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A STUDY OF THE CONCEPT OF THE MAHAPURUSA  
IN BUDDHIST LITERATURE AND  
ICONOGRAPHY

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Bellansila Wimalaratana

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Thesis submitted to the University of  
Lancaster for the degree of Doctor of  
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Finally, I wish to take this opportunity of recording my deep sense of gratitude to my preceptor (ācariya) the most Venerable Bellanwila Somaratana Nāyaka Thera, without whose assistance and blessings I might not have been able to undertake and complete this study.

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### ABBREVIATIONS

A	Anguttara Nikāya
AA	Anguttara Nikāya Commentary
Ap	Apadāna
ApA	Apadāna Commentary
AV	Atharvaveda
AVS	Arthaviniscaya Sutra
BHSD	Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary
BV	Buddhavansa
BVA	Buddhavansa Commentary
Dh	Dhammapada
DhA	Dhammapada Commentary
D	Dīgha Nikāya
DA	Dīgha Nikaya Commentary
Dial.	Dialogues of the Buddha
DPPN	Dictionary of Pali Proper Names
EB	Encyclopaedia of Buddhism
ERE	Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics
GV	Gandavyūha Sūtra
It	Itivuttka
IHQ	Indian Historical Quarterly
J	Jataka
JA	Jataka Commentary
JDLCU	Journal of the Depart. Letters, Calcutta University
JOIB	Journal of Oriental Institute, Baroda.

JRAS	Journal of Royal Asiatic Society
Kh	Khuddakapāṭha
Kvu	Kathavatthu
Kvua	Kathavatthu Commentary
Lotus	Le Lotus de la Bonne Loi
LV	Lalitavistara
M	Majjhima Nikāya
MA	Majjhima Nikāya Commentary
Mhvs	Mahāvamsa
MB	Mahābhārata
Mand. Up.	Mandūkya Upaniṣad
Manu	Manusmṛiti
MIL	Milindapaṇha
MV	Mahāvastu
Nd1	Mahāniddeśa
Nd2	Cullaniddeśa
OZ	Orientalische Zeitschrift
PTSD	Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary
Rv	Rgveda
S	Samyutta Nikaya
SA	Samyutta Nikaya Commentary
Snp	Saddhammapundarikā Sūtra
SB	Satapata Brāhmana
Sn	Suttanipāṭa
Ud	Udāna
Vin	Vnaya Pitaka
Vism	Visuddhimagga
Vv	Vimanavatthu
VvA	Vimanavatthu Commentary

## ABSTRACT

This work being essentially a study of the origin and development of the Mahāpurisa (Great Man) concept in Buddhism consists of seven chapters entitled (i) "Aspects of the Mahāpurisa Concept.", (ii) "later development of the concept and 'Trikaya' (three body) theory in Mahayana Buddhism", (iii) "Mahapurisa as Buddha and Cakkavatti", (iv) "Study of the thirty-two characteristics", (v) "Iconographical representation of the thirty-two marks", (vi) "Ethical Foundation of the Mahapurisa concept", and (vii) "Conclusion".

The first chapter presents the references which deal with the subject of the Mahapurisa in the Pali Canon and discusses some views regarding its origin in the light of Brahminical and Jaina sources. The two different types of interpretations of the Mahapurisa concept are distinguished - one identifies the Great Man by spiritual progress, the other by physical accomplishment. Early reference to the practice of prognostications, such as physiognomy and palmistry are dealt with; the probable influence upon Buddhism in spite of its condemnation of this low form of arts (tiracchanavijja) is shown.

The second chapter attempts to elucidate the changing attitude towards the person of the Buddha and its relation to the Mahapurisa concept. After the emergence of different schools of Buddhism there appeared various theories regarding the nature of the Buddha, and the Buddha was transformed into a divine state. In the light of Buddhist Sanskrit texts, the nature and the significance of the marks with

reference to the Body of the Buddha are made clear, as reflected in this new approach. Both Theravada and Mahāyāna traditions maintain that the Mahāpurisa who possesses the thirty-two marks, becomes either a Buddha or Cakkavatti (universal monarch).

The third chapter discusses several views put forward by scholars of the origin of the ideal king or Cakkavatti, and his attributes. Furthermore an attempt is made to draw out the comparison of the Buddha and the Cakkavatti by the Mahāpurisa theory.

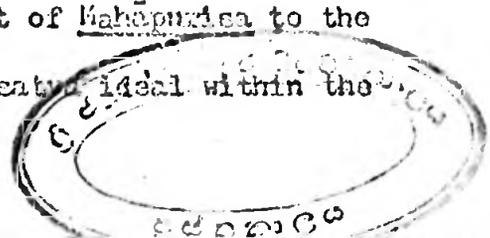
The fourth chapter deals with the comparative study of the thirty-two characteristics of the Mahāpurisa. The Pali texts as the primary source are used and the Chinese and Tibetan translations of Mahāvastu (an early canonical text which existed in Sanskrit before the division of Mahāyāna schools) are consulted. Buddhist Sanskrit texts of Sarvāstivāda, Mādyanika and Prājñā-pāramitā schools are also referred to. The intention is to make clear each characteristic, what it originally meant in relation to the physical appearance of the Buddha as well as his great personality. Moreover the evidence which relates the ideas of some lakṣaṇas to non-Buddhist sources and their influence on the development of interpretations in the Pali Commentaries and later works are examined.

