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THE BODHISATTVA IDEAL IN THERAVĀDA
BUDDHIST THEORY AND PRACTICE:
A REEVALUATION OF THE
BODHISATTVA–ŚRĀVAKA OPPOSITION

Jeffrey Samuels

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. The distinctions made between the Mahāyāna and the Hīnayāna, however, force the schools into neat, isolated, and independent categories that often undermine the complexities that exist concerning their beliefs, ideologies, and practices.

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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. This article attempts 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-yāna*), whereas the goal of Hīnayāna practitioners is to become arahants by following the path of the Hearer or the Buddha’s disciples (*śrāvaka-yāna*). In demonstrating the oversimplifications inherent in this model, this article will investigate the presence and scope of the bodhisattva ideal in Theravāda 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-yāna* and (2) Hīnayāna Buddhism with the *śrāvaka-yāna* 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 Avalokiteśvara in Sri Lanka, is to “raise questions among students of Buddhism regarding the very utility of the terms Mahāyāna . . . and Theravāda as designating wholly distinctive religio-historical constructs”¹ (emphasis added).

Before turning to the presence and scope of the bodhisattva ideal in Theravāda Buddhism (the only extant school of Hīnayāna Buddhism), it may be beneficial to investigate briefly the sources that identify the *bodhisattva-yāna* with Mahāyāna Buddhism and the *śrāvaka-yāna* 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.

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One of the first Mahāyāna Buddhists who identifies the *bodhisattva-yāna* with Mahāyāna Buddhism and the *śrāvaka-yāna* with Hīnayāna Buddhism is Nāgārjuna. In his *Precious Garland of Advice for the King (Rājaparīkathā-ratnamālā)*, Nāgārjuna rhetorically asks “Since all the aspirations, deeds and dedications of Bodhisattvas were not explained in the Hearers’ vehicle, how then could one become a Bodhisattva through its path?”² In another instance, Nāgārjuna writes that “[In the Vehicle of the Hearers] Buddha did not explain the bases for a Bodhisattva’s enlightenment.”³ While Nāgārjuna compares the *śrāvaka-yāna* with the *bodhisattva-yāna* in these first two passages, he later states that “the subjects based on the deeds of Bodhisattvas were not mentioned in the [Hīnayāna] sūtras.”⁴ Nāgārjuna’s third passage, then, suggests that subjects concerning bodhisattvas are found only in Mahāyāna texts and are absent from *all* Hīnayāna texts.

Another Mahāyāna Buddhist to uphold a Mahāyāna–Hīnayāna distinction based on a bodhisattva–*śrāvaka* opposition is Asaṅga. As Richard S. Cohen illustrates,⁵ Asaṅga posits, in his *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*, 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 Asaṅga discusses the opposing nature of these two vehicles, he then identifies the *śrāvaka-yāna* as the lesser vehicle (Hīnayāna), and remarks that the lesser vehicle (*yānaṃ hīnaṃ*) is not able to be the great vehicle (Mahāyāna).⁸

Candrakīrti is yet another Mahāyāna thinker who views the Mahāyāna and the Hīnayāna as being mutually opposed. Like Asaṅga, Candrakīrti uses the bodhisattva–*śrāvaka* distinction to separate Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna Buddhism as well as to promote the Mahāyāna tradition over and against Hīnayāna Buddhism. In his *Mādhyamakāvātāra*, for instance, he remarks that the lesser vehicle (Hīnayāna) 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 Candrakīrti associate the *bodhisattva-yāna* with Mahāyāna Buddhism, he also clings to the belief that the Hīnayāna schools know nothing of the “stages of the career of the future Buddha, the perfect virtues (*pāramitā*), 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 Candrakīrti (as for Nāgārjuna), the Hīnayāna tradition does not present a bodhisattva doctrine.

The points raised by these Mahāyāna Buddhists are problematic for three reasons. First, the dichotomy presented by both Asaṅga and Candrakīrti sets up an opposition between an ideology and an institutional affiliation. Rather than comparing an ideology with an ideology (bodhisattva and *śrāvaka*) or a Buddhist school with another Buddhist school,

this opposition contrasts one ideology (arahantship through following the *śrāvaka-yāna*) with an institutional affiliation (Mahāyāna Buddhism). In order for a more accurate distinction to be constructed, then, we must either compare the *bodhisattva-yāna* with the *śrāvaka-yāna*, or compare a Mahāyāna Buddhist school with a Hīnayāna Buddhist school.

