



The Signification Of Bodhisattva Manjushri In Mahayana Buddhism

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Abstract

Manjushri is a bodhisattva of the tenth and final stage (bhumi) of the bodhisattva path, and at this level he is joined by figures such as Avalokite'svara and Maitreya. As stated above, Manjushri's standard epithet kumaarabhuuta has a double sense, being a youth or being a prince. Understood as prince the term also has a technical meaning which indicates that its bearer has received consecration (abhi.seka) from the Buddha as crown prince (kumaara) of the Dharma, making him a tenth stage bodhisattva. The consecration gives him the powers of a Buddha, enabling him to be a Cloud of the Dharma (dharmamegha) that rains down the Buddha's teachings upon the world for its benefit. As well as 'Cloud of the Dharma' the tenth stage of the bodhisattva path is therefore also called the Stage of Consecration (abhi.seka-bhuumi). In this article I would like to express about practical approach and its experience of Manjushri bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism.

Keywords: Manjushri, Bodhisattva, Wisdom, Perfect wisdom, Mantra, Pranja, Insight, Buddha, Nirvana, Meditation, Mahayana Buddhism

Introduction

Manjushri is bodhisattva associated with *pranjna* (insight) in Mahayana Buddhism. In Tibetan Buddhism, he is also a *yidam*. His name means 'Gentle Glory' in Sanskrit. Manjushri is also known by the fuller name of *Manjushrikumarabhata*, literally 'Manjushri, Still a Youth' or, less literally, 'Prince Manjusri'. Manjushri is a Bodhisattva who represents wisdom. Along with Avolokiteshvara and Vajrapani, he is one of trinity of family protectors. The family that Manjushri protects is known as the Tathagata family, which includes the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, as well as Vairochana, the central figure in the Five Buddha Mandala. Tathagata" the name of Manjushri's family, means "The one thus gone (to *Nirvana*) or (because of the ambiguities in Sanskrit) "The one thus come (to this world) and is an epithet of the historical Buddha. Of all the Bodhisattvas, Manjushri has perhaps the closest association with the Buddha, and could be said to represent his genius (in the sense of his attendant deity) or daimon (attending spirit or inspiring force).

Manjushri is depicted as a beautiful young prince, usually said to be sixteen years old. His freshness and beauty represent the fresh way that the awakened mind sees the world. While the unenlightened mind typically sees life as being ordinary, to those who are awakened life is magic, extraordinary, and full of potential. The name Manushri means 'Gently Auspicious One.' He is also known as Manjughosha, or 'Gentle Voiced One.' Like most *Bodhisattva* figures, he is seated on a lotus flower. Because the lotus grows from mud in often foul water, and yet remains unstained, it is considered to represent the purity of wisdom, which can exist in the midst of delusion without being affected by it.

Manjushri's most distinctive emblem is the flaming sword that he holds aloft in his right hand. The sword symbolizes his mind's ability to cut through the fetters that bind beings to the cycle of delusion and suffering. The flames suggest that the sword is not a literal one, and flames in Buddhist iconography invariably represent transformation; Manjughosa's wisdom does



not destroy ignorance in the conventional sense, but transforms it into wisdom.

In Manjushri's left hand is his other characteristic emblem: the stem of a lotus, which bears a book. This book is the Perfection of Wisdom, which is both the source of his realization and a concrete symbol of it. In the Manjughosa form the book is held to the heart. There are numerous other variations of Manjushri, some of which go by different names. For example he is sometimes seen riding a lion, or holding a bow and arrow.

Manjushri features prominently in many Perfection of Wisdom texts. He makes a late appearance in the Lotus Sutra, and is particularly prominent in the *Vimalakirti Nirveda*. Both of these are early Mahayana sutras. However he is most often found in the later Perfection of Wisdom Sutras, where he is, in effect, the Buddha's spokesman. In some of these sutras the dialogues that Manjushri has with the Buddha are so intimate that we can get a sense that we are hearing the Buddha thinking out loud.

