A Bodhisattva Ideal in Five Nikāyas: A Fresh Perspective

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the academic study of Buddhism, the terms “Mahāyāna” and “Hīnayāna” are often set in contradiction to each other, and the two vehicles are described as having different aspirations, teachings, and practices. However, the distinctions made between the Mahāyāna and the Hīnayāna force the schools into neat, isolated, and independent categories that often undermine the complexities that exist concerning their beliefs, ideologies and practices.

While some of the categories used to differentiate the Mahāyāna and the Hīnayāna are helpful in the study and interpretation of Buddhism, these distinctions must continually be reviewed. I attempt to review one such distinction: the commonly held theoretical model that postulates that the goal of Mahāyāna practitioners is to become Buddhas by following the path of the bodhisattva (Bodhisattva), whereas the goal of Hīnayāna practitioners is to become arahants by following the path of the Hearer or the Buddha’s disciples (Śrāvakayāna). In demonstrating the oversimplifications inherent in this model, this article will investigate the presence and scope of the bodhisattva ideal in Theravada Buddhist theory and practice.

By raising issues surrounding the Mahāyāna-Hīnayāna opposition, however, I am not suggesting that distinctions cannot be made between the two vehicles, nor am I proposing to do away with the terms “Mahāyāna” and “Hīnayāna.” Rather, in exploring the oversimplifications inherent in the Mahāyāna-Hīnayāna dichotomy, it is my intention to replace the theoretical model that identifies: 1) Mahāyāna Buddhism with the Bodhisattva and, 2) Hīnayāna Buddhism with the Śrāvakayāna with a model that is more representative of the two vehicles. In doing so, the implied purpose of this article, as is John Holt’s study of the place and relevance of Avalokitesvara in Sri Lanka, is to “raise questions among students of Buddhism regarding the very utility of the terms Mahāyāna and Theravaada as designating wholly distinctive religiously historical constructs.”

II. CONTENTS

1. Brief Analysis of Three Mahāyāna Buddhists

Before turning to the presence and scope of the Bodhisattva Ideal in Theravada Buddhism (the only extant school of Hīnayāna Buddhism), it may be beneficial to investigate briefly the sources that identify the Bodhisattva with Mahāyāna Buddhism and the Śrāvakayāna with Hīnayāna Buddhism. Instead of looking at how this model is appropriated by scholars of Buddhism, I will turn to the writings of three Mahāyāna Buddhists in which this bifurcation is suggested.

One of the first Mahāyāna Buddhists who identifies the Bodhisattva with Mahāyāna Buddhism and the Śrāvakayāna with Hīnayāna Buddhism is Nagarjuna. In his Precious Garland of Advice for the King (Rajaparikatha-ratnamala), Nagarjuna rhetorically asks “Since all the aspirations, deeds and dedications of Bodhisattvas were not explained in the Hearer’s vehicle, how then one could become a Bodhisattva through its path?” In another instance, Naagaarjuna writes that “[In the Vehicle of the Hearers] Buddha did not explain the bases for a Bodhisattva’s enlightenment.” While Nagarjuna compares the Śrāvakayāna with the Bodhisattva in these first two passages, he later states that “the subjects based on the deeds of Bodhisattvas were not mentioned in the [Hīnayāna] sutras.” Nagarjuna’s third passage, then, suggests that subjects concerning bodhisattvas are found only in Mahāyāna texts and are absent from all Hīnayāna texts.

3 Ibid., p. 391.
4 Ibid., p. 393.
Another Mahāyāna Buddhist to uphold a Mahāyāna-Hinayāna distinction based on a bodhisattva-sravaka opposition is Asanga. As Richard S. Cohen illustrates,5 Asanga posits, in his Mahayanasutralamkara, that the Great Vehicle and the Hearers’ Vehicle are mutually opposed.6 Their contradictory nature includes intention, teaching, employment (i.e., means), support (which is based entirely on merit and knowledge), and the time that it takes to reach the goal.7 After Asanga discusses the opposing nature of these two vehicles, he then identifies the Śrāvakayāna as the lesser vehicle (Hinayāna), and remarks that the lesser vehicle (yanam hinam) is not able to be the great vehicle (Mahāyāna).8

