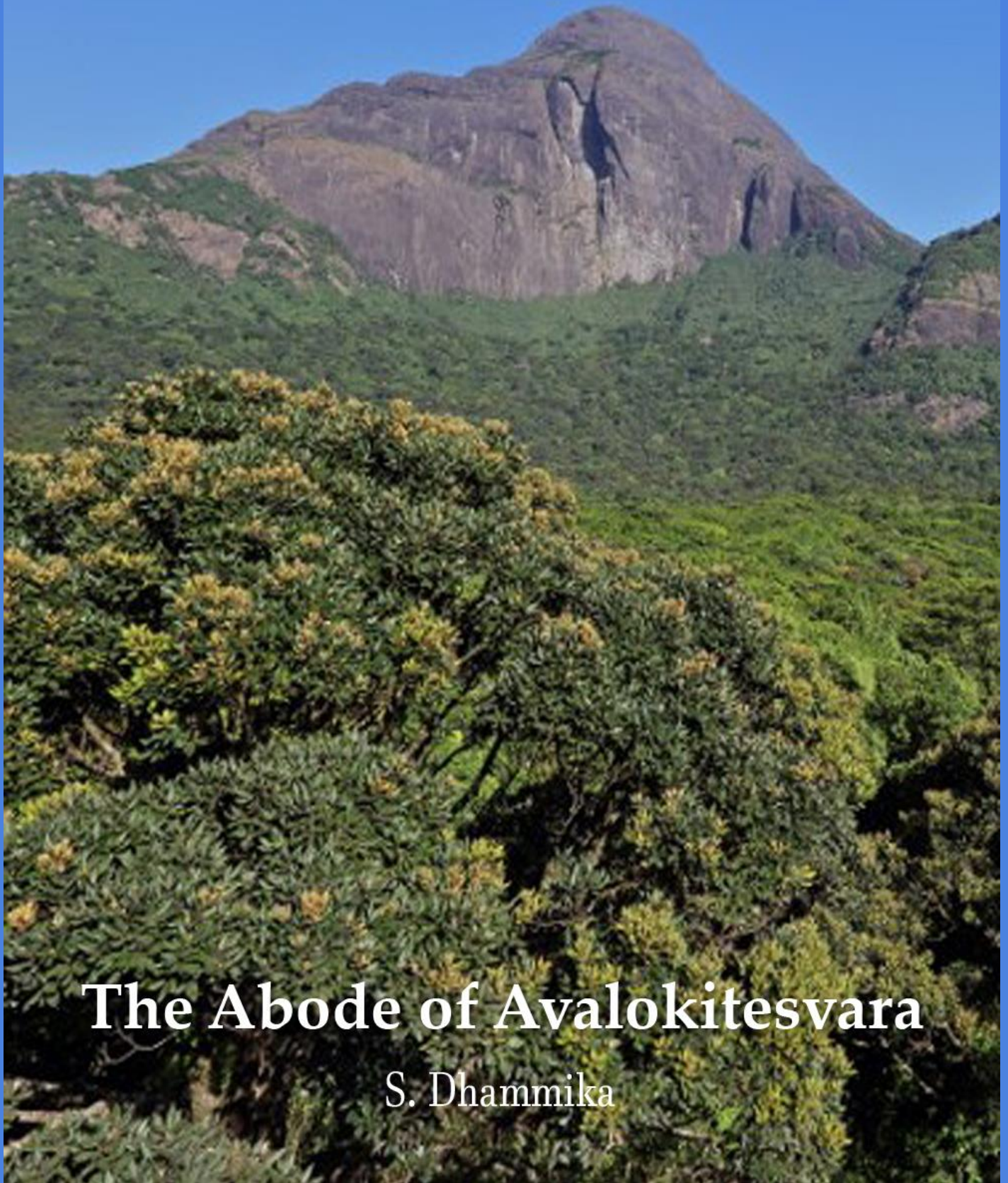


Mount Potala



The Abode of Avalokitesvara

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by S. Dhammika

After the Buddha himself, the most revered and universally popular figure in Buddhism is Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. Since his appearance in about the first century BCE this beloved bodhisattva has been worshipped with almost unparalleled fervor by the followers of all schools of Buddhism. Though accessible through prayer and supplication to anyone anywhere, Avalokitesvara was believed to abide on a mountain in a remote part of India where, from its lofty and cloud-decked heights, he could be as his name suggests, “the regarder of the cries of the world”. This mountain was called Potala or sometimes Potalaka. It seems that from about the first century CE pilgrims began visiting Potala although records are very scant. The main entr'eport for Potala for pilgrims coming by sea was Mulavansa where there was a great temple to Avalokitesvara. Those sailing between the east and west coasts of India would stop there to pray for a safe voyage thus starting a special bond between Avalokitesvara and seafarers that has lasted up to the present day. The statue enshrined in the Mulavansa temple was

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believed to be Avalokitesvara's exact likeness. Its fame can be judged by the fact that a copy of it has been found in the ruins of a Buddhist temple in northern Pakistan. Apparently there was another such statue on the very top of the mountain. The famous Tantric *siddhas* Buddhanta and Buddhaguhya are said to have seen this statue when they went to Potala.



Mt. Potala, now called Potikai.

When the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang was in Nalanda in the 7th century he met a brahmin who had made a vow to worship this statue, a vow he had been able to fulfil. The Mahayanist poet and philosopher Candragomin went to Potala by ship and is said to have spent the last years of his life there. He wrote his most famous work, the *Sisyaleaka*, while there and gave it to some merchants to pass to his disciples in north India. Both of the great Tamil Buddhist epics, the *Manimekalai* and the *Cilappatikanam*, make references to

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Mount Potala. The first mentions Kayacantikai and Gandharvas coming on pilgrimage to Potala from north India while the second describes a character named Matalan circumambulating the mountain.



Avalokitesvara in a cave on Mt. Potala, India, 8th century.

Of course to worship Avalokitesvara was the main reason to go to Potala but some went for quite different reasons. For example, the *upasaka*

