

## **Bodhisattva: - A Messenger of Universal Friendliness and a Model of the Ideal of Buddhist Education**

**By Dr. Susmita Vyas**

The culture of a nation, the civilization of a country, is the product of its system of education. At present different systems of reform in education are in discussion. Still, the western principles of education do not seem to make for the perfection of human personality. Therefore, we have to examine the role of the ancient Indian education system in the creation of the ideal man in modern times.

At the very outset, it is essential to note here that ancient Indian education including the centralized educational system of Buddhists is the outcome of the Buddhist attitude of the Dhamma, the theory of knowing it, and a part of the corresponding scheme of life and values. The aim of the Buddhist system of education is the purification of the consciousness or complete eradication of those evil factors of the mind by which one is able to see the total life situation. Thus, education, in the Buddhist outlook, is a process of creative self-culture aimed at the illumination of life and discipline and subduing the human instinct. It never aimed at the acquisition of mere objective knowledge. It was more concerned with the subject than the object, the inner than the outer world.

With the emergence of the Mahāyāna, the education system of Buddhists received a tremendous impetus. It seems that from the time of its inception Mahāyāna Buddhism exerted a great educational influence on society owing to its tendency for the upliftment of the mass of lay followers. The monasteries, where the poets and scholars of Mahāyāna lived, became the natural centers of collective education. Secular problems of academic nature and secular arts and crafts also came within the scope of education and training of Bodhisattvas. Thus, the first systematical educational institutions of ancient India emerged due to the

influence of Buddhism and contributed immensely to the development of systematic educational institutions in India and abroad.<sup>1</sup> Bodhisattva concept is a natural outcome of the education system of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

It is a well-known fact that Buddhism in general and Indian Buddhism, in particular, is not a national religion in the strict sense of the term (religion). Historically it originated at a particular time and in a particular region of this globe, yet it is beyond the limits of time and space. Similar is the nature of Buddhist education. It manifests the Dhammatā of the Dhammas or shows the way of perfection for all and forever. Buddhas' message of loving, kindness (Karuṇā), and Universal friendliness (Mettā) is called Appamaññā, as it is not confined to any particular place or time and is directed toward all irrespective of their cast, birth, creed, culture, nationality, and social status, etc. The Buddha is declared to be the teacher of all gods and all types of human beings: "Satthā Devamanussānam" and his extra-ordinary realization of Anuttarāsamyak-saṃbodhi is itself the inner experience of the universal suffering, its cause in the form of hankering desire, originated in the form of twelve-linked series, its cessation and the way leading to the universal freedom. Dr. Hardayal remarks: - "Buddhism has spread among other Asiatic nations because it is universal in spirits like Christianity and Islam, but Hinduism is a national and social system like Confucianism and Jūdaism"<sup>2</sup>

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The earliest form of Buddhism, known to us by the name of the Theravāda, also exhibits universal character in its emphasis on the purity of conduct (sīla), purity of consciousness (samādhi), and clarity of vision (paññā). Its ethical guidelines are equally useful to all human beings of all ages. However, it

<sup>1</sup>A.S. Altekar, Education in ancient India, pp. 231,234.

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Hardayal "Bodhisattva doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature" P.

is essential to point out here that the ideal of the Arahatta or the highest goal of the spiritual practice seems to be self-centered and introverted in the early phases of Buddhism. It is true that in the spiritual practice of Theravāda Buddhism, a strong emphasis is laid upon the elimination of the thought of self or what belongs to a self (Attavāda), but whether a way-fairer thinks of a self to be purified or of a self to be annihilated, he is thinking of himself in the manifold part and not of any other. Actually, this type of selfishness is nothing but the over regard for the good of that which lies within his body. This danger of selfishness was, most probably, sensed earlier by the founder of the movement, and therefore his teaching to his first disciples was to go forth and preach the 'Dhamma' for the welfare of all. But it seems that sooner the Buddhist monks became self-centered ascetics, concentrating on their own enlightenment and utterly neglect full of the greater duty toward society.

