

The Concept of Many Buddhas

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In Buddhist tradition, the most important term is the 'Buddha'. In pre-Buddhist traditions of India, there was no concept of Buddha. There were concepts of 'Muni', 'Tāpasa' and the like.

The term Bodhisattva refers to all beings who aspire to attain enlightenment. The Bodhisattva is an aspirant who strives to be a Sammāsambuddha, which means, the future Buddha. The suggestion is that a person will one day achieve Buddhahood, no matter how long or how many lifetimes it take. Nothing can discourage or divert him from his goal. In their penultimate life, all Bodhisattvas are born in Tushita heaven before taking the last birth in the human world and getting teachings about the omniscience, ultimate knowledge of the *Dhamma* and experience of *Nibbāna*. Buddha never claimed a monopoly or prerogative of Buddhahood, nor did he ever make an attempt to discourage others from attaining to it.

The word 'Buddha' is a generic term, meaning the Enlightened One. It refers to a person who has realized the Dhamma and attained enlightenment. This enlightenment is open to all and so is Buddhahood. The inherent potential for enlightenment can be cultivated and actualized by each and every individual. This spirit of openness and tolerance is characteristic of Buddha.

Pacceka Buddha

The Pacceka Buddha (a private Buddha) is the one who has attained enlightenment (through his own effort and without any

external assistance), but is incapable of imparting his knowledge to others in such a way that they also could realize the Dhamma. He is known as Pacceka Buddha or silent Buddha. The attainment of the status of Sammāsambuddha and Pacceka Buddha is said to be in accordance with a resolution made in the past and fulfilment of ten perfections: i) generosity (*dāna*), ii) morality (*shila*), iii) renunciation (*nekkhamma*), iv) wisdom (*paññā*), v) forbearance (*khanti*), vi) truthfulness (*sacca*), vii) resolution (*adhitthāna*), viii) loving kindness (*mettā*), ix) effort (*virīya*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*). These can help them to be free from Samsāra and lead them to the other shore—*Nibbāna*. The Pacceka Buddhas are superior to Arhants but inferior to Sammāsambuddha.

As far as attaining enlightenment is concerned, one who has attained supreme and complete enlightenment through his own efforts unaided and unguided and is capable of teaching others the truth he has realized is known as Sammāsambuddha, the perfectly Self-Enlightened One.

It is true that Buddhism began with the Buddhas, but it does not rest on them. Buddhism could go on without the Buddhas. There are many Bodhisattvas and Buddhist deities too. Actually, the Buddhas are regarded in Buddhism as the highest spiritual beings. The Buddhas appeared in the world in an endless series, but they are alike, barring a few points. For example, they differ in size or duration of life. Some are born as Khsattiya, others as Brāhmanas.

The Buddhas are only anthropomorphic, not a man, or Deva or Gandharva or Yaksha. They had infinite renunciation. They neither offended anyone, nor did anything wrong, impelled by fear. There was neither greed, nor desire in them. They went beyond suffering and grief.

Four types of Buddhas

In Theravāda as well as Mahāyāna tradition, we find four types of Buddhas. The first is *Ādi Buddha*. He is the father of all Buddhas. He is the Primordial Buddha, so to say. The second type is *Dhyāni Buddha* who include Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha, Amoghasiddhi and Akshobhya. These five Buddhas constitute the family of Tathāgata. They are the priests of the whole world. They originate from the five *skandhas* (*Rupa, Vedanā, Samjñā, Samskāra and Vijnāna*). The third is *Mānushi Buddha*—Vipashyi, Sikhi, Veshvabhu, Kanakamuni, Konagamana, Kashyapa, Shākyamuni. These seven Buddhas are known as Saptā Mānushi Buddhas. They are the Buddhas in human forms. They make the world, and save all living beings. The fourth type is *Medicine Buddhas*. They are the healing Buddhas. They heal the ills. Bhaisajyaguru, Simhanāda, Suparikirti-nāmasri, Svaraghosarāja, Suvarnabhadra-Vimalaratna-Prabhāsa, Acokottāmasri, Dharmakirtisāgaraghosa, Abhijñarāja, Sikhin and so on belong to this group.

