



An Analytical Study of Bodhisattva Concept in Mahāyāna Buddhism

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Abstract

It's not difficult to discern that the ideal of Bodhisattva can be derived from the Arahant's ideal. Concerning the development of the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva doctrine, the most accessible documentation for this is found in the original Buddhist sutras. The early concept of Bodhisattva was related only to the Buddha as found in the Buddhist scriptures such as Dīgha Nikāya, Majjhima Nikāya, etc. Later Mahāyāna Buddhism developed the Bodhisattva theory in the important Mahāyāna sutras. The difference between Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhism is the number of Bodhisattvas that appeared in the two systems of the sutras. But the Bodhisattva in Mahāyāna Buddhism is the personification of the characteristics of the Buddha such as compassion, loving-kindness, and wisdom. Considering the historical context and geographical spread of Buddhism, the author believes that this change was suitable to propagate the Dharma.

Keywords: Buddhism, Bodhisattva, Mahāyāna, concept and development.

Introduction

The ideal of Bodhisattva is presented as an outlet for devotional practice, and offers a model for practitioners to guide them on the path to attain the enlightenment. It remains an important part of Mahāyāna Buddhism today and an inspiration to practice the teaching of the Buddha. Moreover, the Bodhisattva ideal is provided for the engaged form of Buddhism that does not run away from the suffering of the world, but actively seeks to end the mental and physical sufferings of all beings. These human qualities as a whole represent the Buddhist attitude to their final goal. In the outlines of Mahāyāna Buddhism D.T. Suzuki writes that:

*As Sākyamuni was a Bodhisattva in his former lives, destined to become a Buddha, so we are all Bodhisattvas and even Buddhas in a certain sense when we understand that all sentient beings, the Buddha not excepted, are one in the Dharmakāya. The Dharmakāya manifests in us as Bodhi, which is the essence of Buddha as well as of Bodhisattva.*¹

The typical representative figure for the compassion and wisdom of the Buddha in Mahāyāna Buddhism tradition is the image of Bodhisattva, who can help the sentient beings overcome all sufferings. According to Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, the Bodhisattva is the bearer or messenger of the Buddha's teachings in the world, always listening to the sufferings of all people to help them overcome sufferings and find the truth of real peace. Scholars of the Mahāyāna tradition and Buddhist philosophers used the images and ideals of the Bodhisattva in the *Sūtras* of Mahāyāna Buddhism in order to apply "skillful means" to develop the true teachings of the Buddha in life. Therefore, there is no resistance of human beings when compassion flows through their consciousness, especially when the mind is feeling the stream of knowledge, wisdom, and compassion. On the seashore of Buddhism, of course, this flow of compassionate water is always flowing in the blood of the living beings, just as the underground water flows down the earth, but how can beings receive the flavor of it? Does another matter? It is this that opens up another problem for us to step into the next obstacle in the hope that we will study and propose a practical application of the Bodhisattva ideal for daily life.

¹D.T. Suzuki (1907), *Outlines of Mahāyāna Buddhism*, London: Luzac and Company, p. 290.

The Definition of Term Bodhisattva

The concept of *Bodhisattva* is one of the most important concepts in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. This term is frequently mentioned in the early as well as later Buddhism. Etymologically, the term *Bodhisattva* is derived from the root *budh*, originally meaning to be awake. The noun *Bodhi* comes to the meaning: (i) knowledge, (ii) enlightenment, (iii) the knowledge possessed by a *Buddha*.²

According to Encyclopedia of Buddhism etymologically the term can be separated into two parts, *Bodhi* and *sattva*: *Bodhi*, from the root *budh*, to be awake, means “awakening” or “enlightenment” and “*sattva*”, derived from “*sant*”, the present participle of the root as “to be”, means “a being” or, literally, “one who is”, a sentient being. Hence, the term is taken to mean “one whose essence is Enlightenment” or “enlightened knowledge”. By this implication, it means a seeker after Enlightenment, a Buddha-to-be. There is also a suggestion that the *Pāli* term may be derived from *Bodhi* and *satta*, “one who is attached to or desires to gain Enlightenment”.³

The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics also gives that *Bodhisattva* is usually translated as “one whose essence is perfect knowledge” (*sattva* = essence, one nature, *svabhavā*). It is possible that this was the original meaning of the word; historical, however, *Bodhisattva* is “one who is on the way to the attainment of perfect knowledge”, “a future Buddha”.

T.R.V. Murti gives that the *Bodhisattva* is nothing but the virtuous and good, the source of all goodness in the world.⁴ Charls Elliot said that a *Bodhisattva* is one whose essence is knowledge.⁵ H. Kern holds that a sentient or reasonable being, possessing *Bodhi* is a *Bodhisattva*.⁶

²T.W. Rhys-Davids and William Stede, (1993), *Pāli - English Dictionary*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishes, Pvt, Ltd, p. 14.

