

BODHISATTVA IDEAL IN THERAVADA AND MAHAYANA

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There is a wide-spread belief, particularly in the West, that the ideal of the Theravada, which they conveniently identify with Hinayana, is to become an Arahant while that of the Mahayana is to become a Bodhisattva and finally to attain the state of a Buddha¹. It must be categorically stated that this is incorrect. This idea was spread by some early Orientalists at a time when Buddhist studies were beginning in the West, and the others who followed them accepted it without taking the trouble to go into the problem by examining the texts and living traditions in Buddhist countries. But the fact is that both the Theravada and the Mahayana unanimously accept the Bodhisattva ideal as the highest.

The terms Hinayana (Small Vehicle) and Mahayana (Great Vehicle) are not known to the Theravada Pali literature. They are not found in the Pali Canon (*Tipitaka*) or in the Commentaries on the *Tipitaka*. Not even in the Pali Chronicles of Ceylon, the *Dipavamsa* and the *Mahavamsa*. The *Dipavamsa*² (about the 4th Century A.C.) and some Pali Commentaries³ mention Vitandavadins, evidently a sect of dissenting Buddhists holding some unorthodox views regarding some points in the teaching of the Buddha. The Vitandavadin and the Theravadin both quote the same authorities and name the sutras of the Tipitaka in order to support their positions, the difference being only in the mode of their interpretations. The *Mahavamsa*⁴ (5th Century A.C.) and a Commentary on the Abhidamma⁵ refer to Vetulla – or Vetulyavadins (Sanskrit: Vaitulyavadins) instead of Vitandavadins. From the evidence of the texts, it may not be wrong to consider that these two terms – Vitanda and Vetulya – represented the same school or sect.

We learn from the *Abhidharma-samuccaya*⁶, an authoritative Mahayana philosophical text (4th Century A.C.), that the terms Vaitulya and Vaipulya are synonyms, and that Vaipulya is the *Bodhisattva-pitaka*. Now, the *Bodhisattva-pitaka* is definitely Mahayana. Hence Vaitulya undoubtedly denotes Mahayana.

¹It will be seen later that even a Buddha is an Arahant, both according to the Theravada and the Mahayana.

²Dipavamsa, XXII 41, 42.

³*Vibhanga-Atthakatha* (Tripitaka Publication Press, Colombo, 1932) pp. 7, 36, 223; *Majjhimanikaya-Atthakatha* II, (Tripitaka Publication Press, 1943), pp. 302, 335. These commentaries were translated into Pali by Buddhaghosa in the 5th Century A.C. at Anuradhapura, Ceylon, from the original Sinhalese. But the origin of the Sinhalese commentaries goes back to the 3rd Century B.C., and they grew till about the 2nd Century A.C.

⁴Mhv. XXXVI 41, 111.

⁵*Pancappakarana-Atthakatha* I, (TripitakaPub. Press, 1936), p. 190.

⁶*Abhidharma-Samuccaya*, ed. Pradhan, (Santiniketan, 1950), p. 79.

So we can be certain that the terms Vitanda and Vetulya used in the Pali Chronicles and Commentaries refer to Mahayana. But the terms Hinayana and Mahayana were not known to them, or ignored or unrecognized by them.

It is universally accepted by scholars that the terms Hinayana and Mahayana are later inventions. Historically speaking, the Theravada already existed long before these terms came into being. That Theravada, considered to be the original teaching of the Buddha, was introduced to Ceylon and established there in the 3rd Century B.C., during the time of Emperor Asoka of India. At that time there was nothing called Mahayana. Mahayana as such appeared much later, about the beginning of the Christian era. Without Mahayana there could not be Hinayana. Buddhism that went to Ceylon, with its Tipitaka and Commentaries, in the 3rd Century B.C., remained there intact as Theravada, and did not come into the scene of the Hinayana-Mahayana dispute that developed later in India. It seems therefore not legitimate to include Theravada in either of these two categories. However, after the inauguration of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Ceylon in 1950, well-informed people, both in the East and in the West, use the term Theravada, and not the term Hinayana, with reference to Buddhism prevalent in South-east Asian countries like Ceylon, Burma, Thailand and Cambodia. (There are still some outmoded people who use the term Hinayana).