Another problem with the ideas put forth by Nāgārjuna, Asaṅga, and Candrakīrti concerns their statements that Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna Buddhism are mutually contradictory and exclusive. These assertions undermine the fact that the terms “Hīnayāna” and “Mahāyāna” refer to numerous schools and that the category of “Hīnayāna” includes even a number of “proto-Mahāyāna” schools (e.g., the Mahāsaṅghikas).¹⁰ By using the terms “Mahāyāna” and “Hīnayāna” 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 Hīnayāna are *śrāvakas* 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 Hīnayāna school, the Theravādin tradition, this is clearly not the case.

Before reevaluating the bodhisattva–*śrāvaka* opposition as it is presented by Nāgārjuna, Asaṅga, and Candrakīrti, it is first necessary to ascertain the presence and scope of the bodhisattva ideal in Theravāda Buddhism. This will be accomplished by looking at the presence of the ideal in the Theravāda Buddhist Pāli canon (theory) as well as by investigating how the same ideal permeates the lives of Theravāda Buddhists (practice).

The presence of the bodhisattva ideal in the Theravāda Buddhist Pāli canon is primarily restricted to Gotama Buddha. The use of the term “bodhisattva” occurs in a number of the *sūttas* (Skt: *sūtra*) in the *Majjhima*, *Anguttara*, and *Samyutta Nikāyas* where the Buddha is purported to have said: “Monks, before my Awakening, and while I was yet merely the Bodhisatta [Skt: bodhisattva], not fully-awakened. . . .”¹¹ 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 Tuṣita (Pāli: 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 Theravāda Buddhism what in Mahāyāna studies has been called ‘the Bodhisattva ideal.’”¹³ In the *Sutta Nipāta*, 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

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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 *Buddhavaṃsa*, 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 (*sammāsambuddha*) out of compassion for all sentient beings,¹⁶ who performs various acts of merit,¹⁷ and who receives a prophecy of his future buddhahood.¹⁸ In addition, the bodhisattva depicted in the *Buddhavaṃsa* 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 Dīpaṅkara to walk on, Sumedha thought: "If I so wished I could burn up my defilements today. What is the use while I (remain) unknown of realizing dhamma here? Having reached omniscience, I will become a Buddha in the world with the devas."¹⁹

Another idea that arises in conjunction with the bodhisattva ideal is the need to complete a number of bodhisattva perfections (*pāramitā*); this can be found most clearly in the *Buddhavaṃsa* and the *Cariyāpiṭaka*.²⁰ In these two texts, ten perfections are delineated, as opposed to six perfections described in certain Mahāyāna texts (e.g., the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-Prajñāpāramitāsūtra* and the *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā*). The *Buddhavaṃsa* and the *Cariyāpiṭaka* 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 *Buddhavaṃsa*,²¹ the *Cariyāpiṭaka* explores the idea in more detail, especially with the example of the first *pāramitā*—giving (*dāna*). To exemplify how the perfection of giving (*dāna*) 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.²² To illustrate how the same perfection was fulfilled in the middle degree, we read how the bodhisattva gave away his bodily parts such as his eye.²³ 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.²⁴

In the Pāli canon, the term "bodhisattva" is also used in reference to other previous buddhas. For instance, in the *Mahāpadānasutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, 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.²⁵ After briefly outlining the lives of these six buddhas, Gotama begins an in-depth recollection of the first buddha, Vipassī, from his life in Tuṣita heaven until he dispersed his monks for the purpose of spreading the teachings. In this narration, the Buddha not only refers to Vipassī up to his enlightenment as a bodhisattva,²⁶ but also takes the life events of Vipassī as the example for all future bodhisattvas and buddhas, including (retroactively) Gotama himself.²⁷

Another section of the *sutta-piṭaka* where the term “bodhisattva” pertains to each of the six previous buddhas is the *Samyutta Nikāya*. For instance, in the fourth section of the second book, we find the phrase “To Vipassī, brethren, Exalted One, Arahant, Buddha Supreme, before his enlightenment, while he was yet unenlightened and Bodhisat[ta], there came this thought. . . .” This same phrase, then, is used in conjunction with the other five previous buddhas in the following verses: Sikhi, Vessabhu, Kakusandha, Konāgamaṇa, and Kassapa.²⁸

