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**Anālayo: *The Genesis of the Bodhisattva Ideal*. (Hamburg Buddhist Studies 1.) Hamburg: Hamburg University Press. 2010. 178 pp., 12 figures (i.e., b/w illustrations).**

## A

In this fairly short, handsomely produced book, Bhikkhu Anālayo examines how the term and concept *bodhisatta* are used in the earliest sources. These sources he defines (uncontroversially) as “the discourses found in the four main Pāli *Nikāyas*, together with material from the fifth *Nikāya* that may reasonably be held to belong to roughly the same textual stratum (*Dhammapada*, *Udāna*, *Itivuttaka* and *Suttanipāta*);” also such counterparts to these texts as have been preserved in Sanskrit, Tibetan or (mostly) Chinese. (p.10)

There are three chapters. The first examines what the sources mean by the term *bodhisatta*. The second discusses a Pāli *sutta* in which the former Buddha Kassapa meets the future Buddha Gotama, who thereupon becomes a monk, but takes no vow to become a Buddha. The third presents the only case in these texts in which a bodhisattva receives a prediction that he will succeed in fulfilling his vow to attain Buddhahood. The book makes fruitful use throughout of Chinese and other parallel texts, showing how the concept familiar to us from the Mahāyāna was built up by stages, perhaps over as long as several centuries (though the chronology is not discussed).

Given how important the bodhisattva later became in Buddhism, it is astonishing that no one before has focussed so methodically on how the concept originated. Anālayo gives us his answers simply, clearly and convincingly. He also presents his material in an intelligent way, which many would do well to emulate. The main text, which is in clear large type, consists of everything essential to his argument, but no more; it can (and should) be read by non-specialists in order to learn about this important strand in the early development of Buddhism. This main text probably has less than half the words in the book. The footnotes, on the other hand, give all references both primary and secondary, and discuss side issues, thus giving specialists everything they need in order to scrutinise and to build on this work.

Both in content and in presentation I find the book entirely admirable, and can only urge that it be read. I would like, however to use this context as an opportunity to present a couple of further observations of my own on the topic.

## B

It may have irked readers that in the above lines I seem to oscillate between the Sanskrit word *bodhisattva* and its Pali equivalent *bodhisatta*. The Sanskrit form has become virtually a naturalised loan word in European languages and is the obvious form to use when referring to Buddhism as a whole. However, it seems sure that the term originated in Pali (or in a form of Middle Indo-Aryan very like Pali) as *bodhisatta*, so that must be the appropriate form to use when discussing the word's origin. In general usage, a bodhisattva is a future Buddha, and to this the Mahāyāna adds that it is a nobler goal than just attaining nirvana and freedom from rebirth oneself, and that a bodhisattva is concerned primarily with helping others to attain enlightenment; some forms of the Mahāyāna (I believe in the Far Eastern tradition) even go so far as to teach that a bodhisattva refuses to attain nirvana while unenlightened beings still exist. This contrasts, Anālayo shows, with the *bodhisatta* in the early discourses. "Passages that reflect his motivation indicate that Gautama's chief concern was to find liberation for himself. His compassionate concern for others appears to have arisen only as a consequence of his awakening, instead of having motivated his quest for liberation." (p.51).

What, then, did the term at first mean or refer to? In the Pali Nikāyas, Anālayo tells us, it "is used predominantly by the Buddha Gotama to refer to his pre-awakening experiences, the time when he was 'the bodhisattva' par excellence. Such usage occurs as part of a standard formulaic phrase, according to which a particular event or reflection occurred 'before (my) awakening, when still being an unawakened bodhisattva', *pubbe va (me) sambodhā anabhisambuddhassa bodhisattass' eva sato ...*" (p.15).

Anālayo discusses the word *bodhisatta* in this passage at some length. Here it refers only to Gotama himself, and Anālayo makes it overwhelmingly probable that that was its earliest usage. But what exactly does it *mean*? A long footnote (fn. 18, p.19) is devoted to this question and the views of many scholars are adduced. It seems that majority opinion has come round to accepting a view already found (alongside others, of course) in the Pāli commentaries: that *satta* here is derived from Sanskrit *sakta*, "attached"; so *bodhisatta* would mean "attached to enlightenment". Some have objected that the Buddha, even before he became enlightened, could not have been "attached" to anything, but I find this utterly unconvincing, a typical example of the literalistic clinging to words which the Buddha condemns in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* (MN *sutta* 21).

