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A.G.S. Kariyawasam



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By

A.G.S. Kariyawasam

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The Bodhisattva Concept



he bodhisattva (Pali: *bodhisatta*) is a being who aspires for Bodhi or Enlightenment. The concept of bodhisattva (meaning 'Buddha-to-be') is one of the most important concepts in 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 implication it means a seeker after enlightenment, a Buddha-to-be. There is also a suggestion that the Pali term may be derived from *bodhi* and *satta*, (Skt. *sakta* from *sañj*) 'one who is attached to or desires to gain enlightenment.'

In original Pali Buddhism, the term *bodhisatta* is used more or less exclusively to designate Gautama Buddha prior to his enlightenment.

The concept of bodhisattva, along with that of

Buddha and of the *cakravartin* (world-ruler), was in vogue in India even before the appearance of Gautama Buddha. When Prince Siddhārtha, who later became Gautama Buddha, took conception in the womb of Queen Māyā, a seer predicted that Suddhodana's future son would be either a world-ruler (*cakravartin*) or a Buddha. Once, answering a question by a brahmin, the Buddha himself admitted that he is neither a god nor a *yakkha*, but a Buddha, meaning thereby one of a succession of Buddhas (A II 38).

The well-known Pali stanza *sabbapāpassa akaraṇaṃ—kusalassa upasampadā, sacitta-pariyodapanaṃ—etaṃ buddhāna sāsanaṃ* (Dhp v 183; Nett. p. 43) states that the teaching it contains is not of a single Buddha but of all the Buddhas. The Āmagandha Sutta is similarly recorded as a discourse not of Gautama Buddha but of a past Buddha named Kassapa (Sn vv 239 ff).

Sammāsambodhi or Perfect Enlightenment is an impersonal universal phenomenon occurring in a particular context both in time and in space and a Buddha is thus a person who 're-discovers' the Dhamma, which had become lost to the world and proclaims it anew (Pug. p. 29). When Gautama Buddha appeared, however, he himself as well as others used the term *bodhisattva* to indicate his career from the time of his renunciation up to the time of his enlightenment. Later, its use was extended to denote

the period from Gautama's conception to the enlightenment and, thereafter, to all the Buddhas from their conception to Buddhahood. By applying the doctrine of *kamma* and of rebirth, which had general acceptance even in pre-Buddhist India, the use of the term was further extended to refer to the past lives not only of Gautama Buddha, but also of those rare beings who aspire for Perfect Enlightenment.

The oldest Theravāda tradition, as contained, for example, in the Mahāpadāna Sutta (D II 1) gives details of six Buddhas prior to Gautama. This discourse is attributed to the Buddha himself, who gives the time, caste, family, length of life, etc., of these predecessors of his. In the Buddhavaṃsa, a later work belonging to the Khuddaka Nikāya, the number increases to twenty-five with Gautama Buddha as the last, and this number remains fixed in Theravāda tradition.

However, these enumerations by no means imply that they are exhaustive. In the Mahāpadāna Suttanta the Buddha starts the story of the six Buddhas merely by saying that ninety-one *kappas* ago there was such and such a Buddha, implying thereby that such beings were not limited in number. From this it follows that, if the Buddhas are innumerable, the bodhisattvas too must be innumerable.

When Prince Siddhartha attained Enlightenment he did so as a human being and lived and passed away as such. As mentioned earlier, he himself admitted that he was a Buddha and not a *deva* or any such supernatural being. He was only the discoverer of a lost teaching. His greatness was that he found out what his contemporaries could not discover at all or discovered only incompletely. He was a genius by birth who achieved the highest state possible for man. Both intellectually and morally he was a great man, a superman (*mahāpurisa*). In all the stages of his life, from conception onwards, something extraordinary was seen in him.

In order to understand who a bodhisattva is, it would be useful to explain briefly who a Buddha is. The Buddha-concept in Theravāda Buddhism is not a personality cult; neither is the Buddha an object of glorified devotion. He is neither a theoretical metaphysician nor a materialist. He is not a religious teacher who demands unquestioned loyalty like a Messiah. He is a man who has perfected himself by realising his 'self' to the highest degree possible for man. Only a man can become a Buddha.