Here, we are concerned with the great heroes known as Bodhisattvas in Buddhism. Bodhisattva means enlightened being, someone whose whole energy and interest are devoted to the attainment of Enlightenment. Although, it literally means enlightened being, the word always connotes someone committed to achieving Enlightenment for the sake of all living beings. The Mahāyāna vision sees the

Bodhisattva working for aeons, through endless rebirths, serving the living beings and helping them to move towards Enlightenment. He himself defers his attainment of Enlightenment in order to continue working for sentient beings. Only when the last one has gained *Nirvāna*, do they allow themselves to enter the realm of perfect peace. This conception of the Bodhisattva is very much at odds with the emphasis on gaining Buddhahood as quickly as possible that we find in many Buddhist traditions.

One could see the Bodhisattvas as the vanguards of the whole process of evolution. In them the evolutionary process becomes self-conscious. They are self-aware, and work on their own development, then ‘turn back’ to encourage the further development of those aspects of life which are as yet blindly struggling for the light.

In Mahāyāna sutras and commentaries, the Bodhisattva ideal is contrasted with that of the ‘Arhat’. The Buddha’s first sixty enlightened disciples are described as Arahats, and he sent them out into the world to wander for the welfare and happiness of gods and men. The Bodhisattva aspires to gain supreme Enlightenment not just for his own sake, but so as to be of maximum benefit to living beings. Rather than escaping from the wheels of suffering as fast as possible, he is prepared to work within it, for aeons if necessary, rescuing sentient beings from the clutches of the demon of impermanence.

What is it that makes someone capable of working endlessly to help others? No ordinary person could face the hardships, or manifest the extraordinary selflessness that would be required to be a Bodhisattva. What turns an ordinary person into a Bodhisattva is the profound spiritual experience, the arising of the *Bodhicitta*.

That *Bodhicitta* can arise through four stages. So, the Buddhist tradition describes the following four different levels of Bodhisattvas.

In the *Kārandavyuha Sutra* there are long list of Bodhisattvas, different classes of gods and goddesses, and many hundred thousands of laymen, laywomen, wanderers and even Jain (Nirganthas).

Bodhisattva further teaches beings according to whatever discipline they follow. More catholic than in the Lotus, he assumes the form of a Buddha, a Pratyekabuddha, or an Arhat in order to teach, and even takes the forms of Hindu gods, Maheshvara, etc. and preaches according to the doctrine of each. It is heard that Bodhisattva went to the realm of the rebel gods, the *asuras* and consoled the monsters and converted them into the holy noble beings, the *yakshas* and *rākshasas*. At his preaching, some reached the fruit of entering the stream, some the fruit of once-returner and some of non-returner, some arhatship, some supreme enlightenment. Then he went to the gods of the pure Abode in the form of a Brāhmin, where after working a miracle he declared, 'I am not god, but a man, and has become a Bodhisattva, having compassion on the abandoned and wretched and a teacher of the way of enlightenment'. So, he expounded to them the Noble Eight-fold Path, the ten rules of good action, and taught them the four Āgamas.

Sukhāvati-vyuha is a Mahāyāna Sutra, portraying a heaven surpassing in bliss any of those of rival religions or even of rival Buddhas. It is chiefly the qualities of Tathāgata that are eulogized. Buddha gives a list of eighty-one Buddhas, the last of whom was Lokeshvararāja. This Buddha described to his disciple Dharmakārā, the perfections of innumerable Buddha fields, and

conceived a field of eighty-one times more excellent than all those which had been described. He vowed to become its Buddha, and now he dwells in it, the Happy Land Sukhāvati.

The nature of Tathāgatas and their worship are seen at its best in the works of Shāntideva of 7th Century A.D. His *Sikshā-samuccaya* (collection of the rules of instruction) is a poem of twenty-seven verses, to which he has added a long commentary consisting chiefly of extracts from Mahāyāna scriptures. It is a book of moral rules for the Bodhisattva who has taken the vow and begins to undergo training and it forms a *Bodhisattva Vinaya*. Shāntideva is chiefly interested in the moral training of the Bodhisattvas and has very little to say about their higher attainments. He gives the ten great vows according to the *Dashabhumika Sutra*. The vows include the following:

1) The first stage is *Durāroha*, ('hard to reach'). In this stage, Bodhisattvas practise the eight good qualities such as liberality, compassion, zeal, unworriedness, absence of pride, study of all the shāstras, heroism, taking leave of the world, and steadfastness. If they are defiled by some such vices like sensual pleasures, sloth, not practising the thought of impermanence, they may fail to reach the next stage. This means they are reborn again and again in this stage till they get rid of those vices.

