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YAZDAN MITHRA

MITHRAISM  
MITHRAEUM JAPAN



# On the History of Incorporation of Iranian Gods into Buddhism

یزدان میترا

ONE FORCE, ONE JUSTICE, MAY WE BE!

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## Study in Mithraism (Mehrparasti)

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## On the History of Incorporation of Iranian Gods into Buddhism

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## 1. Introduction

Mahāyāna Buddhism was born and developed under the strong influence of Iranian religion in the time of Parthian rule in the area controlled by Parthia, Bactria and kingdoms of the Sakas. In chapter 2 important historical facts concerning about deities shown in the table 1 and 2 below are listed up with supplementary notes. In chapter 3 considerations are given to Mithra, Ahura Mazda and Sraoša. In chapter 4 the chronological order of incorporation of Iranian Gods into Buddhist pantheon is summarized.

Table 1 Syncretism of Mithra

Syncretism	Area	Ethnic Group	Date of Syncretism
Zeus-Mithra	Bactria	Greeks	180 BC-10 AD
Mihir-Surya	Northwest India	Sakas (Indo-Scythians), Maga-Brahmin	1 <sup>st</sup> BC

Table 2 Correspondence between Buddhas and Iranian Gods

Buddhism	Iranian Religions	Date of Incorporation into Buddhism*
Metteya/Maitreya/Mitra	Earthly Mithra	Early Buddhism
Miroku	Earthly Mithra, saosyant	2 <sup>nd</sup> BC to 2 <sup>nd</sup> AD
Buddha-Mazda	Ahura Mazda	1 <sup>st</sup> BC
Amitābha	Celestial Mithra	1 <sup>st</sup> to 2 <sup>nd</sup> AD
Amitāyus	Zurvan	1 <sup>st</sup> to 2 <sup>nd</sup> AD
Mahāvairocana	Celestial Mithra	Until 7 <sup>th</sup> AD

Kwan-yin	Sraoša	1 <sup>st</sup> to 2 <sup>nd</sup> AD
Mahāsthāmaprāpta	Rašnu	1 <sup>st</sup> to 2 <sup>nd</sup> AD

\* Primarily based on the research of Dr. Hajime Nakamura.

## 2. Historical Facts

### 2. 1 Bactria

Mithra worship flourished in Indo-Greek kingdom Bactria (180 BC-10 AD). One of its evidence is a huge golden image of Zeus-Mithra in a Hellenistic city Ai-Khanum of Bactria. Bactria was a kingdom which flourished in the area now part of Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

### 2. 2 Sakas (Indo-Scythians)

There was a kingdom of the Sakas, which flourished in the area now part of Pakistan and Afghanistan. This kingdom was founded by Scythians immigrated from Central Asia and Caucasus. According to *Bavišya Purana* 133, their religion was Simorghian Mithraism. It is written in it that Maga-brahmin of this Scythians claimed that they were descendents of Sun God Mihir (=Mithra), and they worshipped Him (Mithra). It is also written that they resided in the temples of Surya in the northwest part of India (1<sup>st</sup> BC).

#### Note

Images of Surya in the Surya temples wear Central Asian style clothes and boots.

### 2. 3 Buddhism

Under the influence of Mithra worship of Bactria, Sakas and Parthia, Maitreya cult and Pure Land sect (Amitābha Sect) was born in the peripheral area of Parthia (2<sup>nd</sup> BC-2<sup>nd</sup> AD). Under the strong influence of Manichaeism, Esoteric Buddhism (Mahāvairocana Sect) was born in Sassanid time in the same peripheral area.

#### Note 1

- ①The state religion of Parthia was Mithraism. Mithra was the supreme Lord God of Parthia.
- ②After the foundation of Sassanid dynasty, Parthia survived in the northwest part of India as Indo-Parthian kingdom.

#### Note2

- ①Mithra has two aspects .One is celestial, the other is earthly. Sun God Mithra is His celestial aspect, Maitreya is His earthly aspect (double). In the Mahāyāna scripture *Greater Sukhāvativyūha* 大無量壽經 (Jp.: *Daimuryōju-kyō*), Amitābha 阿彌陀仏 gave a teaching to Maitreya 彌勒. This is a reflection of two aspects of Mithra. In this case, Amitābha is celestial Mithra, Maitreya is earthly Mithra.
- ②According to Persian tradition, the Sun in the Sun sphere is the throne of Mithra. According to Mahāyāna tradition (Bamiyan), those who will become World Teacher reincarnate on the Earth as a son of Mithra, after finishing their training in the Sun sphere. According to Manichaean doctrine, Maitreya the Christ is a spirit of Sun God Mithra.