The Mahayana mainly deals with the Bodhisattvayana or the vehicle of the Bodhisattva. But it does not ignore the other two: Sravaka-yana and Pratyekabuddha-yana⁷. For example, Asanga, the founder of the Yogacara system, in his magnum opus, the *Yogacarabumisastra*, devotes two sections to Sravakabhumi and Pratyekabuddha-bhumi just as he devotes one section to Bodhisattva-bhumi, which shows that all three yanasa are given due consideration in the Mahayana. But the state of a Sravaka or a Pratyekabuddha is inferior to that of a Bodhisattva. This is quite in keeping with the Theravada tradition which, too, holds that one may become a Bodhisattva and attain the state of a Fully Enlightened Buddha; but if one cannot, one may attain the state of a Pratyeka-buddha or of a Sravaka according to one's capacity. These three states may be considered as three attainments on the same Path. In fact, the *Sandhinirmocana –sutra* (a Mahayana sutra) clearly says that the Sravakayana and the Mahayana constitute one yana (ekayana) and that they are not two different and distinct 'vehicles'⁸.

Now, who are these three individuals: Sravaka, Pratyekabuddha and Bodhisattva? Very briefly:

⁷It must be noted that there is nothing called Arahant-yana.

⁸Sandhinirmocanasutra, editeetraduit par Etienne Lamotte, Louvain (1935), pp. 73, 147, 198, 255.

A sravaka is a disciple of a Buddha. A disciple may be a monk or a nun, a layman or a laywoman. Bent on his liberation, a Sravaka follows and practises the teaching of the Buddha and finally attains Nirvana. He also serves others, but his capacity to do so is limited.

A Pratyekabuddha (Individual Buddha) is a person who realizes Nirvana alone by himself at a time when there is no Samyaksambuddha in the world. He also renders service to others, but in a limited way. He is not capable of revealing the Truth to others as a Samvaksambuddha, a Fully Enlightened Buddha, does.

A Bodhisattva is a person (monk or layman) who is in a position to attain Nirvana as a Sravaka or as a Pratyekabuddha, but out of great compassion (mahakaruna) for the world, he renounces it and goes on suffering in samsara for the sake of others, perfects himself during an incalculable period of time and finally realizes Nirvana and becomes a Samyaksambuddha, a Fully Enlightened Buddha. He discovers the Truth and declares it to the world. His capacity for service to others is unlimited.

The definition of the three *yanikas* (followers of the three yanayas) given by Asanga is very instructive and clarifies some points⁹. According to him a Sravakayanika (one who takes the vehicle of disciples) is a person who, living according to the law of the disciples, by nature having feeble faculties (qualities), bent on his own liberation through the cultivation of detachment, depending on the Canon of the Disciples (*Sravaka-pitaka*), practising major and minor qualities, gradually puts an end to suffering. A *Pratyekabuddha-yanika* (one who takes the Vehicle of the Individual Buddha) is a person who, living according to the law of the Individual Buddhas, by nature having medium faculties, bent on his liberation through the cultivation of detachment, having the intention of attaining Enlightenment exclusively through his own mental development, depending on the Sravaka-pitaka, practising major and minor qualities, born at a time when there is no Buddha in the world, gradually puts an end to suffering. A *Mahayanika* (one who takes the Great Vehicle) is a person who, living according to the Law of the Bodhisattvas, by nature having sharp faculties, bent on the liberation of all beings, depending on the Canon of the Bodhisattvas, matures other beings, cultivates the pure Buddha-domain, receives predictions or declarations (*vyakarana*) from Buddhas and finally realizes the perfect and complete Enlightenment (*samyaksam-bodhi*).

From this we can see that anyone who aspires to become a Buddha is a Bodhisattva, a Mahayanist, though he may live in a country or in a community popularly and traditionally regarded as Theravada or Hinayana. Similarly, a person who aspires to attain Nirvana as a disciple is a Sravakayanika or Hinayanist though he may belong to a country or a community considered as

⁹Abhidharma-samuccaya, p. 87.

