

MAITREYA OF GANDHĀRA—AN ANTICIPATED SANGUINE OF BUDDHISM

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The Maitreya Boddhissatva, 'the unconquered, the invincible is the one who is free of the three poisons of greed, anger and stupidity' (Bell, 1998).

Abstract

Maitreya enjoys the unique distinction of the only Bodhisattva being recognized throughout the entire Buddhist World, including the Theravada sect. The prophecy of the arrival of Maitreya is found in the canonical literature of all Buddhist sects and is accepted in most Buddhist sects as an actual event that will take place in the distant future. The article presents a short summary of the concept of Maitreya as a 'future savior of the world'. A short description of other boddhissatvas (recognised by the Theravada texts) is also presented in this paper. The paper presents an analytical review of how Maitreya cult has provided a ray of hope for a better future to the common masses. Moreover, throughout centuries, the same cult has initiated several schools/societies, that yearn for promulgation of a global moral and ethic decree.

A *bodhisattva* is the symbol of compassion who seeks enlightenment while also trying to save all sentient beings by spreading the Buddha's teachings. In early Buddhism the term *boddhissattva* (on the way to enlightenment) was used to identify Siddharta autama before he became a *buddha* (the enlightened one). Nonetheless, some other *boddhissatvas* were known as early as the early Buddhism, before its schism in several sects. The *boddhissatvas* in Hinayana were limited in their number and function. They began to gain greater importance for the *Mahāsamghikas*¹. Later on, the Mahayana beliefs, translated it in to legends, and iconography gave new and varied dimensions to the *boddhissatvas*. In Mahayana, this term was given a new interpretation, and used as a designation for every one aspiring to a perfect Enlightenment, i.e, the Buddhahood (Hien, 1999; p. 87). Now *boddhissattvahood* could be attained by anyone who raised himself to the point of practice of Virtue. All Buddha's older disciples were entered into bodhisattvas, whose images were exhibited for veneration as the means of attaining nirvana.

An enormous literature was developed focusing on the Boddhisattva and Bodhisattva path, including such famous texts as *Bodhisattvabhumi Sutra* and *Dasambhumika Sutra*, etc (Hien, 1999; p. 87). *Avatamsaka Sutra* made the treasures of Maitreya Tower accessible to the greatest number of people. The Mahayana distinguishes two kinds of Boddhissattvas, the Earthly and the Transcendental. The Celestial Boddhissattvas included *Avalokitesvara*², *Maitreya*, *Manjusri* and *Mahasthamaprapta*, etc. They served as ideal model for their earthly counterparts. A vast quantity of ancient literature and a number of modern works are dedicated to the functions of *boddhissatvas*. Iconographically, these celestial *bodhisattvas* are depicted in Gandhara art as young princes, with gem studded tiaras on their brows, the gold bracelets and strings of jewels.

In the *Siddharma Pundarika* (Lotus Sutra) he plays prominent role but is subordinate to Manjusri, who acts as his instructor. Maitreya is described as a 'world ruler, uniting those over whom he will rule' (<http://www.ladengtunan.com/komunitas/index>). *Avalokitesvara*, 'the Bodhisattva of Compassion' is represented on the right hand side of Buddha. With the development of the Vajrayana tradition, an even greater emphasis was developed around various Buddhist images.

The most popular *boddhissatva* at Kusana period was Maitreya, 'the Future Savior of the World'. Fa Hien describes that the worship of the future *boddhissatva* was highest when he traveled through India and Southeast Asia (Matics, 1979). Its popularity continued down to the 5th century AD. It is

said that he will reappear in this world after Sakyamuni's stead. He is mentioned in the earliest Sanskrit and the mixed Sanskrit works, as the '*Lalitavistara*', the '*Divyavadana*', and the '*Mahavastu*' (Hien, 1999; p.410).

