois du V<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Ph.D. dissertation, Paris 1988, pp. 104–8.

8. Prostration, refuge to the Three Jewels, Invocation of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, final refuge in the Three Jewels.

In this ritual cycle, acts like the burning of incense, the strewing of flowers, and numerous prostrations (*dingli*) before the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas belong to the first category of repentance by actions. The invocation of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and the recitation of the marks and the actions of the thousand-armed Guanyin fall under the second category. But for Zhiyi, just as for Zhili, the third form, or repentance by contemplation of the unborn, is the most important one. It is based on the understanding of emptiness, the understanding of the condition out of which sins arise.

According to Zhiyi, the nature of sin is just as empty as the nature of all that exists: “The sea of karmic hindrances is a product of illusions. Those who want to repent have to contemplate the true nature of the *dharmas*. All sins are like frost and dew which melt under the sun of wisdom.”<sup>20</sup> Although Zhili never explicitly states the nature of sin as being empty, this follows from his emphasis on the emptiness of all *dharmas*. The understanding of emptiness is the most efficient tool of repentance, the gateway to liberation from karmic existence. How is this understanding brought about? In this text, insight into emptiness is not merely dependent upon the individual’s mental faculty, but ensured by the tenfold vow given in the text:

If there are monks and nuns ... who wish to recite and hold this *dhāraṇī*, and to bring forth a heart of great compassion for all beings, they should first follow me in making these vows:

- Namu Guanshiyin, may I quickly know all *dharmas*
- Namu Guanshiyin, may I quickly attain the wisdom eye
- Namu Guanshiyin, may I quickly save all beings
- Namu Guanshiyin, may I soon attain good skill in means
- Namu Guanshiyin, may I quickly board the boat of *prajñā*
- Namu Guanshiyin, may I soon escape from the sea of suffering
- Namu Guanshiyin, may I attain morality, *samādhi*, and the way
- Namu Guanshiyin, may I soon ascend the mountain of *nirvāṇa*
- Namu Guanshiyin, may I quickly dwell in the unconditioned
- Namu Guanshiyin, may I quickly unite with the Dharmakāya.<sup>21</sup>

This vow is followed by another sixfold vow to end all suffering of the hell-dwellers, hungry ghosts, and animal existences. Before the actual recitation of the *dhāraṇī*, Guanyin confirms in another vow that she will not realize true enlightenment if one of the beings who recite the *dhāraṇī* should ever

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<sup>20</sup> T. 1916, p. 486a17–19, quoted from the *Foshuo guan puxian pusa xingfa jing*, T. ix/277, p. 393b10–12.

<sup>21</sup> ZZ. 74, 1480, p. 543b24–543c8.

fall into the three evil paths of existence; not be reborn in a Buddha Land; or not attain unlimited *samādhis* and everything she or he wishes for, including the obtaining of fifteen kinds of good birth and the avoiding of fifteen kinds of evil death. In the repentance ritual, the vow and the *dhāraṇī* of the *Nīlakaṇṭha-sūtra* are the conditions for insight into the origin of sin and the way of liberation.

In this first part, we have looked into the nature of sin, which is ignorance of emptiness. Now, as a result of the recitation of the vow and the *dhāraṇī*, repentance of the insight category is possible. The text enhances this form of repentance by regularly contrasting the former state of sin with the newly gained state of awareness. While from time immemorable up to this point, we have been ignorant about the empty and quiet nature of all *dharma*s, “we now recognize emptiness and quiescence.”<sup>22</sup> While formerly we were deluded into thinking that the law of cause and effect is non-existent, “we today firmly believe in the law of cause and effect. We develop a deep sense of shame, humility, and fear. We repent and abolish the constant mind of evil. We bring forth the mind of wisdom, give up evil and do good . . . .”<sup>23</sup> While, due to our ignorance, we did not know the wonderful principle of emancipation, “we, because we know it today, take refuge in Guanshiyin, repent and ask for her protection, for the sake of all sins and all living beings, so that all sins may be eradicated.”<sup>24</sup> While, as a result of the perversion of the fundamental *dharma* of equality and of grave sin, we have been suffering in the three evil paths of existence,

