

The Myth of Maitreya in Tibet

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ABSTRACT: This paper analyzes the myth of Maitreya from the perspective of a Tibetan Buddhist commentarial tradition. The worship of Maitreya as the future buddha is prevalent in all Buddhist countries. The notion of a mystical encounter with Maitreya plays an important role there. Then, when we see what happened in Tibet, we notice that the meaning of Maitreya myth has been interpreted in a unique way. Instead of saying that Maitreya will become the next buddha, many Tibetan scholars argue that he is already a buddha. This idea was suggested by Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa (1357-1419) and later developed by scholars belonging to the Dge lugs pa tradition. 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa ngag dbang brtson 'grus (1648-1721), for instance, asserts that Maitreya attained enlightenment in the past, and that Maitreya, currently dwelling in the Tuṣita Heaven, is a Manifestation Body of the buddha. 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa distinguishes between Maitreya's external appearance (the common form) and his real nature (the uncommon form), and thus tries to establish that Maitreya is really a buddha, even if he may behave like a bodhisattva. Furthermore, 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa stresses that the believer who worships Maitreya as a buddha can accumulate great merit by virtue of his faith; for buddhahood is simultaneously manifested in various emanations in the Tuṣita Heaven, in the Jambudvīpa, and potentially in any other place. This is a new type of Maitreya worship; it has nothing to do with Pure Land devotions or messianic belief, but is rather linked to the traditional Mahāyāna doctrine that buddhahood is eternal and omnipresent.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the myth of Maitreya from the perspective of a Tibetan Buddhist commentarial tradition. As is well known, Maitreya is a bodhisattva who is anticipated to appear in this world, the Jambudvīpa, in the very distant future and to become

the next buddha.¹ It is commonly held that he is currently spending his penultimate life in the Tuṣita Heaven, where he awaits his appearance on earth. The worship of Maitreya is prevalent in all Buddhist countries. Key concepts governing this worship are the beliefs in the ascent of the believer to the Tuṣita Heaven and the descent of Maitreya to earth. Believers, longing for their encounter with Maitreya and the subsequent attainment of *nirvāṇa*, aspire to rebirth in the Tuṣita Heaven after this present lifetime. Believers also place their hopes on the arrival of this future buddha.² Thus, broadly speaking, this worship has two coexisting aspects. The first is connected to Pure Land devotions, and the second has often been construed as a kind of messianic belief or millenarianism, especially within the context of Chinese and Korean Buddhism.

When we observe the myth of Maitreya in Tibet, we notice that it acquires yet another significance. Instead of saying that Maitreya will become the next buddha, many Tibetan scholars argue that he is already a buddha. This idea was suggested by Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa (1357-1419) and later developed by scholars belonging to the Dge lugs pa tradition. 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa ngag dbang brtson 'grus (1648-1721) was one of the scholars who stressed the idea that Maitreya attained enlightenment in the past, and that Maitreya, currently

1 It is believed that the advent of Maitreya will take place in a future golden age, which is calculated to be 5.6 billion, or 5.67 billion, or 576 million, years after the death of Śākyamuni. 观弥勒菩萨上生兜率天经, T 452, vol. 14: 420a7f.: 阎浮提岁数五十六亿万岁, 尔乃下生于阎浮提. 如弥勒下生经说. *D mdo sde, tsa* 300b6f.: 'dzam bu'i gling gi tshe lo'i grangs bye ba 'bum phrag lnga bcu rtsa drug lon nas | byams pa dga' ldan gyi gnam nas 'dzam bu'i gling du skye ba blangs pa'i mdo bshad par 'gyur ro || 菩萨从兜率天降神母胎说广普经, T 384, vol. 12: 1025c15f.: 弥勒当知, 汝复受记五十六亿七千万岁, 于此树王下成无上等正觉. *Bu ston chos 'byung* 122b2f. (cf. Obermiller 1932: 179): *kha cig de bzhin gshegs pa shākya thub pa mya ngan las 'das nas lo bye ba phrag lnga bcu rtsa bdun na sangs rgyas byams pa 'byung ngo zer ro ||*