Maitreya³ also called as 'Ajita', meaning invincible⁴ is among the few Bodhisattvas recognized by the early Theravada sect. The earliest mention of Maitreya is said to have been in *Cakavatti Sutta* in the *Digha Nikaya* of the Pali canon (Maitreya: Fact, Discussion Forum). The prophecy about Maitreya coming is described in detail in *Maitreyavyākaraṇa* (The Prophecy of Maitreya). The tradition that Buddha had several predecessors and will be followed by another Buddha was already present at Aśoka's time. The Seven Buddhas of the past are mentioned in the canonical literature of Theravada. The prediction (*vyākaraṇa*) of a future Buddha Maitreya occurs in many texts across all sects and does not vary to any great extent as regards the main content. All the old and new Buddha schools exhibited this Maitreya cult. Maitreya was thought from very beginning as already existing in some birth and practicing the Bodhisattva path. The earliest Mahayāna scriptures, e.g., *Astasāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā*, where Bodhisattvas are classified into four categories, the last is separated from Buddhahood by only one existence (*ekajātoprālibaddha*), may be implying that a Bodhisattva of this kind is already awaiting his final birth in Tusita heavens. The narration of the Maitreya's life also exist in the Chinese versions⁵. Scholars also mention an Iranian influence in the development of the concept of a future saviour of the world, as it was already mentioned in Iranian Mithra and Zoroastrian ideas about Saoshyant (Scott, 1990; p. 67). Dani (1978) also mentions a link between Iranian Mithra and the Buddhist Maitreya.

The concept of impermanence and change (*annica*) was basic in Buddhism. Early Pali sources like *Anguttara-Nikaya* 4.84 describes the dharma decline at some future point. Buddhism also established the idea of successive Buddha's appearing for each *kalpa*. The Pali sources like *Samyutta-Nikaya* 2.104 describes Sakyamuni as the 25th in line of Tathagatas. Each Tathagata had re-established decayed dharma during their *kalpa*. According to the Buddhist teachings, the dharma would decline in future due to natural process of *anicca*, so the Maitreya Bodhisattva would come to renew the dharma (Scott, 1990; p. 68). Maitreya coming is characterized by a number of physical events. The oceans are predicted to decrease in size. The prime duty of Maitreya is education of all creatures on earth, when he will come to earth, his followers will be strongly attached to him and many will advance to the higher stages with perfected mind and consciousness whose brightness spans the realms of the ten directions (Leadbeater, 1925). According to the predictions, when the Maitreya will be reborn in the city of *Ketumatī* it will be a paradisiacal age where people do not have to work and will live in harmony with each other. They will have more time for religious discussion and discourses.

Maitreya figures has enjoyed a favorite theme of Gandhara relief. He is shown in relief, on the panels, on stele, as well as in sculpture. Maitreya figures are identified on basis of some particular attributes. He may be shown in the center of a relief, sitting in *padmāsana* below an umbrella or canopy on a throne with a foot stool. He performs *abhaya mudrā* with his right hand and holds a flask (*kalaśa kamandalu*) in the left. He may also holds a *Kumbha*⁶, or a *Bumpa*⁷. The flask is interpreted as the iconographic character of Bodhisattva Maitreya. Asher (2003) describes it as the *pot of ambrosia (amrita)*, 'the nectar of immortality'. The flask is sometimes decorated with incised pattern. However, there were some regional variations in the depiction of these attributes. Buddhism faced a number of cultural and religious strata in Asia. It adopted iconographic formulae from various sources, and incorporated them in their themes. Ingholt (1957; p. 135-140, pl. 288-312) reports about twenty five Maitreya figures in sculpture (both seated and standing postures), busts, heads and in relief, recovered from, Takht-i-Bahi, Sahri Bahlol, Upper Nathu Monastery, Karki, Rawalpindi and Palatu Dheri, placed in Peshawar, Lahore and Karachi Museums. Ichnographically when seated his both feet are on the ground (*bhadrāsana*), indicating that he has not yet completed

