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Kwanseum

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My name is Linda Heuman and I am a visiting scholar in the Department of Religious Studies at Brown University. I am a journalist and also a Buddhist practitioner. Today we are viewing *Kwanseum*.

This is a form that is meant to embody compassion. For somebody who is a Buddhist practitioner, compassion is one of the most sublime states of mind that I could imagine—the wish for others to have happiness and to be free of suffering—and what I see in this form is the embodiment of that state of mind.

The shape of the form is enormously sort of flowing and graceful, the eyes especially. They don't seem to focus on a particular point; they're open and all-encompassing in a way that a heart of compassion is. It's taking in everything and everyone, all beings; and they're also very kind.

It makes me think of the devotional context in which this image was probably originally created and interacted with. With art that is speaking to people who are relating to it devotionally, its purpose is inspirational and is to provide an uplift for the mind—a particular kind of uplift.

Why would this be relevant to a viewer today, when it is an object that was created long ago and far away and in a culture very different from ours? As a Buddhist, the way that I would answer that is that the expressions of Buddhism have changed over time and throughout cultures, the basic ideas, inspirations, motivations are timeless, and they're really about the capacity of the human heart and the capacity of the human mind, aspirations that I don't think are necessarily culturally or historically bound, although their expressions certainly are.