There may be other supernatural beings inhabiting perhaps other planets in a given solar system. But they are not capable of becoming fully enlightened unless there are planets similar to our own where humans

live. Even if such beings are leading happier lives in their non-human spheres, still they are subject to the laws of change and evolution (*anicca* or *vaya-dhamma*), and as such not free from birth and death and their attendant conflicts: hence they are not released from *dukkha*.

A Buddha is a human being who has realised that there is a happier state than this world of conditioned phenomena. After a persevering mental struggle, he realises this unconditioned state (*asaṅkhata*) which is free from duality. This freedom from duality implies the absence of any conflict (*dukkha*). Therefore, this state is described as free from both sorrow and happiness in the ordinary sense. It is the highest happiness (*parama-sukha*) in the transcendental sense. As such it is not subject to change and is, therefore, imperishable (*avyaya*) and, therefore, permanent (*dhuva*). It is this that is described as *Nibbāna*. The Buddha is the person who realised this for the first time by his own effort and proclaimed it to the world and hence, he is the Teacher (*satthā*). Arahants are his disciples who follow his teaching. Bodhisattvas are those who aspire to be fully enlightened ones or Buddhas, in preference to merely becoming arahants.

Strictly speaking, the life of the Buddha commenced only from the time of his enlightenment and his life before this event was that of the bodhisattva. The

Buddha himself used the term in this sense and, it is more than probable that he occasionally referred to his previous existences in his discourses to the people in order to elucidate a particular doctrinal point. The Jātakas found in the *Sutta Piṭaka* such as the Mahāgovinda Sutta (D II 220 ff), the Mahāsudassana Sutta (D II 169 ff) and the Makhādeva Sutta (M II 74 ff), etc., bear out this view. Besides these, there seems to have been neither a Jātaka collection as such, nor the developed concept of the bodhisattva practising *pāramitās*, until a much later period. Hence it would appear that the concept of the bodhisattva could be divided into two parts, the original concept and the concept developed by later Buddhists.

The division of Schools which began at the second Council with the separation of the Mahāsaṅghikas also made its contribution to the development of the bodhisattva cult in later literature, as it marked the remote beginnings of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

The earliest use of the term bodhisattva in literature seems to be when the Buddha refers to the days prior to his enlightenment, in such contexts as “in the days before my enlightenment” or “when as yet I was only a bodhisattva” (M I 114, 163; M III 119). Then, we have the Pali suttas referred to above, in which the Buddha recounts a previous existence of his after the fashion of the later Jātaka stories. In the Buddhavaṃsa and in the

later commentaries we see how the concept has been extended not only in relation to Gautama's own previous lives, but also as a general concept.

In the *Buddhavaṃsa* which belongs to the *Khuddaka Nikāya* of the Pali Canon, are found the life-stories of twenty-five Buddhas of whom Gautama was the last. The names by which he was known during his 'apprenticeship' as a bodhisattva under each of the twenty-four Buddhas, are also given. The chronicle describes the ten *pāramitās*, the eight conditions necessary for the fulfilment of Buddhahood and the bodhisattva's decision to postpone his entry into Nibbāna. The other early work that describes the bodhisattva's career is the *Mahāvastu* (circa 1st or 2nd century BC), a Sanskrit work of the Mahā-saṅghikas.

Since the Buddha's teaching is not fatalistic but a course of mental training implying constant change until the realisation of the unconditioned state of Nibbāna, everyone has the ability not merely to attain release but also to be authoritative teachers (i.e., perfect Buddhas) as well. People with lesser ability may rest content with mere arahantship or by becoming Pratyeka Buddhas.