- ③Cosmology, meditation technique and image of Amitābha and Maitreya are essentially the same one (Kōzaburō Matsumoto. *Considerations on Miroku's Pure Land and Amitābha's Pure Land*; 松本文三郎『弥勒浄土論・極楽浄土論』)
- ④In the trilogy of Pure Land sect, the latest scripture is *Lesser Sukhāvativyūha* 阿弥陀経. In this scripture Amitābha, Kwan-yin, Mahāsthāmaprāpta formed triple-buddhas. According to Manichaeism, Amitābha is Mithra, Kwan-yin is Sraoša and Mahāsthāmaprāpta is Rašnu. In Iranian tradition Mithra, Sraoša and Rašnu consist to be the triple judges.

## 2. 4 Buddha-Mazda and the Sassanid Empire

The cave temple of the 1st century found in Kara-Tepa (Syr Darya Province of Uzbekistan) is an archaeological attestation of Iranian religion and Buddhism in Bactria. Many Zoroastrian elements are incorporated into its statues and wall paintings. There is a depiction of a syncretic divinity “Buddha-Mazda” with a fire halo, who has both features of Ahura Mazda and Buddha. The temple lay-out is typical of Iranian temples, where processions of priests performed the main Iranian ritual of walking around the sanctuary. (Berzin. *Historical Sketch of Buddhism and Islam in Afghanistan and Buddhists*)

### Note 1

In the Sassanid time (during the 2nd half of the 3rd century), a Zurwanite Zoroastrian high priest Kirder persecuted Buddhism (Buddha-Mazda worship) in Afghanistan (Bactria) and ordered to destroy their monasteries. Buddhism quickly recovered after his death, but Buddha-Mazda worship never revived. (Berzin. *Historical Sketch of Buddhism and Islam in Afghanistan and Buddhists*)

### Note 2

In Bactria (3rd to 7th AD), the state religion of the Sassanid dynasty, i. e. the Zurwanite Zoroastrianism was less powerful than Simorghian religion (including Mithraism) and Manichaeism who were tolerant to the syncretism. (Berzin. *The Historical Interaction between the Buddhist and Islamic Cultures before the Mongol Empire*)

## 2. 5 Bamiyan

There are two huge images of Buddhas (East-Buddha 東大仏 and West-Buddha 西大仏) in the Bamiyan Buddhist site. These images were made during 4 to 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. East-Buddha is Shyakamuni (prince Gautama), and West-Buddha is Maitreya. Between the two lays an image of dying Shyakamuni. There is a mural painting of Sun God Mithra above the head of East Buddha. These images and their alignment mean that both Shakyamuni and Maitreya are avatars of Mithra, and after the death of Shakyamuni, Maitreya succeeded the role of World Teacher. (Maeda. *Golden city Bamiyan reconstructed in Hi-vision video*)

## 2. 6 Parthia

According to *Dīnkard* vol. 4 (9<sup>th</sup> AD), Parthian king Volgash (Vologases I, c. 51-78 AD) ordered to collect and collate the scattered sacred *Avesta* scriptures. But this restored *Avesta* has not survived. Several versions of *Avesta* known today are all derived from the Sassanian *Avesta* compiled in 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> AD by the high priest Tansar under the command of Ardashir I (226-241 AD). It is difficult to know the followings:

- (1) Whether *Mihr Yašt* today is the same as the Parthian version or not.
- (2) Whether Parthian used *Mihr Yašt* or not.

If Parthians used *Mihr Yašt*, and its contents are the same as those of today known, only then the following consideration has a meaning:

Combining the following points in *Mihr Yašt* with Armenian type Iranian religion, it is highly probable that in Parthia the heavenly lordship was succeeded from Ahura Mazda to Mithra peacefully, and Mazdaism (Zoroastrianism) was transformed into Mithraism.

- ① Ahura Mazda said that Mithra is his son, and he is as worthy as him. (*Mihr Yašt* 1.1)
- ② Ahura Mazda gave the lordship (jurisdiction) over the creatures on the Earth to Mithra. (*Mihr Yašt* 23.92, 26.103)
- ③ Ahura Mazda worshipped Mithra. (*Mihr Yašt* 33.140, 31.123)
- ④ Ahura Mazda ordered Zoroaster and all the other magi to worship Mithra as he (Ahura Mazda) do. (*Mihr Yašt* 30.119, 31.124, 33.137, 33.140)
- ⑤ Mithra demonstrated He is the giver of kingship to a man who deserves to be a king by his word and deed. (*Mihr Yašt* 27.108-111)
- ⑥ Mithra is worshipped as “Ahura Mithra”. (*Mihr Yašt* 28.113, 35.145)
- ⑦ Mithra is praised as Saošant (*Mihr Yašt* 31.124)

