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The Historical Spectrum of the Bodhisattva Concept and Career¹

Abstract

This paper offers a modest contribution towards the historical and doctrinal evolution of the Bodhisattva concept and career. Initially the term Bodhisattva occurs in a few passages of the Pali canon, in which the Buddha uses it with reference to himself prior to his enlightenment. After the Buddha's demise the early Buddhist schools debated the character of the Bodhisattva, but without formulating a coherent theory. Then eventually certain stories were invented, and the term Bodhisattva became also applied to the Buddha's previous lives. Then with the emergence of the Mahayana, the concept of Bodhisattva was reinterpreted and presented as a universal ideal to be followed by all Mahayana adepts. While in the Theravada the term is applied exclusively to the Buddha's previous existences, in the Mahayana it is applied not only to the Buddha's existences prior to his enlightenment, but also to all beings who take the Bodhisattva vow in order to gain enlightenment and strive for the welfare of all sentient beings.

The Bodhisattva concept is present and treated in all periods of Indian Buddhism, but it is not understood or interpreted in the same way by all Buddhist traditions in India and beyond. During the period of early Buddhism, some of the early Buddhist schools² engaged

¹ This article represents a modified version of my earlier article which was first published, including six illustrations, in *The Middle Way*, 75.2, 2000, 95–106.

² The terms early Buddhism and early Buddhist schools are used here with reference to the Buddhist tradition, which stems directly from the historical Buddha, and which evolved prior to the emergence of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and then continued to coexist with it.

Right from the early period, Buddhism recognised three paths to deliverance: Śrāvaka(yāna), Pratyeka Buddha(yāna), and the Saṃyak Saṃbuddha(yāna). The Mahāyāna adepts clustered the first two ideals together under the name of Śrāvakayāna or Hinayāna, and adopted the third one as their ideal.

in doctrinal speculations and controversies about the status of the Bodhisattva, and later on there eventually became established two major interpretations of the Bodhisattva concept: one represented by the early schools, and one represented by the Mahāyāna schools. In fact, the variant interpretations of the Bodhisattva's identity and career constitute one of the fundamental disagreements between the early schools and Mahāyāna Buddhism. In contemporary Buddhism these disagreements continue to persist and constitute one of the major divisions between the Theravāda tradition of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia and the Mahāyāna traditions of Tibet, China, and Japan.

The major stages in the development of the Bodhisattva concept, from the time of its appearance in early Buddhism to the time of becoming a universal ideal in Mahāyāna Buddhism, can be demarcated or outlined with some confidence provided that one is aware of certain lacunae in our knowledge of three crucial factors. First, the precise historical chronology of specific ideas advanced in different sources is somewhat uncertain and complex, because of difficulties involved in dating Buddhist texts and historical events. Second, certain ideas formulated about the Bodhisattva in later texts were imputed retrospectively and superimposed on the more primitive form of the Bodhisattva concept. Third, the historical and doctrinal factors, which induced and led to the emergence of Mahāyāna Buddhism as such and its formulation of the Bodhisattva ideal, remain largely unknown or obscure. Thus, for instance, we cannot locate the precise origin of the Bodhisattva concept, and we do not possess the vital information on the intellectual and social milieu in which the Bodhisattva ideal of Mahāyāna Buddhism was formulated. In addition, it is also important to remember that the various ideas and formulations about the Bodhisattva do not readily blend together into one historically and conceptually coherent image. As we shall see, the content and structure of the Bodhisattva ideal and career did not evolve in neatly cut monolithic blocks that were eventually fitted together into a masterly designed edifice. On the contrary, as Buddhist history progressed, the doctrinal speculations about the Bodhisattva's identity and career developed in different directions to the extent that the Bodhisattva's identity and role, even in its mature Mahāyāna version, contains certain conflicting elements.

The term Bodhisattva

Since the term Bodhisattva does not occur in the Vedic texts, the early Hindu or Jaina literature, it is generally assumed that it is of Buddhist origin. Etymologically the term is given different interpretations such as a being (*sattva*) whose essence is enlightenment (*bodhi*), or a being destined to become enlightened (Buddha-to-be). According to some Buddhist masters in India, the term Bodhisattva is a compound of two terms which constitute the two principal goals of the Bodhisattva career, namely the attainment of enlightenment (*bodhi*) and the welfare of living beings (*sattva*). The emphasis is not so much on the person pursuing the Bodhisattva career, but rather on the principal aims of the career itself.