³G. P. Malalasekera (1971), *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Vol. III, and O.B.E, Sri Lanka: The Government of Ceylon, p. 224.

⁴T.R.V. Murti (1960), *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, London: C. Tinling & Co., Ltd., p. 264.

⁵Charles Elliot (1968), *Buddhism and Hinduism*, Vol. II, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, p.1.

⁶H. Kern (1974), *Manual of Indian Buddhism*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, p. 65.

According to Edward Conze, the *Bodhisattva* is being composed of two contradictory forces of wisdom and compassion. In his wisdom, he had no attachment to selfhood, no discrimination between him and other; in his compassion, he is resolved to save them. His ability to combine these contradictory attitudes is the source of his greatness and his ability to save himself and others.⁷

In short, etymologically *Bodhisatta* means a Bodhi-being, a future Buddha, or “a being who desires to attain enlightenment”. The word can, therefore, be used in reference to all those who seek Bodhi. As far as this research work is concerned, we are able to understand that *Bodhisatta* is considered as an ordinary man, a hero or a warrior who possess his own karma at his very birth as all other human beings, but with effort and determined mind, he will be able to eliminate all his bad karmas and sufferings, and attain the final liberation by cultivating a realistic and practical way, which had been discovered and taught by Lord *Gotama Buddha*. However, we should remember the fact that in Mahāyāna Buddhism such Bodhisattvas are only symbolic characters, derived from the characteristics of the historical Buddha or descriptions of the saints in other worlds; they are neither historical personalities nor heavenly gods for worship and the real nature of all the Bodhisattvas has crystallized only as a result of the virtues of the historical Buddha as a kind of god in response to the popular demands influenced by the practice of polytheism.

The Character of Bodhisattva in Mahāyāna Buddhism

The first characteristic is compassion; compassion is the central motivating basis of the path. Compassion urges to reduce the current suffering of others, encourage them to act in a way to reduce their future suffering and aid them on the path to awakening so as to bring all their suffering to end.⁸ The Pali-English Dictionary defined compassion (*Karuṇā*) as follows:

*The desire of bringing welfare and good to one's fellow men, or the desire of removing bane and sorrow of one's fellow men, it also denotes the exalted state of compassion for all beings.*⁹

⁷Edward Conze (1997), *Buddhism: It Essence and Development*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, p.125.

⁸Group of Author (2017). *Guidance And Insight From The Buddha*, Thailand: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University Press, p.24.

⁹T.W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, (1993), *Pali-English Dictionary*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishes, Pvt, Ltd., p. 197.

The second characteristic of Bodhisattvas is great wisdom; wisdom came as a result of having brought forth the great Bodhi-heart. Bringing forth the great Bodhi-heart is the resolve to take across all living beings without being attached to the mark of having made them crossed over. As in the *Vajraccedika Prajñā Pāramitā Sutra*, the Lord says to Subhūti (Good Existence) that someone who has set out in the vehicle of a Bodhisattva should produce a thought in this manner. Again and again, all Bodhisattvas should subdue their hearts with the vow, as many beings as there are in the universe of beings, comprehended under the term beings – all living beings born from eggs, wombs, humidity or by transformation, with or without form, either thoughtful or thoughtless, and neither thoughtful nor thoughtless – are all led by me to final Nirvana for the extinction of reincarnation. Although immeasurable, uncountable and unlimited numbers of living beings are thus led to (the Nirvana for) the extinction of reincarnation, it is true that not a living being is led there. Although the Buddha saves countless beings, in actuality there are no beings that he saves. Living beings save themselves. Thus it is said that there is crossing over living beings but not attaching oneself to the mark of doing so.

The third characteristic of *Bodhisattvas*, according to many traditions within *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, is that on the way to attaining the Buddhahood, a bodhisattva proceeds through ten *Bhūmis*. Before a *bodhisattva* arrives at the first, he or she first must travel the first two of five paths: the path of accumulation and the path of preparation. After the ten *Bhūmis*, according to *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, one attains complete enlightenment and becomes a Buddha.

Bodhisattva Concept in Mahāyāna Sutras

1. Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra

According to *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, the *Bodhisattva* will become thoroughly conversant with the noble truth of self-realization, will become a perfect master of his own mind, will conduct himself without effort, will be like a gem reflecting a variety of colors, will be able to assume the body of transformation, will be able to enter into the subtle minds of all beings, and because of his firm belief in the truth of mind-only, by gradually ascending the stages, will become established in Buddhahood.

