



**The Role of Bodhicitta in Buddhist Enlightenment
Including A Translation Into English of
Bodhicitta-Sasta, benkemmitsu-Nikyoron, And
Sammaya-Kaijo (Studies in Asian Thought and
Religion)**

Kenneth R. White

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This important work contains the first complete translation and complete interpretation of the works of Kukai (744-845), the founder of the Japanese Shingon School of Buddhism. That the doctrines of bodhicitta and the teachings of Kukai both occupy a central place in the development and history of Mahayana Buddhism is a matter that hardly warrants asserting. Even further, it is well understood that Kukai made the doctrine of bodhicitta central to his interpretation of the Chinese Chen-yen, or esoteric school of Buddhism. Given this, it is surprising that Kukai's interpretation of bodhicitta has as yet received relatively little scholarly attention, particularly in English language sources. The concept of bodhicitta, the mind that seeks and reflects enlightened insight, has a long though as yet somewhat unclear history in Mahayana literature. As with so many technical Buddhist terms its lexical definitions have varied. The term has been generally understood as referring to the mind of enlightenment, but its implied connotations are much more complex. Given its associations with the mind seeking enlightenment, it is not surprising to find it has doctrinal connections to the concepts of the bodhisattva, a practitioner cultivating the Mahayana path, the tathagata-garbha, the "seed" (garbha) that may develop into enlightenment, and hence, one who is so enlightened (tathagata), and the alayavijnana, that aspect of consciousness that functions as a repository of karmic tendencies and influences. Similarly, its connotations of the enlightened mind that both reflects and perceives the very nature of all arisings gives it links to the concepts of prajna, Buddha-nature, and sunyata. These are just a few of the possibilities and themselves hint at the complex relationships and meanings suggested by the term. In many ways then it is accurate to say bodhicitta is central to much of Mahayana thought and practice. Furthermore, the bodhicitta concept is also situated center stream in an issue of historical importance regarding the question of East Asian Buddhism's, and perhaps even more broadly, general Mahayana notions of the ontological status of dependent arisings. More specifically, as with concepts such as tathagata-garbha, some have questioned whether it might connote an ontologically essential existent. Such a notion is certainly directly at odds with Nagarjuna's views and while it is generally accurate to note Nagarjuna's views have influenced other schools of Mahayana thought, there remain many questions regarding whether and to what extent that is the case. As a consequence it is often still not clear in the various particular cases whether the term suggests as much and even further, broader assertions to that effect are problematic. For example, the normative nature of the assertion aside, we have good reason to question views such as Matsumoto's claim that tathagata-garbha is not Buddhism. Such assertions are clearly not historical and in light of the above considerations give us pause. Such a pause may leave us convinced the multivalent and historically specific usage of these terms means the question cannot be accurately answered simply and broadly in the affirmative or negative. What we need then are more works such as this one that delve deeply into specific interpretations of bodhicitta. Such works not only help us fill the missing pieces in our historical knowledge of the concept, they advance our knowledge of key thinkers like Kukai as well. For example, as we begin to more clearly understand Kukai's views on bodhicitta, we are then better able to understand how distinctions such as those reflected in his hierarchical classification scheme (Chin. p'an-chiao) reflect on the accuracy of his understanding of various schools. Even further, they may shed new light on other possible functions of

his p'an-chiao. For example, given the political realities at court during his life, a p'an-chiao system built on a reading of bodhicitta that emphasized the opportunity to become "the Buddha in this very body" may have convinced aristocratic patrons to support his school in addition to, or perhaps even in place of established institutions such as the Kegon school. In such a case there were clearly practical benefits to emphasizing the idea that other schools do not teach becoming "the Buddha in this very body." Such an emphasis becomes more intriguing to the historian once we note a comparison of the two metaphysics illustrates the fact that the idea, or some variation on it, is common to both Shingon and Kegon doctrines, and even further, quite common within Mahayana thought. Clearly then, investigating topics such as Kukai's interpretation of bodhicitta stands to broaden our understanding beyond just Kukai and bodhicitta. If such an investigation also included translations of key texts on the topic, our opportunities only grow. What we have then in this work by Kenneth White is precisely the sort of investigation and translation effort that helps us more fully understand these and related matters. Accordingly, this effort will certainly be a welcome addition to the range of scholarly material available on these topics and, I expect, will stimulate further fruitful inquiry.

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