In early Buddhism, the term Bodhisattva is very much linked with the person of Śākyamuni Buddha. Depending on the sources, it refers either to his last life on earth up to the time of his enlightenment, or to all his previous lives. In Mahāyāna Buddhism the above use of the term with reference to Śākyamuni is retained, but at the same time it is reworked and reformulated into a universal ideal, which is not restricted exclusively to the past lives of the Buddha, but reoriented into a practical proposition to be embarked on now or in the future.

Two currents of Buddhist doctrines

Within the context of human history, the historical Buddha is unique as a charismatic teacher and spiritual leader, who was born once and lived one single life. Within the context of the basic Buddhist doctrines and the notion of karma, the Buddha, like all living beings, is believed to have experienced many lives before reaching the state of enlightenment. However, when one takes a closer look at the various sources dealing with the Buddha's progressive steps leading to his enlightenment, one can detect two doctrinal orientations which postulate that Siddhārtha approached the tree of enlightenment through two different routes, and in two different capacities: one route trodden as an ordinary but exceptional human being, and one route traversed as a Bodhisattva.

The first doctrinal orientation, which is tangibly present but not pronouncedly articulated or consistently affirmed, is that the Buddha attained enlightenment as a man in one single lifetime, and without any prior career as a Bodhisattva. It is evident in the early texts that from the time of his birth to the night of his enlightenment, he was not aware of his previous lives as a Bodhisattva or of his immediate destiny. Having become dissatisfied with his life as a prince, he left his home and family and became a mendicant. For six years he sought and struggled to find the truth through studying with several teachers and by practising austerities and meditation. When he finally gained the state of enlightenment, he asserted to have discovered the Dharma and destroyed the bonds of karma. He also declared that his discovery of the Dharma was achieved with no aid from other people or any transcendent agency. Some sources do say that at the time of his enlightenment the Buddha perceived his previous lives and the coming and passing away of other living beings. However, they do not state or insinuate that through such visions he understood his progress to enlightenment as a Bodhisattva. The purpose of referring to such visions is to indicate that he understood the complex workings of karma. Since the concept, and in particular the career of the Bodhisattva, are a back-formation, it is appropriate to postulate that initially he did not make any explicit connections between his attainment of buddhahood and his previous lives as a Bodhisattva. The fact that the Dharma was discovered under the *bodhi* tree clearly suggests that the Buddha followed a course of practices, which were not based on, at least explicitly, or motivated by the very Dharma he discovered and subsequently taught to his followers.

In terms of doctrine and practice, the earliest ideal taught by the Buddha was not that of a Bodhisattva, but that of an *arhat*, whose aim it was to gain deliverance from the toils and suffering of karmic existences through extinguishing moral defilements and ignorance. The Buddha taught the Dharma and his followers applied it in their lives in order to free themselves from *saṃsāra*. When the Buddha passed away, he is said to have disappeared like an extinguished flame, and his disciples were left to take care of their own destinies by relying on the Dharma. The teachings on karma as a universal law binding all living beings to rebirth is prominent in early Buddhism, and it does not allow any exceptions, including the Buddha himself up to the time of his enlightenment.

The second doctrinal orientation, which eventually became dominant, is based on a limited number of early texts, which speak of the Buddha's last life, or all his previous lives as a Bodhisattva. Although such texts ostensibly continue to describe the Buddha's past existences as results of karmic retribution, at the same time they overshadow and permeate them with a notion of "prophetic" or "predestined" progress towards buddhahood. In other words, the Buddha's previous lives are not portrayed or treated as merely a blind and haphazard voyage in the ocean of karmic rebirths, but as motivated steps leading towards enlightenment. This is clearly evident in the available biographies of the Buddha, which are formulated on the pattern of a Bodhisattva, and project the Buddha's person as unique and superior to all other living beings.