Just as the Theravādins in course of time began to lay greater stress on intellectual development than on religious practice and realisation, those who

advocated the bodhisattva ideal, as a protest against the theoretical teaching of the Theravādins, went to the other extreme of making it too practical by making the bodhisattva somewhat like a saviour as exemplified by Avalokiteśvara. Everyone tries to be a Buddha to save others while passively believing in the saving grace of the bodhisattvas. The pendulum swung from one extreme to the other. Gautama Buddha's teaching of practical psychological ethics and that of the avoidance of extremes was falling into oblivion.

In this evolution of thought, the altruistic motives which had become more or less mere intellectual concepts among the Theravādins began to be greatly emphasised. As a result, individual responsibility, on which the Buddha has laid great stress, began to be overlooked. This tendency was developed to its extreme, especially in the Far East, the results of which are to be seen in the concept of Buddha Amitābha and of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara as embodiments of compassion, an all-merciful divine father, whose sole aim is to deliver all living beings from suffering.

This development was the natural result of the intrinsic human nature which seeks for external protection and consolation either in a male or a female divinity. It is an extension of the father-mother concept and can be found in any developed religious

system. But Gautama Buddha firmly believed that Buddhas are only pathfinders and teachers who, out of compassion for all living beings, preach the doctrine of deliverance which has to be individually realised by the wise. As such, the idea of salvation, except through the teaching which every person has to follow individually, is foreign to him. This is why the Buddha's teaching is regarded as too demanding in practice.

It was shown earlier how, by the application of the doctrines of karma and rebirth, the life of the bodhisattva was extended backwards to an innumerable number of existences. The doctrine of karma implies that intellectual and moral greatness cannot be produced without great effort. The necessary training and discipline cannot be practised to perfection in a single life-time. However, this did not mean that enlightenment could not be obtained in a given time. On the contrary, it was often asserted that such attainment is possible in this very life (*ditṭheva dhamme*) provided the devotee has the required qualification for arahantship, and it is the duty of every follower to attempt such achievement.

It is of interest to see how the concept of the bodhisattva has developed down the ages. The historical facts about the Buddha are not difficult to determine. He began his life as Siddhartha, son of a

local rajah in north India in the 6th century BC. At first he quite enjoyed sensual pleasures but his attitude to such self-indulgence was quite different from that of the ordinary man. Even while enjoying pleasure, he intuitively felt that true and lasting happiness could never be found by giving into each and every sensual attraction. That would lead to moral and intellectual ruin, resulting in becoming subject to more and more suffering. He was sure of this.

He got married and begot a son and still he felt that that was not the ultimate fulfilment of human life. His inner urge could not stop at anything short of full and complete self-realisation, not only for his own private release, but also for the good of humanity as a whole. This made him think. First he took to a self-mortifying life, and when that failed, he, after a severe mental struggle, achieved perfection by becoming a Buddha and then a teacher.

During the rest of his career of forty-five years, he gave his findings to the rest of humanity by oral preaching (*dhamma-desanā*), which was the best method of disseminating knowledge in those days when writing and reading of books were not common. There was nothing mystic about the Buddha. He was a practical man, a psychiatrist who, after realising the cause of man's troubles, was eager to convey the benefits of his realisation to the rest of humanity,

which he did quite successfully.

There is no reason to doubt these simple facts of history. But, in course of time, these facts became mixed up with much legend and the Buddha's teaching became more or less a devotional cult. Its rationalistic and practical nature began to go underground. The higher life (*brahmacariya*) was thought of as something impracticable and gradually Buddhism lost its pragmatic character. Coupled with these tendencies there was the inborn human need for a father-figure or a mother-figure to fall back upon. All these led to the creation of a Buddhology.

For the artist, literary as well as plastic, the Buddha became an object of study and devotion. He was analysed from every possible angle and various theories regarding his career were evolved as, for instance, when the original triple classification (of the path of release)—*sīla* (morality), *samādhi* (mind-culture) and *paññā* (wisdom)—was resolved into ten pāramitās. The bodhisattva became a special kind of God-like character, the like of whom could hardly be an actuality. It was as a part of this development that the main events of the bodhisattva's life were portrayed as being accompanied by miracles.