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Santivarman, whose dates are difficult to determine, made three trips to Potala and although the account of his journeys is filled with miracles it seems to be based on fact. His first journey was purely for worshipping Avalokitesvara and interestingly he is said to have made his way with the help of a guide book. Another visit was made at the request of the monks at Varanasi who wanted him to ask Avalokitesvara about difficulties in a particular text. On another occasion he was sent by King Subhasara to beseech the bodhisattva to free his realm from a plague.

Xuanzang travelled through south India in the 7th century and although he was unable to visit Potala himself he left this description of it based on what others had told him. "To the east of the Malaya Mountains is Mount Potala. The passes on the mountain are very dangerous; its sides are precipitous and its valleys rugged. On the top of the mountain is a lake; its waters are as clear as a mirror. From a grotto precedes a great river which encircles the mountain twenty times as it flows down to the southern sea. By the side of the lake is a rock palace of the gods. Here Avalokitesvara in coming and going takes his abode. Those who strongly desire to see the bodhisattva do not regard their lives, but fording the streams, climb the mountain forgetful of its difficulties and dangers. Of those who make the attempt there are very few who reach the summit. But even those who dwell below the mountain, if they earnestly pray and beg to behold the god, sometimes he appears as Isvara, sometimes under the form of a yogi, and addresses them with benevolent words and then they obtain their wishes

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according to their desires.” This description is clearly a blend of fact and fiction, a trend concerning Potala that increased as time went by. Gradually the sacred mountain came to be seen as a kind of magical fairy land, a paradise where rare medical herbs and exquisite flowers grew, where mythological animals frolicked and where those blessed enough to be reborn in Avalokitesvara’s presence abided in bliss. The *Aryatarabhattacharitanamashtottarasatakastotra*, the celebrated hymn to Avalokitesvara’s consort Tara, describes the mountain like this;

The beautiful and delightful Potalaka is resplendent with various minerals,
Covered with manifold trees and creepers, resounding with the sound of
many birds,

And with murmur of waterfalls, thronged with wild beasts of many kinds;
Many species of flowers grow everywhere,

And it is furnished with many sweet fruits; one hears there the humming of the
bees and the sweet song of the Kinnaras; Throngs of elephants,

Frequented by hosts of accomplished Holders of the mystical lore,
Gandharvas and sages free from passions.