The significance of distinguishing the above two currents of doctrinal orientations rests on the evidence, which discloses a certain tension in Buddhist texts between the Buddha as a human being and as a Buddha or Bodhisattva. It is in fact a tension between his mundane and transcendent dimensions that eventually split early Buddhism into two major branches: the Sthavira schools which placed more stress on the Buddha's mundane character, and the Mahāsāṅghika schools which stressed his transcendent character. Although the early schools differ on this fundamental issue, the Buddha's identity in all sources and traditions is never drastically demarcated exclusively as either human or transcendent. It is so because these two tendencies are frequently mingled together, and also because all traditions portray the Buddha as unique and endowed with bodily and moral attributes which set him apart from all other beings.

Two early prototypes of the Bodhisattva career

The variable application of the term Bodhisattva either to the Buddha's last or previous lives eventually brought about the formation of two distinct patterns of the Bodhisattva career. The first one, based on the events of his last life, became formulated into a unique series of events, which were eventually perceived as true and common to all the Buddhas. The second one, based on the Buddha's previous lives, became formulated into a structured path, which evolved over a long period of rebirths and incorporated certain specific practices. It is this second pattern that provided an inspiration for the Mahāyāna formulation of the Bodhisattva ideal.

The first of the above two patterns provided a basic scheme for the appearance of all Buddhas in this world. Although initially, no doubt, the Buddha's last life, in terms of how he lived and what he did, was particular to him alone, fairly soon his life events were integrated into a biographical model or template common to all the Buddhas. In the *Mahāpadāna-sutta* of the *Dīghanikāya*, the Buddha tells his disciples about six previous Buddhas, and recounts the major life events of the Buddha Vipāśyin as a Bodhisattva. The narrative starts with the descent from the Tuṣita abode into his mother's womb, and concludes with his enlightenment and the proclamation of the Dharma. After recounting each event, the Buddha states that it is a universal rule or norm (*dharmatā*) that such an event inevitably takes place. This fixed sequence of life events recounted with reference to the Buddha Vipāśyin was eventually incorporated, with some modifications, into Śākyamuni's biographies, and treated as a universal or cosmic scheme common to all the Buddhas. Such series of life events shared by all the Buddhas is further reinforced in other sources such as the *Buddhavaṃsa*, which basically tabulates the lives of twenty five Buddhas from Dīpaṅkara to Gotama. All their life events follow the same pattern except for such differences as their personal names, the lengths of their life-spans, the names of their birth places, parents, disciples, and so forth. The significant thing about this fixed pattern of life events is that it merges the events lived as a Bodhisattva and as a Buddha. The events starting with the descent from the Tuṣita abode and concluding with the approach to the *bodhi* tree belong to the Bodhisattva phase, and the events from the moment of gaining enlightenment to passing into *parinirvāṇa* belong to the Buddha phase. While the *Mahāpadāna* recounts Vipāśyin's life up to the proclamation of the Dharma, the *Buddhavaṃsa* carries the narratives of the past Buddhas up to the time of their *nirvāṇa*. It is not clearly stated in the early canonical texts, but it is deducible that in his last life the Bodhisattva is free from karma. It is so because of the inevitable fixity (*dharmatā*) of this scheme as such. In the Mahāyāna texts, the appearance of Buddhas in the world is said to consist of twelve events, which are referred to as the twelve deeds of the Buddhas (*dvādaśakāra*). They start with the descent from the Tuṣita abode and conclude with *parinirvāṇa*. These twelve deeds or events are not interpreted as stages leading to enlightenment but as a routine way of performing the Buddha activities in the world.³ In the *tantras*, one way of amassing merit and benefiting living beings is to enact these twelve deeds in meditational visualisations (*sādhana*).

The second pattern of the Bodhisattva career based on the Buddha's previous lives has absorbed a number of innovations. In the first instance, we have a series of narratives about the Buddha's previous lives, but without suggesting any coherently structured pattern or intentional engagement as a Bodhisattva. The various stories of his previous lives, as for instance compiled in the *Jātaka*, served as elevating narratives, which portrayed the Bodhisattva as an extraordinary being. However, gradually the Buddha's previous lives were framed into a programmed pattern, which included the following major innovations:

³ For a brief discussion of the twelve deeds and a translation of their eulogy, see my "Eulogy of the Twelve Deeds of the Buddha", *The Buddhist Forum*, Volume VI, (Tring, The Institute of Buddhist Studies), 2001, 31–36.

an initial aspiration to become a Buddha, a prophecy, a specified length of the career, and certain specific practices.