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 Pāli canon to the possibility of future buddhas (and hence bodhisattvas). For example, in the *Cakkavatisihanādasutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the Buddha foretells of the future when “an Exalted One named Metteyya [Skt: Maitreya], Arahant, Fully Awakened [i.e., *sammāsambuddha*], 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.²⁹

Though Maitreya is the only future buddha mentioned specifically, the possibility of attaining buddhahood is not restricted solely to him. In the *Sampasādanīyasutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, for instance, Sāriputta 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.”³⁰ Thus, no longer is the term “bodhisattva” used solely in conjunction with Gotama, with other past buddhas, and with Maitreya; the *bodhisattva-yāna* 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 *Khuddakapāṭha*. In the eighth chapter of this canonical text (the *Nidhikaṇḍasutta*), 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

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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 from giving (*dāna*), morality (*sīla*), abstinence (*saṃyama*), and restraint (*dama*). 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) [i.e., *sāvaka-pāramī*], the Enlightenment of a Silent Buddha [i.e., *paccekabodhi*] and the requisites for (Supreme) Buddhahood [i.e., *buddhabhūmi*], all these (qualities) can be obtained by this (treasure). . . . Therefore wise and educated men praise the acquisition of meritorious actions.³¹

This *sutta* illustrates that the goal of buddhahood and the path to the goal (i.e., *bodhisattva-yāna*) 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.³²

Though the idea that anyone may become a buddha through following the *bodhisattva-yāna* is only present in the Theravāda Buddhist Pāli canon in seed form, it appears, nonetheless, to have been taken seriously by Theravādins. This is illustrated in the lives of numerous Theravādin kings, monks, and textual copyists who have taken the bodhisattva vow and are following the *bodhisattva-yāna* 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 Siddhārtha (Pāli: Siddhattha), 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 Kāliṅga, 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 Theravādin 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 Duṭṭagāmaṇī exhibited the quality of compassion by refusing to enter

the heavenly realm after his previous life as an ascetic (*sāmaṇera*) 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.³³ Though Duṭṭagāmaṇī is not referred to as a bodhisattva in the *Mahāvamsa*, 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 Duṭṭagāmaṇī 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 Sirisaṃghabodhi, who is said to have risked his life to save the inhabitants of Sri Lanka from a devastating drought³⁴ and who even offered his own head in order to divert a potential war;³⁵ by King Buddhadāsa, who created "happiness by every means for the inhabitants of the island . . . [and who was] gifted with wisdom [i.e., *paññā*] and virtue [i.e., *sīla*], . . . endowed with the ten qualities of kings [i.e., the ten *rājadhammas*], . . . [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";³⁶ and especially by King Upatissa, who fulfilled the ten bodhisattva perfections during his reign.³⁷

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 Theravādin kings in Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand who openly declared themselves to be bodhisattvas. For example, King Niśśanka 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 virtuous qualities of a bodhisattva king, who like a parent, protects the world and the religion."³⁸ In other epigraphical markings, there is a reference to King Parākramabāhu VI as "Bodhisattva [*sic*] Parākrama Bāhu."³⁹ 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,⁴⁰ but who even went so far as to proclaim that "none but the bodhisattas would become kings of prosperous Laṅkā."⁴¹

In Burma, the relationship between kings and bodhisattvas is exemplified with King Kyanzittha, who claimed himself to be "the bodhisattva [*sic*], 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."⁴² In another instance, King Alaungsithu wrote that he would like to build a causeway to help all beings reach "The Blessed City [i.e.,

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nirvāṇa].⁴³ Finally, kings Śrī Tribhuvanāditya, Thiluiñ Mañ, Cañsū I, and Nātoñmyā all referred to themselves as bodhisattvas.⁴⁴

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."⁴⁶

While it may be 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 Theravāda 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 Theravādin kings or that the bodhisattva ideal has a place in Theravāda 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 Theravāda ideas, including the ideas of a bodhisattva as found in the *Buddhavaṃsa* and *Cariyāpīṭaka*, were not equally influential.