2 The ascending and descending motifs are both found in the writings of Tibetan masters. For the former, see for example *Bka' 'bum thor bu* 27a1f.: 'di yis mtshon nas bdag gzhan 'gro ba kun || shi 'phos gyur pa'i mod la dga' ldan du || chos kyis mtho ba'i khang bzang der skyes nas || mi pham chos rje'i sras kyi thu bor shog ||; for the latter, see for example *Lam bzang* 156.18ff.: sa bcu ba'i dbang phyug rgyal tshab mi pham pa ma 'ongs pa na 'dzam bu'i gling du stobs bcu mnga' ba sangs rgyas kyi go 'phang gsar du bmyes pa'i tshul bstan pa'i tshe | gsung gi bdud rtsi dam chos 'dus pa'i thog mar rab tu myangs nas don nyams su blangs te 'bras bu mngon du byas nas rgyal ba'i mdzad pa ma lus pa sgrub cing de mthar phyin par shog ||

in the Tuṣita Heaven, is in reality a manifestation of the buddha.³ Additionally 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa asserts that the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* was authored by the buddha Maitreya. In this way, 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa tries to establish that Maitreya is an omniscient being who is endowed with an immeasurable capacity to benefit all beings. It emerges from his discussion that those who worship Maitreya as an omniscient and omnipotent buddha can accumulate great merit by virtue of their faith, without needing to seek a personal encounter with this future buddha.

Tsong kha pa and 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa provide a fascinating argument regarding the myth of Maitreya, which invites us to reconsider the myth's significance in the Tibetan tradition. In what follows, I would like to analyze the Tibetan interpretation of the Maitreya myth, and examine its implications from the perspective of Mahāyāna Buddhist soteriology.

1.

We are concerned with the question of whether Maitreya is a buddha or a bodhisattva. This is a topic that attracted much attention in the Tibetan scholastic tradition, especially after the time of Red mda' ba gzhon nu blo gros (1349-1412). Red mda' ba's view of this issue is reported in his biography by Sangs rgyas rtse mo (born in the 14th century). This biography records an exchange of opinions between Red mda' ba and G.yag ston sangs rgyas dpal (1350-1414). It tells us that Red mda' ba thought of Maitreya as a bodhisattva. It also says that Red mda' ba considered Maitreya's Five Works (*byams chos lnga*) not to be *buddhavacana*, or the buddha's teachings (*bka'*), but rather to be *cittamātra* treatises (*bstan bcos*), composed by a

3 It is interesting to note here that similar ideas are found in both Chinese and Japanese traditions, as can be seen in a commentarial work by Kuiji (窥基 632-682), as well as in the writings of Kūkai (空海 774-835). An in-depth comparison is, however, beyond the scope of this paper. See 观弥勒上生兜率天经赞 T 1772, vol. 38: 274b13ff. : 今此下生经明成佛事。非法身佛。理但可证。非有上下生成等义。亦非自受用。彼无处天成佛之相说法利生令生见义。他受用佛不处天宫。不住摩竭提。令地前见故。即是化身。上生成佛虽标化佛影彰余身。自受用身圆成道果。真如妙理障尽圆证。自利果满宿愿须行。当此会中化生。权起他受用佛。应十地所宜变化佛身。随地前所现。虽复此处彰化体。而影显余佛。见者自成机别。现者身亦说殊。非实佛身有其异体。如月出云际圆朗彻空影现水中。水月圆明任器器成万别。月本一同。岂以影有千差遂令月亦有异。真权两体义理必然。真即理源。权随物迹。故知上生成佛备彰化质。欲令随类济生欣修易。See also 性灵集 758: 闻于先师。孕色者也空。吞空者也佛。佛之三密。何处不遍。佛之慈悲。天覆地载。悲则拔苦。慈能与东。所谓大师岂异人哉。阿哩也摩诃味怛罗冒地萨埵即是也。住法界宫。辅大日之德。居都史殿。扇能寂之风。尊位普满。惟册宸宫。子于元元。塗炭拔济。无为主宰。谁敢名言。