Some late additions to the Pāli canon, such as the *Buddhavaṃsa*, and the Sanskrit *Mahāvastu*, have a narrative about a remotely past life of the Buddha, which provided a foundation for innovations. In that particular life, he was a rich *brāhmaṇa* called Sumedha⁴ who left the world and became an ascetic. He met the Buddha Dīpaṅkara and enunciated before him an intense aspiration to become a Buddha, and received from Dīpaṅkara a prophetic confirmation of his buddhahood in a distant future. This narrative constitutes a major innovation, which transforms and endows the Bodhisattva career with a sense of purpose and destiny. Although the Buddha's past lives continue to be viewed as having evolved due to his karma, at the same time the texts assert that he followed a specific course of karmic rebirths for a clearly defined purpose, namely the attainment of buddhahood.

Concerning the length of the Bodhisattva career, the sources say that the career extends over a period of three or more aeons (*asamkhyeya*), plus one hundred supplementary cosmic periods (*kalpa*).⁵ This factor determines the length of the Bodhisattva career and demarcates its commencing and concluding stages in cosmic time and space. Thus, it is not a haphazardly evolved process but a wilfully embarked career on some specific and prophetically marked occasion.

In terms of Bodhisattva training, the texts introduce two major innovations, namely the six or ten perfections (*pāramitā*) and the ten Bodhisattva stages (*bhūmi*). This double innovation progressively led to producing a body of practices structured in an ascending or sequential order, which culminated in the attainment of enlightenment. Thus, while in the earliest sources the term Bodhisattva is divested and free from theoretical and practical elaborations, the later texts imbue the Bodhisattva career with a structured body of practices. In fact, they impute retrospectively into the Bodhisattva career a prior knowledge of Buddhist doctrines and practices, which were to serve as guides on the way to enlightenment. In other words, the Bodhisattva career began to be formulated in conformity with Buddhist teachings, which were discovered and taught by the Buddha himself during his lifetime, or which were formulated after the Buddha's death. This unique progress towards buddhahood as a Bodhisattva is linked with Śākyamuni Buddha in all Buddhist traditions, and it is the only Bodhisattva career doctrinally recognised by

⁴ *Buddhavaṃsa*, chapter II; *Jātaka (Nidānakathā)*, I, 2; the commentary on the *Dhammapada*, I, 83. In the *Mahāvastu*, I, 232, he is called Megha and in the *Dīvyāvadāna*, 247, he is called Sumati.

⁵ The majority of texts speak of three *asamkhyeyas*, but there are also texts which postulate seven and thirty three *asamkhyeyas*. The Pāli commentaries speak of four, eight, and sixteen *asaṅkheyyas* plus one hundred thousand *kappas*. During the hundred supplementary *kalpas*, the Bodhisattva is said to perform the deeds, which perfect the thirty-two bodily marks (*lakṣaṇa*) of a great man (*mahāpuruṣa*).

The *Mahāvastu* and the *Nidānakathā* divide the Buddha's lives into three periods: 1. from the time of Sumedha up to the rebirth in the Tuṣita abode; 2. from the descent from the Tuṣita abode up to the attainment of enlightenment; 3. from the time of enlightenment to the donation of the Jetavana park by the merchant Anāthapiṇḍika in the *Nidānakathā*, and from the time of enlightenment to the earliest conversions and the foundation of the Saṅgha in the *Mahāvastu*.

Theravāda Buddhism. The Pāli tradition, however, does not approve of the Bodhisattva ideal as developed by the Mahāyāna adepts.