Candrakirti is yet another Mahāyāna thinker who views the Mahāyāna and the Hinayāna as being mutually opposed. Like Asanga, Candrakirti uses the bodhisattva-sravaka distinction to separate Mahāyāna and Hinayāna Buddhism as well as to promote the Mahāyāna tradition over and against Hinayāna Buddhism. In his Madhyamakaavataara, for instance, he remarks that the lesser vehicle (Hinayāna) is the path reserved solely for disciples and solitary Buddhas, and that the greater vehicle (Mahāyāna) is the path reserved solely for bodhisattvas. Not only does Candrakirti associate the Bodhisattva with Mahāyāna Buddhism, he also clings to the belief that the Hinayāna schools know nothing of the “stages of the career of the future Buddha, the perfect virtues (paramita), the resolutions or vows to save all creatures, the application of merit to the acquisition of the quality of Buddha, [and] the great compassion.”9 In other words, for Candrakirti (as for Nagarjuna), the Hinayāna tradition does not present a bodhisattva doctrine.

2. Problems of These Three Commentators

The points raised by these Mahāyāna Buddhists are problematic for three reasons. First, the dichotomy presented by both Asanga and Candrakirti sets up an opposition between an ideology and an institutional affiliation. Rather than comparing an ideology with an ideology (bodhisattva and sravaka) or a Buddhist school with another Buddhist school, this opposition contrasts one ideology (arhatship through following the Śrāvakayāna) with an institutional affiliation (Mahāyāna Buddhism). In order for a more accurate distinction to be constructed, then, we must either compare the Bodhisattva with the Śrāvakayāna, or compare a Mahāyāna Buddhist school with a Hinayāna Buddhist school.

Another problem with the ideas put forth by Naagaarjuna, Asanga, and Candrakirti concerns their statements that Mahāyāna and Hinayāna Buddhism are mutually contradictory and exclusive. These assertions undermine the fact that the terms “Hinayāna” and “Mahāyāna” refer to numerous schools and that the category of “Hinayāna” includes even a number of “proto-Mahāyāna” schools (e.g., the Mahaaasanghikas).10 By using the terms “Mahāyāna” and “Hinayāna” monolithically, these thinkers ignore the plurality of doctrines, goals, and paths that are present in the schools.

The third problem inherent in the statements of these writers, and which will be the focus of this article, is that they assume that all followers of the Hinayāna are sravakas striving to become arahants while all followers of the Mahāyāna are bodhisattvas on the path to Buddhahood. As we shall see through the example of the only extant Hinayāna school, the Theravaadin tradition, this is clearly not the case.

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7 Ibid., 1:10.
8 The identification of the Hinayana schools of Buddhism with the sravaka-yana made by Asanga has been adopted by certain later scholars. For instance, Har Dayal makes this same identification as follows: “Corresponding to these three kinds of bodhi, there are three yanas or “Ways,” which lead an aspirant to the goal. The third yana was at first called the bodhisattva-yana, but it was subsequently re-named maha-yana. The other two yanas (i.e., the sravaka-yana and the pratye-kabuddhayana) were spoken of as the hinayana” (The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2003, p.11). The identification of Hinayana Buddhism with the sravakayana is also made by scholars like Leon Hurvitz, in Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, p. 116, and M. Monier-Williams, A Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004, p. 1097.
3. Bodhisattva Ideal in Pali Canon

It is first necessary to ascertain the presence and scope of the bodhisattva ideal in Theravada Buddhism. This will be accomplished by looking at the presence of the ideal in the Theravada Buddhist Pali canon (theory) as well as by investigating how the same ideal permeates the lives of Theravada Buddhists (practice).

The presence of the bodhisattva ideal in the Theravada Buddhist Pali canon is primarily restricted to Gotama Buddha. The use of the term “bodhisattva” occurs in a number of the suttas in the Majjhima, Anguttara, and Samyutta Nikaayas where the Buddha is purported to have said: “Monks, before my Awakening, and while I was yet merely the Bodhisattva, not fully-awakened...” 13 In addition to referring to the present life of Gotama, the term “bodhisattva” is also used in relation to the penultimate life of Gotama in Tusita heaven, as well as his conception and birth. 12