sentient being.⁴

It is interesting to discover that Red mda' ba's disciple Tsong kha pa and his successors held a completely different opinion. Tsong kha pa's account in his *Sngags rim chen mo* suggests that Maitreya is already a buddha.⁵ The same idea is expressed in Rgyal tshab rje dar ma rin chen's (1364-1432) commentary on the *Uttaratantra*.⁶ A detailed discussion of the topic can also be found in the section concerning "Maitreya's Works" (*byams gzhung*) from the first chapter of the *Abhisamayālamkāra* commentaries by later Dge lugs pa scholars. Among these scholars, 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa was the one who sought to prove that Maitreya, the author of the *Abhisamayālamkāra*, is a manifestation of the buddha.⁷ The idea that Maitreya is already a buddha can also be found in the works by Go rams pa bsod nams seng ge (1429-89) and Gser mdog pañ chen shākya mchog ldan (1428-1507), who did not belong to the Dge lugs pa tradition.⁸ So we may say that, since the time of Tsong kha pa, the assumption that Maitreya is actually a buddha has been widely accepted by many Tibetan scholars, irrespective of the tradition that they belong to.

4 See *Ku ma ra ma ti'i rnam thar* (edited in Roloff 2009) 167.6ff.: *bdag gis mkhan chen g-yag pa la mjal du phyin dus / khong pa la chos rje lo tstsha ba | rje btsun pa blo bzang grags pa gsum gang lhag zhus [B: pas] | slob dpon gzhon blo ba lta bu'i dge ba'i bshes gnyen ding sang dka' mor gtad yod gsung zhing | khong pa'i phar phyin gyi tīkā de la bltas pas / nang 'gal 'ga' yar 'dug | khong byams chos sems tsam yin gsung na'ang | nga bka' ru 'dod de | byams pa sangs rgyas yin pa'i phyir | khong gsang 'dus pa chen po yin pas | 'jam dbyangs dal gyi gtso bor mdzad kyin yod yong | 'jam dbyangs dang byams pa gnyis sangs rgyas yin na yin mnyam | min na min mnyam yin nga zer kyin 'dug slob dpon la zhus gcig gsungs nas zhus pas / nang 'gal than thun yod srid | 'khrul med smra ba'i 'phags par nga khas blangs pa med | khong gis nang 'gal du bzung ba rnam nang 'gal e yin mi shes | bstan pa 'di gzhir bzhag la byams pa byang sems dang | byams chos lnga bstan bcos su bshad 'dug | [...] | Cf. Roloff 2009: 250f.*

5 See *Sngags rim chen mo* 438a3f.: *ston pa 'di'i bstan pa la rgyal po indra bhū tis byang chub brnyes pa lta bu byung yang bstan pa gcig la ston pa gnyis su 'gyur ba'i skyon med de de dag dngos po la sangs rgyas kyang sangs rgyas pa'i mdzad pa gdul bya rnam la thun mong du mi ston pas* mi 'gal ba'i phyir te zhing 'dir ston pa'i 'khor du byon pa'i byams pa la sogs pa bzhin no | | (*pas sKu 'bum ed. Ga 492b6 : pa Zhol ed.).*

6 See *Rgyud bla ma'i tīkka* 224b4f. (ad UT V 16, cf. Takasaki 1966: 384): *gdul bya thun mong ba 'ga' zhig kyang rjes su bzung ba'i ched du de ltar gsungs kyi nges pa'i don du ma yin te | bcom ldan 'das byams pa nyid chos kyi skur mngon par rdzogs par sangs rgyas zin pa'i phyir ro | |*

7 It must be noticed, however, that not all scholars belonging to the Dge lugs pa school see the author of the *Abhisamayālamkāra* as an enlightened being. Pañ chen bsod nams grags pa (1478-1554) and the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho (1617-82), think that the author of the *Abhisamayālamkāra* is a bodhisattva who has attained the tenth or penultimate stage of the bodhisattva path (*byang sems sa bcu pa ba*). While they do accept the idea that Maitreya is actually a buddha, they say that this idea appears exclusively in certain Tantric texts and is not found at all in the Prajñāpāramitā literature. With this in mind, they assert that, although the idea itself is not wrong, it is pointless to argue whether or not the author of the *Abhisamayālamkāra* is a buddha. See *Yum don yang gsal* 7b7ff.; *Sgra dbyangs* 15b4ff.