The *Jātaka* stories do not emphasise and do not discourse on the Bodhisattva's knowledge or wisdom as it is the case in Mahāyāna sources, but they predominantly portray the Bodhisattva's deeds. The state of enlightenment was certainly the goal, but the actual path leading to it was demonstrated through concrete lives and not through theoretical discourses. The Bodhisattva is shown as a person of deeds who acts wisely in accordance with his existential circumstances. It is only in selected sources, such as the Mahāsāṅghika *Mahāvastu* and the Pāli *Cariyāpiṭaka*, that the Bodhisattva's career began to assume a structured pattern, which included the perfections and the Bodhisattva stages. However, even in those texts the emphasis still remains on concrete lives rather than on theoretical discourses or the practice of meditation.

When one takes a global view of the canonical sources appertaining to early Buddhism, the Bodhisattva concept and career became considerably developed, but not moulded into a tightly structured body of theory and practice. The Bodhisattva ideal and career were not integrated into the early Buddhist theory and practice, but were treated as part of the Buddha's unique career. The Bodhisattva career as such was debated and viewed as something that took place in the past, but not considered as a concrete possibility. In fact, the large number of *jātaka* stories and the relevant speculations remove the Buddha and his Bodhisattva career from earthly realities, and transpose them into the realm of elevating legends detached from tangible history, time or space.

Bodhisattva in the early schools

During the immediate centuries after the Buddha's demise, the Buddhist Saṅgha sustained several internal upheavals in the form of monastic and doctrinal disputes, which decisively contributed to its division into Sthaviras and Mahāsāṅghikas. These two major branches, which jointly amounted to eighteen schools or sects, formulated their doctrinal interpretations which were considerably at variance on a number of important issues. One such issue concerned the nature of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. There is no need to discuss here all the protracted nuances of their controversies, but only those factors, which contributed to a further development of the Bodhisattva concept. Two such issues stand out as landmarks, which transformed the entire landscape of the subsequent doctrinal developments, namely the number of Buddhas existing at the same time, and the identity of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

All the early schools agreed that there can be only one Buddha at a time in one universe, and the majority of the schools formulated their doctrines in relationship to one universe.⁶ However, the Mahāsāṅghikas postulated a concurrent coexistence of more than

⁶ The ancient sources mention more than one universe, but they do not provide any elaborations. See R. Klotzli, *Buddhist Cosmology*, Delhi, 1983, 4.

one universe, and consequently of more than one Buddha. The ancient sources affirm the existence of more than one Buddha, but all such Buddhas were assumed to appear in a sequence and at different cosmic periods (*kalpa*). The Mahāsāṅghika position was that there were many Buddhas abiding concurrently at all times in all of the ten directions of cosmic space.

Concerning the nature of the Buddha, whether as a Bodhisattva or a Buddha, the Sarvāstivāda and other Sthavira schools recognised his uniqueness and special character, but at the same time, they affirmed his human qualities. They maintained that the Buddha's body in his last life, however perfect, was a direct result of his karma's maturation. The Mahāsāṅghikas set forth a distinctly different view and asserted that when Buddhas appear on earth, they are not really human beings, but supramundane or transcendent beings in human guises, yet entirely free from all human limitations. In other words, they are apparitions and not real beings born due to karma's retribution. The Lokottaravādins, a Mahāsāṅghika branch, went even further by maintaining that the entire succession of lives leading to the enlightened state was just a series of apparitional events. This deep disagreement split Buddhism into two doctrinal positions. The Sthaviras continued to sustain, with some modifications, the more traditional and conservative view that although the occurrence of Buddhas in the world was a unique phenomenon, they were entangled in the workings of karma up to the time of their enlightenment. The Mahāsāṅghikas affirmed not only the uniqueness of Buddhas, but rejected their mundane reality, and insisted on their transcendent nature, multiplicity and coexistence in all the regions of space.

Concerning the nature and career of the Bodhisattva, the early schools did not discuss them as a practical proposition but rather as a theoretical issue. One of the debated issues focused on establishing the time or occasion when the Bodhisattva ceases to be an ordinary person (*prthagjana*) and gains the quality or status of a noble person (*ārya*). In other words, when does he truly become a Bodhisattva, a person whose enlightenment and the nature of rebirths leading to it are assured or determined (*niyata*). It was agreed that at the time of generating the thought of enlightenment (*bodhicittotpāda*), the attainment of enlightenment becomes determined, but the precise series of rebirths leading to it is not. However, there was no agreement concerning the precise time at which the Bodhisattva's path of rebirths also becomes determined.