It is also worth mentioning here that early Buddhism and its literature presented only a one-sided picture of total Buddhism. Lay devotees are mere listeners here to the discourses delivered by the monks and used to observe five or occasionally eight precepts. The highest ideal of Arhattva was confined only to the members of the Buddhist Sangha, although there were no restrictions of caste, creed, etc. for the entry into the sangha. This monastic form of Buddhism lacked the colorful aspects of Bhakti and the warmth of popular sentiments. Thus, it was unable to meet the new challenges of the many popular religious movements in India and owing to its rigidity could not adapt properly to the new social situations. Nirvāṇa was conceived here as an Asaṃskṛta category. It was something distinct from Saṃsāra. Buddha-hood was regarded as a rare event.

Thus, there arose in Buddhism itself a new movement, paying more attention to the needs and mental dispositions of all men. Bodhisattva's ideal was the outcome of these attempts to revive in the minds of the people the historical character of the

Buddha. It counteracted the tendencies of inert monastic life and in the course of the history of Buddhism, it inspired the vast majority of the people to follow the compassionate way of lord Buddha. It was a unique idea in the whole history of Indian religions and an attempt in the real sense to universalize the teachings of the Sāstā. It has an immense impact, on religions and social aspects of the Buddhist countries by means of the following aspects: -

#### **A. Plasticity and Adaptability of Bodhisattva concept –**

The negative arguments in the Kārikas of Nāgārjuna are to reveal the relativity of the mundane. The basic teaching of the Mādhyamika, is that to realize the ultimate, is not to abandon the mundane but to learn to see it with the eye of wisdom. To live in the world is itself to realize the Nirvāṇa, only one's perversions and false clinging are to be abandoned. Besides the wise do not abandon things, saying that these may lead them to contradictions and conflicts. In fact, the root of the conflict is ignorance and passion, which are to be abandoned. Having abandoned these, they freely use concepts in order to root out conflicts and sufferings. Even opposing statements do not land them to conflict as they are free from clinging. The suffering of life does not prompt them to abandon life. The Bodhisattvas live this life in order to put an end to the roots of suffering. Its mission is to help all to attain the highest good. The height to which they would take us ultimately is one which is the meeting point of all systems and all religions. It is an understanding that is exclusive. It is a comprehensive attitude where he takes interest in every little thing without being confined anywhere. In the words of Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra. “The wise are like the dragon that keeps its tail in the ocean and its head in the sky and brings down showers on earth.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus, owing to its most comprehensive and non-exclusive character the way of a Bodhisattva has been developed and adapted to different conditions. It underwent many drastic changes in the countries like China, Korea, Japan and Tibet.

From the very beginning of its origin (although no exact date can be assigned for its clear emergence) it contained the seeds of religious synthesis, broader outlook, elements of plasticity, adaptability, and universal friendliness. Being free from any type of rigidity it could assimilate easily many Bramhanical elements. The great Bodhisattva, Avalokiteśwara seems to be an attempt of a synthesis between Buddhism and Śivism. According to some scholars, the cult of “Avalokiteśwara seems to be a Buddhist adaptation of the sun-worship of the Savaras and the Magi.”<sup>4</sup> He has also been identified with the spirit of the universe and all the usual attributes of Brahman and Īśwara have been bestowed upon him. He has hundred thousand arms and several millions of eyes. The sun and moon have sprung from his eyes, Brahmā and other gods from his shoulders, Nārāyaṇa from his heart and Saraswatī from his teeth. In many cases the descriptive titles of the Brāhmanical Devas have been transferred into this Bodhisattva. For example in Daśa-Bhūmika-sūtra, Brahmā is described as Mahābalasthāma-Prāpta and one of the important Bodhisattvas is called Mahāsthāma-Prāpta. Vajrapāṇi and Kṣitigarbha are other such instances. They not only show an interaction between

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<sup>3</sup>Emybirth Translation by C.V. Ramanam, Nagarjuna’s Philosophy, p. 330.

<sup>4</sup>Hardayal, Boddhisattva doctrine, p. 48.