2) The second stage is *Baddhamānā*, ('bound'). Here they cultivate a dislike for existences. Here they have to struggle against twenty-eight vices (love of gain and praise etc.). They may fail to reach the next stage if they are unable to overcome those vices.

3) The third stage is *Pushpamandita* ('adorned with flowers'). At this stage they sacrifice their wealth to obtain a single

‘well-spoken’ verse of Doctrine. Here too are dangers of fourteen vices which may prevent them from reaching the next stage.

4) The fourth stage is *Rucirā* (‘beautiful’). The Bodhisattvas avoid certain great crimes at this stage, and receive births as gods or in high positions. For sins such as corrupting the nuns, they may however, fail to reach the next stage.

5) In the fifth stage, *Citravistāra* (‘of varied expanse’), they view all existence scorched by the fire of lust, hatred, and delusion.

6) They arrive at the sixth stage, *Rupavati*, (‘of fair form’), with the thought, ‘few delights have this terrible whirlpool of the world’. There are certain hindering vices mentioned here, but the passage is corrupt.

7) The seventh stage is *Durjaya*, (‘hard to conquer’). Their minds turn to self-control. Through the thought of great compassion, they pass to the next stage. The sage has become the universal monarch at this stage. There is no turning back.

8) The eighth stage is *Janmanirdesha*, (‘discussion of birth’). A list of Buddhas is given, under whom he can grow and become a great teacher of gods and men.

9) The ninth stage is *Yauvarājya*, (‘viceroys’). The list of such Buddhas is continued.

10) The tenth stage is *Abhisheka*, (‘consecration as king’). The Bodhisattvas are born in the Tushita heaven and then have a desire for human existence. They are not really produced by parents. They arise of their own choice, and their birth is apparitional. When they are born they have the knowledge of all human arts. They do not indulge in sensual pleasures. Rāhula was not Buddha’s son in the course of nature, but arose by apparitional birth.

There is a system of worship for the Bodhisattvas. Their prayers seem to be

based on the praise of the Buddhas, acts of worship, confession of sin, praise of virtue, exhorting Buddhas to preach and asking them to delay their *Nirvāna*, rise of the thought of enlightenment, transference of his own merits for the benefit of other beings. Other discussions of the Bodhisattva’s career are found in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, a work of the Yogācāra School. It adds two more stages. They are *Gotrabhūmi* and *Abhimukticāryabhūmi*. The former is the stage in which the destined Bodhisattva comes to the clan or family of the Buddhas. Five *gotras* are given in the *Mahāvastu*, (a) that of a disciple’s career, (b) Pratyekabuddha’s career, (c) Tathāgata’s career, (d) undetermined *gotra*, (e) Absence of *gotra*. The latter, *Abhimukticāryabhūmi*, is the ‘Stage of aspiration’, in which the thought of enlightenment has been formed, but the vow has not yet been taken. It means, each Bodhisattva is a crown prince or princes, a successor to the throne of Buddhahood.

Besides the worship of these great beings, there was a theoretical treatment of the stages of the Bodhisattva career by the various Buddhist schools. The earliest is in the *Mahāvastu*, where a list of ten stages is given, but not as in Shāntideva’s description. According to the *Mahāvastu*, today’s Bodhisattva is the Buddha of the future (his successor).

The *Mahāvastu* teaches that one of the five necessary actions of a Buddha is to appoint a successor, a viceroy or crown prince (*yuvarāja*) who is to be consecrated. Shākyamuni himself appointed Ajita, the Bodhisattva, who after him, will become a Buddha.