In the Sarvāstivāda sources, the Bodhisattva career lasts for three cosmic aeons (*asamkhyeya*) and one hundred supplementary periods (*kalpa*). During the first aeon, the Bodhisattva has no certainty whether he will become a Buddha, but he gains such certainty at the end of the second aeon. At the end of the third aeon, he performs the deeds productive of the thirty-two bodily marks of a great man, and fearlessly proclaims: "I shall become a Buddha." During the entire period of the three aeons, the Bodhisattva is considered to be an ordinary person (*prthagjana*) because he is not free from karmic fetters (*saṃyojana*), and because many of his rebirths occur in inferior destinies. It is only in the course of the hundred additional periods during which his deeds produce the thirty-two bodily marks that he truly becomes a Bodhisattva, and the actual acquisition of

the *ārya* quality is said to take place under the *bodhi* tree immediately before attaining the state of enlightenment. Thus, effectively the Bodhisattva is subject to karma during his entire career.

The Mahāsāṅghika position is not consistent in all sources. According to some sources, they maintained that the Bodhisattva becomes an *ārya* automatically upon entering the second cosmic aeon, and receives the prediction at the beginning of the third. During the first aeon, he is reborn in accordance with his karmic actions and thereafter as he wishes. According to Vasumitra, the Mahāsāṅghikas maintained that in his last life the Bodhisattva does not undergo the normal embryonic stages in his mother's womb. He enters the womb in the form of a white elephant and is born through the right side of his mother. Wishing to be useful to other beings, he aspires to be born in evil destinies. Some other attributions include a vow to remain in *saṃsāra* for the benefit of other beings, and freedom to choose specific rebirths. Taking into account the above attributions and what was said above about the Lokottaravādins, it appears that the Mahāsāṅghikas had three opinions: freedom from karma during the entire series of rebirths leading to buddhahood; freedom from karma at some point during the career; freedom from karma during the last life.

There are some observations that need to be made in connection with the above discussed doctrinal developments. All the early schools maintain the unique character of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, although they interpreted their nature in different ways. Most of the doctrinal formulations tend to divest and abstract Buddhas and Bodhisattvas from tangible historical realities. More specifically, while the debates were concerned with the nature of Śākyamuni Buddha, at the same time, they did not focus on him as the one and only Buddha. The debates were about the identity and character of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in general. There is thus a marked gap between the historical Buddha and the doctrinal formulations which operated, as it were, in abstractions fitted into idealised patterns of cosmic events and periods. In a sense, they constructed an idealised concept without firmly relating it to any concrete person. All schools agreed that there were more than one Buddha, and hence they sought to establish the doctrinal content of a concept, and not so much the doctrinal identity of a concrete person. The most salient outcome of these early doctrinal debates was that they produced the notions of mundane and transcendent perspectives of reality. The Mahāsāṅghikas firmly asserted the transcendent character of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and viewed their earthly lives as apparitions. The Sarvāstivāda and other Sthavira schools affirmed the human character of the Buddha although they also viewed him as a rare phenomenon very much different from ordinary beings, and consequently as a somewhat idealised entity. Thus, both groups placed a boundary between ordinary human beings and Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Although the available sources do not provide a full picture of the devotional and liturgical life of the early Buddhist communities, it is worth a brief mention that they do indicate that all traditions venerated the Buddha's relics and some traditions very much focused on the worship of the *stūpa*.

Mahāyāna and Tantra formulations

In the Mahāyāna, the concept of Bodhisattva was considerably recast and hinged on several doctrines, which transformed it into two separate but overlapping types: one as an ideal to be followed by all living beings, and one as an agent of universal salvation, or the so called celestial Bodhisattvas. As already indicated, since the origins of Mahāyāna Buddhism are misty and complex, it is not possible to establish a precise sequence of the historical and doctrinal evolution of the Bodhisattva ideal in Mahāyāna Buddhism. There is evidence in Mahāyāna *sūtras* and treatises that the Bodhisattva ideal and in particular the structure and content of his career were worked out and brought to maturity over a period of several centuries.