The presence of a bodhisattva ideal in Theravāda Buddhism is also represented by the numerous examples of other Theravādins 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 Anurādhapura monastery as being, without doubt, an incarnation of Metteyya.⁴⁷ There are even some instances of Theravādin monks who expressed their desire to become fully enlightened buddhas. For instance, the twentieth-century *bhikkhu*, Doratiyāveye of Sri Lanka (ca. 1900), 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 *sottāpanna*). This was unacceptable to Doratiyāveye because he saw himself as a bodhisattva who had already made a vow to attain buddhahood in the future.⁴⁸

The vow to become a buddha was also taken by certain Theravādin textual copyists and authors. The author of the commentary on the *Jātaka* (the *Jātakatṭakathā*), 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 Nibbāna.”⁴⁹ Another example of a Theravādin author who wished to become a buddha by following the *bodhisattva-yāna* is the Śrī Laṅkān monk Mahā-Tiṭṭhaka Cūlābhaya. In his twelfth-century sub-commentary on the *Questions of King Milinda*, he “wrote in the colophon at the end of the work that he wished to become a buddha: *Buddho Bhaveyyaṃ* ‘May I become a Buddha.’”⁵⁰

A Reevaluation of the Bodhisattva–Śrāvaka Opposition

While many canonical uses of the term “bodhisattva” refer to Gotama prior to his attainment of buddhahood, in other canonical texts (such as the *Buddhavaṃsa*), the term designates a being who, out of compassion for other beings, vows to become a fully and completely enlightened buddha (*sammāsambuddha*), performs various acts of merit, renounces the enlightenment of arahants, 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 Theravādin kings, monks, textual scholars, and even lay people.⁵¹

The presence and scope of the bodhisattva ideal in Theravāda Buddhist theory and practice, then, appears to belie Nāgārjuna’s, Asaṅga’s, and Candrakīrti’s claims not only that the “subjects based on the deeds of Bodhisattvas were not mentioned in the [Hīnayāna] sūtras,” but also that the lesser vehicle (Hīnayāna) knows nothing of the “stages of the career of the future Buddha,⁵² the perfect virtues (*pāramitā*), the resolutions or vows to save all creatures, the application of merit to the acquisition of the quality of Buddha, [and] the great compassion.” In addition, the presence of a developed bodhisattva doctrine in the *Buddhavaṃsa* and the *Cariyāpiṭaka* also calls into question the commonly held belief that the bodhisattva ideal underwent major doctrinal developments in early Mahāyāna Buddhism; there are numerous similarities between the bodhisattva ideal as found in the *Buddhavaṃsa* and as found in certain early Mahāyāna Buddhist texts such as the *Ratnaguṇa-saṃcayagāthā*.⁵³ 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 Mahāyāna texts, it was developed in terms of its application. Whereas the goal of becoming a buddha becomes the focus of the Mahāyāna

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tradition, this goal remains de-emphasized in the Theravādin tradition. In other words, although the bodhisattva ideal in Mahāyāna Buddhism becomes a goal that is applied to everyone, the same ideal in Theravāda Buddhism is reserved for the exceptional person. This distinction is described by Walpola Rahula:

Though the Theravādins 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 Śrāvaka, that of the Pratyekabuddha, or that of the Samyak-sambuddha [i.e., *sammāsambuddha*].⁵⁴

The state of buddhahood is highly praised in both traditions. In Mahāyāna 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 Theravādin 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 Buddhavaṃsa is therefore a developed Bodhisattva doctrine, but it was not developed further, even in the Abhidharma.”⁵⁵

These above-mentioned differences between the two traditions are essential and are a useful means to distinguish Theravāda from Mahāyāna Buddhism. Rather than simply identifying the *bodhisattva-yāna* with the various Mahāyāna schools and the *śrāvaka-yāna* with the numerous Hīnayāna schools (as does the old model, which illustrates the ideas put forth by Nāgārjuna, Asaṅga, and Candrakīrti), the revised theoretical model may more accurately portray the differences that exist between the two *yānas* by referring to Mahāyāna Buddhism as a vehicle in which the bodhisattva ideal is more universally applied, and to Theravāda Buddhism as a vehicle in which the bodhisattva ideal is reserved for and appropriated by certain exceptional people. Put somewhat differently, while the *bodhisattva-yāna* and the goal of buddhahood continues to be accepted as one of three possible goals by followers of Theravāda 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.⁵⁶

