

## BOOK REVIEW

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### ASTAMAHABODHISATTVA: THE EIGHT GREAT BODHISATTVAS IN ART AND LITERATURE

The book under review is significant in the area of Buddhist studies. Though there are innumerable Bodhisattvas in Mahayana Buddhism, there is a group of eight Bodhisattvas, known as the Ashtamahabodhisattva. They are Kshitigarbha, Sarvanivarana-vishkambhin, Manjusri, Vajrapani, Maitreya, Samantabhadra, Avalokitesvara and Akasagarbha.

The literal meaning of the word Bodhisattvas is the attainment of Buddhahood (i.e. *Bodhichitta*), which can be called the unified state of *prajna* (insight) and *karuna* (universal compassion). A Bodhisattva aims at the acquisition of *anuttara samayaksambodhi* (the supreme and perfect bodhi), *mahabodhi* and *sarvajnata* (omniscience). A Bodhisattva acts as a teacher to both the Sravakas and Pratyeka-Buddhas. To the Sravakas, he preaches the doctrine associated with the four noble truths and that of the doctrine of the dependent origination aiming at the transcendence of birth, disease, old age, death, and ending at *nirvana*.

The Mahayana phase of Buddhism distinguishes the Bodhisattvas in two kinds: earthly and transcendental. The former kind is distinguished by its insistence upon compassion and altruism as well as upon the attainment of enlightenment. While the latter have realised the *paramitas* (various degrees of perfection) and attained the Buddhahood but have postponed their entry into the state of complete *nirvana*. They are in possession of perfect wisdom, no longer belonging to the *samsara*.

A Bodhisattva must follow certain conduct, duty and practice in order to attain at least the major *paramitas*. Among these practices are: *dana* (alms), *sila* (righteousness), *kshanti* (forbearance), *virya* (energy), *dhyana* (rapt musing), *prajna* (wisdom), *upaya* or *upaya-kausalya* (skillfulness), *pranidhana* (resolution), *bala* (strength) and *jnana* (knowledge).

These doctrines became extremely popular in the arts, literature and thoughts of the lands of the propagation of Buddhism such as in Afghanistan, Central Asia, China and Japan besides, of course, India.

Each of the Ashtamahabodhisattvas is designated one of the eight directions. However, they are not comparable to the Ashtadikpalas, for the Bodhisattvas protect the eight principal quarters for sake of *dharma* so that no evil can come from any quarter to disturb the preaching of *dharma*. The book contains detailed iconographic description of each the Bodhisattva.

Kshitigarbha is known as Di-zang in China, and Jizo in Japan. He has certain feminine traits, for he is an earth-Bodhisattva as the name, earth-womb indicates.

Sarvanivarana-vishkambhin, also known as Vishkambhi, was the spiritual son of Akshobhya. But the Northern school of thought holds that Vairocana was his spiritual father. His other attributes include the full moon and a book placed on lotus flowers. He is well-known in India and China.

Manjusri, one of the most important Bodhisattvas of the Mahayana pantheon, bears a sword for destroying ignorance and holds the Prajnaparamita book that symbolises transcendental knowledge.

Manjusri is best known for his wisdom and intellect and he occurs frequently in the Dunhuang Art.

Vajrapani, or Sakra, has a twofold role. In the Hinayana texts, he is an attendant of Buddha while in the Mahayana iconography he is a Dhyani Bodhisattva and an emanation of Akshobhya with his Sakti being Lochana. With his thunderbolt, he appears as a constant attendant of Buddha to crush every enemy.

Maitreya or the loving one is the future Buddha who is the only Bodhisattva venerated by both the Hinayanists and the Mahayanists. He is a symbol of hope for deliverance in the future.

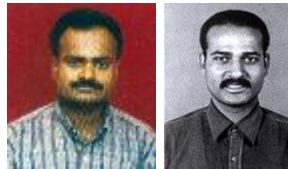
The origin of the Samantabhadra cult is obscure. The Chinese pilgrims visiting various Buddhist countries seldom mention him. He came into prominence in the fifth century after the translation of the *Cheng F-Hua-Ching* (i.e. Dharmaraksha's version of the Lotus). In iconography, he wears not only a crown but he is also dressed up in a princely attire. In Japan he is known as Fu-gen. He is a very popular figure in Chinese and Japanese art.

Avalokitesvara is the most popular and important of all the Mahayana Bodhisattvas because of his many virtues, especially his compassion for all the sentient beings and his deep involvement in their welfare. He took a vow that he would not attain *nirvana* until all the sentient beings are delivered from suffering. His common attributes are the lotus, nectar vase and the Amitabha (his shine) on his crest.

In the *Sadhanamala*, the Bodhisattvas have been described in a variety of forms and names such as Shadakasari Lokesvara, Simhanada Lokesvara, Khasarpana Lokesvara, Lokanatha, Rakta Lokesvara, Nilakantha, Amoghapasa and Chintamani-chakra.

Akasagarbha, also known as Khagarbha, is regarded as the essence of the ether belonging to the Ratnesa family. *Akasa* and *kha* mean the sky or boundless space. He is described and represented in many ways. The *Sadhanamala* describes him 'as green as the sky.' He holds the Chintamani jewel and displays the *varada mudra*. The Ashtamahabodhisattva Mandala with Buddha in the centre symbolically explains the significance of Mahakarunika Buddha and the vows and attainments of the eight chief Bodhisattvas to carry out the noble mission of the master. The Mandala concept is common to Mahayana Buddhism and Tantric Hinduism. As is well known, Buddhism in course of time came closer to Hinduism and developed certain features based on popular forms of worship.

The text in the book is supported by 32 plates depicting the various Bodhisattvas. However, one cannot fail to notice certain errors relating to the italicisation of transliterated words and at times that of the syntax. One also feels that there ought to have been elaboration at points giving requisite descriptions of Chinese, Japanese and Indian examples.



Reviewed by Kailash Mishra and Rajesh Singh

Ashtamahabodhisattva : The Eight Great Bodhisattvas in Art and Literature  
By Radha Banerjee, Abha Prakashan, Delhi, 1994, Plates 32, Rs.800/-