Mahayana. Thus it is found to believe that there are no Bodhisattvas in Theravada countries or that all are Bodhisattvas in Mahayana countries. It is not conceivable that Sravakas and Bodhisattvas are concentrated in separate geographical areas.

Further, Asanga says that when a Bodhisattva finally attains Enlightenment (bodhi) he became an Arahant, a Tathagata (i.e., Buddha)¹⁰. Here it must be clearly understood that not only a Sravaka (disciple), but also a Bodhisattva becomes an Arahant when he finally attains Buddhahood. The Theravada position is exactly the same; the Buddha is an *Arahant-arahamsammāsambuddho* “Arahant, Fully and Perfectly Enlightened Buddha.”

The Mahayana unequivocally says that a Buddha, a Pratyekabuddha and a Sravaka (disciple) all three are equal and alike with regard to their Enlightenment (*bodhi*), with regard to their purification or liberation from defilements or impurities (*klesavarana-visuddhi*). This also is called *vimuktikaya* (liberation-body), and in it there is no difference between the three. That means that there are no three different Nirvanas or Vimuktis for these three persons. Nirvanas or Vimukti is the same for all. But only a Buddha achieves the complete liberation from all the obstructions to the knowable, i.e., obstructions to knowledge (*ineyavarana-visuddhi*), not the Sravakas and Pratyekabuddhas. This also is called *dharmakaya* (Dharma-body), and it is in this and many other innumerable qualities, capacities and abilities that the Buddha becomes incomparable and superior to Sravakas and Pratyekabuddhas¹¹.

This Mahayana view is quite in keeping with the Theravada Pali Tipitaka. In the *Samyutta-nikaya* the Buddha says that the Tathagata (i.e., Buddha) and a bhikkhu (i.e., sravaka, disciple) liberated through wisdom are equal with regard to their *vimutti* (liberation), but the Tathagata is different and distinguished from the liberated bhikkhu in that he (Tathagata) discovers and shows the Path (*magga*) that was not known before¹².

These three states of the Sravaka, the Pratyekabuddha and the Buddha are mentioned in the *Nidhikanda-sutta* of the *Khuddakapatha*, the first book of the *Khuddaka-nikaya*, one of the five Collections of the Theravada Tipitaka. It says that by practising virtues such as charity, morality, self-restraint, etc., one may attain, among other things, “the perfection of the disciple” (*savakaparami*), “Enlightenment of the Pratyekabuddha” (*paccekabodhi*) and “the Buddha-domain” (*buddhabhumi*)¹³. They are not called *yanas* (vehicles).

¹⁰Ibid., p. 101.

¹¹Sandhinirmocana-sutra, pp. 100, 149, 219, 257; Bodhisattvabhumi, p. 3; Trimsika, p. 15; Siddhi, p. 566.

¹²*Samyutta-nikaya* III (PTS), p. 66.

¹³*Khuddakapatha* (PTS), p. 7.

In the Theravada tradition these are known as *Bodhis*, but not *Yanas*. The *Upasakajanalankara*, a Pali treatise dealing with the ethics for the lay Buddhist, written in the 12th Century by a Thera called Ananda in the Theravada tradition of the Mahavihara at Anuradhapura, Ceylon, says that there are three Bodhis: Savakabodhi (Skt. *Sravakabodhi*), Paccekabodhi (Skt. *Pratyekabodhi*) and Samasambodhi (Skt. *Samyaksambodhi*)¹⁴. A whole chapter of this book is devoted to the discussion of these three Bodhis in great detail. It says further that when a disciple attains the *Bodhi* (Enlightenment) he is called *Savaka-Buddha* (Skt. *Sravaka-Buddha*)¹⁵.

Just like the Mahayana the Theravada holds the Bodhisattva in the highest position. The Commentary on the *Jataka*, in the tradition of the Mahavihara at Anuradhapura, provides a precise example¹⁶: In the dim past, many incalculable aeons ago, Gotama the Buddha, during his career as Bodhisattva, was an ascetic named Sumedha. At that time there was a Buddha called Dipankara whom he met and at whose feet he had the capacity to realize Nirvana as a disciple (*Sravaka*). But Sumedha renounced it and resolved, out of great compassion for the world, to become a Buddha like Dipankara to save others. Then Dipankara Buddha declared and predicted that this great ascetic would one day become a Buddha¹⁷ and offered eight handfuls of flowers to Sumedha and made *pradaksina*¹⁸. Likewise, Dipankara Buddha's disciples who were with him and who were themselves Arahants offered flowers to the Bodhisattva and made *pradaksina*. This story of Sumedha distinctly shows the position a Bodhisattva occupies in the Theravada.