A bodhisattva's career should start with his making a resolution before a Buddha (*abhinīhāra-karaṇa* or

mūlāpraṇidhāna) to become a Buddha for the welfare and liberation of all creatures. In later literature this *abhinīhāra* is preceded by a period during which the bodhisattva practises *manopraṇidhi* when he resolves in his mind a desire to become a Buddha without declaring his intention to others.

Even for the *abhinīhāra* or the first resolve to become a Buddha to be effective, eight conditions have to be fulfilled. These are that the aspirant should be a human being, a male, sufficiently developed spiritually to become an arahant in that very life, a recluse at the time of the declaration, that he should make the resolution personally before a Buddha, that he should possess the *jhānas* and be prepared to sacrifice even his life. The resolution has to be absolutely firm.

There are eighteen inauspicious states into which a bodhisattva is not born. He is never born blind, deaf, insane, crippled, among savages, as a slave or as a heretic. He never changes his sex, is never guilty of the five heinous crimes which become immediately effective (*ānantarika-kamma*) and he never becomes a leper. Should he be born as an animal he is never born bigger than an elephant or smaller than a quail. He is not born as a *peta* or in *Avīci* nor in the hells known as *lokāntarika*, which are eternally dark. He is not born as a Māra nor as a *Suddhāvāsa deva*, nor in the Formless

(*arūpa*) worlds, nor in another *cakkavāḷa* (Sn-a I 50 ff).

According to Jātaka 6 p. 552, all bodhisattvas must make the five great sacrifices (*mahāpariccāga*) of giving up wife, children, kingdom, life and limb.

The Buddha, before whom the *abhinīhāra* is made, looks into the future and, if satisfied, declares the fulfilment of the wish, giving all the particulars of such fulfilment. This declaration is called *veyyākaraṇa* (Skt. *vyākaraṇa*) and is made also by all subsequent Buddhas whom the bodhisattva meets during his career. From here onwards, till he attains Enlightenment, all his activities are directed towards the practice of the perfections (*pāramitās*). As mentioned earlier, these perfections were later enumerations and there are slight differences between the Pali and the Sanskrit lists. However, their theme is the same, which is ethical perfection.

Originally, there seem to have been only six *pāramitās* which were later made into a group of ten. The earlier six, as given in Buddhist Sanskrit works, are as follows: *dāna* (liberality), *sīla* (morality), *khanti* (patience), *virīya* (energy), *dhyāna* (concentration) and *paññā* (wisdom). The four supplementary *pāramitās* are *upāya* or *upāya kauśalya* (skill in means), *praṇidhāna* (resolution), *bala* (strength) and *jñāna* (knowledge). [1] In the Pali list there is *nekkhamma* (renunciation)

instead of *dhyāna* while *upāya*, *bala* and *jñāna* are replaced by *sacca* (truthfulness), *metta* (loving kindness) and *upekkhā*, (equanimity) respectively.

The length of a bodhisattva's career varies: some practise the *pāramitās* for at least four *asaṅkheyyas* and one hundred thousand *kappas*, others for at least eight *asaṅkheyyas* and one hundred thousand *kappas* and yet others for sixteen *asaṅkheyyas* and one hundred thousand *kappas*. The first of these periods is the very least required and is intended for those who excel in wisdom (*paññā*), the middle period for those who excel in faith (*saddhā*) and the last and the longest for those whose chief feature is perseverance.

An important event in the bodhisattva's life occurs when his penultimate life in the Tusita heaven is coming to an end and he is to leave the Tusita heaven and be reborn as a man. As this moment arrives, there is much excitement (*halāhala*), because of various signs appearing in the ten-thousand world-systems.

