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## Echoes of Enlightenment: The Bodhisattva Across Buddhist Texts

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### Abstract

The Bodhisattva, who symbolizes the ideal of kindness, selflessness, and enlightened wisdom. It holds a prominent and dynamic place in Buddhist philosophy and literature. The term, which comes from the words bodhi (enlightenment) and sattva (being), refers to someone who seeks awakening not just for their own personal liberation but also for the liberation of all living beings. According to early Pāli sources, especially the Jātaka tales, the Bodhisattva incarnated in different forms and performed pāramitās. It consists of selfless deeds and displaying moral actions. The Bodhisattva's moral discipline and compassionate nature are further emphasized in the Vinaya Piṭaka and Sutta Piṭaka, which place him in line with the central principles of early Buddhism. Mahāyāna texts like the Lotus Sūtra and Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras, on the other hand promote the Bodhisattva to a cosmic archetype, personified in characters like Avalokiteśvara, who represents unending compassion and wisdom. The Bodhisattva's vow to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all beings sets him apart from the samyak sambuddha, pratyekabuddha, and arhat in the Buddhist spiritual order. The development of Buddhist doctrines from individual liberation to universal salvation is reflected in this ideal, which became more prominent after the Buddha's Parinirvāṇa. Thus, the Bodhisattva doctrine serves as a timeless example of selfless enlightenment that continues to influence ethical and spiritual discourse across cultures, encapsulating the philosophical depth and literary richness of Buddhist thought.

**Keywords:** Bodhisattva, compassion, pāramitā, Avalokiteśvara Buddhist literature

### Introduction

The Bodhisattva is a predominant, vigorous perception within Buddhist philosophy and literature, signifying the supreme of compassion, altruism, and spiritual persistence. Etymologically derived from bodhi, meaning enlightenment, and sattva, meaning being, the term denotes one who seeks awakening not solely for personal liberation but for the salvation of all sentient lives. This ideal, deeply embedded in Buddhist thought, undergoes considerable evolution across canonical and post-canonical texts, reflecting diverse interpretations and doctrinal developments. From the early Pāli sources, in which the Bodhisattva is seen essentially as the Buddha in his former births striving toward enlightenment, to the Mahāyāna scriptures, which raise the Bodhisattva to the position of a universal spiritual archetype, the trajectory of the concept reflects the expanding horizons of Buddhist doctrine of salvation.

In the Jātaka stories, the Bodhisattva ideal is embodied in the descriptions of ethical valor and self-sacrifice that highlights the development of pāramitās over countless lifetimes. The Vinaya Piṭaka and Sutta Piṭaka more delicately point to the Bodhisattva's ethical discipline and compassionate motivation, aligning him with the foundational tenets of early Buddhism. The Mahāyāna texts, however, like the Lotus Sūtra, Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras, and Avataṃsaka Sūtra, present the Bodhisattva as a cosmic figure with endless compassion and wisdom, generally personified in the celestial forms of Avalokiteśvara. These later explanations excel the historical figure of the Buddha in presenting the Bodhisattva as an ever-present force guiding beings towards enlightenment.

The Bodhisattva ideal, thus echoed throughout Buddhist literature, embodies the spiritual field from individual liberation to universal compassion. More than that, it demonstrates the philosophical wisdom and literary value of the Buddhist tradition while articulating an

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enduring vision of selfless enlightenment that continues to inspire religious and ethical discourse across cultures.

All forms of spiritual beings are included among the Buddhist monastic system. In the realm of spirituality, these individuals can be categorized into four distinct categories: the absolutely awakened (*samyak sambuddha*), the individually awakened (*pratyekabuddha*), the deserving (*arhata*), and the Bodhisattvas. The ideal of the arhant was well established during the time of Buddha, and it had taken on a tremendous form that was approved by Buddha himself. After the Parinirvana of Buddha, there was a significant surge of religious feeling, and the notion of Bodhisattva started to emerge. The Buddhist literature contains a significant number of reflections on this process of rising up.

The term Bodhisattva refers to 'someone on the path of awakening'. The Sanskrit word 'Bodhisattva' has been explained in different ways. 'Bodhi' means 'enlightenment' and the word 'sattva' had several interpretations; they are substance, a living being, creature, spirit, mind, sense, and consciousness etc. Thus, Bodhisattva may be translated as 'one whose essence' or own nature' (*svabhava*) one who is on the way to the attainment of perfect knowledge' that means a future-Buddha.

