

Maitreya Faith in Korea and Buddhist Social Participation

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Introduction

This paper examines how Korea's Maitreya faith, based on the Three Sūtras of Maitreya (Sūtra on the Ascending Birth of Maitreya, Sūtra on the Descending Birth of Maitreya, Sūtra on Maitreya Becoming Buddha), has led to social participation of the Korean Buddhists, and what kind of ideal society they dreamed of and tried to realize.

Maitreya, the future Buddha and the most important Buddha of Maitreya faith, is originally mentioned under the name Metteya in the early Buddhist scriptures, Nikāyas. However, it was after the establishment of Mahāyāna Buddhism that Maitreya thoughts, and further Maitreya faith, developed in earnest.

First of all, in developing this study, it is necessary to distinguish between two forms of Maitreya belief. Maitreya belief is largely divided into two forms: Maitreya belief in the descending birth and the ascending birth. The ascending birth faith aims to cultivate good karma in the real world and to be reborn in Maitreya the Buddha's Tushita Heaven after death and to reach enlightenment by attending Maitreya the Buddha's teaching of Dharma. On the other hand, descending birth's belief is that 5.6 billion years from now, after the establishment of an ideal society ruled by Cakka-Vattin, Maitreya the Buddha will come down to this earth and preach the Dharma.

It is the latter, the belief in the descending birth of Maitreya, that further encouraged Buddhists' social participation. Although the scriptures say that Maitreya the Buddha will be born 5.6 billion years later, Korean Buddhists pay attention to the fact that the time when Maitreya the Buddha comes down is when the Pure Land of the Buddha was already established on this earth, and based on Maitreya faith, they tried to establish ideal society in the earthly world. This emphasizes the active and independent participation of living beings in society rather than relying solely on transcendent beings such as Buddha or the Cakka-Vattin.

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In this process, interestingly, Maitreya ideology was interpreted as a conservative ideology that encouraged strengthening royal authority and loyalty to the state by identifying the king with Maitreya, and on the other hand, in contrast, it was also interpreted as a subversive revolutionary ideology that sought to establish new social order. In this text, we will compare and contrast these two different interpretations of Maitreya ideology.

Meanwhile, despite these two contrasting approaches, the image of the ideal society described in The Maitreya Sūtras provides only one blueprint for a welfare society in which a comfortable life is guaranteed for all living beings. Ultimately, these two contrasting approaches were different paths toward the same goal, Maitreya's Pure Land.

Methodology

First of all, when discussing the philosophy itself provided by Maitreya Thought, I used the Three Sūtras of Maitreya mentioned as primary sources, the original classical Chinese text by Taishō Tripitaka for its annotations, and the Korean-translated text published by Dongguk University Translation Institute. Meanwhile, I will refer to related secondary sources for major historical events in Korean history that originated from the Maitreya faith, which was influenced by Maitreya ideology.

Results and Discussion

First of all, if we compare Sūtra on the Ascending Birth of Maitreya and Sūtra on the Descending Birth of Maitreya, the former requires Buddhists to practice ten good deeds with their body and mind, including keeping the Five Precepts. It recommends that one think about the wonderful pleasures of the Tuṣita Heaven. This will lead one to be born in Tuṣita Heaven, where Maitreya the Buddha resides, and (s)he will see Maitreya the Buddha in person, gain the highest wisdom, and never retreat again. This is in the nature of relying heavily on the power of Maitreya the Buddha in the process of rebirth and the achievement of enlightenment.

On the other hand, Sūtra on the Descending Birth of Maitreya describes the appearance of the Buddha of the Black Plum Tree Land around the time when Maitreya the Buddha will appear. At that time, this land would be a society where grain and jewels are abundant and no one fought for greed, and it must be an ideal society in which both the material and mental welfare of living beings were realized.

Black Plum Tree Land, where Maitreya the Buddha is born, refers to the world we currently live in. Unlike the Christian faith in the Messiah, in this Maitreya Faith, the subject of building an ideal society is not Maitreya the Buddha, but all sentient beings. This emphasizes the subjectivity and activity of every living being follows Buddhism, and based on this, numerous Buddhists have tried to build better society in this world.

However, this belief in Maitreya has largely influenced Korean history in two contrasting forms. On the one hand, it was used as an ideology to strengthen royal authority and support loyalty to the country. The most representative examples are the Maitreya ideology of the ancient Silla and Baekje kingdoms. Silla's Maitreya ideology identified the king and Hwarangs (young elite warriors) with Maitreya, and Baekje accepted Maitreya faith as a patriotic ideology that should turn the country into a Pure Land of Maitreya the Buddha.

On the other hand, Maitreya belief was sometimes interpreted as a revolutionary idea to destroy the existing order and establish a new order. For example, during the Later Three Kingdoms period, Gung Ye called himself Maitreya the Buddha and succeeded in gathering together the aspirations of the people who wished for a new world to be opened on behalf of the collapsing country at the end of the Unified Silla Dynasty. He said that he was Maitreya who appeared to create a new world order and proposed a revolutionary line of overthrowing Silla and building a new nation called Taebong. In this way, throughout Korean history, Maitreya ideology had both conservative and revolutionary qualities.

Despite these contrasting historical processes, I can assert that the ideal society desired by the people who follow Maitreya ideology was one. That is the ideal society described in The Maitreya Sūtras, where both material and spiritual well-being are expanded. Although they were divided into conservative and revolutionary lines, the blueprint for the ideal world that Koreans who believed in Maitreya had hoped for was consistent.

Conclusion

Therefore, Korean Buddhists who follow the Maitreya faith strive to build an ideal society to realize Maitreya's Pure Land in the world. In order to realize the ideal society shown in The Three Maitreya Sūtras, we must pursue not only material abundance, but also wisdom based on the teachings of Buddha, social interdependence, and consideration for the weak. That can be said to be the essence of Maitreya ideology, which Koreans have believed in for thousands of years.

Keywords: Balanced Welfare, Korean History, Maitreya the Buddha, Social Participation, Tuṣita Heaven

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