All the *devas* come together and request the bodhisattva to seek birth as a human being, whereupon the bodhisattva makes the five great investigations (*pañca-mahā-vilokana*) regarding the time, the continent, the place of birth, his mother and the life-span left to her. The time (*kāla*) has to be investigated because Buddhas do not appear in the

world when men live for more than one hundred thousand years or less than one hundred. Buddhas are born only in Jambudīpa (north India) and only in the *brāhmaṇa* or the *khattiya* clan. Once these investigations are made the bodhisattva proceeds to the Nandanavana where he formally disappears from among the *devas*.

The conception of the bodhisattva is attended by various miracles. Both in Pali and Sanskrit sources an attempt is made to show that at the actual moment of conception there is no physical union of father and mother. With regard to the general life of a bodhisattva as given in the books, the following account from the *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, G.P. Malalasekera (II pp. 324–7), may be quoted:

“On the day of his conception, the Bodhisattva’s mother takes the vows of fasting and celibacy at the conclusion of a great festival, and when she has retired to rest she dreams that the Four Regent Gods take her with her bed, bathe her in the Anotatta lake, clad her in divine garments and place her in a golden palace surrounded by all kinds of luxury. As she lies there the Bodhisattva in the form of a white elephant enters her womb through her right side. The earth trembles and all the ten thousand world-systems are filled with radiance. Immediately the four Regent Gods assume guard over mother and child.

“Throughout the period of pregnancy, which lasts for ten months exactly, the mother remains free from ailment and sees the child in her womb sitting cross-legged. At the end of the ten months she gives birth to the child, standing in a grove, never indoors. Suddhāvāsa brahmas, free from all passion, first receive the child in a golden net and from them the Four Regent Gods take him on an antelope skin and present him to his mother.

“Though the bodhisattva is born free of the mucous otherwise present at birth, two showers of water one hot, the other cold, fall from the sky and bathe mother and child. The child then takes seven strides to the north, standing firmly on his feet, looks on all sides, and seeing no one anywhere to equal him, announces his supremacy over the whole world and the fact that this is his last birth. Seven days after birth his mother dies. She dies because she must bear no other being.

“The Bodhisattva’s last birth is attended by miracles. Soothsayers, being summoned, see on the child’s body the thirty-two-marks of a Great Man (*mahāpurisa*) and declare that the child will become either a Cakkavatti or a Buddha. His father, desiring that his child shall be a Cakkavatti rather than a Buddha, brings him up in great luxury, hiding from him all sin and ugliness of the world. But the destiny of a Bodhisattva asserts itself, and he becomes aware

of the presence in the world of old age, disease, death and the freedom of mind to be found in the life of a recluse. Urged by the desire to discover the cause of suffering in the world and the way out of it, the Bodhisatta leaves the world on the day of his son's birth

“Having left the world, the Bodhisattva practises the austerities, the period of such practices varying. On the day the Bodhisattva attains to Buddhahood, he receives a meal of milk-rice (*pāyāsa*) from a woman and a gift of *kusa*-grass, generally from an *ājīvaka*, which he spreads under the Bodhi tree for his seat. The size of this seat varies.

“Before the enlightenment the Bodhisattva has five great dreams: (i) that the world is his couch with the Himalaya as his pillow, his left hand resting on the eastern sea, his right on the western and his feet on the southern; (ii) that a blade of *tiriyā* (*kusa*) grass, growing from his navel touches the clouds; (iii) that white worms with black heads creep up from his feet, covering his knees; (iv) that four birds of varied hues from the four quarters of the world fall at his feet and become white; and (v) that he walks to and fro on a heap of dung, by which he remains unsoiled.

“The next day the Bodhisattva sits cross-legged on his seat facing the east, determined not to rise till he

has attained his goal. The gods of all the worlds assemble to do him honour, but Māra comes with his mighty hosts and the gods flee. All day, the fight continues between Māra and the Bodhisattva; the pāramī alone are present to lend their aid to the Bodhisattva, and when the moment comes, the goddess of the earth bears witness to his great sacrifices, while Māra and his armies retire discomfited at the hour of sunset, the gods then returning and singing a paean of victory.