### Methodology & Theoretical Interpretation

The current study focusing on how the Bodhisattva ideal portrayed in Buddhist literary traditions using a qualitative, textual, and comparative methodology. The interpretation of Buddhist texts on philosophical and cultural contexts along with textual analysis is emphasized here. This research adopts a descriptive-analytical design, directing to trace the conceptual development and thematic virtues of the Bodhisattva ideal.

### Limitations

The study is restricted to a few canonical and post-canonical texts that are available through critical editions and reliable English translations. Instead of attempting a comprehensive analysis of all Buddhist texts, it focusses on descriptive sources that show how the idea of the Bodhisattva evolved.

### The Genesis of the Bodhisattva Ideal within the Tripitakas

Vinaya Piṭaka promotes the early Hinayana principles in addition to the arhant ideal. Cullavagga and Mahavagga talked about the Bodhisattva ideal's four noble-truths, eightfold noble-paths, karma, etc. The collection of Bodhisattva tales that make up the Jātaka is a distinct section of Pāli literature. The key character of each of these tales is a Bodhisattva who executes any *pāramitās*. There is no distinction between arhant and bodhisattva in this text. Alongside the line of arhant, the Bodhisattva appears here as a mere future Buddha. In this text, Bodhisattva hood is not regarded as a unique principle. Several works that addressed the idea of Bodhisattva in detail surfaced during the second Buddhist council. During this council, many works were written that went into great detail about the idea of Bodhisattva. The third Buddhist council, which took place in the second century B.C., wrote a useful book called *Kathāvattu*, which is about Bodhisattva. This indicates that by the time of Asoka, the Buddhist community was well familiarized with the Bodhisattva ideal.

The Piṭakas only talked about a few things related to the idea of Bodhisattva. The term gained significant prominence in the literary realm subsequently. Scholars like HarDayal and Rhys Davids noted that the origin and evolution of the Bodhisattva concept can be viewed as the culmination of trends that transpired over several centuries.

### The Making of the Bodhisattva: Conceptual Development in Buddhist Literature

The concept of Bodhisattva originated from the Buddhism naturally and inevitably grew and changed. It is a spiritual movement that adjusts itself. The Bodhisattva doctrine emerged as a necessary consequence of two intellectual streams in early Buddhism; the propagation of *bhakti* and the spiritualization of the Buddha. Initially, *bhakti* was directed towards Buddha. This deep-rooted feeling found an outlet in the Bodhisattvas' invention and excellence. The Buddhists came up with and spread the idea of *bhakti*. Buddhists would have embraced the Hindu temple dedicated to deities. After the 5th century B.C., Buddhists incorporated the worship of specific devas and Hindu deities into their faith. So, the idea of incarnation comes up. The incarnation theory thus emerges. The idea of Bodhisattva is growing thanks to the Bhakti movement and incarnation theory.

The development of Bodhisattva doctrine was greatly aided by Persian religion and culture. The emergence of the Bodhisattva concept may also have been influenced by Zoroastrianism, the religion of ancient Persia. It is mentioned in *Digha Nikāya* and *Jātaka* and had a more direct impact on the development of Buddhism through the cult of sun-worship. Every stage of Buddhism was deeply influenced by the solar myth, and many Bodhisattvas possessed solar qualities. The introduction of new ideas in Buddhism was encouraged by foreign invaders such as the Pallavas, Sakas, and Kusanas. Bodhisattvas became the primary deity of these groups. Before Christianity, the idea of Bodhisattva was developed. It was somewhat influenced by Buddhism and undoubtedly had an impact on the later development of Mahayana Buddhism. There were several similarities between the Bodhisattva and the Christian gospel. In absorbing foreign ideals, the Mahāyāna remained loyal to its genius. Indeed, there are a lot of similarities between Christianity and later Mahāyāna.

The second century B.C. saw the emergence of the Bodhisattva ideal. It is a very old word that appears in Pāli *Nikāyas*. Before achieving enlightenment, Buddha describes himself in *Majjhima Nikāya* as a Bodhisattva. In the *Mahāpadāna Sutta* and the *Acchariy-abbhuta-dhamma Sutta*, the word also appears to be used exclusively in reference to a Buddha's final life. The *Saddhamma Pundarika* gave the Bodhisattva doctrine a new identity. The majority of these treatises date from the first century B.C. The core elements of the Bodhisattva doctrine were altered between the second century B.C. and the seventh century A.D.