I have been strengthened in my skepticism by Anālayo himself. I had written to him on this topic: “I am reminded of many a conversation I have had with pupils when introducing Buddhism. I say, ‘The Buddha tells us to achieve Enlightenment by not desiring anything.’ Usually someone objects: ‘But are you not then desiring Enlightenment?’ I reply: ‘That’s OK. Get rid of all other desires first. Then you don’t have to get rid of the desire for Enlightenment, because that has taken place automatically.’” Answering, Anālayo agreed: “Desire for the goal is a necessary requirement that through attaining its object dissolves itself.” He then, most helpfully, drew my attention to *Sutta-nipāta* 365: *nibbānapadābhipatthayāno*<sup>1</sup> “longing for the state of nirvana”, and to SN V, 272-3, where Ānanda explains that it is through desire (*chanda*) that one conquers desire, because when one desires a goal and then achieves it, that desire naturally subsides. (So I have long been following Ānanda without knowing it.)

So what about *bodhisattass’ eva sato*? I believe that *eva* should never be ignored in translation, though it is not possible to give an English word to which it corresponds. It gives emphasis, which is easier to convey in spoken than in written English. (Some European languages are richer in suitable particles, such as German *ja* and *doch*.) Colloquial English has “actually”, but “when I was actually attached to Enlightenment” sounds too literal; “actually determined on” would be better. In more formal English “in fact” sounds better than “actually”; so I offer “when I was not Enlightened but in fact determined on Enlightenment.” Whether or not exactly these words find favour, it is clear to me that it is anachronistic here to translate *bodhisatta* as a noun; there was not yet any such category of living being. Moreover, this interpretation of the phrase paves the way for the idea that the *bodhisatta* has taken a vow to achieve Enlightenment.

To this positive conclusion let me append a further argument against the interpretation which led to the coinages *bodhisattva* and *mahāsattva* in Sanskrit. Several meanings for *sattva* can be found in a Sanskrit lexicon. In both words, tradition makes *sattva* bear the meaning “being”, usually “living being”, which is common in Sanskrit, and the Pāli word *satta* derived from that is indeed also common. But Pali has several homonyms *satta*, derived from different Sanskrit words.

To call the Buddha some kind of “living being” does not sound particularly complimentary. But the main argument against it derives not from decorum but from linguistics. What kind of compound (*samāsa*) would *bodhi-sattva* be? How

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<sup>1</sup>This is for *nibbānapadam abhipatthayāno*, for metrical reasons.

would a commentator be able to analyse it in accord with Pāṇinian grammar? The only remotely plausible way I can think of would be to take it as a possessive compound (*bahubbīhi*) and make *sattva* mean "essence", so that the whole would mean "he who has the essence of enlightenment". But in Buddhism *sattva/satta* never means "essence".

On the other hand, Sanskrit *mahā-sattva* and Pāli *mahā-satta* are usually translated "great being". I think this is wrong in a different way. This is a possessive compound, at least in origin. Here *sattva* has roughly the meaning given in Monier-Williams' *Sanskrit Dictionary* as "strength of character", corresponding to Latin *virtus* and old English "virtue"; in modern English probably the best translation would be "character": "of great character".

All this must appear rather technical, but it has a wider interest. Anālayo has traced for us the earliest stages in the evolution of the term *bodhisatta/bodhi-sattva*. His book falls short of showing the further developments it underwent in the Mahāyāna. Even so, we have here a good example of how a term at the very heart of Buddhist ideology radically changed its meaning and connotations in the early centuries of Buddhist history, and at the heart of this development lay a false back-formation from Pāli (or, if you like, Middle Indo-Aryan) to Sanskrit, which greatly facilitated the word's reinterpretation. As scholars know, but on the whole the wider public does not, there are several other examples of such reinterpretations of key terms, hard to date with any precision but probably arising within a couple of centuries either side of the beginning of the Christian era. What this amounts to, I suggest, is that there was a period in early Buddhism, maybe a century or two after Asoka, when the Buddhist tradition faltered intellectually, perhaps because of a decline in institutional support. By faltering, I mean that the meanings of some key words were forgotten and had to be somehow supplied from what appeared to be their context, a context which itself was more and more understood under the influence of certain trends elsewhere in India religion – in Brahmanism/Hinduism. One can argue about the extent of the changes, but there can at least be no argument about their *direction* when Middle Indo-Aryan was replaced by Sanskrit – certainly not the opposite. This should give the historian of Buddhism much food for thought.