“Meanwhile the bodhisattva spends the night in deep concentration; during the first watch he acquires knowledge of past lives, during the second watch he develops the divine eye, while during the last watch he ponders over and comprehends the *paṭicca-samuppāda* doctrine. Backwards and forwards his mind travels over the chain of causation and twelve times the earth trembles. With sunrise, omniscience dawns on him, and he becomes the Supremely Awakened Buddha, uttering his *udāna* of victory while the whole world rejoices with him.”

If the bodhisattva ideal of the Mahāyāna be regarded as a protest against the arahant ideal of the Hīnayāna, there is an important fact that needs clarification. This is the charge of selfishness brought against the arahant. In this connection there is much misunderstanding. The charge of selfishness has to be

levelled not against the arahants but against those Theravāda monks who have portrayed arahantship as a selfish ideal by their own behaviour and writings and thereby made the higher religious life (*brahmcariya* or *adhisīla*) appear as something impracticable.

The Buddha has clearly shown, both by example and precept, the value of working for the welfare of others. The spirit of his teaching is that one should enlighten oneself first and then try to help those that can be helped as clearly expressed in the well-known words of the Buddha when he addressed the first sixty arahants to devote themselves to the service of others (Vin I 19–20). He also discouraged mere philosophy and speculation if it had no practical value.

But, quite in contrast to this noble example of the Teacher, his later followers, instead of following by practice the religious life he discovered and promulgated, began to make mere academic study thereof as an end in itself. They became speculators and philosophers, with very little practice. The Hīnayāna monk became more or less a fossilised antique living in a world of his own.

The protest of the Mahayanist was against this fossilisation and resultant indolence, and not against the arahant ideal as such. The Buddha and the genuine arahants who, after achieving their release, helped

mankind have to be absolved of this charge of selfishness. Yet, on the other hand, when the bodhisattva ideal was advocated, the pendulum swung to the other extreme of mere bodhisattva worship. The extreme intellectualism of the Hīnayāna was replaced by the extreme emotionalism of developed Mahāyāna. The true spirit of the Buddha's teaching lies in between, in a harmonious combination of intellect and emotion, of head and heart, of theory and practice. That would be the perfection of character as understood in Buddhism.

The Pali Canon shows little interest either in philosophical speculation or in the personality of the bodhisattvas who are simply treated as "larval forms" of the Buddha. Gautama himself would not have denied the possibility of becoming a Buddha to anyone who is intellectually and morally mature. The significant fact is that it became quite incredible that a superior being such as a Buddha should be suddenly produced in a human family. He was not to be explained as an incarnation. Hence it was quite logical and edifying to treat him as a product of a long evolution of virtue, extending over several existences of good deeds and noble aspirations, culminating in a being superior to both gods and men.

Such a being remains in the Tusita heaven in his penultimate existence biding the appropriate time to

be born among men. In this manner the Pali Canon, quite logically, recognises the bodhisattva as a rare type of man appearing at a certain stage in time and space. It leaves the matter at that. But later works like the Buddhavaṃsa, Cariyāpiṭaka, the Pali commentaries and the Mahāyāna sūtras went on developing the bodhisattva concept in such a way that he became an object of devotion and his human nature gradually disappeared. The Mahāyānists, in trying to remedy the situation, ended up by making him a saviour.

According to the Hīnayāna view, the bodhisattva's penultimate life is spent in the Tusita heaven where he enjoys the power and splendour of any Indian deity. But, as it did not admit more than one Buddha at a time, there was evidently also only one bodhisattva at a time in Tusita. In Mahāyāna, however, the multiplication of not only celestial Buddhas but also of celestial bodhisattvas became such a popular theme that as time went on their numbers became endless.

The bodhisattva ideal, with its more practical attitude to life, emphasises the value of family life. Renunciation of household life never meant running away from life. Nibbāṇa was to be sought not outside *saṃsāra* but within it. Gautama Buddha never recommended a 'life of aloofness or of perennial seclusion.' He was not an escapist and wanted none to

be so. What he taught was that owing to ignorance (*avijjā*), people do not see things as they really are, and as such they are given to their desires, which in turn prolong their suffering. His method was to remove this veil of ignorance so that there would be light.

