

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION

The Introduction of Maitreya Cult has been generally regarded to have begun in India as early as the second century B.C. However, a much earlier date has been suggested in the present work which may be shortly after the Parinirvāṇa of the Buddha. This hypothesis is proposed mainly following the Buddhist theory, i.e. the possibility of a plurality of Buddhas in a time sequence. A belief in the former Buddhas seems to have been one of the most important Buddhist ideas as it is mentioned frequently in the earliest Buddhist texts, such as Mahāvastu, Nidānakatha, Mahāpadānasuṭṭa and Mahābodhivaṃsa.

It is believed that the Śākyamuni Buddha himself has told his previous life stories to his followers in order to propagate his teachings. According to this any one, if they followed the identical life as his own, could become a Buddha in future birth. It is logical to presume the existence of the concept of future Buddha when there existed the concept of the Mānushi Buddhas. It is, therefore, very probable to trace back the origin of the concept of Maitreya to the time of the Śākyamuni Buddha. The fundamental idea of future Buddha might have developed greatly, after the Parinirvāṇa of the Śākyamuni Buddha, who by then had

disappeared into total non-existence.

It is a matter of speculation as to how far the cult of Maitreya might have developed during this 'dark period' in the history of India. The earliest archaeological remains of Buddhist art during Mauryan period and as seen in the reliefs of Sanchi and Bahrut, suggest that the Buddhist of that time had followed the teachings of the Buddha, but had not worshipped the image of the Buddha. The symbolic representations did not necessarily mean to represent the /Sākyamuni Buddha, as we have generally believed, but it might have plausibly represented the concept of Buddha. Such an interpretation become possible when we consider that all the previous Buddhas too ~~were~~ believed to have lived almost identical life as that of the /Sākyamuni Buddha. In this context, the future Buddha Maitreya also could have shared the general ideal of Buddhahood in the symbolic representations. For every Hīnāyana Buddhist Maitreya was an aim or the religious wish to achieve<sup>e</sup>.

The Origin of the Maitreya Cult has been generally related with the Mithra, the saviour-god in Zoroastrian religion due to the phonetic and conceptual similarity. In the present work, the theory of Iranian origin has been questioned and <sup>its origin</sup> ~~has been traced its origin~~ back to the vedic concept of samskāra.

As is generally accepted, the nature of Buddhist philosophy was never isolated, but was accommodated within

the Indian traditional thought. The concept of Mānushi Buddha is undoubtedly<sup>ed</sup> an outcome of the traditional concept of saṃskāra and had become a fundamental element of Buddhist thought. The concept of Maitreya seems to have begun as one of the many Mānushi Buddhas, in his case specifically as a future Mānushi Buddha, which alternately made his present state as a Bodhisattva. For Maitreya, the term 'Bodhisattva' should be understood differently from other Dhyāni Bodhisattvas, whose notion developed with the change of philosophical and cosmic theory, probably effected by the system of transcendent gods of Zoroastrian religion.

The Nature of the Belief in Maitreya is totally different from the nature of Mithra and the supposedly important paradise concept. This in connection with the popularization of the Maitreya cult is an invalid<sup>ed</sup> observation. The western concept of paradise may be more appropriat<sup>e</sup>ly compared with the concept of Sukhāvatī, the heavenly abode of the Dhyāni Buddha Amitābha. Maitreya's Tushita is a transient realm where beings are supposed to stay for a while in between two consequent births. Maitreya's Ketumati, on the other hand, is a name of the Future world; as is the 'earth' for the present world, where the <sup>/</sup>Sākyamuni Buddha had descended and taught<sup>3</sup> the people. Ketumati is the earthly realm where Maitreya will descend and lead people to the final salvation. These two realms of Maitreya seem to have been affected by the paradise cult of

Amitābha's Sukhāvatī, sometimes by the fifth century A.D., however, the concept of paradise in the cult of Maitreya seems to have gained no popularity in India.