8 See *Yum don rab gsal* 6a2ff.; *Lung rigs rol mtsho* 8a1ff.

2.

We will now observe Tsong kha pa's argument in his *Sngags rim chen mo*. Near the end of the treatise, he discusses how one attains enlightenment in the final stage of the bodhisattva path,⁹ in accordance with the *Uttaratantra*, *Tarkajvālā*, *Madhyamakāvātārabhāṣya*, and other non-tantric Mahāyāna texts. His argument can be summarized as follows: the Śrāvaka schools accept a literal interpretation of the story of Śākyamuni. They take it for granted that he was born as the prince Siddhārtha in our world, practiced asceticism, and finally attained enlightenment in Bodhgaya. On the contrary, the Mahāyāna schools deny this interpretation of the story, saying that Śākyamuni's attainment of enlightenment was merely an act or performance. They argue that a buddha never attains enlightenment in our world, the Jambudvīpa, but that he attains enlightenment in the palace of the Akaniṣṭha Heaven (*og min*), which is located at the top level of the Form Realm (*gzugs khams, rūpadhātu*).¹⁰ A bodhisattva dwelling on the tenth level is born in the Akaniṣṭha Heaven. There he spends his penultimate life and actualizes his buddhahood, which consists in the transcendent, gnostic Dharma Body (*chos sku, dharmakāya*). When the bodhisattva achieves buddhahood, his physical body is transformed into the Enjoyment Body (*longs sku, saṃbhogakāya*), endowed with its thirty-two major and eighty minor distinguishing marks. But the Enjoyment Body is only visible to other buddhas and bodhisattvas living in the Akaniṣṭha Heaven. It is out of the reach of *śrāvakas*, *pratyekabuddhas*, and other ordinary beings, and hence it cannot serve as a means of helping all of us. Therefore, for the sake of all beings, a buddha repeatedly embodies himself in a Manifestation Body (*sprul sku, nirmāṇakāya*) in this or any other world. With regard to the activities of a Manifestation Body, Tsong kha pa quotes a well-known passage from the *Uttaratantra*:

"The knower of the world [i.e., the buddha], having perceived the whole world out of great compassion, without being separated from the Dharma Body, manifests himself in various emanations: [0] previous lives, [1] descent from the Tuṣita Heaven, [2] entrance into [his mother's] womb, [3] birth [in this world], [4] skillfulness in various arts, [5] pleasures of playing in the harem, [6] renouncement of [worldly life], [7]

⁹ See *Sngags rim chen mo* 436a5: *sa de dag rim gyis bgrod nas 'tshang rgya tshul la* [...].

¹⁰ This "Akaniṣṭha" is equated with Ghanavyūha (*stug po bkod pa*), which is considered to be the eighteenth heaven of the Form Realm, not to be confused with the seventeenth heaven of the Form Realm, as enumerated in the third chapter of the *Abhidharmakośa*. See *Mi pham zhal lung* (skabs bgyad pa) 81a6ff.: *dang po grub ste | gzugs khams gnas rigs bcu bdun las brgal ba'i steng na | dbang phyug chen po'i gnas 'og min zhes pa gzhal yas khang lha dang mi las 'das pa rgyan khri phun sum tshogs pa rgya yongs su ma chad pa der 'khor byang chub sems dpa' dang dus rtag tu bzhus pa yin pa'i phyir | mal 'byor spyod pa'i sa las | gnas gtsang ma rnams las 'das pa na dbang phyug chen po'i gnas yod de | byang chub sems dpa' sa bcu la gnas pa rnams kyis | sa bcu yongs su bsgom nas gang du skye'o | | zhes dang |*. Cf. *Dung dkar tshig mdzod* 1837.

practice of asceticism, [8] arrival at the seat of enlightenment, [9] conquest over the army of evil demons, [10] attainment of the supreme enlightenment, [11] [turning of] the Wheel of the Dharma, [12] attainment of *nirvāṇa*. He exhibits such behaviors in [various] impure lands as long as there is cyclic existence."¹¹