...today we have discovered the practice, namely: the perfect Great Compassion Dhāraṇī, which can remove all sinful hindrances. That is why we keep and recite it today and take our refuge in the Buddhas of the ten directions and in Guanshiyin. We develop the mind of wisdom and carry out the teaching of the *dhāraṇī*. Before all living beings, we confess our sins.<sup>25</sup>

Note again how the text opposes the former state of sinful ignorance with the insight gained “today” and “now”. Repentance in this text is not the condition for insight, but its result. We repent our sins because we have realized the law of *karma* and because we have recognized the principle of emancipation, not the other way round.

(3) At this point, we want to address the third question, about the two different levels of understanding of the repentance process. Since the central part of the ritual, prepared for by the strewing of flowers, offering of incense and numerous prostrations, consists of the tenfold invocation of Guanshiyin,

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 544c20.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 544c15–17.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p. 544c1–3.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 544c6–10.

the recitation of the vow and of the *dhāraṇī*, one has to reflect on the role of Guanshiyin in the process.

There are two ways of understanding, which may be labelled the “exterior” and the “interior” way respectively. As numerous tales about the miraculous working of Guanyin amply show, Guanyin in popular piety is a miracle worker who intervenes on behalf of suffering beings from “outside”. The invocation, “Namu Guanshiyin Pusa”, as already taught in the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra*, is a pious device for attracting Guanyin’s attention and mercy. According to this understanding, Guanyin saves from sinful karmic existence not only those who actually participate in the repentance ritual, but also those deceased relatives for whose sake the ritual is most commonly performed.

The “exterior” understanding of Guanyin as a miracle worker is contrasted by the “interior” understanding of Guanyin as “self-nature”. It is this understanding that Zhili expresses in his commentary on the tenfold invocation of Guanyin in the text.<sup>26</sup> He states,

Now, we have to understand that the Great Compassionate Guanshiyin is our original nature. Because we want to return to our origin now, we invoke the origin and make the vow. This is why the vow is the powerful putting into practice of our original nature.<sup>27</sup>

This understanding of Guanyin as “self-nature” may be prevalent among a circle of highly educated Buddhists. However, for those familiar with popular Guanyin devotion in China and Japan there is no doubt that for most people Guanyin is a miraculous saviour, a compassionate being other than ordinary human beings tied up in sinful karmic existence. Let us now turn to this popular understanding of Guanyin, which is revealed in a popular tale about the repentance ritual as the only means of saving suffering ancestors from hell.

### **3. The Repentance Ritual Against the Backdrop of Confucian Ancestor Worship, Filial Piety, and the Buddhist Belief in Transmigration**

The author of a work entitled, *Guanyin ci liji* [The Collection of Tales about the Loving Kindness of Guanyin, Compiled in the Qing Dynasty],<sup>28</sup> explains in a postscript his gratitude to Guanyin as the motivating force behind his work. In this postscript he gives a autobiographical account about how the performance of the repentance ritual saved his parents from hell and granted them rebirth in the Pure Land. Let us now look at this account.

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<sup>26</sup> For his analysis, see T. 1950, p. 974c1–8.

<sup>27</sup> T. 1950, p. 974c9–16.

<sup>28</sup> ZZ. 88, 1644, pp. 75b–106b (75B–106B). The author is Hongzan (1610–80), the work is dated AD 1668.

Hongzan begins his account with the death of his parents, who died when he was twenty-nine years old. As a matter of filial duty towards his parents he tried different methods to help their lot in the other world: renunciation of meat, fish, and vegetables with a strong smell, as well as pious reading of scriptures during the three-year mourning period. Dissatisfied with these efforts, he decided to become a hermit in the wilderness and to carry out daily religious duties “in order to profit the spirits of the ancestors in hell”. During the Yulanben festival for deceased souls he made all the necessary offerings, but still felt restless and ashamed about his weak efforts.