Maitreya remained as a source of Dharma through out the Buddhist period of India and people wished to go to Tushita or to be reborn in Ketumati not to have a heavenly life over there, but to solve any religious doubts or to achieve the final salvation with the help of Maitreya's teaching. Such a nature of Maitreya as the only Mānushi Bodhisattva is observable through out the Buddhist period of India. In some cases during the Tantric period, Maitreya appears as one of the Dhyāni Bodhisattvas. As a next Buddha-to-be, Maitreya was represented independently in Mathura school of art emphasising more on Buddha's nature. On the other hand in Gandhara he was represented in the Buddhist triad pairing with Avalokiteśvara, the Dhyāni Bodhisattva of the present world giving more emphasis on his Bodhisattva aspect. These two Bodhisattvas ideally represent two Buddhist systems, Hīnayāna ideal in the Mānushi Bodhisattva Maitreya and Mahāyāna ideal in the Dhyāni Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. Such a triad may also be a synchronized representation of the present world (by the Avalokiteśvara) and the future world (by the Maitreya). In other words, the popular triad composed of Avalokiteśvara-Buddha-Maitreya, represents both Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna ideals with the Śākyamuni Buddha as a founder of Buddhism. That is why this triad type could remain through out the Buddhist period in

India despite many changes that occurred in Buddhist philosophy. Under the Tantrayāna system, the nature of Maitreya as a Mānushi Bodhisattva was challenged and was adopted into the system of Tantrayāna as one of the many Dhyāni Bodhisattvas, however the result seems to be most unsuccessful.

The Origin of the Maitreya Image has so far been understood in connection with the iconography of God Brahmā, and the so-called 'bow-knot' type of Maitreya images has been regarded as the earliest images of the deity. According to the present study, it is neither Brahmā from whom the Maitreya iconography seems to have derived, nor the 'bow-knot' type that is the first Maitreya image. The first Maitreya images available from both Mathura and Gandhara schools of Kushana art are characterized by the combined features of Buddha and Bodhisattva; i.e. the head of the Buddha and the body of the Bodhisattva. This very first Maitreya iconography seems to be an amalgamation of iconic features made after accurate information of Maitreya's Hīnayānic nature. Basic elements of the first Maitreya images might have been derived from the traditionally known mahāpurṣhalakṣhaṇa for making the head and the contemporary regal attire. It is unnecessary to presume that the Maitreya iconography has been derived from the already established iconography of the Buddha or the Bodhisattva Siddhārtha. On the contrary, the Maitreya iconography could

have developed well before the first images of the Buddha or the Bodhisattva Siddhatha. The close similarity between the first Maitreya images and the Yaksha images of the pre-Kushana period suggests that the final formation of Maitreya iconography could have been invented following the iconography of the Yaksha images.

The Date of the First Maitreya Images, therefore, should be either prior to the first images of the Buddha or at least contemporary to the first Buddha images. The Maitreya images found on the coins of Kanishka I undoubtedly suggests that Maitreya iconography was already well known by the time of Kanishka I. It is a matter of conjecture whether the artists, who introduced Maitreya image on Kanishka's coin, are the actual creators of the Maitreya iconography or there might have been a sculptural prototype. Considering the well established iconographical features seen in the coin images of Maitreya, it is more likely that there must have been Maitreya images in stone before the time of Kanishka I. The beginning of the Maitreya image making tradition may even go back to the second century B.C. if we could interpret some of those Yaksha images as that of Maitreya.

The Evolution of Maitreya Iconography has been observed changing through out the Buddhist period in India according to time and place. After the initial stage of the first

Maitreya images, already there appeared a change in the iconography of Maitreya in the early Kushana art. Around the middle of the second century A.D. in Mathura, Maitreya was attributed with a crown as an addition to the first Maitreya image type, whereas in Gandhara he was becoming more of an ascetic Bodhisattva with the introduction of long hair first, and then around the end of the second century A.D. the deity began to appear with the bow-knot hair arrangement, due to which the origin of Maitreya has been related to that of Brahmā by previous scholars.