Avalokitesvara was easily worshipped at numerous other places. His main shrine in north India was at Parvati Hill to the north east of Rajagaha where a wonder-working statue of him was enshrined in a temple which had been built by the king of Sri Lanka. Xuanzang had visited this temple and been overwhelmed by its magnificence. Although Potala was not that far from Sri

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Lanka, Sinhalese Buddhists found it easier to go to the great shrine on the hill at Tiriya on the north-east coast of the island.



The abode of the Bodhisattva Manjusri was called the Five Peaked Mountain and is clearly visible from Mt. Potala. The Chinese identify it with Wu Tai Shan in Shanxi Province.

In a strange twist proving that faith can quite literally move mountains, Chinese Buddhists came to believe that Potala was in their own country. A rocky island now called Putuo Shan off the coast of Zhejiang Province is popularly believed to be the real Potala and is now considered one of the four sacred mountains of Chinese Buddhism. In 1361 Sheng Hsi-ming wrote that while on pilgrimage at Wu Tai Shan he had met a Tibetan who had told him that an Indian book titled *A Travel Account Of Mount Potala* gave details of how to get there and made it clear that the sacred

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mountain was in south India. This information caused Sheng to doubt everything he had previously believed about Avalokitesvara. His fellow Buddhists were not troubled by such doubts though. Since the 10th century when this island first came to be identified with Potala, Chinese Buddhists have flocked there in their millions and have often reported encounters with the bodhisattva. Interestingly, Mt. Potala is not the only sacred mountain the Chinese have 'transported to their own country. The abode of the Bodhisattva Manjusri was called the Five-peaked Mountain and is actually clearly visible from Mt. Potala. The Chinese identify it with Wu Tai Shan in Shanxi Province. Since the 15th century the Dalai Lamas of Tibet have been looked upon as incarnations of Avalokitesvara and appropriately enough their residence, called the Potala Palace, is on a steep-sided hill.

From perhaps about the 9th century onwards some of the great Tantric *siddhas* claimed to have visited Potala, usually to receive teachings directly from Avalokitesvara. However, by that time the sacred mountain's geographical reality was no longer widely understood and most such journeys must have taken place in the imagination only. Like Sudhana's pilgrimage as described in the *Gandhavyahu*, claiming to have gone to Potala became a metaphor for spiritual illumination or even an attempt to vest one's own ideas with unimpeachable authority. Gradually the paths up the mountain and the shrines on it were absorbed into the jungle while Avalokitesvara himself was absorbed into Siva. A Tantric work called the

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Potalakagamanamargapattribika, 'The Pamphlet for Going on the Way to Potala', claims to be an itinerary to the sacred mountain.



The Potala Palace, Lhasa, Tibet

Some of the places it says one must pass through to get there, like Dhanyakataka, Malaya, Udumbaravarna are real and identifiable while many of the others appear to be purely mythical. In 1300 the Tibetan teacher Man-luns-po went to Bodh Gaya and made a vow in front of the Mahabodhi Image to neither to eat or drink until the statue spoke to him. After eighteen days the statue did speak saying, "Oh son of noble family! Proceed to Mount Potala and there practice in the manner of bodhisattvas in the presence of Avalokiteavara." The account of Man-luns-po's subsequent journey says he went to Sri Dhanyakataka Caitya (Amaravati in southeastern Andhra

Pradesh), then in the guise of a yogi crossed the sea and finally arrived at his destination. These details are sufficient to suggest that Man-luns-po did actually go to Potala and if this is correct, he must be the last pilgrim known to have done so.