Brāhmanism and Buddhism but also confirm the comprehensive and assimilating character of Bodhisattva ideal in the history of Indian Buddhism. Many other Brāhmanical, as well as non-Brāhmanical ideas and practices, could easily be brought under the banner of Bodhisattva ideal and thus the Buddhists of those ages could face the challenges of the most popular contemporary religious movements like Bhāgavatism and Śivism.

In North-western India, Afghanistan, and Bactria around our Christian era, the whole atmosphere was very much international. There were some Asiatic Greeks, Parthians, Scythians, and Persians. Being the meeting ground of many nationalities and semi-barbarian tribes this was a sensitive geographical region for many new elements in Indian religions. The Bodhisattva concept exalted love and activity and peopled the heavens with gracious beings, who could be worshipped. Even some deities of new tribes were adopted as Bodhisattvas. Thus, this idea turned out to be one of the most important factors in making Buddhism very popular among these new semi-barbarians of Afghanistan and Central Asia. In this region, it could stand on firm grounds owing to its plasticity.

The history of Central Asian Buddhism is even more interesting for throwing ample light on the adaptability of this concept. Buddhism could penetrate very deep in the oasis cities of western China and in the Russian part of central Asia, mainly due to the goal and great dedication of the broad-minded Bodhisattvas – the Buddhist missionaries, who were living symbols of selflessness and mahākaruṇā. Besides for the simple people of this region, this form of Buddhism proved to be more colorful, and attractive. The element of Bhakti or devotion was a unique instrument to attract the commoners, as dry asceticism would have been beyond their mental capability. In Mahāyāna, they universalized and deified the

historical Buddha. As cosmic law or Dharma-kāya he could not be loved or adorned by common men and women. They needed deity of flesh and blood with whom they could feel more at home. Universal practice of saint worship shows that it satisfies certain fundamental needs of human nature at a certain stage of intellectual development. Thus, by means of Bhakti, Bodhisattva concept opened the doors of Buddhism to common men and women and thus universalized it.

This concept further traveled to the most cultural and highly sophisticated societies of ancient China. Very instructive in this respect are the developments which took place first in China than in Korea and in Japan, where many Confucian and Shinto practices and ideas could be easily assimilated without losing the basic elements of Buddhism. That was due to the interpretation of Śūnyatā by Kumārajīva – in terms of the inexpressibility of the dharma's or the skillfulness of non-clinging and the teaching of Seng-Chao that Nirvāṇa is not apart from Saṃsāra,<sup>5</sup> and that one should find peace in activity and realize Nirvāṇa in Saṃsāra. In the different Buddhist schools of China, this ideal was re-shaped several times under different local conditions, resulting in the emergence of new types of Bodhisattvas. This ideal has also played an important role in framing the political, cultural and social character of China. Tibet and Japan, as it has no rigid formula with it regarding these aspects.

The growth of Avatamsaka school is especially significant. It is indeed a glory of the learned achievements of Chinese Buddhism. In India Avatamsaka, is unknown as an independent school. In philosophical

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<sup>5</sup> C.V. Ramanan "Philosophy of Nagarjuna", p. 323-24.

thinking the totalistic principle of the Kegon was developed mainly in China. The theory of causation of Pratītya-samutpāda has a peculiarity here. It is called “the theory of universal causation of Dharmadhātu”<sup>6</sup>, is the causation by all beings themselves and is the certainty of the universe itself or it is the causation by the common action influence of all beings. In short, the object of the teaching of Kegon is the establishment of a harmonious whole of all beings having the perfectly enlightened Buddha at the center. The totalistic principle of the Avatansaka is further based on the theory of selflessness, (Anātma), the theory of universal causation of Dharmadhātu, and on the strong belief in the existence of the Buddha- nature in every being.

Very important are the “New Profound Theories” of this school. They were the reformations of the old theories by a Chinese master named Fu-Tsang (643-712). They very clearly illustrate the one in all and all in one principle of this school. They are –

- a. The theory of co-relation in which all are co-existent not only in relation to space but also in relation to time,
- b. The theory of perfect, freedom, in which one action, however small, includes all sections,
- c. The theory of mutual penetration of dissimilar things, implies many in one, one in many and all in unity,
- d. The theory of freedom from ultimate distinctions or the universal identification of all beings,
- e. The theory of complementarity or mutual supply,

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<sup>6</sup>S. Takakushu “Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy” p. 117.