In later canonical texts, the bodhisattva ideal is further developed and associated with numerous concepts. These developments (which include the concept of a bodhisattva vow) may be said to introduce “into Theravada Buddhism what in Mahāyāna studies has been called the Bodhisattva ideal.” 11 In the Sutta Nipata, for example, the term “bodhisattva” refers to the historical Buddha prior to his enlightenment and signifies a being set on Buddhahood. 14 In addition, the bodhisattva ideal in this text is also associated with the quality of compassion. This is exemplified by the sage Asita’s remark to Gotama’s father (Suddhodana) that the young bodhisattva-prince “will come to the fulfillment of perfect Enlightenment... [and] will start turning the wheel of Truth out of compassion for the well-being of many.” 15

In yet another canonical text, the Buddhavamsa, the bodhisattva ideal is developed to the greatest extent. Here, the bodhisattva ideal refers to an ideal personage who makes a vow to become a fully and completely enlightened Buddha (sammassambuddha) out of compassion for all sentient beings, who performs various acts of merit, and who receives a prophecy of his future Buddhahood. In addition, the bodhisattva depicted in the Buddhavamsa makes a vow to become a bodhisattva only after the attainment of arahantship is within reach. This is portrayed in the chronicle of Sumedha. While Sumedha was lying in the mud and offering his body to the Buddha Dipankara to walk on, Sumedha thought: “If I so wished I could burn up my defilements today. What is the use while (remain) unknown of realizing dhamma here? Having reached omniscience, I will become a Buddha in the world with the devas.” 16

Another idea that arises in conjunction with the bodhisattva ideal is the need to complete a number of bodhisattva perfections (paramita); this can be found most clearly in the Buddhavamsa and the Cariyapitaka. In these two texts, ten perfections are delineated, as opposed to six perfections described in certain Mahāyāna texts (e.g., the Astasahasrika-Prajnaparamitasutra and the Ratnagunasamcayagatha). The Buddhavamsa and the Cariyapitaka also discuss how each of the ten perfections may be practiced at three different levels: a regular degree, a higher degree, and an ultimate degree of completion.

Though the concept of three degrees of perfection is suggested in the Buddhavamsa, 17 the Cariyapitaka explores the idea in more detail, especially with the example of the first paramita giving (dana). To exemplify how the perfection of giving (dana) was completed in the lowest degree, we find stories of how the bodhisattva gave people food; his own sandals and shade; an elephant; gifts to mendicants; wealth; clothing, beds, food, and drink; offerings; and even his own family members. 18 To illustrate how the same perfection was fulfilled in the middle degree, we read how the

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15 Ibid., v. 693.
16 Buddhavamsa 2A:54-55.
17 In Buddhavamsa 1:76-77, Sariputta asks the Buddha about his process of Awakening and how he fulfilled the ten perfections. He then asks: “Of what kind, wise one, leader of the world, were your ten perfections? How were the higher perfections fulfilled, trow the ultimate perfections?”
18 Cariyapitaka 1:1-1:8 and 1:9.
bodhisattva gave away his bodily parts such as his eye. 19 And finally, to demonstrate how the perfection of giving was fulfilled in the highest degree, we find a story of how the bodhisattva gave away his own life when he was a hare.20

In the Pali canon, the term “bodhisattva” is also used in reference to other previous Buddhas. For instance, in the Mahapadanasutta of the Digha Nikaya, the notion of past Buddhas (and hence past bodhisattvas) is elucidated. In the beginning of this sutta, the six Buddhas who preceded Gotama are mentioned as well as their names, the eons when they became Buddhas (i.e., when they attained enlightenment and taught), their caste, their clan, their life span, the trees where they attained enlightenment, the number of their disciples, their personal attendants, and their parents. 21 After briefly outlining the lives of these six Buddhas, Gotama begins an in-depth recollection of the first Buddha, Vipassi, from his life in Tusita heaven until he dispersed his monks for the purpose of spreading the teachings. In this narration, the Buddha not only refers to Vipassi up to his enlightenment as a bodhisattva, but also takes the life events of Vipassi as the example for all future bodhisattvas and Buddhas, including (retroactively) Gotama himself. 22

Another section of the suttapitaka where the term “bodhisattva” pertains to each of the six previous Buddhas is the Samyutta Nikaya. For instance, in the fourth section of the second book, we find the phrase “To Vipassi, brethren, Exalted One, Arahant, Buddha Supreme, before his enlightenment, while he was yet unenlightened and Bodhisatta, there came this thought....” This same phrase, then, is used in conjunction with the other five previous Buddhas in the following verses: Siki, Vessabhu, Kakusandha, Konagama, and Kassapa.