This passage enumerates the twelve deeds (mdzas pa bcu gnyis) performed by a Manifestation Body. After having attained the Dharma Body in the Akaniṣṭha Heaven, the buddha displays these manifestations in our world to teach people a way to achieve enlightenment. According to this theory, the historical buddha Śākyamuni is a Manifestation Body of the eternal buddha. Like other buddhas, Śākyamuni attained buddhahood in the palace of Akaniṣṭha. After that, he embodied himself as the bodhisattva Śvetaketu in the Tuṣita Heaven, from where he descended into the Jambudvīpa and embodied himself as the prince Siddhārtha. He then exhibited the behaviors that are listed in the Uttarantra, beginning with skillfulness in various arts and ending with the attainment of nirvāṇa.

3.

The followers of Mahāyāna say that Śākyamuni, who attained enlightenment in the Jambudvīpa, is a Manifestation Body. More importantly, they say that his previous incarnation in the Tuṣita Heaven was also a Manifestation Body. Now we can ask whether the same theory applies to the case of Maitreya. According to Tsong kha pa and 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa, this theory applies to all buddhas of the past, present, and future without exception. Maitreya, who resides in the Tuṣita Heaven, and who will descend to earth, is a Manifestation Body. Maitreya is currently preparing to descend into the Jambudvīpa to manifest himself in various

11 This is translated according to the Tibetan version, which slightly differs from the Sanskrit (cf. Takasaki 1966: 329). Compare the followings: UT D 64b2ff. (cited in *Sngags rim chen mo* 436b3f.; *Rin chen sgron me* 27a4f.): *thugs rje chen pos 'jig rten mkhyen || 'jig rten kun la gzigs nas ni || chos kyi sku las ma g-yos par || sprul pa'i rang bzhin sna tshogs kyis || skye ba mngon par skye ba dang || dga' ldan gnas nas 'pho ba dang || lhums su 'jug dang bltams pa dang || bzo yi gnas la mkhas pa dang || btsun mo'i 'khor dgyes rol pa dang || nges 'byung dka' ba spyod pa dang || byang chub snying por gshegs pa dang || bdud sde 'joms dang rdzogs par ni || byang chub chos kyi 'khor lo dang || myang ngan 'das par gshegs mdzad mams || yongs su ma dag zhing mams su || srid pa ji srid gnas par ston ||; UT II 53-56: *mahākaruṇayā kṛtsnaṃ lokam ālokya lokavit | dharmakāyād aviraḷam nirmāṇaiś citrarūpiḥ || jātakāny upapattiṃ ca tuṣiteṣu cyutiṃ tataḥ | garbhā[va]kramaṇaṃ janma śīlpasthānāni kauśalam || antaḥpuraratikrīḍāṃ naiṣkramyāṃ duḥkhacārikām | bodhimaṇḍopasaṃkrāntiṃ mārasainyapramardanam || sambodhiṃ dharmacakraṃ ca nirvāṇādhiḡamakriyām | kṣetresv aparīśuddheṣu darśayaty ā bhavasthite ||* Cf. 究竟一乘宝性论, T 1611, vol. 31: 843a26ff.: 如來亦如是方便力示現 . 从兜率陀退次第入胎生 . 习学诸伎艺婴儿入王宮 . 厌离诸欲相出家行苦行 . 推问诸外道往詣于道場 . 降伏诸魔众成大妙觉尊 . 转无上法轮入无余涅槃 . 于不清净国现如是等事 ; 佛性论 , T 1610, vol. 31: 810c24ff.: 事有十四 . 一现本生事 . 二现生兜率天 . 三从天下处中阴 . 四入胎 . 五出胎 . 六学技能 . 七童子游戏 . 八出家 . 九苦行 . 十詣菩提树 . 十一破魔军 . 十二成佛 . 十三转法轮 . 十四般涅槃 . 此十四事 .*

emanations. This very fact implies that Maitreya is already a buddha, as according to the Mahāyāna doctrine it would not be possible for Maitreya to become a buddha in this world after descending from the Tuṣita Heaven. 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa quotes a passage from the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*:

"A buddha never attains enlightenment in the Desire Realm as well as in the Formless [Realm]. Instead he attains enlightenment in the Form Realm named Akaniṣṭha, which is free from passion."¹²

The passage makes it clear that buddhahood is attained only in the Akaniṣṭha Heaven, not in this world. According to this theory, it would not be possible for Maitreya to achieve enlightenment in the Jambudvīpa, which is part of the Desire Realm (*'dod khams, kāmadhātu*). Therefore, 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa assumes that Maitreya achieved enlightenment in the Akaniṣṭha Heaven at a certain point in the past. He argues that Maitreya the bodhisattva, who currently resides in the Tuṣita Heaven, and whose appearance in our world is anticipated, is the supreme Manifestation Body (*mchog gi sprul sku*) of the buddha.¹³ From this perspective, he asserts that Maitreya is already endowed with an immeasurable capacity to perform activities to benefit all sentient beings.

4.

This is how 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa explains the myth of Maitreya. The key point to note here is that Maitreya is actually a buddha, even though he may embody himself as a bodhisattva. In order to further elaborate on this idea, 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa differentiates two different forms that Maitreya has: the common form (*thun mong*) and the uncommon form (*thun mong ma yin pa*). These two terms appear in the *Rnam bshad snying po rgyan* of Rgyal

12 LAS D 187b1 (cited in *Rin chen sgron me* 22b2): *'dod pa khams dang gzugs med na || sangs rgyas nam par 'tshang mi rgya || gzugs kyi khams kyi 'og min du || 'dod chags bral khyod 'tshang rgya'o ||*; LAS 361.5f. (cf. Eckel 1994: 218 nn. 32-33, 225 n. 17): *kāmadhātu tathārūpye na vai buddho vibudhyate | rūpadhātvakaniṣṭheṣu vītarāgeṣu budhyate ||*; 大乘入楞伽经, T 672, vol. 16: 638a20f.: 欲界及无色不于彼成佛 . 色界究竟天离欲得菩提 . Cf. THA D 302a6ff.: *longs spyod rdzogs pa'i sku 'og min du sangs rgya ba'i rgyu mtshan yang | de'i zhing khams ni ye shes yongs su dag pa'i snang ba yin la | khams gsum po gzhan ni byis pa'i skye bo rnam kyi sems nyid ma dag pa'i snang ba yin zhing | gtsang ma'i gnas gzhan yang 'phags pa rnam kyi ye shes phyogs 'ga' tsam dag pa'i snang ba yin te | rnam pa thams cad du dag pa'i snang ba min pas de rnam su sangs mi rgya ba'o || 'dir phyi rol gyi dngos por gyur pa'i zhing la sogs pa ni yod pa ma yin no zhes rgyas par bstan to ||*.

13 *Rin chen sgron me* 29a4ff.: *rgyan rtsom pa po'i byams pa dang | rnam 'dren shāk seng bzhi pa'i rjes su sangs rgyas lnga pa'i mdzad pa ston dgos kyi rje btsun byams pa | dga' ldan gyi rten can gyi de dang | sangs rgyas stong gi nang gi byams pa rnam sangs 'phags dang | dge slong rnam dag dang | mchog gi sprul sku gsum ga yin te | sangs rgyas tshul beom ldan 'das ltar dang po 'og min du sangs rgyas nas slar dga' ldan du phebs pa sogs yin pa'i phyir te |*.

tshab rje dar ma rin chen,¹⁴ and they were defined in two different ways by later Dge lugs pa scholars. For now, let us consider the interpretation accepted by the scholars of Drepung Gomang Monastic College (*'bras spungs sgo mang*). First, the common form is the equivalent of Maitreya's external appearance, referring to the way that he appears (*snang tshod*). Secondly, the uncommon form is the real nature of Maitreya, referring to his actual status (*dngos po'i gnas tshod*).¹⁵ Maitreya has both of these forms, so in reality he is a buddha, but at the same time he behaves like a bodhisattva in front of his disciples. To put it another way, Maitreya is really an enlightened being, but there are many occasions on which he behaves like an unenlightened being (*dngos po'i gnas tshod la sangs rgyas kyang sangs ma rgyas pa ltar ston pa du ma yod*).¹⁶ Only those who have insight into his real nature can realize that he is in fact a buddha. 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa identifies the followers of the Mahāyāna schools (i.e, the Yogācāra and Mādhyamika) as those having this insight, and he refers to them as "uncommon disciples" (*thun mong ma yin pa'i gdul bya*).¹⁷