The *Mahāvastu* is a long exposition of the career of the Bodhisattva, but it usually calls Shākyamuni. It begins by explaining the four kinds of conduct of Bodhisattvas:

1) Their conduct as natural unconverted men (*Prakriticārya*) when they follow the ordinary moral rules, pay reverence to Buddhas and their disciples, but do not harbour the thought of attaining perfect enlightenment.

2) Their conduct in making the vow (*Pranidhāna*) to become a Buddha.

3) Their conduct in practising the ten stages leading to Buddhahood (*anulomacārya*).

4) Their conduct in reaching a stage from which there is no falling back (*avaivartacārya*).

The Theravāda teaching is much the same, but, as has been pointed out previously, the doctrine is discussed only in one Pāli work, the *Buddhavamsa*.

Career of the Bodhisattva

In the *Caryāmārgabhūmi Sutra*, the general career of the Bodhisattva is given. A Bodhisattva who practices the career, progresses gradually till the moment when he arrives at supreme wisdom. By means of the six perfections, he discerns the practice of the *Void*. After having accumulated merits during innumerable cycles, he acquires the career of a Buddha. Like a young soldier who advances at first, he is poor, but gradually he obtains great riches. By making efforts, he is promoted to the grade of a lieutenant; finally he becomes a General. By degrees, he is raised to the dignity of governor of a province, receiving 360,000 measures of rice as revenue. Successively, he becomes minister of second rank, of first rank, universal monarch, king of the gods. Thus, he who practises the stages of the career of the Bodhisattvas produces the thought of enlightenment, fulfils (the perfections of) almsgiving, morality, patience, heroism, meditation, and wisdom in succession. He vanquishes the

six movements of the heart (contentment, anger, sadness, joy, love, hatred), rejects the three poisons (passions, hatred, stupidity). He turns to the three modes of release, arrives at the condition of not turning back and approaches the state of being bound to existence by only one birth. All through the career of the Bodhisattva run two motives, the aim of becoming a Buddha in order to save beings and the attainment of the absolute truth.

The Sammāsambuddha

The Sammāsambuddha is he, who will possess 32 valuable *Mahāpurusha lakkhana* and 80 signs of a Great Man, he will live a householder's life for a certain period and renounce the world in search of Truth, he will become Enlightened under a Bodhi-tree and will preach the Dhamma to the innumerable beings and Devas. After his *Parinibbāna*, his bodily relics will be spread around, thousands and thousands of *stupas* will be built on his relics and gods and men will worship those *stupas* for their benefit. Sammāsambuddha is higher than the Pacceka Buddha, because of the greatness of his virtue. He is the first, among the ten Puggalas. The Sammāsambuddha awakes, by himself in this world to the truths, and then attains omniscience and mastery over the powers.

Future Buddha

Now one may ask about the future Buddha whether he would be a Pacceka Buddha or a Sammāsambuddha. The answer will be that 'undoubtedly he would become Sammāsambuddha possessing all qualities of Goutama Buddha (Shākyamuni Buddha)'.
The birth of a child is a happy event. Having a baby and bringing him up is an adventure that can be embarked upon happily and with confidence. At the same

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time, it means the beginning of a long period of sacrifice and responsibility for the parents. Parents have the onerous duty of bearing the responsibility of caring for their children and nurturing them to become useful adults of the future.

The Buddha is playing the same role to us. He is our parent. He trains us in ethics, behaviours and morality. In Buddhism, the Buddha has given very useful advice on the duties. Once again, the Buddha's constant advice that we should not blindly believe but rather question, examine, enquire and rely on our own experience, has a definite scientific ring to it. He says: Do not go by revelation or tradition, do not go by rumours, or the sacred scriptures, do not go by hearsay or mere logic, do not go by bias towards a nation or by another person's ability and do not go by the idea that he is our teacher. But when you yourself know that a thing is good, that it is blameless, that it is praised by the wise, and when you practise and observe that it leads to happiness, then follow that thing.

Misconception about Buddha

When we say Buddha, most people have a great misconception. They think that Buddha refers to the Buddha Shākyamuni, who taught Buddhist philosophy in India. However, this is not what you are taking refuge in. You are actually taking refuge in enlightenment, which is the essence of the Buddha of ten directions, the essence of the saints, the essence of nature and the essence of yourself. We call it the Buddha and this term is very special in Buddhist terminology.