While most of the uses of the term “bodhisattva” concern Gotama Buddha and the numerous Buddhas who preceded him, there are also references in the Pali canon to the possibility of future Buddhas (and hence bodhisattvas). For example, in the Cakkavatishananasutta of the Digha Nikaya, the Buddha foretells of the future when “an Exalted One named Metteyya [Maitreya], Arahkan, Fully Awakened [i.e., sammaasamBuddha], abounding in wisdom and goodness, happy, with knowledge of the worlds, unsurpassed as a guide to mortals willing to be led, a teacher for gods and men, and Exalted One, a Buddha, even as I am now,” will arise.23

Though Maitreya is the only future Buddha mentioned specifically, the possibility of attaining Buddhahood is not restricted solely to him. In the Sampasadaniyasutta of the Digha Nikaya, for instance, Sariputta is professed to have said: “In the presence of the Exalted One have I heard him say and from him have received, that... in times gone by and in future times there have been, and will be other Supreme Buddhas equal to himself [i.e., Gotama] in the matter of Enlightenment.” 24 Thus, no longer is the term “bodhisattva” used solely in conjunction with Gotama, with other past Buddhas, and with Maitreya; the Bodhisattva is regarded as a possible, albeit difficult, path open to anyone who desires Buddhahood.

This more expanded use of the term “bodhisattva” is explicitly expressed in the Khuddakapaa.tha. In the eighth chapter of this canonical text (the Nidhikandasutta), the goal of Buddhahood is presented as a goal that should be pursued by certain exceptional beings. After demonstrating the impermanence and uselessness of accumulating and storing material possessions or treasures, the sutta mentions another type of treasure that is more permanent and which follows beings from birth to birth. This treasure results

19 Ibid., 1:8:2-3.
20 Ibid., 1:10:9, 1:10:22-23.
22 In many of the following paragraphs, for instance, we find the phrase “It is the rule, brethren, that....” (Ayam ettha dhammataa) used to refer to the paradigm set by Vipassi.

23 Digha Nikaya 3:76.
24 Ibid., 3:114. Though the possibility for the existence of other future Buddhas beside Metteyya is mentioned only briefly in the Pali canon, in other post-canonical Theravadin texts, there are more specific references to future bodhisattvas and buddhas. For instance, in the Dasabodhisattupappattikatha, the Dasabodhissattaddesas, and in one recension of the Anaagatavamsa Desana, the nine bodhisattvas who will follow Maitreya are mentioned. Moreover, in one recension of the Dasabodhisattupattikathaa, we even find the places of residence of seven of the ten bodhisattvas: Metteyya, Raama, Pasena, and Vibhuti are presently residing in Tusita heaven and Subhuuti, Nalagiri, and Parileyya are now in Taavati.msa heaven. Thus, it appears that the Theravadin tradition acknowledges certain “celestial” bodhisattvas who are currently residing in various heavenly realms and not that the only recognized bodhisattva in Theravada Buddhism is Maitreya (Edward Conze, Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies: Selected Essays by Edward Conze, Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1998, p. 38.)
from giving (dana), morality (sila), abstinence (samyama), and restraint (dana). This treasure fulfills all desires, leads to a rebirth in a beautiful body, enables one to become sovereign of a country and a loving spouse, and leads to rebirth in the human realm (from which liberation is possible) Moreover, the qualities of charity, virtue, abstinence, and restraint lead to the wisdom which produces the “bliss of Extinguishment” of either arahants, pratyekaBuddhas, or completely enlightened Buddhas. We read:

“Discriminating knowledge, release of mind, the perfections of a Noble Disciple of a Buddha, the Enlightenment of a Silent Buddha and the requisites for Supreme Buddhahood, all these (qualities) can be obtained by this (treasure).... Therefore wise and educated men praise the acquisition of meritorious actions”.

This sutta illustrates that the goal of Buddhahood and the path to the goal (i.e., Bodhisattva) are no longer simply associated with specific Buddhas of the past and future; rather, Buddhahood is one of three possible goals that may be pursued by “wise and educated” people.