It is the removal of mental illusion, resulting in a psychological revolution, which makes one free from the trammels of ordinary birth, disease and death. This cannot be achieved by running away from life. The problem has to be solved by facing and overcoming it, by changing the inner self, the mind where lies the cause of the problem. It is a change of attitude and outlook, resulting from the removal of ignorance. Such a person lives in the world, but is not of the world.

If a person can become enlightened after leading a family life, as Prince Siddhartha himself did, he would certainly be a more useful man than a sanctimonious ascetic living in the jungle. And it is this kind of pure social life that the bodhisattva ideal recommends. The ancient emphasis on inward life is given a new application.

The godly and efficient layman so envisaged is exemplified in the figure of Vimalakīrti described in the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*. This wealthy householder who was residing at Vaiśālī lived “only for the sake of the

necessary means of saving creatures; abundantly rich, ever careful of the poor, pure in self-discipline, obedient to all precepts, removing all anger by the practice of patience, removing all sloth by the practice of diligence, removing all distractions of mind by intent meditation, removing all ignorance by fullness of wisdom; though he was but a simple layman, yet observing the pure monastic discipline; though living at home, yet never desirous of anything; though possessing a wife and children, always exercising pure virtues; though surrounded by his family, holding aloof from worldly pleasures; though using the jewelled ornaments of the world, yet adorned with spiritual splendour; though eating and drinking, yet enjoying the flavour of the rapture of meditation; though frequenting the gambling house, yet leading the gamblers into the right path; though coming in contact with heresy, yet never letting his true faith be impaired; though having a profound knowledge of worldly learning, yet ever finding pleasure in the things of the spirit as taught by the Buddha; though profiting by all professions, yet far above being absorbed by them; benefiting all beings, going wheresoever he pleases; ever teaching the young and ignorant, when entering the hall of learning; manifesting to all the error of passion when in the hours of debauchery; persuading all to seek the higher

things when at the shop of the wine-dealer; preaching the law when among wealthy people; teaching the ksatriyas patience; removing arrogance when among Brahmins; teaching justice to the great ministers; teaching loyalty and filial piety to the princes; teaching honesty to the ladies of the court; persuading the masses to cherish virtue.”

The bodhisattva concept had its influence in the evolution of kingship in Sri Lanka too. For some time between the fourth and the eleventh centuries AD, the kings of Sri Lanka began to be regarded not as ordinary human beings but as bodhisattvas. The Jetavanārāma slab-inscription of Mahinda IV and the Prītidānaka-maṇṇapa inscription of Nissaṅkamalla are instances where the rulers refer to themselves as bodhisattvas. The *Rājatarāṅganī* (p.470) and the *Nikāyasaṅgraha* (ed. Kumāraṇatunga, p. 24) also bear evidence to this. Parākramabāhu II says that he would become a Buddha (Mahāvamsa, Ch. 86, v 7).

Charles Eliot mentions that in China there is a system of admission into the Order of the Sangha consisting of three stages: admission (*pabbajjā*), higher ordination (*upasampadā*) and the acceptance of the bodhisattva vows (*shou-pu-sa-chich*). The burning of the candidate’s head from three to eighteen places is said to be an essential part of the ceremony of taking the bodhisattva-vows. [2]

The worship of bodhisattvas needed iconographical representation and this need has been more than fulfilled by the creation of an abundance of bodhisattva images, especially in those countries that accepted Mahāyāna. Buddhist art became the richer through these artistic creations. In the subsequent phases of the bodhisattva-cult, these deified personages were given many forms in order to symbolise their multifarious functions. Sometimes they were given many heads and many arms which practice has sometimes led to the creation of such figures as exemplified by the thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara from Japan.

Notes

1. Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature*, London, 1932, p. 168. [\[Back\]](#)
2. *Hinduism and Buddhism*, III, p. 328 [\[Back\]](#)

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