The idea of distinguishing between Maitreya's real nature and his external appearance is very familiar to many Tibetans. It may be worth mentioning, in passing, that the same idea can be applied to other bodhisattvas and lamas. For instance, the regent Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (1653-1705) also uses this idea to explain the status of Avalokiteśvara and the Dalai Lama.¹⁸ He argues that Avalokiteśvara, who is generally known as a bodhisattva, has already attained enlightenment, and that he is really a buddha. This implies that the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, who embodies himself in this world, is a manifestation of the buddha.¹⁹ Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho means here that the Dalai Lama too, as an incarnation of Avalokiteśvara, is in reality a buddha even if he may appear to be a bodhisattva or even if he may behave like an ordinary person. In

14 *Rnam bshad snying po rgyan* 8b4ff.: *rje btsun la rang don don gnyer med par 'dod pa sogs ni theg pa chen po'i gzhung la ngal ba zhib tu ma byas pa yin te | rje btsun mngon par rdzogs par sangs rgyas pa'i dbang du byed na thun mong dang thun mong ma yin pa'i skabs ma phyed pa yin la | byang chub sems dpa'i dbang du byed na ni rang don yongs su rdzogs pa la chos sku dgos par ma mthong na | rang don du zhi ba rkyang pas chog par 'dzin pa ldog mi nus la | de ma ldog na theg pa chen po'i sems bskyed kyi mtshan nyid mi rdzogs par 'gyur te | rang don chos sku la don gnyer sa bcu pa'i gnas skabs su mi dgos pa'i phyir | sangs rgyas kyi sku la rang don gyi sku dang gzhan don gyi sku gnyis su phye ba yang dgos pa med par 'gyur ro ||*.

15 *Phar phyin mchan 'grel* 12b2: *thun mong dang thun mong ma yin pa'i skabs [Hi] snang tshod dang | dngos po'i gnas tshod la byed pa rang lugs yin pa 'dra |*

16 See *Rin chen sgron me* 23a2f.

17 See *Rin chen sgron me* 26b3f.: *yang nyan thos sde gnyis 'di'i gdul bya thun mong ba'i mtshan gzhi dang | dbu sems gnyis gdul bya thun mong ma yin pa'i mtshan gzhir rung yang thun mong ba nyan thos sde gnyis su mi rung bar thal | de la phyi rol ba yang yod la | grub mtha' la ma zhugs pa yang du ma yod pa'i phyir |*

18 See *Bai dūrya ser po* 347.11ff., 359.18ff.

19 Similarly, it is often said that Tsong kha pa is the manifestation of the buddha. For example, Rdo sbis dge bshes shes rab rgya mtsho (1884-1968) states as follows: *Thor bu smad cha* 147a5f.: *sprul sku ni | nges pa lnga dang mi ldan pa'i gzugs sku ste | bskal bzang gi sangs rgyas stong dang | rje tsong kha pa lta bu |*

this way, Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho distinguishes between the two forms of the Dalai Lama and tries to strengthen the Dalai Lama's authority as both a political and a religious leader.

5.