Though the idea that anyone may become a Buddha through following the Bodhisattva is only present in the Theravada Buddhist Pali canon in seed form, it appears, nonetheless, to have been taken seriously by Theravadins. This is illustrated in the lives of numerous Theravadin kings, monks, and textual copyists who have taken the bodhisattva vow and are following the Bodhisattva to the eventual attainment of Buddhahood.

The relationship between kings and bodhisattvas has its source in the bodhisattva career of Gotama as depicted not only in his life as Prince Siddhartha, but also in his penultimate earthly life when he was King Vessantara. As King Vessantara, the bodhisattva exhibited his compassion by fulfilling the perfection of giving. For instance, we find that the bodhisattva gave away his elephant to alleviate a drought in nearby Kalinga, his wealth, his kingdom, and his wife and children, and was even willing to give away his own life out of compassion for other beings.

Though the paradigm for the close association between the institution of kingship and Buddhahood came from Gotama when he was a bodhisattva, it was quickly adopted by Theravadin kings by the second century B.C.E. and fully incorporated after the eighth century C.E. In the early examples, we find the relationship drawn between kings and bodhisattvas in numerous, albeit tempered, ways. For instance, King Duttagamani exhibited the quality of compassion by refusing to enter the heavenly realm after his previous life as an ascetic (samanera) so that he could be reborn as a prince and unite the regional rulers of Sri Lanka as well as help develop the sangha and the Buddha’s teaching. Though Duttagamani is not referred to as a bodhisattva in the Mahavamsa, he appears to demonstrate certain bodhisattvic qualities. Just as a bodhisattva renounces the enlightenment of an arahant so that he could be reborn countless times in this world of impermanence and suffering out of compassion for all beings, so, too, did King Duttagamani renounce the world of the devas in order to return to this world of suffering for the sake of the Buddhist doctrine and out of compassion for all inhabitants on the island of Sri Lanka.

Similar examples of bodhisattva-like compassion are exhibited by King Sirisamghabodhi, who is said to have risked his life to save the inhabitants of Sri Lanka from a devastating drought and who even offered his own head in order to divert a potential war; by King Buddhadasa, who created “happiness by every means for the inhabitants of the island... and who was [gifted with wisdom [i.e., panna] and virtue [i.e., sila]... endowed with the ten qualities of kings [i.e., the ten raajadharmas]... and lived openly before the people the life that bodhisattas lead and had pity for (all) beings as a father (has pity for) his children”; and especially by King Upatissa, who fulfilled the ten bodhisattva perfections during his reign.

By the eighth century C.E., the amalgamation between the institution of kingship and bodhisattvas became even stronger. At this time, we find evidence of certain Theravadin kings in Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand who openly declared themselves to be bodhisattvas. For example, King Nissanka Malla (1187-1196 C.E.) of Polonnaruva, Ceylon, states that “I will show my self in my [true] body which is endowed with benevolent regard for and attachment to the

25 Khuddakapatha 8:15-16.
26 Though the accessibility of these three goals to all beings is only briefly mentioned in the Khuddakapatha, in the Upasakajanalankara (a twelfth-century Pali text dealing with lay Buddhist ethics), all three ways of liberation are clearly admitted (Hajime Nakamura, Indian Buddhism: A Survey with Bibliographical Notes, Osaka: Kufs Publication, 1999, p. 119.
28 Ibid., 36:76.
29 Mahavamsa 36:91.
30 Culavamsa, 37:106.
virtuous qualities of a bodhisattva king, who like a parent, protects the world and the religion.” 34 In other epigraphical markings, there is a reference to King Paraakramabahu VI as “Bodhisatva Paraakrama Baahu.” Finally, the conflation of kings and bodhisattvas on the island of Sri Lanka is established most strongly by King Mahinda IV, who not only referred to himself as a bodhisattva as a result of his bodhisattva-like resolute determination, but who even went so far as to proclaim that “none but the bodhisattwas would become kings of prosperous Lanka.” 32

In Burma, the relationship between kings and bodhisattvas is exemplified with King Kyanzittha, who claimed himself to be “the Bodhisatva, who shall verily become a Buddha that saves and redeems all beings, who is great in love and compassion for all beings at all times...and who was foretold by the Lord Buddha, who is to become a true Buddha.” In another instance, King Alaungsithu wrote that he would like to build a causeway to help all beings reach “The Blessed City [i.e., nirvana].” Finally, kings Sri Tribhuvanaditya, Thiluwin Man, Cansu I, and Natomnya all referred to themselves as bodhisattvas. 33