- f. The theory of construction by mutual penetration of minute and abstruse matters,
- g. The theory of inter reflection,
- h. The theory of elucidating the truth by factual illustrations,
- i. The theory of variously completing ten times periods creating one entity, and
- j. The theory of completion of virtues, by which the chief and the retinue work together harmoniously and brightly.<sup>7</sup>

This school also influenced the political social and cultural aspects of China, Korea, and Japan. In Korea it was called Hwaom. The rise of Hwaom sect marked an important stage in the centralization that was taking place in the Korean Political system by the influence of the Avatamsaka ideals.

Hawom scripture honoured a new Buddha, the MahaVairocana, from whom all others were thought to emanate. The ruling caste first in Korea and then in Japan, saw an analogy between such religious concepts and the government system, the king being equated with the Vairocana and his officials with the minor Buddhist deities. Korea and Japan both and their rulers were drawn into close connection through this sect by means of the tie of international Buddhism. Hwaom or Kegon become so important in these countries that the royal courts took from it many of their ceremonies, their new art forms, their literature, and their music.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, Bodhisattva ideal attracted the semi-barbarians of central Asia as well as the highly cultural people of ancient China owing to its inherent

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<sup>7</sup> S. Takakushu "Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy" p. 117.

<sup>8</sup> Mccame "The Arts of Korea" Tokyo 1962.

plasticity and adaptability. It also underwent major re-shaping and was responsible for the emergence of several new Buddhist schools like Avatamsaka, as shown above. In Japan, the living tradition of Bodhisattva yāna, the impact of its broader and universal outlook is so great that nearly every aspect of Japanese life was touched by it. Their religious tolerance, their inexhaustible healing, their harmonious outlook and their selfless dedication to their respective duties, is the clear evidence of the impact of this form of Buddhism.

## **B. Practical Attitude –**

Bodhisattva-ideal has a more practical attitude, which also is an additional factor in making it more useful for the world. There is much emphasis (at least in the earlier Mahāyāna) on family life. If a person can become enlightened after or while leading a family life (as prince Siddhārtha himself did), he should certainly be a more useful man than a sanctimonious ascetic living in the jungle. Bodhisattva's ideal rightly recommends this type of pure social life. In many Mahāyānasūtras the ancient emphasis on inward life finds a new expression. In Gandavyūha Sudhana, the son of a wealthy merchant aspires for Bodhi and undertakes a pilgrimage to contact 53 worthies some of them religious house-holders while others were secular. Many of these Kalyāṇamitras are the men and women of this world, leading worldly life (although not clinging to it). In Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra, the godly and efficient laymen is amplified in the figure of Vimalakīrti. This wealthy householder, in the words of this sūtra, “lived only for the sake of saving others. He was abundantly rich, ever careful of the poor, pure in self-discipline, obedient to all precepts, removing all the anger by the practice of Kṣānti, all sloth by diligence (Vīrya) all distractions of mind by the practice

of meditation (Dhyāna) and all ignorance by the fullness of wisdom (Prajñā). Though he was but a simple layman, yet he used to observe pure monastic discipline, though living at home, never desirous of anything, though frequenting the gambling places, yet teaching the gamblers into the right path, though profiting by all professions, yet far above being absorbed by them. He used to teach Dharma when among wealthy people, teaching the Ksatriyas, patience, removing arrogance, when among Brāhmanas, teaching justice to the great ministers, teaching loyalty and filial piety to the princess and teaching honesty to the ladies of the court.”<sup>9</sup>

Thus, Bodhisattva's concept and the Buddhist education he received were also responsible for making Buddhism a universal religion. Due to the most comprehensive realization of Śūnyatā, its adaptability and also owing to the fundamental universal vision of friendliness, and selflessness, it is still a most inspiring source of relief for the suffering humanity.

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<sup>9</sup>Translation from Prof. Hokelldomi in “The Eastern Buddhist III. P. 138-9.