NOTES

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- 1 – John C. Holt, *Buddha in the Crown: Avalokitesvara in the Buddhist Traditions of Sri Lanka* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. viii–ix.
- 2 – Nāgārjuna, *Precious Garland of Advice for the King and the Song of the Four Mindfulnesses*, trans. Jeffrey Hopkins and Lati Rimpoche, The Wisdom of Tibet Series, no. 2 (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1975), v. 390.
- 3 – *Ibid.*, v. 391.
- 4 – *Ibid.*, v. 393.
- 5 – Richard S. Cohen, “Discontented Categories: Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna in Indian Buddhist History,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63 (1) (1995): pp. 2–3.
- 6 – Asaṅga, *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*, trans. Surekha Vijay Limaye, Bibliotheca Indo-Buddhica Series, no. 94 (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1992), 1 : 9.
- 7 – *Ibid.*, 1 : 10.
- 8 – *Yānaṃ hīnaṃ hīnam eva tat na tan Mahāyānaṃ bhavitum arhati* (*ibid.*). The identification of the Hīnayāna schools of Buddhism with the *śrāvaka-yāna* made by Asaṅga 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 *yānas* or “Ways,” which lead an aspirant to the goal. The third *yāna* was at first called the *bodhisattva-yāna*, but it was subsequently re-named *mahā-yāna*. The other two *yānas* (i.e., the *śrāvaka-yāna* and the *pratyekabuddha-yāna*) were spoken of as the *hīna-yāna*” (*The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* [Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975], p. 11). The identification of Hīnayāna Buddhism with the *śrāvaka-yāna* is also made by scholars like Leon Hurvitz, in *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), p. 116, and M. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990), p. 1097.

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- 9 – Louis de La Vallée Poussin, “Bodhisattva,” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913), 8:334.
- 10 – André Bareau, *Les Sectes Bouddhiques du Petit Véhicule* (Paris: École Française D’Extrême-Orient, 1955).
- 11 – “*Pubbe va me, bhikkhave, sambodhā, anabhisambuddhassa bodhisattassa sato, edad ahoṣi.*” The suttas in which the word “bodhisattva” follows this prelude are: *Majjhima Nikāya* 1:17, 92, 114, 163, 240; 2:93, 211; 3:157; *Anguttara Nikāya* 3:240; 4:302, 438; and *Samyutta Nikāya* 2:4; 3:27; 4:233; 5:281, 316. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to the Pāli canon are from the English translation of the Pāli Text Society.
- 12 – *Majjhima Nikāya* 3:119–120, and *Dīgha Nikāya* 2:108.
- 13 – Richard Gombrich, “The Significance of Former Buddhas in the Theravādin Tradition,” *Buddhist Studies in Honour of Walpola Rahula*, ed. Somaratna Balasooriya et al. (London: Gordon Fraser Gallery, 1980), p. 68.
- 14 – H. Saddhatissa, trans., *The Sutta-Nipata* (London: Curzon Press, 1985), v. 683.
- 15 – *Ibid.*, v. 693.
- 16 – The vow to become a buddha includes both the qualities of mental determination (i.e., *manopaṇidhi*) and aspiration (*abhinīhārakaraṇa*) to attain buddhahood: to engage in the long and arduous path to complete and perfect enlightenment (i.e., *sammāsambuddha*). Whereas the mental determination to become a buddha is made silently to oneself and is analogous to the Mahāyāna concept of *bodhicitta* or “thought of Enlightenment,” the aspiration is usually made in the presence of an existing buddha. Though the mental determination to become a buddha occurs only once, the aspiration to attain buddhahood must be repeated in the presence of all subsequent buddhas (I. B. Horner, introduction to the *Buddhavaṃsa* [Chronicles of the Buddha], Sacred Books of the Buddhists, vol. 31 [London: Pāli Text Society, 1975], pp. xiv–xv). The clearest example of a bodhisattva vow is found in *Buddhavaṃsa* 2A:56 ff., where the bodhisattva Sumedha thought:

What is the use of my crossing over alone, being a man aware of my strength? Having reached omniscience, I will cause the world together with the devas to cross over. Cutting through the stream of saṃsāra, shattering the three becomings, embarking in the ship of Dhamma, I will cause the world with the devas to cross over.