Although the Theravada holds that anybody can be a Bodhisattva, it does not stipulate or insist that all must be Bodhisattvas – which is considered not practical. The decision is left to the individual whether to take the Path of the *Sravaka* or of the *Pratyekabuddha* or of the *Samyaksambuddha*. But it is always clearly explained that the state of a *Samyaksambuddha* is superior and that the other two are inferior. Yet they are not disregarded.

In the 12th Century A.C. in Burma (a strictly Theravada country) King Alaungsithu of Pagan, after building the Shwegugi Temple, set up an inscription

¹⁴Upasakajanalankara (PTS), p. 340.

¹⁵Ibid. p. 344.

¹⁶*Jataka* I (PTS), p. 16.

¹⁷This is called *vyakarapa* “prediction” or “declaration” by a Buddha, which was referred to earlier in Asanga's definition of Mahayanika. There is no guarantee that all those who take the Bodhisattva-vow would one day become Buddha. But when a Bodhisattva receives the *vyakarana* from a Buddha, he is definitely destined to become a Buddha.

¹⁸*Pradaksina* is to circumambulate clock-wise or walk round an object of veneration, keeping the object to the right. To make *pradaksina* is a gesture of the highest veneration.

in Pali verse to record this act of piety in which he publicly declared his resolution to become a Buddha and not a Sravaka¹⁹.

In Ceylon, in the 10th Century, King Mahinda IV (956-972 A.C.) in an inscription²⁰ proclaimed that “none but the Bodhisattvas would become kings of Sri Lanka (Ceylon).” Thus it was believed that kings of Ceylon were Bodhisattvas.

A Thera named Maha Tipitaka Culabhaya who wrote the *Milinda-Tika* (about the 12th Century A.C.) in the Theravada tradition of the Mahavihara at Anuradhapura, says at the end of the book in the colophon that he aspires to become a Buddha: *Buddhobhaveyyam* “May I become a Buddha,”²¹ which means that this author is a Bodhisattva.

We come across at the end of some palm-leaf manuscripts of Buddhist texts in Ceylon the names of even a few copyists who have recorded their wish to become Buddhas, and they too are to be considered as Bodhisattvas.

At the end of a religious ceremony or an act of piety, the bhikkhu who gives benedictions, usually admonishes the congregation to make a resolution to attain Nirvana by realizing one of the three *Bodhis* – Sravakabodhi, Pratyekabodhi or Samyaksambodhi – as they wish according to their capacity.

There are many Buddhists, both bhikkhus and laymen, in Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, which are regarded as Theravada countries, who take the vow or resolution to become Buddhas to save others. They are indeed Bodhisattvas at different levels of development. Thus one may see that in Theravada countries all are not Sravakas. There are Bodhisattvas as well.

There is a significant difference with regard to the Bodhisattva ideal. The Theravada, although it holds the Bodhisattva ideal as the highest and the noblest, does not provide a separate literature devoted to the subject. The teachings about the Bodhisattva ideal and the Bodhisattva career are to be found scattered in their due places in Pali literature. The Mahayana by definition is dedicated to the Bodhisattva ideal, and they have not only produced a remarkable literature on the subject, but also created a fascinating class of mythical Bodhisattvas.

¹⁹A portion of this inscription is reproduced in English in the *Buddhist Devotion and Meditation* by PeMaung Tin (London, S.P.C.K., 1964), pp. 56-58.

²⁰*Epigraphia Zeylanica* I, pp. 234, 237.

²¹*Milinda-Tika* (PTS), p. 73. This is a sub-commentary (tika) on the famous *Milinda-panha* (Milinda's Questions) which is referred to as an authority even in Pali Commentaries.

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