Manjushri is associated with ordinary intelligence and mental acuity as well as transcendent wisdom, and his mantra Om A Ra Pa Ca Na Dhihi is said to confer intelligence. Shantideva, the author of the great *Bodhicaryavata* ('Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of life') is said to have gained his wisdom by communing with Manjushri by night, while appearing by day as a slovenly and lazy scholar-monk. Some scholars believe that Manjushri has his origins in a *Ghandharva* (celestial musician) called *Pancashiksha*, who is found in some early Pali texts, the name *Pancacirakha* means five-crests, and has a correspondence with Manjushri's Being a musician, *Pancashiksha* is also "gentle voiced" and is praised by the Buddha for quality of his singing. Both figures are also involved in question-and-answer sessions with the Buddha and both are generally depicted as eternally young, although this is so common a quality that it's not in itself persuasive. Manjushri is often known as

Kumarbhuta ('Youthful Being'), although he does also manifest in some texts as elderly man. His quality of having eternal youth (sometimes despite appearances to contrary) symbolized the eternal freshness and spontaneity with which the enlightened mind approaches life.

The word "*bodhisattva*" is a compound word formed from *bodhi* (spiritual awakening, enlightenment) and *sattva* (a being, essence, spirit). The word can then be translated as "A being set upon enlightenment," "One whose essence is perfect knowledge," or "A being whose essence is enlightenment."

The word, however, has several shades of meaning, and we will explore these below.

Heare's Monier-William's Sanskrit-English Dictionary definition of the word 'bodhisattva'

"sattva means 'one whose essence is perfect knowledge,' one who is one the way to on the attainment of perfect knowledge, (i.e. a Buddhist saint when he has only one birth to undergo before obtaining the state of a supreme Buddha and then Nirvana), Buddha (the early doctrine had only one Bodhi-sattva, viz, Maitreya: the later reckoned many more) the principle Buddha of the present era (before he become a Buddha)"

There is a possibility that the Pali word '*sattv*' was actually a back-formation from the Sanskrit word *sakta*, meaning "committed to, fixed or intent upon, directed towards." The Pali term "*bodhisatta*" would, from a Sanskrit point to view, has been ambiguous, and it's possible that it wrongly as "enlightenment being" when it should have been retranslated as "one committed enlightenment."

Three meanings of the word "bodhisattva"

There are three principle meaning of the term "*bodhisattva*," each of which I will discuss in more detail below:

1 In early Buddhist, *bodhsattva* meant "the previous lives of a (or the) Buddha."



2 In Mahayana Buddhism, *bodhisattva* refers to a human being committed to the attainment of enlightenment for the sake of others. Becoming a bodhisattva is the goal of Mahayana Buddhism.

3 Bodhisattva may also refer in Mahayana Buddhism to archetypal bodhisattvas: mythical beings such as Avalokiteshvara and Manjushri, who are objects of devotion. We will look at these three different understandings of the term bodhisattva below.

1 The Bodhisattva in early Buddhism

This relief from *Borobodur* illustrates a *Jataka* tale in which the *bodhisatta* (the Buddha in a previous life) is a great turtle who first saves a group of shipwrecked sailors by taking them on his back, then offers his body to them as food to relieve their hunger.

The Pali equivalent to bodhisattva is *bodhisatta* (*satta* having the same meaning as Sanskrit *sattva*- or *sakta*), and this is a word that appears in the Pali canon to refer to:

1 The historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, before his enlightenment, and

2. The current life or lives of the Buddha-to-come, Maitrey (Pali *Metteya*).

The word bodhisattva therefore originally meant something like “a being who is well on the way to becoming a Buddha.” The previous lives of the *bodhisatta* Sakyamuni are told in the Pali *Jataka* (‘birth’) Tales, a collection of folk tales that later became the basis for Aesop’s fables, and that illustrated the Buddha-to-be’s development of god qualities such as patience, generosity, and compassion.