In sum, 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa asserts that Maitreya is a manifestation of the buddha, who is omniscient and omnipotent. He also urges the believer to see Maitreya as a buddha. He argues that the believer who worships Maitreya as a buddha can accumulate greater merit through his faith than the person who considers him to be a bodhisattva. To explain this, 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa cites a passage from the *Tathāgatācintyaguhyānirdeśa* (*De bzhin gshegs pa'i sku'i gsang ba'i le'u*).²⁰ In brief, the argument runs as follows. To benefit all beings, buddhahood is manifested in diverse, illusory emanations in different places at the same time. As a result, each individual disciple sees the buddha in different ways. When one sees the buddha walking, the others may see him sitting or sleeping or preaching doctrine or performing any other behavior; and when one sees the buddha shining like gold, the others may see him shining like silver or crystal or lapis lazuli or any other thing. In this way, the buddha embodies himself as having many different forms and performing many different actions at the same time. This is the nature of the buddha's mystical body. 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa assumes that Maitreya also embodies himself in the same manner because he is actually a buddha. This being the case, according to 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa, if the believer imagines Maitreya as a buddha with various forms and performing various behaviors, he can gain immeasurable merit because his faith is directed toward the immeasurable qualities of the buddha Maitreya.²¹ But if the believer considers him to be a bodhisattva dwelling in the Tuṣita Heaven, he cannot accumulate so much merit, because his faith is focused on only one aspect of Maitreya.²² Accordingly, believers are advised to worship Maitreya as a buddha with immeasurable qualities.

6.

So far, we have seen 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa's view of the Maitreya myth. In accordance with Tsong kha pa's theory, 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa asserts that Maitreya attained enlightenment in the past, and that Maitreya, currently dwelling in the Tuṣita Heaven, is a Manifestation Body of the buddha. He distinguishes between Maitreya's external appearance (the common form)

20 See TAGN D 126a7ff.; 佛说如来不思议秘密大乘经, T 312, vol. 11: 716c6ff. Cf. *Rin chen sgron me* 27a5ff.

21 See *Rin chen sgron me* 28a4f.: *gn̄yis pa grub ste | sku gsung thugs gsum ka thun mong ma yin pa'i dbang du byas na nam mkha' ltar tshad med pa dang | de ltar shes na nam mkha' dang mnyam pa'i dge ba 'byung [...]* |.

22 See *Rin chen sgron me* 28a2ff. (citing TAGN D 130a1): *khyod k̄yis kyang de ltar go dgos par thal | de ltar nam mkha' dang mtshungs par ma go na skur 'debs dang | go na sems bskyed dang mthun pa'i phan yon yod pa'i phyir | dang po grub ste | mdo de las | sku dang gsung dang thugs dang mtshan gyi dper bya ba'i dpe de dag thams cad ni de bzhin gshegs pa la skur ba 'debs pa'o || zhes gsungs pa'i phyir dang | rdo rje gcod pas kyang shes so ||*.

and his real nature (the uncommon form), and thus tries to establish that Maitreya is really a buddha, even if he may behave like a bodhisattva. The idea of distinguishing between these two forms is broadly applicable to other bodhisattvas and lamas. In fact, this idea was also used by the regent Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho to explain the status of Avalokiteśvara and the Dalai Lama.

Furthuremore, 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa suggests a new type of Maitreya worship. He does not emphasize the ascent of the believer to the Tuṣita Heaven or the descent of Maitreya to earth. Instead, he stresses that the believer who worships Maitreya as a buddha can accumulate great merit by virtue of his faith. The notion of a mystical encounter with Maitreya does not play an important role here. Believers are advised to deepen their faith in the buddha Maitreya and to consider his buddhahood as simultaneously manifested in various emanations in the Tuṣita Heaven, in the Jambudvīpa, and potentially in any other place. This type of worship has nothing to do with Pure Land devotions or messianic belief, but is rather linked to the traditional Mahāyāna doctrine that buddhahood is eternal and omnipresent.

Abbreviation and Bibliography

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Ku ma ra ma ti'i nam thar: Rje btsun thams cad mkhyen pa ku ma ra ma ti'i nam thar ngo mtshar rmad byung zhes bya ba (Mnga' ris pa sangs rgyas rtse mo): see Roloff 2009.

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TAGN D: *Tathāgatācintyaḡuhyānirdeśa*: Tibetan Sde dge ed. dkon brtsegs Ka. Tohoku No. 47.

THA D: *Āryalaṅkāvatāra-nāma-mahāyānasūtravṛtti-tathāgatahṛdayālaṅkāra* (Jñānavajra or Rgya'i mkhan po dznyā na badzra): Tibetan Sde dge ed. *mdo 'grel* Pi. Tohoku No. 4019.

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