Some of the marks of the Mahāpurisa have been depicted in the Buddha image since inception in India. The fifth chapter examines how far the concept of Mahāpurisa directed the artist in his attempt to form the image of the Buddha in early Buddhist iconography. However, various artists have understood these marks differently, and their way of depicting lakṣaṇas differed. In this chapter the methods of

depicting Mahāpurisa lakṣhaṇa, the Garbhāṅga, Mathurā and Amravatī schools of art are discussed and it is attempted to show the possible reasons for these variations in the light of historical and textual evidence.

The sixth chapter deals with the ethical foundation of the Mahāpurisa concept. The physical characteristics of the Mahāpurisa are generally looked upon as physiognomical beliefs, and are considered less important in regard to the Buddha's doctrine. We attempt to establish the fact that the concept of Mahāpurisa in Buddhist literature mainly emphasises the social ethics of Buddhism. The physical features and other attributes of the Mahāpurisa were taken into account as one of the methods of assimilating prevailing concepts in order to endorse ethical teaching in early Buddhism.

It is more often remarked that the Buddhist concept of Mahāpurisa is of pre-Buddhistic mythology and references to the physical characteristics are condemned as absurd and ridiculous. No serious attempt has so far been made to throw light on the early Buddhist definition of Mahāpurisa regardless of the physiognomical aspect. In the seventh chapter, on the basis of discussions in preceding chapters, we make it clear that the Buddhist concept of Mahāpurisa is not essentially the Purusa Narayana of Vedic Mythology. It prevailed in the society at the time of the Buddha, and has come through a common source of the occult science of physiognomical belief. Early Buddhist texts assimilated this concept not to endorse the physiognomical beliefs but to emphasize social ethics more. In the conclusion of our study of the Mahāpurisa concept we have traced the socio-ethical aspect of Mahāpurisa to the earliest stage of the development of the Bodhisattva ideal within the Pali Canon.



## INTRODUCTION

It is well known in Buddhist literature that the Buddha is called Mahapurisa (Great Man) as he possessed thirty-two auspicious marks (lakkhana) on his body. Further it is stated that these marks are possessed only by a Buddha or a Cakkavatti (universal monarch), whose appearance is a very rare event in this world. It is interesting to note that this concept is an important aspect of Buddhism not only in the Theravada tradition but also in all other schools of Buddhism. Later, in the course of the development of this concept, the characteristic signs of the Mahapurisa were regarded as not only representing physical excellence, but also conceived in Mahayana Buddhism as distinctive features of the supernormal body of the Buddha.

Moreover, with the evolution of the Buddha concept and the growth of the devotional aspect in the Buddhist tradition, the Mahapurisa concept underwent various changes. Controversial views arose regarding the thirty-two bodily marks of the Buddha. It seems that the manifestation of multiple bodies of the Buddha in the Mahāyāna schools made it uncertain as to which form of the Buddha these marks could be attributed. However, it is evident that the idea of Mahapurisa lakkhana became far more important as the Buddha became an object of veneration after his demise, especially in the attempt to portray the Buddha in visual form.

On the other hand a completely different definition of the concept of Mahāpurisa is found in the Pali Canon itself; the Mahāpurisa or the Great Man could be recognized mainly by his internal qualities. As such this may lead one to argue that these two definitions seem to disagree with each other. On this point scholars have remarked that the Mahāpurisa idea relating to the physical marks of the Buddha and Cakkhavatti is a later addition. There has not been a proper attempt to throw light on this important subject by a careful study of relevant material in the Pali Canon and in other Buddhist and non-Buddhist sources. Rhys Davids in his translation of the Asbattha sutta in the Digha Nikāya adds a note on the importance of the study of the Mahāpurisa theory which had been attributed to the Brahmin tradition. He says:

"The knowledge of these thirty-two marks of a Great Being (Mahāpurisa) is one of the details in the often recurring paragraph giving points of Brāhmana wisdom. No such list has been found, so far as I know, in those portions of the pre-Buddhistic priestly literature that have survived. And the inference from both our passages is that the knowledge is scattered through the Brāhmana texts. Many of the details of the Buddhist list are very obscure; and a collection of the older Brāhmana passages would probably throw a light upon them and upon a curious chapter in mythological superstition. Who will write us a monograph on the Mahāpurisa theory as held in early times among the Aryans in India?"<sup>1</sup>

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1. Rhys Davids, T. W., Dialogues of the Buddha, Part I, London 1899 p