While the basic perception of the Bodhisattva career linked with the person of Śākyamuni is retained, and used to enhance the Bodhisattva ideal through existing and new stories about his previous lives, the Mahāyāna texts, with some exceptions, postulate that all living beings have the seed of enlightenment, and that the ultimate goal of religious life is the attainment of buddhahood. Thus in contrast to early Buddhism, which advocates the path of arhatship culminating in *nirvāṇa*, the Mahāyāna sets forth a career leading to buddhahood, and some Mahāyāna texts even assert that it is the only true path. This type of Bodhisattva ideal is no longer concerned with the Buddha's past lives, but becomes an ideal cast into the future and offered to mankind as a captivating challenge. The Mahāyāna texts further assert that the Bodhisattva path does not entail the pursuit of enlightenment solely for the sake of the individual concerned, but it must involve an effort rooted in compassion to help other living beings. These two primary goals, enlightenment and activities for the benefit of others, are encapsulated in pairs of technical terms such as wisdom and means, emptiness and compassion. While wisdom and emptiness denote the universal and omniscient insight into the state of all things, means and compassion represent the practical expedients. The actual career takes three aeons and it includes the following major elements: the generation of the thought of enlightenment (*bodhicittotpāda*), the Bodhisattva vow, the study and practice of the six or ten perfections, and a progressive ascent towards enlightenment along the ten Bodhisattva stages. It is evident that the basic scheme is adopted from early Buddhism, but in the Mahāyāna, it is reworked and provided with full expositions of both theory and practice. Further elements of the Bodhisattva training include certain ritualised activities such as the worship of all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, confession of sins, sharing the acquired merit with other beings, and rejoicing in the merit of other beings.⁷ One of the standard schemes, which accommodates the perfections and the stages, is divided into five progressive paths: the path of accumulating knowledge and merit (*sambhāra-mārga*), the path of active engagement in the Bodhisattva practices (*prayoga-mārga*), the path of vision (*darśana-mārga*), and the path of inner cultivation (*bhāvanā-mārga*). Viewed

⁷ For the Bodhisattva vow and the sevenfold practice, see my "Bodhisattva Vow by Bodhibhadra", and "Sevenfold Practice of the Dharma by Śākyaśrībhadra", *The Buddhist Forum*, Volume VI, 2001, 15–22, 23–24.

from another perspective, the Bodhisattva training aims to remove all moral defilements (*kleśa-āvaraṇa*) and all obstacles to omniscience (*jñeya-āvaraṇa*).

While in early Buddhism the path to liberation is framed within the context of monastic life, in the Mahāyāna the Bodhisattva career can be pursued by monks and laymen. The Mahāyāna texts make a distinction between lay and monastic Bodhisattvas, and frequently debate which of the two is superior, but without reaching a clear cut conclusion. In contrast to the Buddha's search for enlightenment, the Mahāyāna path does not set out in blind search for enlightenment, but rather provides a complete theoretical and practical framework for its realisation. The Dharma and the nature of enlightenment are known right from the start, and they are explained in the Mahāyāna *sūtras* and treatises. Basically the Bodhisattva career involves the study of Mahāyāna doctrines and their progressive transformation into a living experience. It is said that upon reaching the seventh stage, the Bodhisattva becomes free from the bonds of karma and can assume various rebirths at will in order to act for the benefit of living beings. Upon completing the career, the Bodhisattva is fundamentally equal in rank to the Buddha except for the actual experience of enlightenment. His state of wisdom is perfect and qualifies him to sit under the *bodhi* tree and to pass into *nirvāṇa*. However, his compassion for living beings keeps him active in *saṃsāra*. Broadly speaking, the Bodhisattva never abandons *saṃsāra* and never enters *nirvāṇa*. However, the Mahāyāna texts also teach that the highly advanced Bodhisattvas of the tenth stage are called Great (Mahā-) Bodhisattvas and reside in the Tuṣita abode awaiting their last rebirth on earth in order to become Buddhas.