2. The Avataṃsaka Sūtra

The *sūtra* is also well known for its detailed description of the course of the bodhisattva's practice through ten stages where the Ten Stages *Sūtra*, or *Daśabhūmika*

Sūtra, is the name given to this chapter of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*.¹⁰ This *sūtra* gives details on the ten stages (*bhūmi*) of development a *bodhisattva* must undergo to attain supreme enlightenment. The ten stages are also depicted in the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*. The *sūtra* also touches on the subject of the development of the “aspiration for Enlightenment” (*Bodhicitta*) to attain supreme Buddhahood.

3. The Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra (The Large Sūtra on Perfect Wisdom)

The literature on *Prajñāpāramitā* is vast, deep and vital to figure out for understanding the *Mahāyāna*. The oldest text is the Perfection of wisdom in 8000 lines and 32 chapters. Many thousands lines of this *sūtra* can be summed up in two sentences: (1) One should become a Bodhisattva (a Buddha to-be), i.e. someone content with nothing less than all-knowledge attained through the perfection of wisdom for the sake of all living beings. (2) There are no such things as a Bodhisattva, or all-knowledge, or a “being”, or the perfection of wisdom, or an attainment. *Asaṅga* as the avoidance of five standpoints explains the often-repeated saying that the *Bodhisattva* should “stand in perfect wisdom by not taking his stand anywhere.”¹¹

4. Prajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya Sūtra (The Heart Sūtra)

Various commentators divide this text into different number of sections. Briefly, the *sūtra* describes the experience of liberation of the bodhisattva of compassion, *Avalokiteśvara*. According to the Heart *Sūtra*, not only the Bodhisattvas, but also all the *Buddhas* own the attainment of their goal to the realization of the Full Emptiness. In order to win Enlightenment of the full emptiness, they had to cast everything aside, and to rely only on the perfection of wisdom. It also means that wisdom plays an important role in Buddhism.

The Bodhisattva Ideal in Mahāyāna Buddhism

According to *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, everyone who follows the Gotama Bodhisattva’s path to practice his vow of action to become a Buddha and efforts for helping others. They are “accepted” as the Bodhisattvas. It seems that a person who aspires to *attain sammā-sambuddhahood* is called a Bodhisattva. Who wishes to serve others and reach ultimate perfection? Everyone is free to pursue the *Bodhisattva* ideal, but there is no compulsion that all must strive to attain Buddhahood which, to say the least, is practically impossible. Therefore,

¹⁰Rigpa Shedra, *Sūtra of the Ten Bhūmis*. (Accessed: April 10, 2009)

¹¹*Mahāyānasamgraha*, p. 253.

Bodhisattva concept should be understood philosophically. With the advancing impetus of doctrine, *Mahāyāna* Buddhism at the same time gave a meticulous doctrine to explain how the *Buddhas* and Bodhisattvas do to save all living beings. Besides, *Mahāyāna* Buddhism also offers a progressive perspective when determining the role, improving the important position of lay people in religious activities and their abilities to reach enlightenment. The formation of *Mahāyāna*, especially the Bodhisattva ideal, thus, did not make a break of the Buddhist community but has lighted up the fire of faith in their heart. Since everyone has a Buddha mind or Buddha nature and can be a Buddha by following the Bodhisattva-path, it promotes and encourages everyone to constantly move forward, not retreat in front of any danger or hardship to fulfill their goal.

The Bodhisattva Vow (praṇidhāna) in Mahāyāna Buddhism

The above of seeking the *Bodhi*, below to save (transform) beings. One of the great vow and action of a *Bodhisattva*. The *Bodhisattva* action and vow (*Bodhisattvācāryā-praṇidhāna*) is the vow (*praṇidhāna*) taken by *Mahāyāna* Buddhists to help all beings. One who has taken the vow is nominally known as a *Bodhisattva*. This can be done by venerating all *Buddhas* and by cultivating supreme moral and spiritual perfections, to be placed in the service of others. In particular, *Bodhisattvas* promise to practice the six perfections of giving, moral discipline, patience, effort, concentration, and wisdom in order to fulfill their *bodhicitta* aim of attaining enlightenment for the sake of all beings. The vow is the wish to save all human beings from sufferings, to learn and practice dharma in order to attain enlightenment: “Followers of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism are expected to take and repeatedly reiterate the bodhisattva vow, a promise to dedicate one’s life to the welfare of other being and to forgot final realization of *Nibbāna*.”¹²

The Bodhisattva path in Mahāyāna Buddhism

In Encyclopedia of Religion,¹³ it is stated that the English term Bodhisattva path is translated from the *Sanskrit* *Bodhisattva*, “Vehicle” of the Bodhisattva or, more frequently, *Bodhicaryāvatāra* the practice of the Bodhisattva terms widely employed in *Mahāyāna* Buddhist texts.