In Thailand, a similar connection is drawn. One example of a Thai bodhisattva-king is Lu T’ai of Sukhothai who “wished to become a Buddha to help all beings... leave behind the sufferings of transmigration.” (45) The relation between King Lu T’ai and bodhisattvahood is also manifested by the events occurring at his ordination ceremony that were similar to “the ordinary course of happenings in the career of a Bodhisattva.” 34

While it may by argued that these bodhisattva kings were influenced by certain Mahāyāna doctrines when they appropriated certain bodhisattvic qualities or took the bodhisattva vow, this does not invalidate the relationship between kingship and bodhisattvas in Theravaḍa Buddhism. Though a link may be established between these bodhisattva kings and Mahāyāna Buddhism, this does not dismiss the fact that the bodhisattva ideal was taken seriously by Theravadin kings or that the bodhisattva ideal has a place in Theravada Buddhist theory and practice. Moreover, while it may be possible to posit that these kings were influenced by Mahāyāna concepts, it is impossible to demonstrate that these kings were only influenced by Mahāyāna Buddhism; just because a king may have been influenced by Mahāyāna ideas does not mean that certain Theravada ideas, including the ideas of a bodhisattva as found in the Buddhava.msa and Cariyapitaka, were not equally influential.

The presence of a bodhisattva ideal in Theravada Buddhism is also represented by the numerous examples of other Theravadin monks who have either referred to themselves or have been referred to by others as bodhisattvas. The celebrated commentator Buddhaghosa, for example, was viewed by the monks of the Anuradhapura monastery as being, without doubt, an incarnation of Metteyya. 35 There are even some instances of Theravadin monks who expressed their desire to become fully enlightened Buddhas. For instance, the twentieth-century Bhikkhu, Doratiyaveye of Sri Lanka, after being deemed worthy of receiving certain secret teachings by his meditation teacher, refused to practice such techniques because he felt that it would cause him to enter on the Path and attain the level of arahant in this lifetime or within seven lives (i.e., by becoming a sotapanna). This was unacceptable to Doratiyaveye because he saw himself as a bodhisattva who had already made a vow to attain Buddhahood in the future. 36

The vow to become a Buddha was also taken by certain Theravadin textual copyists and authors. The author of the commentary on the Jataka (the Jatakattakatha), for example, concludes his work with the vow to complete the ten bodhisattva perfections in the future so that he will become a Buddha and liberate “the whole world with its gods from the bondage of repeated births...[and] guide them to the most excellent and tranquil Nibbana.” Another example of a Theravadin author who wished to become a Buddha by following the Bodhisattva is the SriLankan monk MahaTipitaka Culabhaya. In his twelfth-century subcommentary on the Questions of King Milinda, he “wrote in the colophon at the end of the work that he wished to

31 Epigraphia Zeylanica, 2:76.
32 Ibid., 1:240.

become a Buddha: Buddho Bhaveyya ‘May I become a Buddha.’

4. Perspective on Bodhisattva and Sravaka:

While many ‘canonical uses of the term “bodhisattva” refer to Gotama prior to his attainment of Buddhahood, in other canonical texts (such as the Buddhavamsa), the term designates a being who, out of compassion for other beings, vows to become a fully and completely enlightened Buddha (sammassamBuddha), performs various acts of merit, renounces the enlightenment of arhants, receives a prophecy of his future Buddhahood, and fulfills or completes the ten bodhisattva perfections. In addition, the bodhisattva ideal was also developed in terms of its application. Not only does the word “bodhisattva” pertain to Gotama and all previous Buddhas before their enlightenment, it also applies to any being who wishes to pursue the path to perfect Buddhahood. This new development resulted in a more general adherence to the ideal by numerous Theravadin kings, monks, textual scholars, and even lay people.