This difference certainly is an outcome of the two different Buddhist ideals, Hīnayāna and Māhāyāna both of which flourished during the Kushana period. The crowned Bodhisattva Maitreya that was created by the artists of Kushana Mathura seems to be the result of Hīnayāna system, whereas a more emphasis on Māhāyāna system might have resulted in the ascetic type of the Bodhisattva Maitreya as was created in Gandhara. The above hypothesis is strongly opposed to the generally accepted theory that the ascetic type of Maitreya is the outcome of Hīnayāna Buddhism, on the basis of the fact that they emphasised a great deal on the Arhatship. Under the Hīnayāna Buddhism, on the contrary, Maitreya seems to have been emphasised more as a Buddha of the next coming world; hypothetically, his status seemed to have been stronger than the Śākyamuni Buddha who had long before disappeared into the final salvation. A great change in the cult of Maitreya seems to have taken place with the

coming of Māhāyana Buddhism; when the cult of the Mānushi Buddhas was overshadowed by the concept of Dhyāni Buddhas. The Sākyamuni Buddha then became a spiritual god, whereas Maitreya seems to have emphasised relatively more on Hinayanic spirit of the Arhatship. It does not, however imply that his status became inferior to the other Dhyāni Bodhisattvas, but maintained his importance as a celestial Bodhisattva, whose next career was confirmed as a Buddha. As the Sākyamuni Buddha had ruled over Tuṣṭita before descending to the earth, Maitreya was understood as the ruling figure over the Tushita abode now.

These two apparently different types of Maitreya iconography created by the artists of the two great art schools of Kushana dynasty have fundamentally influenced all the later Buddhist art at least until the coming of Tantrayāna Buddhism. In the Gupta Sarnath the ascetic type of Bodhisattva of Gandhara origin was further emphasized by discarding the bodhisattva ornamentation and adding a japa mālā and ajina. This Gupta Sarnath tradition was followed by the artists of Western Deccan. Through out this period, the kamaṇḍalu in the left hand became the chief attribute of Maitreya, although there appeared a few variations such as the so-called 'empty handed' Maitreya, as is observed in the Gupta Sarnath and Western Deccan. The crowned Maitreya type of the Kushana Mathura school, on the other hand, appeared only on some special occasions in the later art; Maitreya appears always with crown when he is represented in a group



of the Mānushi Buddhas as the eighth Mānushi Buddha.

With the coming of Tantrayāna belief system the ascetic type of Maitreya seems to have been replaced by elaborating the hair arrangement and replacing kamaṇḍalu by nāgakesara flowers. Maitreya now began to appear along with other Dhyāni Bodhisattvas. Such a tendency is observed working strongly in the late phase of the Buddhist art at Ellora and in the contemporary art of Orissa. The later Maitreya iconography of Eastern India stands parallel to that of the late Buddhist art of Ellora and Orissa, but here Maitreya seems to have revived his earlier status as an important attendant of the Buddha pairing with Avalokiteśvara.

Rather unusual type in the evolution of Maitreya iconography is found in Kushmir, and in South India of post-Buddhist period. In both the places, Maitreya image appeared with the elaborate crown even though he is not represented in the Maitreya Buddhas group. Moreover, the traditional kamaṇḍalu of Maitreya reappear in Kashmiri sculpture and the artists of South India created the multiple-handed images of Maitreya. With a few exceptions, the Maitreya images of the post-Gupta period invariably carry an emblematic stūpa in front of the hair arrangement.

The Meaning of the Iconographical Elements of Maitreya is undoubtedly<sup>ed</sup> one of the most crucial aspects in understanding the cult of the deity and has been explored parallel terms with the iconographical study. Admittedly, such

iconological study have not been carried out in the field of the Buddhist iconography till now. This limited circumstance is caused mainly by insufficient textual materials, and inappropriate reading of the sculptural materials. In the present study, an attempt has been made to bring out the probable meaning of each element of Maitreya iconography, such as, mudrā, stūpa emblem, hair arrangement, general attire and various attributes seen in his hand.