Although the Mahāyāna makes the Bodhisattva ideal available to all living beings and explains in detail the Bodhisattva path, it does not dwell exclusively on the mundane dimensions in terms of speaking about concrete or ordinary people. On the contrary, the Bodhisattva ideal is portrayed through powerful images of highly advanced Bodhisattvas, who are no longer tangibly lodged in historical situations, but are transposed into transcendent and mythical dimensions. The Mahāyāna has created a whole array of transcendent or celestial Bodhisattvas, who epitomise particular aspects of Mahāyāna doctrines or particular activities performed for the benefit of living beings. Thus, for instance, the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī epitomises wisdom while the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara epitomises compassion. It is this type of Bodhisattva that dominates in Mahāyāna *sūtras*. It is an ideal removed from history, although it can be invoked and supplicated for help. It may be apt to add that in the final analysis of existence, the Bodhisattva realises that he and all living beings do not exist. Thus, all and none become dissolved in emptiness.

The Buddhist *tantras* accept the Mahāyāna teachings as their doctrinal foundation, but at the same time, they voice an implicit criticism of the Mahāyāna abstraction from reality and its highly aloof projection of the Bodhisattva ideal. They do recognise the Bodhisattva ideal, but instead of continuing the intellectual discourse, they convert the Mahāyāna concepts into a body of practices, which aim to achieve the state of enlightenment not in three aeons, but if possible, in one single life. They set forth a variety of rituals, magic, and meditational exercises, which lead to the realisation of buddhahood within one's body,

and indeed they say that in fact the five aggregates (*skandha*), the basic components of a human being, are the five cosmic Buddhas. As in the Mahāyāna texts, the state of enlightenment constitutes an attainment of omniscience and the realisation of emptiness of all things. However, it is not the only way the *tantras* described the realisation of enlightenment. They also speak of dissolution into emptiness or pure light, and the non-dual union of all opposites. The fact that the *tantras* aim to achieve enlightenment in one single life suggests that the *tantras* somewhat undermine the Bodhisattva ideal and its career evolving over the period of three cosmic aeons.

Having glanced at the historical development of the Bodhisattva ideal, it seems evident that it is more complex than it is usually realised. However, as such the Bodhisattva ideal remains one of the most appealing and captivating religious ideals created in human history. Within Buddhism, it is considered as restricted to unique beings that become Buddhas, or it is presented as a universal ideal. Whether restricted or universal, the only concrete example of a Bodhisattva is the person of Śākyamuni Buddha, if he ever was a Bodhisattva.

Sources

The sources indicated below include only the works, which appertain to early Buddhism, and which made important contributions to the formulation of the Bodhisattva ideal. The Mahāyāna sources are not listed here because they are too numerous.

The term Bodhisattva occurs in a number of the Pāli *suttas* where it is used by the Buddha with reference to himself and in the context of his life prior to his enlightenment. Some of the most important of such *suttas* are *Cūḷadukkhakkhandha*, *Dvedhāvitakka*, *Ariyapariyesana*, *Mahāsaccaka*, and *Sanḅārava* of the Majjhimanikāya. In the *Mahāpadāna* of the Dīghanikāya, we find one of the major innovations about the life events of the Bodhisattva.

In the Pāli Canon, the Buddha's previous lives are compiled in two works, the *Jātaka*, which contains more than five hundred stories, and the *Cariyāpiṭaka*, which has thirty five stories. The stories included in the *Cariyāpiṭaka* are largely derived from the *Jātaka*, and serve to illustrate the ten perfections. These two works have no exact correspondences in Sanskrit, but there exists in Sanskrit the same type of literature known as *avadāna*.

The story about Sumedha is first narrated in the Pāli *Buddhavaṃsa* and later recast in the *Nidānakathā*, which is inserted as a prologue to the *Jātaka*. Among the Sanskrit sources, it is given in the *Mahāvastu* and the *Divyāvadāna*. The last title is generally dated to the second century AD, and it is considered to be somewhat on the border between the Hīnayāna and the Mahāyāna.

The perfections (*pāramī* in Pāli, *pāramitā* in Sanskrit) are mentioned or discussed in the *Buddhavaṃsa*, *Cariyāpiṭaka*, and *Mahāvastu*. The *Mahāvastu* also contains a list of ten Bodhisattva stages (*bhūmi*), but they are different from the stages given in Mahāyāna sources, such as the *Daśabhūmika*.

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