The presence and scope of the bodhisattva ideal in Theravaada Buddhist theory and practice, then, appears to belie Nagarjuna’s, Asanga’s, and Candrakirti’s claims not only that the “subjects based on the deeds of Bodhisattvas were not mentioned in the Hinayana sutras,” but also that the lesser vehicle (Hinayana) knows nothing of the “stages of the career of the future Buddha,” the perfect virtues (paramittta), the resolutions or vows to save all creatures, the application of merit to the acquisition of the quality of Buddha, the great compassion.” In addition, the presence of a developed bodhisattva doctrine in the Buddhavamsa and the Cariyapitaka also calls into question the commonly held belief that the bodhisattva ideal underwent major doctrinal developments in early Mahayana Buddhism; there are numerous similarities between the bodhisattva ideal as found in the Buddhavamsa and as found in certain early Mahayana Buddhist texts such as the Ratnagunasamcayagatha. Both of these texts, for instance, express the need for the completion of certain bodhisattva perfections, the importance of making a vow to become a Buddha, the notion of accumulating and applying merit for the attainment of Buddhahood, the role of compassion, and the implicit presence of certain bodhisattva stages.

Even though the bodhisattva ideal did not undergo substantial doctrinal developments between the later canonical texts and certain early Mahayana texts, it was developed in terms of its application. Whereas the goal of becoming a Buddha becomes the focus of the Mahayana tradition, this goal remains de-emphasized in the Theravadin tradition. In other words, although the bodhisattva ideal in Mahayana Buddhism becomes a goal that is applied to everyone, the same ideal in Theravada Buddhism is reserved for the exceptional person.

This distinction is described by Walpola Rahula: “though the Theravadins believe that anyone can become a bodhisattva, they do not stipulate or insist that everyone must become a bodhisattva--this is not considered to be reasonable. It is up to the individual to decide which path to take, that of the Sravaka, that of the PratyekaBuddha, or that of the SamyaksamBuddha.”

The state of Buddhahood is highly praised in both traditions. In Mahayana Buddhism, this praise for and focus on the ideal of Buddhahood has resulted in a vast amount of literature centered on the bodhisattva ideal. In the Theravadin tradition, on the other hand, the high regard for Buddhahood has never led to a universal application of the goal, nor has it resulted in a vast amount of literature in which the bodhisattva concept is delineated. As K. R. Norman posits: “The Buddhavamsa is therefore a developed

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38 Epigraphia Zeylanica, 4:133.
39 While the concept of the bodhisattva stages is not overtly delineated in the Buddhavamsa, it is implicit in the text. The stages found in the Mahayana, though, closely resemble the four bhumi outlined in one section of the Mahavastu, and not the traditional ten stages found in the Dasabhumi Sutra. These four stages outlined in the Mahavastu (1:1 and 46 ff.) are: (a) the natural career (prakritya), in which a bodhisattva acquires merit by living a righteous life, giving alms to the sangha, and honoring the buddhas; (b) the resolving stage (pranidhana-carya), in which a bodhisattva makes a vow to attain buddhahood; (c) the conforming stage (anuloma-carya), in which a bodhisattva advances to his goal by fulfilling the perfections (paramita); and finally, (d) the preserving stage (anivarana-carya), whereby a bodhisattva is destined to become a budhha and cannot turn back from the path to buddhahod.
Bodhisattva doctrine, but it was not developed further, even in the Abhidharma.”

III. CONCLUSION

These above-mentioned differences between the two traditions are essential and are a useful means to distinguish Theravada from Mahāyāna Buddhism. Rather than simply identifying the Bodhisattva with the various Mahāyāna schools and the Śrāvakayāna with the numerous Hinayāna schools (as does the old model, which illustrates the ideas put forth by Nagarjuna, Asanga, and Candrakirti), the revised theoretical model may more accurately portray the differences that exist between the two yanas by referring to Mahāyāna Buddhism as a vehicle in which the bodhisattva ideal is more universally applied, and to Theravada Buddhism as a vehicle in which the bodhisattva ideal is reserved for and appropriated by certain exceptional people.

Put somewhat differently, while the Bodhisattva and the goal of Buddhahood continues to be accepted as one of three possible goals by followers of Theravada Buddhism, this same goal becomes viewed as the only acceptable goal by followers of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Hence, it should be stressed that the change introduced by the Mahāyāna traditions is not so much an invention of a new type of saint or a new ideology, but rather a taking of an exceptional ideal and bringing it into prominence.42

BIBLIOGRAPHY