The most important point in the study of iconographical meaning is that each element can be understood only in the evolutionary context. For instance the abhaya mudrā in the held by Maitreya is closely related to the earliest Maitreya images having combined features of Buddha and Bodhisattva in Kushan art and is meant to represent the teaching aspect of Maitreya, whereas the dhyāni mudrā can be understood in connection with the ascetic type of Maitreya which reveals the arhatship of Hīnayānic Bodhisattva. The most controversial study of the mudrā of Maitreya made here is on the so-called 'namaskāra mudrā', with which the Brāhmanic nature of Maitreya had been related by the previous scholarship. Against such a theory a new terminology, namely the gesture of 'acceptance' of 'magnanimity' has been suggested in the present work.

As for the emblematic stūpa, its origin has been traced back to the early sixth century cave temples in Western Deccan, particularly to the Nasik caves. The symbolic

meaning of the stūpa has been understood in the context of the Parinirvāṇa of the Sākyamuni Buddha; symbolizing the event and from which the cult of Maitreya had began. This hypothesis is based on the fact that the stūpa first appeared not only with Maitreya but with Avalokiteśvara too. After an initial stage, when finally Avalokiteśvara has been attributed with the figure of the Buddha Amitābha as his emblem, the stūpa become Maitreya's specific emblem and became meaningful so as to symbolize the final salvation, which is the final aim of every Buddhist. In this context, the emblematic figure of Buddha in the headdress of the Bodhisattva images found during the Kushana and Gupta periods have been related to the Sākyamuni Buddha rather than the Dhyāni Buddha Amitābha. Consequently, such Bodhisattva images could be identified as Maitreya rather than as Avalokiteśvara.

In the present work the kamaṇḍalu in the hand of Maitreya has been interpreted as symbolizing <sup>c</sup>the source of the Buddhist Dharma rather than as the realistic representation of a water bottle, which was postulated with the assumption of Maitreya's strong Brāhmanic nature. With the coming of Tantrāyana Buddhism, the kamaṇḍalu symbolizing the Dharma is replaced by the nāgakesara flowers, which fulfilled suitably <sup>both</sup> the traditional aspect of the Mānushi Buddha Maitreya who needed a bodhi tree and a new aspect of Maitreya as one of the Dhyāni Bodhisattvas, most of whom carry some kind of flowers in their hands.

According to the demands of different Buddhist theology, regional variations appeared in Maitreya iconography, however each of such changes shared the basic elements of Maitreya in one way or other.

The Importance of the Textual Descriptions seems to have been often over emphasized in the study of Maitreya iconography, however the present study reveals that most of the textual descriptions do not match with the actual representation of the deity while taking into account the following points:

- a) The description of color of the deity is useless in identifying the deity in the sculptural representations.
- b) The description of direction of the deity is practically impossible to use in the condition when the works are removed from their original placements.
- c) The description of mudrās of the deity becomes useless since all Bodhisattvas share more or less the same mudrās.
- d) The description of certain elements, like crown, emblematic stūpa and nāgakesara flowers are inapplicable for the early works of Kushana and Gupta periods.
- e) The description of Maitreya with multiple heads and hands can not be studied since examples of this kind has not been found in the sculptural tradition of Indian.

Moreover, the iconographical types of Maitreya differ from region to region, so it becomes impossible to relate any particular type of image to a particular textual

description. Evidently, the presently available textual sources fail to explain the meaning of iconographical features of Maitreya. Thus, it became necessary to limit the dependency on the textual descriptions in the present study.

Lastly, mention should be made that the present study has left a few points unexplored, such as the date of the first Maitreya image in connection with Yaksha icons. A closer study of the socio-religious and historical aspects in the evolution of Maitreya iconography, and a more precise study of the genesis of Maitreya iconography could have added up greatly to the present study. A lot more contributions in the field of Buddhist iconography is awaited, much like the Buddhists who wait for their future Buddha Maitreya.