ascending his throne. He is shown seated on an inverted lotus throne, or throne with lion legs. He may or may not wear a moustache. He wears a hairstyle of a chignon parted in the middle. In Takht-i-Bahi sculpture (now placed in Lahore Museum), his hair are falling around his shoulders (Hutington, 1985; p. 138). Ingholt (1957) provides examples of arrangement of hair at the top of the head, in two loops, looking like the figure 8, or a tuft of small curls across the forehead, reminiscent of Siddharta (Ingholt, 1957). At Bamiyan Maitreya is shown with a crown that was identical to that portrayed in Sasanian Iran for Khusro II. In Tarim basin at Ming-oi-Karashar during 6th-7th AD, he was bedecked with Sasanian ribbons (Scott, 1990; pp. 51-52). He may wear a small stupa in his head dress and could be holding a *dharmacakra* resting on a lotus flower (Maitreya: Facts, Discussion Forum). Ingholt (1957; No. 289) describes the lunar crescent between the diadem and the tiara, as a conclusive evidence to Maitreya's iconographic identification. In No. 299 (Ingholt, 1957) the halo has one incised circle round the edge. There is also a second halo near the head. In No. 301 the halo is decorated by a border of radiating flames (Ingholt, 1957; No. 301). He is attended by seated figures, mostly wearing turbans, of which one is usually portrayed in a vague attitude of conversation or discussion. The human figures are sometimes identified with brother *Asanga* and *Vasubandhu*. In other instances god Brahma on the left and god Indra on the right are shown, with joined hands (*añjali*), thus paying homage to future Boddhisattva Maitreya⁸ (Fussman, 1985; p. 144). In Takht-i-Bahi sculpture (Hutington, 1985; p. 138), Maitreya is portrayed in a standing figure, wearing a dhoti like lower garment. His jewelry reveals his regal position and includes necklaces, earrings, armbands and hair ornaments. In some instances additional jewelry is depicted, e.g., jeweled chains passing from the left shoulder across the chest (Ingholt, 1957; No. 290), or the large, heavy earrings having a lion's head ornament at the pierced lobe (Ingholt, 1957; No. 292). The figure is highly bedecked with jeweled embellishments; even the sandals have jeweled lacings. As a highly perfected being, he reveals many of the laksanas and other special characteristics of Buddhas, e.g., *ūrnā* and *usnisā*, a halo (Hutington, 1985; p. 138), and a circle on right hand (Ingholt, 1957; No. 299).

The Maitreyas were also portrayed on a number of coin images from Kusana period. The Boddhisattva is represented seated on a throne and inscribed as *Mētrago Boudo* (Luczanits, 2005; p.180). The figure performs *Abhayamudra*, holds a flask and wears ear rings, necklace, bracelets on wrist and upper arm and has a nimbus. On one coin type Maitreya is performing *dharmachakramudrā*.

Manjusri⁹, or *Pancasirsha*, meaning 'the Mountain with five Peaks', the instructor of Maitreya Boddhisattva, although less reported in figures, but venerated in the ancient texts, is an intermediary between Indra and Buddha and renders account of the latter of what happens among the devas. Manjusri is said to have attained the highest rank in Boddhisattvas (Graves, 1996; p. 358). Manjusri is sometimes shown as a being of more benefit to the sentient beings than is Buddha. Manjusri is described as the intermediary between Sakyamuni and man. In the introduction to *Saddharmapūnarikasūtra* Manjusri is named as the first of the Boddhisattvas surrounding Sakyamuni immediately followed by Avalokitesvara. The hair style of Manjusri done in five locks has also been described as *Pancaciraka*. Quagloitti (1990) mentions that *Manjusrimulakalpa* narrates five locks of Manjusri hair style. According to Sylvain Levi, *Manju* is the catch translation of Kumara. *Kumarabhūta*, or *Kumarabhūta*. Manjusri is represented as *Kumarabhūta* in Gandhara in Kushan Period. *Kumarabhūta*, 'a Royal Prince', is a bodhisattva who abides in the Tenth Land where he will receive the *abhisekha* which consecrates him as a crown prince of the 'King of Law' and associates him with the power to which he is to accede (Quagloitti (1990; p. 110). There is a belief that transcendental wisdom of *Prajnaparamita*, which Manjusri embodies can conquer demons, and not the magical formulae, spells or other theumaturgical techniques (Hien, 1999; p. 412). Hien in his scholarly work "The Seeker's Glossary of Buddhism (1999; p. 412-413) describes that Buddha has once said:

“I owe it to the Manjusri that I now become a Buddha. Innumerable Buddhas in the past had been Manjusri’s disciples, and those who become Buddhas in future will also owe their Enlightenment to his awesome power. Just as children in the world have their own parents, so Manjusri assumes parenthood on the Buddha path”.