Finally Hongzan invited an artist to paint an image of the thousand-armed Guanyin and ordered a group of monks to perform the repentance ritual for twenty-one days. At the end of that period the following happened:

I suddenly noticed that the body of Guanyin emitted a golden light. The red and the blue lotus flower in his hands emitted a white light. Some of the monks and laypeople present also saw this and testified to this unusual appearance. At the bottom of my heart I felt happy and comforted. I trusted firmly that the compassionate power of Guanyin would save the souls of my ancestors in the other world. We all performed the ritual in front of the statue. The white light continued to flow from it. Everybody who saw it was happy and developed pure faith.<sup>29</sup>

According to the *Nīlakaṇṭha-sūtra*, the function of the blue lotus flower is “for rebirth in the Pure Land”, and the red lotus flower is “for coming together with all the Buddhas of the ten directions”.<sup>30</sup>

In this tale we have all the elements that make the ritual attractive for popular piety: while for educated monks and laymen, the ritual may lead to a deeper grasp of emptiness, the “average” believer participating in the ritual is most certainly not motivated by the search for insight, but by (1) the demands of filial duty towards the deceased and (2) by fear of the law of cause and effect, which leads to rebirth in a possibly less fortunate existence. (3) The performance of the ritual serves as a communal act, in which the sins of the living and of the dead are expiated at the same time. In this act, the harmony between the world of the living and the dead is established anew, and the threat of possibly harmful acts by unappeased souls is eliminated.

This harmony is central to the Chinese way of thinking, and it is Guanyin who is well equipped to establish it by her two “unsurpassed merits”, described in the *Sūraṃgama-sūtra*:

The first (consists of) participating in the deep mind of enlightenment of all the Buddhas of the ten directions above, and the same

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 106b.

<sup>30</sup> T. xx/1060, p. 111a20–22.



compassionate power as the Tathāgata. The second [consists in] participating with all the living beings of the six realms of existence in the ten directions here below, and in sharing with them the same plea for compassion”.<sup>31</sup>

This same relationship is expressed in the short formula of the *Hṛdaya-sūtra*, the text which, like the Great Compassion Dhāraṇī, is called the “Mantra of Guanyin”. The *Heart Sūtra* often figures as an introduction to the *Nīlakaṇṭha-sūtra* in Taiwanese editions of the text, and we have seen how Zhijue used to recite it together with the Great Compassion Dhāraṇī for the repentance of sins. The short formula of the *Hṛdaya-sūtra* contains the message that is ultimately the message of the repentance ritual as well as of all Mahāyāna texts:

The Bodhisattva Guanyin, when practising the deep Prajñāpāramitā, saw that the five factors of existence are all empty and overcame all suffering. Śāriputra, form is not different from emptiness. Emptiness is not different from form. Emptiness is form and form is emptiness.<sup>32</sup>

### List of Characters

<i>Chūgoku no bukkyō girei</i>	中國の佛教儀禮
<i>Dabei qiqing</i>	大悲啓請
dingli	頂禮
<i>Fahua chanfa</i>	法華懺法
guanwusheng chanhui	觀無生懺悔
guanxiang chanhui	觀相懺悔
Guanyin	觀音
<i>Guanyin zilin ji</i>	觀音慈林集
Hongzan	弘讚
<i>Huashan Lüshi tudi</i>	華山律師諱體
liugen	六根
Kamata Shigeo	鎌田茂男
Miaoshan	妙山
Namu guanshiyin pusa	南無觀世音菩薩
<i>Qianshou qianyan guanshiyin pusa</i>	手千眼觀世音菩薩
<i>guang da yuanman wuai</i>	廣大圓滿無礙
<i>dabeixin tuoluoni jing</i>	大悲心陀羅尼經
<i>Qianshou qianyan dabei xinzhou xingfa</i>	千手千眼大悲心咒行法

<sup>31</sup> T. XIX /945, p. 128b20-23.

<sup>32</sup> T. VIII/251, p. 848c6-8 (Xuanzang’s translation).

Shuxian

*Siming zunzhi jiao xing lu*

Tiantai

Zhijue

*Zhiue chanshi zixing lu*

Zhili

Zhiyi

zuofa chanhui

寂暹

四明尊者教行錄

天台

智覺

智覺禪師自行錄

知禮

智顓

坐法懺悔