¹²Noble Ross Reat (1994), *Buddhism of History*, California: Jain Publishing Company, p. 51.

¹³Mircea Eliade, op.cit, p. 165.

There is not one kind of cause and condition, which is used in seeking the *Buddhahood* way. The *Bodhisattvas* either cultivate Dharma through belief and understanding of the twelve causes and conditions, the Middle Way, or through belief and understanding of the six Perfections (*Pāramitās*). When one talks of the *Bodhisattvas* or their effort to become an Enlightened One, the role of these perfections becomes much more significant. When one discusses various appearances of their practice of the Bodhisattva way, this does not refer to the physical appearances of the Bodhisattvas, but to the various practices and *Dhamma* they cultivated.

The Qualifications of Bodhisattvahood in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism.

1. Bodhisattva for the Practice of Wisdom

Across the method of the wisdom view above, evident liberation and liberation wisdom can be expected because it is through the following statement of the Buddha:

*Seeing this, Bhikkhus, the Bhikkhus-monks are boring to the disciples color ...for the feeling ...for the thought ...for the ... boring for awake. Due to boredom, he is greedy. Due to lust, he freed. In liberation, the mind is up: I am liberated ... no longer retreats this state anymore.*¹⁴

Thus, through the training of the *Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva* view, or more accurately, by the practice of wisdom, one can realize the truth of all things. It is impermanence, suffering and non-self. Thus, the enlightenment of truth arises in one's mind as if he or she is being blessed by the *Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara*, and enables them to experience happiness and liberation without clinging... In fact, this is not only the ultimate goal of the general *Bodhisattva* ideal, and the *Avalokiteśvara* in particular, but also the unique and unparalleled wisdom through which the Buddha realized the truth. Therefore, without any hesitation, one can say that this goal is the true convergence of both the Buddhist teachings, the *Theravāda* Buddhist teachings and the *Theravāda* or *Theravāda* Buddhism. This is also the main practice of Buddhist followers.

¹⁴Most Ven. Hoang Ngoc Dung, (2001), *The Concepts of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva: Doctrine And Practice*, Ph.D. Dissertation, New Delhi: University of Delhi, p.113.

2. The Six Perfection (Pāramitā)

In the development of *Bodhicitta*, a *Bodhisattva* must practice the perfections (*Pāramitās*). In other words, the germination of the *Bodhicitta* produces a Bodhisattva out of an individual, and to realize the complete fulfillment of this pledge, the Bodhisattva makes an entry into the most arduous and strenuous stage of the path, the practice of the *Pāramitās*.¹⁵ According to Mahayanists, the doctrine of *Pāramitās* is leading to Bodhisattvahood, and in the end Buddhahood was the new method of Buddhist practice resulting from the intention of *Mahāyāna* patriarchs of later times.

Conclusion

The *Mahāyāna* went on developing the Bodhisattva concept in such a way that it became an object of devotion and its human nature gradually disappeared. Moreover, *Mahāyāna* encourages everyone to enter the Bodhisattva-path. *Mahāyāna* followers believe that everyone has a Buddha mind or Buddha nature and can be a Buddha by following the Bodhisattva path. It seems that *Mahāyāna* doctrine of the Bodhisattva derived logically from the firm belief in future Buddha. If earlier *Buddhas* had existed there must be other *Buddhas* yet to come. Moreover, the Bodhisattva ideal is the production of the Thought of Enlightenment. *Mahāyāna*, from the compassionate aspect of Buddhism, deployed it as an ideal. And it became a main goal of the school. Therefore, we must not forget that in any attempt at pointing to a philosophy of the Enlightened One, one is in much the same position as the blind men; one cannot ‘say it all’ with regard to Buddhism. Our reading of primary texts from several Buddhist traditions leads us to the conclusion that there is no one ‘central philosophy’ of Buddhism. All forms of Buddhism, *Theravāda* Buddhism and *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, affirm the perfectibility of a person, and one finds this notion of perfection embodied in both images: the *Arahant*, the Bodhisattva. The image of human perfection is explained in different perspectives, that is because of looking to the Buddha as the ideal. In fact, there is only one *Nirvāṇa* for all who follow in the *Buddha’s* footsteps, who meditate to realize the reality of life, who destroy the hatred, the destruction and the delusion.

¹⁵Gunapala Dharmasiri (2006), *Buddhist Social Philosophy and Ethics*, Sri Lanka: Samadhi Buddhist Society, p. 120.

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