But, we have to know that the term 'Buddha', does not mean a personal God. He did not claim that he was a God, the child of a God or even the messenger of a God. He was a *man* who perfected himself and taught that if we follow his example, we

too could perfect ourselves. Buddha was a human who practised the Noble Dharma and strove to attain the ultimate aim.

In my view, Buddhism is a cosmic religion. It covers both the natural and the spiritual experiences of all meaningful entity. But at the same time, it avoids the notion of a Personal God and all the dogmas and theology. Buddhism believes in all the beings, in their inner power. All beings are endowed with the Buddha nature.

There are two sorts of qualities: those that are developed within oneself—and those which are directed towards others. The qualities are love and compassion. It is beneficial for all beings. It helps us to realize the emptiness. And that refers to the Buddha nature within us. All beings are endowed with the potential for enlightenment. All beings can reflect on emptiness and impermanence. It is an understanding that must come from within. And only then all the beings live in happiness and are free from sufferings. Hence, if we effectively wish to dedicate ourselves fully to the practice of Dharma, we must go to a solitary place free of distractions, where there are neither attractive things, nor things which we find repugnant. From there, happiness can emerge in our minds. Actually the *Karma* is the *Dharma*.

Thus, we can see that the wise men realized the ultimate truth through proper meditation in the different *Kalpas* (ages). Hence, there are many Buddhas, and the last Buddha (Shākyamuni or Goutama Buddha) is actually preaching what other Buddhas have preached before him. All Buddhas were born and dwelt in the Tushita heaven. But they visit this world in a shape which is specially created. The term *Samsāracakra* means the round of rebirth. This term is used not only for normal human beings but for our Lord Buddha. He lives his life not just once. He must undergo the round of rebirth

indefinitely so long as they possess defilement, *karma* and the fruits of *karma*. So he had undergone the round of rebirth. In every life, he had gathered a lot of merits and at last became the Goutama Buddha as *Sammāsambuddha*.

Sammāsambuddha is the *Mahāpurusha* who is happy in all conditions. He is an epoch-making sage and the greatest teacher of the age. The faithful Buddhist believes that the Buddha is not really extinct after his *Mahāparinibbāna*. He gained *Nibbāna* by his own efforts, and discovered the *Dharma* without having a teacher. For the attainment of this state, Buddha professed an eight-fold Path to be followed by each and every man. This was neither one of complete indulgence nor one of complete asceticism. It was a middle path.

The *Sammāsambuddha* himself reached this stage (*Nibbāna*) in this very life. But he was not an atheist. Buddha had propounded definite ways so as to get rid of the false worldly attractions.

It is notable that only one *Sammāsambuddha* appears at a time, not several. Buddha Maitreya is referred to as *Ajita Bodhisattva*. He is to appear on Earth, achieve complete enlightenment and teach the pure *Dharma*. Maitreya will be a successor of the historic *Shākyamuni* Buddha. *Theravāda*, *Mahāyāna*, *Vajrayāna* and rest of all Buddhist schools accept the

concept of Maitreya Buddha, who will appear in the distant future. He will be the Buddha of prosperity, wealth, good luck, and no worries. Now, he resides in the *Tushita* heaven, said to be reachable through meditation.

As a result, the word Buddha is no longer a proper noun (the name of Goutama Buddha), it becomes a common noun. There are different types of worship when someone worships a god. They praise and honour him or her, make offerings and ask for favours, believing that the god will hear their praise, receive their offerings and answer their prayers. Buddhists do not indulge in this kind of worship.

The other kind of worship is when we show respect to someone or something we admire. When a teacher walks into the room, we stand up; when we meet a dignitary, we shake hands; when the national anthem is played, we salute. This is the type of worship the Buddhists practise. A statue of the Buddha with its hands rested gently in its lap and its compassionate smile inspires us to strive to develop peace and love within ourselves. The perfume of incense reminds us of the pervading influence of virtue, the lamp reminds us of the light of knowledge and the flowers, which soon fade and die, remind us of impermanence. When we bow, we express our gratitude to the Buddha for the teachings he has given us. ■

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