- 17 – A list of the various meritorious acts performed by Gotama to each of the twenty-four previous buddhas is delineated by I. B. Horner, in her introduction to the *Buddhavaṃsa*, pp. xlix ff. One example of a meritorious act performed for a Buddha can be found in the chronicle of Sumedha. When Sumedha heard that the then buddha—Dīpaṅkara—was to pass along a road, he, as an act of merit, offered to clear a section of the path:

When I heard “Buddha,” zest arose immediately. Saying “Buddha, Buddha” I expressed my happiness. Standing there elated, stirred in mind, I reasoned, “Here will I sow seeds [of merit]; indeed, let not the moment pass! If you are clearing for a Buddha, give me one section. I myself will also clear the direct way, the path and road” (*Buddhavaṃsa* 2A: 42 ff.).

Before Sumedha was able to finish the section of the road allotted to him, Dīpaṅkara arrived accompanied by four hundred thousand arahants. As a result of not having finished his task of preparing the road, Sumedha prostrated himself in the mud and offered his body to Dīpaṅkara for walking on (2A: 52–53).

- 18 – See, for instance, *Buddhavaṃsa* 2A: 61 ff. These developments have a great affect on the ways in which the term “bodhisattva” is used. As Gombrich posits, “Any future Buddha is a Bodhisattva (by definition), but with the appearance of this theory one formally becomes a Bodhisattva by taking a vow in the presence of a Buddha and receiving his prediction” (“The Significance of Former Buddhas,” p. 68).
- 19 – *Buddhavaṃsa* 2A: 54–55.
- 20 – The ten perfections are mentioned numerous times in the *Buddhavaṃsa*. See, for example, *Buddhavaṃsa* 2A: 117 ff., 4: 14, 5: 20, and 6: 14.
- 21 – In *Buddhavaṃsa* 1: 76–77, Sāriputta 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, how the ultimate perfections?”
- 22 – *Cariyāpiṭaka* 1: 1–1: 8 and 1: 9.
- 23 – *Ibid.*, 1: 8: 2–3.
- 24 – *Ibid.*, 1: 10: 9, 1: 10: 22–23.
- 25 – *Dīgha Nikāya* 2: 1–7.
- 26 – For instance, we find: “Now Vipassī, brethren, when as a Bodhisat[ta], he ceased to belong to the hosts of the heaven of Delight, descended into his mother’s womb mindful and self-possessed” (*Dīgha Nikāya* 2: 12).

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- 27 – In many of the following paragraphs, for instance, we find the phrase “It is the rule, brethren, that. . .” (*Ayam ettha dhammatā*) used to refer to the paradigm set by Vipassī.
- 28 – *Sāmyutta Nikāya* 2 : 4 ff. The six previous buddhas mentioned in the *Dīgha* and *Sāmyutta Nikāyas* are increased to twenty-four and even to twenty-seven in later canonical texts such as the *Buddhavaṃsa*. In yet a later canonical text, the *Apadāna* of the *Khuddaka-Nikāya*, the number of previous buddhas increases to more than thirty-five.
- 29 – *Dīgha Nikāya* 3 : 76.
- 30 – *Ibid.*, 3 : 114. Though the possibility for the existence of other future buddhas beside Metteyya is mentioned only briefly in the Pāli canon, in other post-canonical Theravādin texts, there are more specific references to future bodhisattvas and buddhas. For instance, in the *Dasabodhisattuppattikathā*, the *Dasabodhisattaddesa*, and in one recension of the *Anāgatavaṃsa Desanā*, the nine bodhisattvas who will follow Maitreya are mentioned. Moreover, in one recension of the *Dasabodhisattuppattikathā*, we even find the places of residence of seven of the ten bodhisattvas: Metteyya, Rāma, Pasena, and Vibhūti are presently residing in Tuṣita heaven and Subhūti, Nālāgiri, and Pārileyya are now in Tāvātimsa heaven. Thus, it appears that the Theravādin tradition acknowledges certain “celestial” bodhisattvas who are currently residing in various heavenly realms and not that the only recognized bodhisattva in Theravāda Buddhism is Maitreya (Edward Conze, *Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies: Selected Essays by Edward Conze* [Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1967], p. 38).
- 31 – *Khuddakapāṭha* 8 : 15–16.
- 32 – Though the accessibility of these three goals to all beings is only briefly mentioned in the *Khuddakapāṭha*, in the *Upāsakajanālaṅkāra* (a twelfth-century Pāli 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, 1980], p. 119).
- 33 – *Mahāvaṃsa* 22 : 25–41.
- 34 – *Ibid.*, 36 : 76. There is a remarkable parallel between King Sirisaṃghabodhi, who risked his life to avert a devastating drought, and King Vessantara, who gave away his precious elephant to avert a drought in Kāliṅga.
- 35 – *Mahāvaṃsa* 36 : 91 ff. The willingness to offer his own life to avert the potential suffering of his subjects appears to have some origin in the life of King Vessantara, who was willing to offer his life to fulfill