The origins of the name Potala are obscure. Shu Hikosoka has very plausibly suggested that it may be a Sanskritization of the Tamil *potiy + il*, meaning “the place of Buddhists”, *potiy* being the Tamil of *bodhi*. In ancient times *potiyil* was the common Tamil word for a Buddhist temple or shrine. Although Potala’s whereabouts is almost completely unknown to contemporary Buddhists, the mountain has never actually been “lost”. It seems rather that, at least for the last thousand years, Buddhists have not bothered about its location. Called Potiyil in ancient Tamil literature and Potikai today, the sacred mountain is situated on the border between the south Indian states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu and at 2726 meters is the highest peak in the Tinevelly Range. It was at the end of the 19th century that the epigraphist Hultzsch first suggested that Potikai might be Avalokaesvara’s abode, an idea more or less confirmed by Prof. K.A.N Sastri in 1930. According to a legend going back to at least the 10th century, it was Avalokitesvara who revealed the Tamil language to its first human teacher the sage Akattiyam, known in Sanskrit as Agastiya. Akattiyam is still worshiped at Potikai and as he is likely to have had his revelation from the bodhisattva at Mount Potala, this is further confirmation that the two names refer to the same place.

In 2000 I set out to visit Mount Potala and hopefully to climb to the top. On the way there by train someone stole the bag containing all my maps, notes and travel details which meant that had to rely on my memory and on information gleaned from the locals. I arrived at the small town of Shencotta thinking that this would be the easiest approach to the mountain. Beyond the town very high emerald green mountains, some with peaks obscured by clouds loomed up beyond the town. As it happened the station master was on the platform when I alighted, saw that I was a monk and immediately asked if he could help me. Assuming that he probably knew nothing about Avalokitesvara or even the name Potala I told him that I wanted to visit Agastiya's mountain. He was astonished that I had even heard of the place, told me that he was a devotee of Agastiya and offered to take me to the foot of the mountain on his motorbike. On the way there he told me that he knew the Brahmin of the temple half way up the mountain and that he would write him a note asking him to look after me and let me stay in Agastiya's cave. When we got to the foot of the mountain the station master showed me the path, bid me good luck and sped off back to his duties. I ascended through forest full of monkeys, butterflies and birds and crossed bubbling streams of pure water. This must be amongst the few areas of pristine forest still left in India.

Eventually I got to the temple, gave the priest the note and he led me further up the mountain to Agastiya's cave which is situated besides a beautiful waterfall. He said several things to me but knowing no Tamil I

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couldn't understand any of it. Towards evening an old swami from another cave brought me some candles and a tin of hot tea. The Brahmin must have asked him to do this. During my numerous trips to India have rarely been treated with such kindness. I felt that Avalokitesvara was watching over me. I spent the next day resting and trying to find out how to get up the mountain but the several swamis I spoke to just smiled and pointed upwards. Early next morning I set off to climb Mount Potala. The jungle was so thick that I could see no peak but I assumed that if I just kept climbing sooner or later I would be able to find it. But it was not to be. When I got above the tree line I saw that there were several peaks and I had no way of knowing which was the one was Potala. Further, it was clear that I was neither dressed, provisioned or informed adequately for what would obviously be a long strenuous climb.

As my time was limited I reluctantly decided to give up and try some time in the future. I was a little disappointed that the bodhisattva seemed to have abandoned me. When I got home and consulted my maps, I discovered that I had been in the wrong place altogether and that the usual approach was on its other side of the mountain, some 40 miles away. I also found out that I had been heading into one of south India's main tiger reserves so perhaps Avalokitesvara had been taking care of me after all. Sometime in the future I will ascend Potala, the abode of Avalokitesvara. Later I gave all my travel information and notes to a friend who was also interested in visiting Mount Potala. He got much closer than I but was finally stopped by rain and

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forest rangers who said that he needed permission to climb the mountain which is now part of a national.

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