The Bodhisattvas were viewed as inferior and subservient to the Buddhas in the early Mahāyāna, but over time, their significance grew. Like the Buddhas, they are to be worshipped. Wisdom and mercy are equally important in the early Mahāyāna tradition, and a Bodhisattva needs to have both merit and knowledge. Gaining Bodhi and becoming a Buddha does not require a Bodhisattva to be in a rush. The idea of Bodhisattva flourished and spread throughout the world with the advent of Vajrayāna. These deities were

worshipped similarly to Hindus. The Vajrayāna tradition included Tantric ceremonies and symbol worship. It was well-known outside of India.

### **Paths of Perfection: Literary Portrayals of the Bodhisattva Ideal**

It is believed that the Nidānakathā was composed sometime between the first century B.C. and the first century A.D. During this time, the Bodhisattva concept was organized. The development of the Bodhisattva ideal is a significant topic in the book "Dure nidāna." In their previous lives, the twenty-four Buddhas who are mentioned in books were Bodhisattvas who were pursuing enlightenment. Thus, this idea was gaining traction, whether consciously or unconsciously. Three categories of Bodhis were identified during this time: Arvaka, Pratyeka, and Samyaka. Three yantras were created for these three types. Samyakayana, Pratyekayana, and Arvakayana. The final one is imbibed in Mahayana, while the first two are known as Hinayāna. The Bodhisattva was on the rise, according to the arhant ideal. Pratyeka and Samyak Buddhas were introduced during this process. Pratyeka Buddha was Buddha himself, and Samyaka was for everyone, not just himself. Pratyeka Buddhas were not accepted by Arhantavādins, and the samyaka ideal quickly expanded and eventually gave rise to the Bodhisattva ideal. With great reverence, Theragāthā alludes to Pratyeka Buddhas.

Others such as Citta, Dantika, Bhaddakapilani, and Mahāprajāpati Gotama attribute their current prosperous renunciate lives entirely to the Pratyeka Buddha. Milinda Prashna makes reference to the Bodhisattva theory. Pratyeka Bhumi is compared to Samyaka Bhumi in this instance and is subsequently regarded as superior. According to this text, the arhant's mind is more open; it absorbs information fast and responds with ease. However, Pratyeka Buddha does it slowly and with difficulty. Pratyeka Buddhas rely only on themselves. The Milinda Prashna references are significant because they demonstrate Pratyeka Buddha's weak recognition and strong adherence to the arhant ideal. One of the most popular themes in Mahāyāna texts, such as Mahāvastu, is the exaltation of the Bodhisattva's extraordinary selflessness and generosity. Pratyeka Buddha is praised in both the Suttanipāta of the Pāli Canon.

One can also observe the clear development of Bodhisattva in Lalitavistara. Here, the master is consistently depicted as being encircled by 32,000 Bodhisattvas and 12,000 monks, all of whom are celebrating their recent knowledge. This tendency began to grow quickly and strongly.

The Bodhisattva ideal is praised in the majority of Apadāna literature and in Jātakamālā of Aryasura. The jñāna of arhant is depicted in the tenth and twelfth Nipāta of Jātaka. The Apadāna of early Buddhist monks in their prior incarnations was included in the Thirteenth Nipāta. The Bodhisattva lineage was included in the Fourteenth Nipāta. It contains the biographies of ancient Bodhisattvas such as Vipassi, Sikhi, Vessa, Kakusa, Konagaman, Kassapa, and others. The Cariya Piṭakas, which were fifteenth Jātaka stories in the form of poetry, were also included in the fifteenth Nipāta. It clearly depicts the perfections of Bodhisattva.

There were 26 vaggas in Dhammapada. The Arhatavagga portrays the Bodhisattva ideal and the Arhant among these. This work suggests that the path to Buddhahood is similar to that of a horse rider. The Bodhisattva ideal is better portrayed by Saddharma pundarika, or Lotus of the true law.

This text states that, despite being unfamiliar with all concepts of creation, the Bodhisattva primarily manifests himself through mythological performances. Numerous magical effects have been attributed to Bodhisattva in the text. It demonstrates that he is a Buddha from the start and not a god; he is the father of the worlds and the ancestor of all future Buddhas and saints.