the perfection of giving. After commenting on the bodhisattva-like nature of King Sirisamghabodhi, John Holt argues: "By his actions, Sirisamghabodhi very clearly cuts the figure of an earthly, royal bodhisattva, and almost a Mahāyāna bodhisattva at that" (*Buddha in the Crown*, p. 59).

- 36 – *Cūḷavaṃsa*, 37 : 106 ff.
- 37 – *Ibid.*, 37 : 180.
- 38 – *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, 2 : 76.
- 39 – *Ibid.*, 3 : 67. This passage is translated on pages 68–69 of the same volume.
- 40 – *Ibid.*, 1 : 227.
- 41 – *Ibid.*, 1 : 240.
- 42 – *Epigraphia Burmanica*, 1 : 146.
- 43 – P. M. Tin, "The Shwegugyi Pagoda Inscriptions, Pagan 1141 A.D.," *The Journal of the Burma Research Society* 10 (2) (1920): 72.
- 44 – T. Tun, "Religion in Burma, A.D. 100–1300," *The Journal of the Burma Research Society* 42 (1959): 53.
- 45 – E. Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965), p. 47.
- 46 – B. W. Andaya, "Statecraft in the Reign of Lu T'ai of Sukhodaya," in *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos, Burma*, ed. Barwell L. Smith (Chambersburg: Conococheague Associates, 1978), p. 13.
- 47 – *Cūḷavaṃsa* 37 : 242. In commenting on this story, Holt posits: "What this . . . seem[s] to suggest is that not only did Maitreya come to be associated with visions of perfected kingship, but he also seems to have been continuously associated with the ideal of the perfected monk" (*Buddha in the Crown*, p. 8). Even though Buddhaghosa was depicted as being an incarnation of Metteyya, he is never described as taking a bodhisattva vow and as practicing certain bodhisattva perfections.
- 48 – F. L. Woodward, trans., *A Manual of a Mystic: Being a Translation from the Pali and Sinhalese Work Entitled "The Yogavachara's Manual"* (London: Oxford University Press, 1916), pp. xvii–xviii.
- 49 – H. Saddhatissa, *The Birth-Stories of the Ten Bodhisattas and the Dasabodhisattuppattikatha*, Sacred Books of the Buddhists, vol. 29 (London: Pāli Text Society, 1975), pp. 38–39.

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50 – *Milinda Tikā* (Pāli Text Society), p. 73; quoted in Walpola Rahula, “L’ideal du bodhisattva dans le Theravada et le Mahayana,” *Journal Asiatique*, 1971, p. 69.

51 – There is evidence that suggests that certain lay people living in Sri Lanka took bodhisattva vows to attain buddhahood. For example, we find that two Sri Lankans, after freeing their children and wives from slavery, dedicated the merit derived from these actions “for the benefit of all beings” (*Epigraphia Zeylanica*, 4:133, nos. 1–4) as well as to their own attainment of “Buddhahood as desired” (*ibid.*, 4:133, nos. 2–3). We also find a similar wish made by a “lay” person who lived between the fifth and eighth centuries and who sculpted or commissioned the sculpting of a rock in the shape of a *stūpa*. The person then dedicated the merit accrued from his undertaking for the benefit of all beings and for his attainment of buddhahood. He writes:

By this merit, may I be able, in every succeeding rebirth, to relive all the suffering of the world and to bestow complete happiness [on humanity]. [May I also always] be full of forbearance and compassion.