1 The bodhisattva as the goal and idea of Mahayana Buddhism

Mahayana Buddhist do not aspire to enlightenment purely to free themselves from suffering; they do so out of compassion in order to liberate other sentient beings. One of the greatest works of Buddhist literature is the 8th century “Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life” (*Bodhicaryavatara*) by Shantideva. The

Bodhicaryavatara contains ten chapters detailing the practice of the Perfections (*paramitas*) by which one becomes a bodhisattva. It is thought the cultivation of *bodhicitta* (the mind or heart of awakening) that one becomes a bodhisattva. The Mahayana (“Great Vehicle”) seems to have arisen at least in part because of a perception that Buddhist practitioners in certain schools (which they pejoratively dubbed the ‘*Hinayana*’ or “Lesser Vehicle”) had too narrow a conception of the Buddhist path, seeing it purely in terms of liberation oneself from suffering without regard to the wellbeing of others.

This self-centered orientation was in conflict with the Buddha’s original emphasis that his disciples “go forth for the welfare of the many” and with his own untiring concern with the wellbeing of others. Mahayanists therefore looked back to the Buddha’s own life for inspiration. Prior to his own enlightenment, the Buddha-to-be, or Bodhisattva, was said to have spent countless lifetimes cultivating the perfection of compassion and generosity. The *Jataka* tales mentioned above contain a vast body of folklore in which the Bodhisattva, whether in human or animal form makes great sacrifices in order to help others. Inspired by both the actual and the mythic stories of the Buddha, Mahayanists, reinstated compassion at the heart of Buddhist practice, rather than aiming at Arhatship- the individual liberation of the Hinayana – Mahayanists aimed to attain enlightenment for the sake of all beings.

To Mahayanists, wisdom and compassion were considered to be inseparable. To truly see the nature of reality is to see that the whole conception of separate entities is a delusion. Paradoxically, therefore, a “*bodhi-being*” has to see that there are no beings to save in order to want to save them, and therefore to become a “*bodhi-being*”. The *Bodhisattva* path is said to take many lifetimes.

1 The Bodhisattva as devotional object



Mahayana Buddhism vastly increased the range of objects of devotion by introducing new Buddha and Bodhisattvas. The historical Buddha had always been an object of great devotion to his followers. He himself had encouraged the veneration of the tombs of previous “Solitary Buddha” or *pratyekabuddhas*. The Buddha-to-be, *Metteya* (Sanskrit:Maitreya), was also an object of veneration and prayer. There was never, therefore, any sense of there being only a single (or no) focus for devotion in Buddhism. But the Mahayana broadened the range of devotional figures, by introducing “new” Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. How did this happen ?

First it may well have been the case that existing pre-Buddhist or simply non-Buddhist figures were incorporated into the Buddhist tradition and promoted. As it were, to enlightened status. This seems to be the case with Vajrapani, who began life a Yaksha who acted as the Buddha’s protector. Some scholars have also speculated that Manjushri began as a celestial musician, or *gandharva*.

Second, it’s likely that some Buddhist deities first appeared as spontaneous manifestations in meditation practices. It’s fairly common for meditators to have meaningful and stable images appear as a result of the mind attaining unusually concentrated states of mind. These image are known as *nimittas*. A meditator who slips into a particularly refined state of mind may see, for example, as still pool or water or a jewel hanging against an infinite black background. It’s conceivable that a meditator, upon having a particularly strong experience of compassion, say, experienced a vision of beautiful and loving goddess caught in the act of stepping from a lotus in order to help sentient beings. And so, Tara would be “born”. In certain states of meditation the border between the unconscious and conscious minds can be crossed more easily, and the mind can begin to see things in a more symbolic way – as in dreaming but with a greater degree of

mindfulness than in found in normal daily life.

Bodhisattva may then be irruptions into waking consciousness of symbolic representations of meditation experiences. It is not unknown for Buddhas and bodhisattva who appear in this way to even give teachings. Some Mahayana sutras may have started in this way. Meditator who had such visionary experiences may have encourage others to meditate upon the image that had spontaneously arisen, and so the tradition of *sadhana*, or the visualization of Buddhist deities, may have arisen.

Teaching On The Meaning Of The Manjushri Mantra: Om Ah Ra Pa Ca Na Dhi

Now I would like to give a short teaching combining both the sutra and the tantra approach. Manjushri is a bodhisattva who represents wisdom, and his mantra also symbolized that quality. He holds a sword in his right hand symbolizing his ability to cut through delusion. In his left hand, by his heart, he holds the stem of a lotus flower, which bears a book – the Perfection of Wisdom teaching, or *Prajnaparamita*.

