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Summary

One in a series of writings about Buddhist Iconography this article is a brief introduction to the Buddhist Ariya Bodhisattva Manjusri with reference to a traditional Manjusri cast image which is located at the Buddhist Discussion Centre Australia.

BUDDHIST ICONOGRAPHY AND PRACTICES



Manjusri Bodhisattva

Over many years the Buddhist Discussion Centre Australia has collected a number of Buddhist Images and Sacred Artifacts. A knowledge of Buddhist Iconography can be very beneficial as an aid in the development of certain wholesome types of consciousness.

One of these Images is a representation of the Bodhisattva of Wisdom Manjusri. The Image was donated to the Centre on 23 October, 1986.

The Image stands 19cm. high, is 12.5cm. across the base, and is cast in a silver coloured alloy. The face and head-dress have been traditionally decorated with substances of gold, orange and blue colour.

Manjusri is shown seated with his legs crossed in the full lotus posture (Skt. Vajra - Paryanika), sometimes called the adamantine or unshakeable posture on a lotus throne symbolizing, in this case, the authority of the Buddha's Teachings.

Manjusri is sometimes represented by a sword alone, standing upright on a lotus. This form symbolizes the Vow made by Manjusri to destroy the ignorance of sentient beings.

In his right hand he holds a flaming sword, the pommel of which, in the form of a Vajra, unites the symbolism of the hardness of the Vajra and the destruction of ignorance represented by the sword.

It is said that just as a sword cuts even the most complicated knot, in the same way Wisdom penetrates to the very essence of the most abstruse doctrine. In his left hand, he holds the stem of a lotus which blooms close to his left shoulder. On top of the lotus is a Buddhist Text called the Prajna Paramita or Perfection of Wisdom Sutra, the heart of the early Mahayana Doctrine. The word Bodhisattva can be divided into two parts, 'Bodhi' meaning awakened or enlightened state of mind and 'Sattva' meaning being or essence.

A Bodhisattva could be characterized as one who is devoted to helping living beings come to the end of suffering.

The name Manjusri can also be divided into two parts, 'Manju' meaning smooth in the sense of being free from hard or rough defilements and 'Sri' meaning glorious. Thus, the name Manjusri could be said to contain two of the central points of the Buddha's Teachings, namely, rejecting what is unwholesome or rough and cultivating what is wholesome. The popular deification of Manjusri Bodhisattva had scarcely developed in the First Cent. C.E. during the early Mahayana formation in India. In time as the Mahayana Doctrine gained in respectability and influence" Manjusri became the interlocutor in many important Mahayana Sutras. By the end of the Fifth Cent. C.E., Manjusri Bodhisattva was considered to be a spiritual progenitor. In the Ajatasatthura Sutra the Buddha informs Sariputra, 'Manjusri is the father and mother of the Bodhisattvas and he is their spiritual friend'. This popular understanding of Manjusri being the spiritual progenitor was carried still further in the Sixth Cent. C.E. by the Vajrayana Tradition in which Manjusri is viewed as the Primordial or Adi Buddha, a principal figure in certain Vajrayana Teachings.

From the viewpoint of the Vajrayana, Manjusri embodies the Wisdom aspect of the Buddhas and in that respect is not different from them. The cultivation of Wisdom Minds is an essential part of the Buddha's training and must be developed by the practitioner for himself or herself.

One basic Buddhist instruction is to sustain wholesome states that have arisen and sweep (cut) aside unwholesome states that have arisen. Subjectively, a nimitta of the sword will cut thoughts itself. The Abhidhamma or higher Dhamma lists a total of one hundred and twenty-one types of consciousness, fifty-two different mental factors and twenty-eight types of matter together constituting the possible sum total of conditioned existence. If one is not clear on the nature and content of those minds, how is one to know which to sustain

and which to sweep aside?

On the surface it would appear that the development of Wisdom Minds is a prerequisite to the practice of Buddhism. A more accurate view is that these Wisdom Minds are innate and need only to be uncovered. Just as a mirror covered in dust does not reveal its nature, in the same way the minds of human beings covered in the dust of hate, greed and ignorance do not see their own true nature, that is Fundamental Enlightenment.

The power of Manjusri practices can cut the unwholesome predisposition to perpetuate hate, greed and ignorance.

The Teachings of the Buddha can be divided into three sections called 'the Threefold Training'. (Trisiksa)

1. The training in Supreme Virtue (Adhisila-siksa)
2. The training in Supreme Collectedness (Adhisamadhi-siksa)
3. The training in Supreme Wisdom (Adhiprajna-siksa)

Of the three, the training in Supreme Wisdom is the last to be completed, after which it is called the Perfection of Wisdom (Prajna-Paramita). Here we may distinguish three sorts of Wisdom:

1. Paramarthaparicchedaka-prajna (Wisdom analysing the Supermundane or Absolute).
2. Samvrttaparicchedak-prajna (Wisdom analysing the relative).
3. Sattvarthaparicchedaka-prajna (Wisdom analysing the advantages of beings).

Of these three, 'The Wisdom analysing the Supermundane or Absolute' is superior because it cuts off the last remaining ignorance, that of a belief in the existence of a permanent self or soul.

'Manjusri the youth is always pure among all creatures. As long as this instruction is in the world, he will perform the deeds of the Buddha'.

R.A.

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