By this merit, may I vanquish the foes, Māra . . . and sin; and having attained to that supreme state of Buddhahood, may I, with my hand of great compassion, deliver suffering humanity from the extensive quagmire of *samsāra* (*ibid.*, 3:161; neither the brackets nor the ellipses are mine).

One cautionary note concerning these examples must be made. While there is evidence that certain Sri Lankans took a bodhisattva vow, there is not sufficient evidence to suggest that these people were, in fact, Theravādins.

52 – While the concept of the bodhisattva stages is not overtly delineated in the *Buddhavaṃsa*, it is implicit in the text. The stages found in the *Buddhavaṃsa*, though, closely resemble the four *bhūmi* outlined in one section of the *Mahāvastu*, and not the traditional ten stages found in the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra*. These four stages outlined in the *Mahāvastu* (1:1 and 46 ff.) are: (a) the natural career (*prakṛti-caryā*), in which a bodhisattva acquires merit by living a righteous life, giving alms to the *sangha*, and honoring the buddhas; (b) the resolving stage (*praṇidhāna-caryā*), in which a bodhisattva makes a vow to attain buddhahood; (c) the conforming stage (*anuloma-caryā*), in which a bodhisattva advances to his goal by fulfilling the perfections (*pāramitā*); and finally, (d) the preserving stage (*anivartana-caryā*), whereby a bodhisattva is destined to become a buddha and cannot turn back from the path to buddhahood.

In the *Buddhavaṃsa*, these four stages are implicit in the chronicle of Sumedha. For example, Sumedha first performed an act of merit to the Buddha Dīpaṅkara by lying in the mud (natural

career); he then made a mental resolution to become a buddha in the future (resolving stage); he then examined (and worked on completing) the ten perfections (conforming stage); and finally, he became assured of the attainment of buddhahood by receiving a prediction from Dīpaṅkara and by the occurrences of certain supernatural events that caused him to resolve to attain buddhahood (preserving stage). Contrary to the *Mahāvastu*, however, all of the four stages implicit in the *Buddhavaṃsa* are reached in each lifetime of Gotama's bodhisattva career and not over a number of lifetimes.

- 53 – This point is more fully developed in chapter four of my M.A. thesis, "Bodhisattva Ideal in Theravāda Buddhism: With Special Reference to the *Sūtra-Piṭaka*" (University of Colorado, 1995). It may be argued, however, that while the *Buddhavaṃsa* contains the central doctrines associated with the bodhisattva ideal, this text was heavily influenced by certain Mahāyāna Buddhist schools of thought. While this idea is sometimes asserted (E. J. Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953], pp. 147–148), it has not been confirmed. In fact, the opposite assertion may also be made. This may be supported by the dating of texts. For example, though the *Buddhavaṃsa* is a relatively late addition to the Pāli canon, according to certain scholars (e.g., Gombrich, "The Significance of Former Buddhas," p. 68, and A. K. Warder, *Indian Buddhism* [Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991], p. 298), this text may be dated from the third to the second century B.C.E. This approximate date is also supported by the fact that there is a parallel version of this text in the *Mahāvastu*, which has been dated to the first century B.C.E. (Etienne Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism: From the Origins to the Saka Era*, trans. Sara Webb-Boin [Paris: L'Institut Orientaliste de Louvain, 1988], p. 158). Hence, the *Buddhavaṃsa* may actually precede the earliest Mahāyāna text, the *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā* (which has been dated by Conze to the first century B.C.E.), by at least one hundred years.
- 54 – Walpola Rahula, "L'ideal du bodhisattva dans le Theravada et le Mahayana," *Journal Asiatique*, 1971, p. 69.
- 55 – K. R. Norman, *Pali Literature: Including the Canonical Literature in Prakrit and Sanskrit of All the Hinayana Schools of Buddhism, A History of Indian Literature*, vol. 7, fasc. 2 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1983), p. 94.
- 56 – Reginald Ray, *Buddhist Saints in India: A Study of Buddhist Values and Orientations* (London: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 251.

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