## C

The second part of Anālayo's book focuses on the story found in the *Ghaṭṭikāra Sutta* in the *Majjhima Nikāya*,<sup>2</sup> according to which Gotama in a former life met the previous Buddha, Kassapa. This is a strange *sutta* in more ways than one. To begin with, it is the only *sutta* which concerns a former life of Gotama and thus resembles a *Jātaka*.

Here is the story in barest outline. In the time of Kassapa Buddha, two young men, a brahmin and a potter, are friends. They go bathing together. The potter suggests to the brahmin that they go to call on Kassapa, but the latter refuses rudely, using the kind of insulting terms to refer to Kassapa which are familiar elsewhere in the Canon on the lips of brahmins. However, the potter refuses to take no for an answer and ends up by using force in a way which would pollute the Brahmin. "... [T]he young Brahmin finally agrees to come along and thereon gets to hear a discourse from the Buddha Kāśyapa. On their way back home, the young Brahmin expresses his wish to go forth. The potter brings him back to the Buddha Kāśyapa, who at the request of the potter ordains the young Brahmin." (p.73)

The rest of the story consists of an episode which has no direct connection with what precedes. In Vārāṇasī, Kassapa Buddha is visited by the local king and preaches to him. The king invites Kassapa to stay for the rains retreat but the latter refuses. When the king asks if he has another supporter who equals him, Kassapa talks of the potter and tells of how the potter has helped him on other occasions. The king decides to send food to the potter, but the potter declines. The story ends here. The young Brahmin does not reappear.

In the Chinese counterpart to the *Acchariyabbhutadhamma Sutta*<sup>3</sup> of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the future Gotama "took his initial vow to become a Buddha when he was a monk under the Buddha Kāśyapa" (p.85). There is however no trace of this in the *Ghaṭṭikāra Sutta*.

On the latter, Anālayo justly comments that "the potter is – from the perspective of the Buddha Kāśyapa – a superior lay supporter" to the king. "In fact, throughout the discourse the potter is the main protagonist, exhibiting the exemplary conduct of an ideal lay disciple." (p.74) One might add that the very title of the text ("The Potter Sutta") signals that the potter is the protagonist.

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<sup>2</sup> *Sutta* 81, *MN* II, 45-54.

<sup>3</sup> *MN sutta* 123.

Anālayo spends several pages on a judicious analysis of the anomalies raised by this *sutta*, and shows how some other texts set about dealing with them. This is an exemplary illustration of how difficulties (i.e., inconsistencies) in a text lead to a new development.

In my view, however, Anālayo has failed to say one crucial thing. It seems to me extremely probable that the anomalies all arise from one simple fact: that originally it was the young potter, not the young Brahmin, who was identified with the future Gotama. Seen in this light, the caste theme appears as a familiar one. The low-caste person, whose touch will pollute the Brahmin, disregards that tabu and goes ahead in order to help to save his high-caste friend. He is not only a better man than the king, but also than the Brahmin.

Though there are famous old stories based on this theme, such as the *Mātanga Jātaka*,<sup>4</sup> versions of which are found in both Buddhist and Jain<sup>5</sup> literature, some monk evidently found the idea of the future Buddha as a low-caste person too much to stomach, and changed the identification. To appreciate how much trouble he caused, read Anālayo's book.

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<sup>4</sup>*Jātaka* 497. The story is well analysed by Justin Meiland in his unpublished Oxford D.Phil thesis "Buddhist values in the Pāli *Jātakas*, with particular reference to the theme of renunciation", 2003, pp.83 ff. In fn.12, p.84, he writes: "Other stories in which the Bodhisatta is born as a *caṇḍāla* include the *Satadhamma Jātaka* (179), *Chavaka Jātaka* (309), *Amba Jātaka* (474) and *Cittasambhūta Jātaka* (498)."

<sup>5</sup>*Uttarajjhayaṇa Sutta* 12. This is far shorter than the *Jātaka* but some of the verses are almost the same.