The syllables between Om and the concluding *Dhihi* are the first syllables of a syllabary called the *arapacana* because it beings with A RA PA CA and NA (A syllabary is like an alphabet, but made up of syllables). This Syllabary is found in a number of Buddhist texts, including some Perfection of Wisdom (*prajnaparamita*) texts. Many of the texts in which A RA PA CA NA (and the rest of the syllabary) appears are not connected with Manjushri, but according to Dr. Conze (in the introduction to the Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom) “in later literature is always connected with the Bodhisattva Manjushri.” The individual syllables A RA PA CA and NA has no conceptual meaning, although they are seen as having symbolic connections with various spiritual qualities.

Here’s the scheme laid out in the Large Sutra of Perfect Wisdom (adapted from Conze):



A leads to the insight that the essence of all things is unproduced.

RA leads to the insight that all things are pure and free of defilements,

PA leads to the insight that dharmas have been “expounded in the ultimate sense.”

CA leads to the insight that the arising and ceasing of things cannot be apprehended because in reality there is no arising or ceasing.

NA leads to the insight that although the names for things change the nature of things behind their names cannot be gained or lost. These are all important concepts in the Perfection of Wisdom, although to say they are concepts in a bit limiting – really they’re attempts to describe the indescribable nature of reality.

Dhihi is defined as meaning: thought (especially) religious thought, reflection, meditation, devotion, prayer, understanding, intelligence, wisdom.

OM

Represents the enlightenment form of body, speech and mind embodied in Manjushri’s three *kayas*. First, the Manjushri mind is equally to the wisdom mind of all Buddhas – the *dharmakaya*. We may ask how to practice the *dharmakaya* ? If you experientially understand Buddha nature and rest in the Buddha nature in our meditation we are practicing *dharmakaya*. Second, the Manjushri mantra Om Ah Ra Pa Ca Na Dhi represents the enlightenment speech of all the Buddha. If we recite this mantra more and more our usual worldly perceptions will transform into perceptions of Buddhas in Buddha fields. This is how enlightened speech of Manjushri manifests in the *shambhogakaya* form. Finally, if we focus in our meditation on the body of Manjushri as depicted in *thankas*/images – in orange color and with the ornaments we are engaging in a *nirmankaya* practice. This is practice focusing solely on the visualization without reciting the mantra and without resting in Buddha nature.

Practitioners differ in terms of their *dharmakaya*, *sambhogakaya* and

nirmanakaya meditation. Those of the highest capacity engage in the *dharmakaya* practice recognizing Buddha nature. Practitioners of medium capacity do the *sambhogakaya* practice through reciting mantras, finally, practitioners of the lowest capacity engage in the *nirmanakaya* practice by visualizing the form of the deity. We may think that if we are doing the *dharmakaya* practice we are not practicing the other *kayas*. Similarly, we may think that if we practice *sambhogakaya* meditation you are not practicing *dharmakaya* and *nirmanakaya* meditation. But the best practice combines all three *kayas*. In such practice we rest our mind in its Buddha nature first. Then we recite mantra to practice *sambhogakaya* while resting in the nature of our mind. And finally, while maintaining the *dharmakaya* and the *sambhogakaya* practice you also visualize ourselves as the deity. The visualization adds the *nirmanakaya* aspect to the practice.

AH

Stands for the direct understanding of the nature of phenomena. This realization develops as we examine everything. That means that we ask questions such as: What does my body and mind consist of? What do all the things around me consist of? As a result of repeated inquiry and contemplation, the realization of emptiness as the true nature of our mind as we all external phenomena arises. Understanding of the emptiness of everything is the wisdom path.

RA

The syllable RA represents understanding of emptiness from the Hinayana point of view. This approach emphasizes the emptiness of the self but believes that at the deepest level everything consists of very small subatomic particles. Similar views are held by scientists these days. These teachings of the ‘Hinayana’ emptiness are suitable for those practitioners that have difficulty in understanding emptiness in its ultimate nature.