Nidānakathā and Bodhisattvāpadānam are the two components of Jātakakathās. These tales teach common people the Dharma doctrine. Buddhists held that Buddha became a Bodhisattva after undergoing a series of births. He has over five hundred births. There were more significant human stages among these ascetic, emperor, religious leader, merchant, etc. In addition to these, he gives birth to a lion, ox, elephant, deer, and others. Every narrative in this book presented a different dharma doctrine to the general public.

### **The Cult and Concept of Avalokiteśvara: A Study of the Compassionate Bodhisattva**

Bodhisattva is regarded by the Tibetans as Avalokiteśvara, Dalai lama was regarded as an incarnation of the same. The literal meaning of the word is "the god visible to all." They thought that would reincarnate at the end of the world. He was referred to as "Banteezee" in Tibetan. Avalokiteśvara was portrayed as the lord of all living things in Buddhist texts. According to Tibetan folklore, he is the ancestor of all other gods.

Avalokiteśvara. is a Dhyani Buddha's earthly manifestation. He is known as the "Bhagavan," who assumes the form of a Bodhisattva and whose job it is to guide people toward enlightenment and to look around for their happiness and well-being. He was regarded as an incarnation in later Hindu mythology. As a result, fresh ideas that he created the world emerged. Brahma emerged from between his shoulders, followed by the sun and moon from his two eyes, the wind from his mouth, the water from his navel, and so forth.

Avalokiteśvara. is the most significant of the nineteen Bodhisattvas, according to scholars like H. Kern. Because he gave up his nirvana to serve the people he wishes to guide, he is referred to as the Bodhisattva of compassion and instruction. He had more than three hundred known incarnations as well. The goddess Tara is frequently shown with him. Additionally, he is Buddha's universal spirit continued. In later Mahāyāna tradition, he is worshipped as Lokeśvara and is considered the ninth incarnation of Lord Vishnu.

### **Conclusion**

It is evident from the previously mentioned discussions that the Bodhisattva ideal originated in India in the second century B.C. and ended in the seventh century A.D. Bodhisattva was only mentioned in passing in Tri Piṭaka texts. Christianity, Hinduism, and other faiths all support this ideal in different ways. Much was accepted and contributed to the practice of these religions, whether knowingly or unknowingly. Following the third Buddhist council, which took place at Pataliputra in the second century A.D., the idea of Bodhisattva was widely promoted. Some Piṭaka texts, such as the Dhammapada, Khudhaka Nikāya, Cullavagga, Mahāvagga, and others, view the Bodhisattva ideal as the pinnacle of Buddhahood.

Subsequent Buddhist literary works such as Saddharmapundarika, Milindapaṇṇa, and Lalitavistara

presented the Bodhisattva in a completely different light. It is therefore better than all. According to the aforementioned texts, the Bodhisattva ideal emerged as a result of the doctrines of karma and pāramita.

Brahmins, in addition to the Buddha's early disciples, contributed positively to the development of Buddhism. Thus, the Bodhisattva ideal evolved into the Hindu path. Hindu myths, rituals, and worship styles, among other things, evolved into the idea of Bodhisattva and lost the system's primary goal and integrity.

For the Bodhisattva ideal to be firmly fixed, four to five centuries were needed, from the fourth century B.C. to the first century A.D. By the fourth century A.D., this ideal had grown steadily but quickly. The development and expansion of Buddhism as a whole coincided with the advancement of the Bodhisattva ideal in India. Later, Avalokiteśvara and Bodhisattva were regarded as Buddha's equals and occasionally as his superiors. Later on, this argument completely changed. The Bodhisattva ideal and its place in Buddhist philosophy were not given much attention by later Buddhist schools such as Yogācāra and Mādhyamikavāda. The dissemination of mantras, diagrams, and other materials by the Vajrayāna School gained popularity in India, where Tantric teachings are regarded as the foundation of Buddhist studies. This Buddhist ideal lost significance in India as a result of these new methods.

Such notions fall apart as philosophical and religious ideas emerge. Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, the renowned scholar, was a fierce opponent of Buddhism. In śloka-vārtika, he made numerous arguments against Buddhist philosophy. Adishankaracharya was also a Buddhist critic who criticized Buddhist ideology. He was somewhat successful in his mission. Later Buddhist schools neglected the idea of Bodhisattva by placing greater emphasis on scholarly debates and ethics. Thus, the Bodhisattva ideal was degraded as a result of both internal and external tactics. However, he is still regarded as the highest devotional ideal in Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan tradition.

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