Manjusri is attributed with wisdom beyond measure. He is the patron of grammatical sciences and wisdom. Iconographically, he is depicted with a sharp sword in his left hand that severs all afflictions. Quagloitti (1990; p. 99) describes relief 1.M.53-1936 in Victoria and Albert Museum as the oldest representation of Manjusri as ‘The Lord of Word’. The relief reveals Buddha in the centre, on his left is seated bodhisattva turned to right, and a bodhisattva portrayed in an unusual manner towards his left. The figure rests his right hand behind his ear, the gesture revealing poetic and religious inspirations, i.e., receiving revelations from gods. The figure is seated with legs apart, one leg being held aslant across the seat; the gesture is attributed to Manjusri in *Manjusrimulakalpa*. The leg posture reveals the royal ease (Hutington, 1985). The figure holds in his hand a book (*pustaka*), which symbolizes knowledge, one of the attributes of Manjusri. The book bears an inscription in Kharosthi character. Quagloitti also describes several other similar examples¹⁰ where the bodhisattva is holding a book in his left hand. He is said to have turned poisonous and fierce beasts to be subdued and becoming cool. He is also portrayed seated on blue lion with a red maw, in the posture of teaching, a blue lotus in his hand, often with a sword, the sword of knowledge and a book. Quagloitti (1990; p. 99) describes Manjusri as ‘The Lord of the Spoken Word’. In *Saddharmapunarikasutra* Manjusri is called as *Manjusvara* (i.e., of the harmonious sounds), and *Manjughosa* (i.e., of the sweet word). It shows Manjusri’s connection with the sound and the words.

Conclusions:

The Buddha’s prophecies about future Maitreya have created a widely venerated cult throughout the Buddhist countries. There existed a religious practice in Buddhist countries to generate the wish to be reborn on earth during the age when Maitreya will attain Buddhahood. Maitreya is deemed as a leader, who will call for justice, peace and freedom for the oppressed. His name has become equivalent to the ‘energy of love’ that will flow in the heart of the humanity. Through centuries, the Maitreya bodhisattva has served as a continuous hope to people, who could believe that Dharma is not a deteriorating entity, whose memory each day receded deeper into irretrievable past. Faith in a better and prosperous future helps man to rise above his problems, and provides strength and motivation that comes from hope. Basic faith changes man’s life. It gives him something to hope for and strive towards future. Faith in a better and more prosperous future helps man to rise above his problems, and provides the strength and motivation that comes from hope. It provides a logical significance to man’s struggles, and provides faith to the highest ideals that we can aspire.

Notes:

¹ Māhāsamghikas (the Greater Community) was the opponent of the stheviravāda at the time of the first schism among Buddhists disciples in Pataliputra in 346 BC (Call, 1997).

² Avaloketisvara is a compound of *Ishwara*, meaning ‘Lord’, and *avalakita*, meaning ‘looked upon or seen’, and is usually translated as the ‘Lord Who Observes’.

³ The word is derived from the Sanskrit word *maitri*, meaning ‘love’, ‘compassion’.

⁴ As described in *Cullavagga* 5.5, *Lalitavistara* 1.621, and *Mahavamsa* 6.28.30

⁵ *Mi Le* in Chinese, *Jampa* in Tibetan and *Miroku* in Japanese.

⁶ A pot or a pitcher, symbolic of the womb

⁷ Wisdom urn, a life long vase, the precious vase or wisdom urn of the *ashtamangla*. It symbolizes life long wealth and prosperity)

⁸ Fussman reports a panel from Gandhara whose exact provenance is not known, now in a private collection, photographed by Mrs. Bonardi Tucci, and also by B. N. Mukerjee.

⁹ Meaning ‘the Wonder Virtue’ or ‘Wonderfully Auspicious’. Manjusri or Manjughsha (in Chinese) is a translation of the Sanskrit *Pancasika* (*pancasikha*, an emanation of Sanat Kumara has been described as the heavenly messenger.

- ¹⁰ i.e., Loryan Tangi relief representing Buddhist triad, placed in Indian Museum, Calcutta; the grey schist relief (Gandhara, but exact provenance is unknown) showing Biddhissatva in padmasana, placed in Miami University Art Museum; the Buddhist stela from Mohammad Nari, placed in Lahore Museum, showing a haloed figure with book in his left hand; the Buddhist stela from Sahri Bahlol, placed in Peshawar Museum; and the fragment of a Buddhist stela, in Musee Guimet, Paris, from Mardan area.

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