PA

Stands for meditation. There are two basic types of meditation: the conceptual (thinking) and the non-conceptual (without thinking) meditation. In the conceptual meditation we really on thinking about various concepts such as impermanence, suffering or karma. This is actually not considered a meditation in the strict sense. The 'real' meditation is non-conceptual and means that we see the nature of phenomenal directly. In our practice we usually first combine the conceptual and the non-conceptual meditation until we are able to rest in the nature of mind completely without thinking. For example, if you have to ask yourself whether your meditation is conceptual or non-conceptual we are practicing conceptual (thinking) meditation. If we engage in a true non-conceptual meditation we don't have to check where our meditation is conceptual or non-conceptual- our feeling or resting in the nature of mind is so reassuring that there are no questions to be asked.

CA

Symbolized the importance of *sansara* and *nirvana*. The exact nature of both *nirvana* and *samsara* is emptiness. But if we don't understand the exact nature of *samsara*, it manifests to us in the form of three suffering. The three sufferings are : the suffering of change, the suffering upon suffering and the suffering of everything composite. If we exactly experientially understand the real nature of *sansara* it will instead appear to us in the form of three kinds of peace: *arhat* peace, *bodhisattva* peace and *Buddha* peace. It is crucial to understand the importance of both of *sansara* and *nirvana*. For example, we may think that *sansara* is not important and think only about *nirvana*. As a result we may think that we should do a life-long retreat and abandon all our worldly commitments to other people. This not correct, we need to apply wisdom in our action and understand that both *sansara* and *nirvana* are important. We need to understand that the nature of retreat and real practice is in our mind and does not

depend on where our boy it. It is of no use if our body is in a great retreat place when our mind is wandering around. As a proof of this they are great practioneres that lead a very bushy household life, have a job and family commitments.

NA

represents karma (action). In short, it signifies that all the suffering we experience is the result of our previous non-virtuous actions (negative karma) and all our happiness results from our previous virtuous deeds (positive karma). There are 2 basic kinds of karma: the collective karma and the individual karma. We need to understand that with each action of our speech, body, and mind we are sewing the seeds of our future experience.

DHI

represents the *bija*, or seed syllable, of Boddhisatva Manjushri. After chanting 108 *dhihs*, envision the *dhi* on your tongue coming down and absorbing into the *dhi* on the moon disk at your heart, which becomes very brilliant. Immeasurable red-light rays radiate from that seed syllable, filling your entire physical body and purifying all negative karma (actions), sickness, and obstacles.

In short, the view helps us recognize the correct path. Meditation is the actual practice through which we develop an experiential understanding of the path, leading to a change in our mind and feelings. Activity combined with wisdom gives us the capacity to help sentient beings in an efficient way at the right time. Fruition is the happiness and courage resulting from accomplishing our virtuous intentions.

Conclusion

Devotion to Manjushri then, whether by meditating on his form and teaching or by repeating his name, leads to seeing him, possibly to receiving teachings and to the gaining of appropriate spiritual insight. At the very least, the devotee can be sure of Manjushri's protection and freedom from a poor rebirth.



These meditation practices, in which the mind is focused on a particular Buddha or bodhisattva, have their roots in the tradition of the Recollection of the Buddha (*buddhaanusm.rti*). This practice, going back to the earliest phase of Buddhism, involves bringing to mind or 'recollecting' the different qualities of the Buddha 'Saakyamuni. One of its results, according to Buddhaghosa, is that the meditator can come "to feel as if he were living in the Master's presence." A visual dimension to this experience, though not mentioned by Buddhaghosa, is suggested by other sources. For example, in the Pali *Sutta Nipaata*, there is a story of a Brahmin called Pi'ngiya, who because of old age is not able physically to accompany the Buddha. Nonetheless, Pi'ngiya does not feel separated from the Buddha because, "with constant and careful vigilance it is possible for me to see him as clearly as with my eyes, in night as well as day." This early account, which may predate formalised practice of *buddhaanusm.rti*, suggests that its early practice may have grown out of visualisation of the Buddha and his qualities. All practices of Bodhisattva Manjushri are very powerful for helping us to clear our ignorance and delusions, and to enhance our learning skills, debating, writing, memory, and wisdom.

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