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**A Critical Study of the Religious Syncretism of the Concepts  
of Buddha and Bodhisattva in Mahāyāna Buddhism**

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## Abstract

The present study entitled “A Critical Study of the Religious Syncretism of the Concepts of Buddha and Bodhisattva in Mahāyāna Buddhism” has been undertaken as an investigation into the sphere of religious syncretism related to the concepts of Buddha and Bodhisattva in Mahāyāna Buddhism. It has two approaches:

- i. Theoretical approach
- ii. Practical approach

For this purpose we have consulted the most authoritative primary sources and the important secondary sources. The data found in these sources have been discussed by keeping four aspects in mind:

- i. Analytical
- ii. Historical
- iii. Critical and
- iv. Comparative

The research so far completed has been presented in seven chapters. The first chapter clarifies the development of the concepts

of Buddha and Bodhisattva with reference to the early Buddhist sources with special attention to the Pāli sūtras. Here we have found that the two concepts have already been undergone a development to a certain extent in the first stage of the history of Buddhism.

It is a fact that the Buddhist community of Saṅgha split into various sects after the second Buddhist council held in India. There were about eighteen Buddhist schools or sects by the time of King Asoka in the third century B.C. The Buddhist schools at the time were different from each other particularly with regard to the interpretation of the Buddha's teachings. One of the main topics on which they were arguing was the concept of Buddha and Bodhisattva. These controversial points have been dealt with in detail in the seventh text of the Theravada Abhidharma - Kathāvatthupparakaraṇa (the Points of Controversy). We have given almost all the important data relevant to the topic with special attention to the above-mentioned text. It was clear that a large number of controversial points among the Buddhist schools were related to the concepts of Buddha and Bodhisattva.

It is a well-known fact that the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition came into being as a result of controversial points held by some of the Buddhist schools headed by the Mahāsaṅghikas. The concepts of Buddha and Bodhisattva were highly developed and given a supreme status in the Mahāyāna tradition. The third chapter is an attempt to

clarify the extent of the development of Buddha and Bodhisattva concepts in the Mahāyāna tradition.

Our main purpose of this research was to discuss and reveal the most important elements connected with the religious syncretism with reference to the concepts of Buddha and Bodhisattva in Mahāyāna Buddhism. The former three chapters have been arranged as a preface or background for the main theme in our research. The fourth chapter is dedicated to discuss the theoretical aspect of the religious syncretism in the Mahāyāna Buddhism. Here we have discussed in detail how Mahāyāna concepts of Buddha and Bodhisattva are assimilated with the religious and philosophical concepts of Hinduism. This is purely a conceptual analysis and therefore we have not touched the artistic creations related to these concepts.

A complete research of this theme cannot neglect the artistic creations which cover a vast field in Mahāyāna Buddhism. So we have taken an attempt to show in practical what we have so far discussed in the previous chapters. Therefore the rest of this research has been arranged in order to complete that aspect of the concepts concerned. Before directly entering the subject, it was considered important to introduce in brief the Buddhist concept of art as a prelude to the religious syncretism of the Buddhist art. So chapter



five was compiled to introduce the concept of Buddhist art, drawing attention to the Buddhist sources of both Theravāda and Mahāyāna.

The sixth chapter is the most important one because it shows how the facts explained in chapter four have been put into action as artistic creations. We have collected a considerable number of Buddhist and Hindu figures of various Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and Deities to be compared with the similar aspects of them. It is to be noted that we have tried our best to show all the similar figures with their relevant symbols.

Buddhist philosophy, Buddhist culture or Buddhist art has no meaning without ethical or social basis. All Buddhist aspects are introduced to lead the people along the path which comprises of morality, concentration and wisdom. In chapter seven we have clarified the ethical and social basis of the concepts and artistic creations of the Buddha and Bodhisattva in the context of religious syncretism.

The last chapter summarizes all the important aspects of the foregoing chapters and explain in brief the general opinions that can be derived from the facts analysed through this research.