## 2. 7 Iranian Tradition

For Mazdayasnians (Zoroastrians), Ahura Mazda is the Creator of all. For them “being the Creator of all” is a mandatory function to be Lord God. But for Simorghians, it seems to be not a mandatory function to be Lord God, but a job for the lesser gods. For the Simorghians, the mandatory function to be Lord God seems to be “being the king”. According to Zoroastrian myth, after Ahura Mazda’s creation, Mithra came into the cosmos as the king and sat on his throne (=the Sun) in order to rule the cosmos. It is likely that Parthians and Scythians (both are Simorghians and closely connected), thinking along this line, interpret *Mihr Yašt* as I pointed out in 2. 6, and convinced that Mithra is superior to Ahura Mazda.

## 3. Considerations

### 3. 1 Mithra

In the area where Iranian tribes and other ethnic groups such as Greeks, Indics, Uighurs and Chinese live together, Mithra was worshipped as supreme Lord God. This Mithra made syncretism with Greek Zeus and Indic Surya. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, celestial Mithra was incorporated into its pantheon as Amitābha (Meaning “he who possesses infinite light” in Skt.). His (Mithra’s) aspects were adopted into its pantheon as Amitābha, earthly Mithra as Maitreya. Iranians tolerated these syncretism and adoption.

The same phenomenon occurred in the area to the Iran. Mithra made syncretism with Apollo, Helios, Horus, Shamash, and absorbing them all, He finally became Deus Sol Invictus Mithras.

One reason of this phenomenon is that Mithra is the God of contract between Iranians and

other Ethnic groups.

### 3. 2 Ahura Mazda

For Mazdayasnians, Ahura Mazda was the sole Supreme God. But for other Iranians, he (Ahura Mazda) was one of gods they worshiped. The reason why there occurred no syncretism except one is not clear. The one exception was the syncretic Buddha-god Buddha-Mazda. But this syncretic Buddha-god was destroyed in the latter half of 3<sup>rd</sup> AD. It is also not clear to what extent Kirder's antipathy to Buddha-Mazda worship was shared with other Iranians.

#### Note

In the area west to Iran, Ahura Mazda made syncretism with Greek Zeus. This syncretic God was called Aramazd in Armenia, Zeus-Oromasdes in Commagene. (Boyce & Grenet. *A History of Zoroastrianism vol. 3*, p323; Russell. *Zoroastrianism in Armenia*, p162-163)

### 3. 3 Sraoša

According to Chinese Manichaeic scripture *the Hymn Scroll* 摩尼教下部讚 (Jp.: *Mani-kyō-kabusan*), Sraoša is identical with Kwan-yin 觀音 (Skt. Avalokiteśvara). This Kwan-yin is male. But the nearer he came to China via the silk road, the more he was female-lized. Onto this female Kwan-yin Anāhitā is projected.

## 4. Chronological Order of Incorporation of Iranian Gods into Buddhism

Here is a summary of syncretism of Buddhism with Iranian religions along the timeline:

### 4.1 Beginning

Maitreya appears as Metteya and Ajita in the oldest Buddhist scripture *Sutta-nipāta* 5.1-3, 4.7., whose archtype verses were formed before the time of king Aśoka (268-232 BC). This Maitreya was noticeable. But, by uniting with Iranian Mithra in Central Asia, he became the savoir-buddha (messiah Buddha) Miroku 弥勒. His scriptures are *Maitreya Sutra Trilogy* 弥勒三部經 (Jp.: *Miroku-sanbu-kyō*).

#### Note 1

*Sutra for Wise and Folly* 賢愚經 (Jp.: *Kengu-kyō*) is a scripture which contains a birth story of Maitreya. It is a collection of Buddhist legends, and was edited in Khotan by eight Chinese Buddhist monks (445 AD). The story (*Sutra for Wise and Folly* 12.57) remarkably resembles the birth story of Jesus in *the Gospel According to Mathew* 1:18-25, 2:1-23. It is highly probable that Buddhist Maitreya and Christian Jesus was linked via Manichaeic "Maitreya the Christ" in Central Asia.

#### Note 2

The Vijnāna-vādin 唯識派 (Jp: Yuiśikiha), also called Yogācāra 瑜伽行派 (Jp: Yūgyōha) was founded by Maitreya 弥勒 (Jp: Miroku), succeeded and expanded by

Asanga 無着 (Jp: Mujaku). This Maitreya is believed to have lived in 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries. Asanga lived in 4th century and came from a Brahmin family living in present-day Peshawar (Pakistan). The historicity of Maitreya is a matter of controversy. According to tradition Asanga received the inspiration for his teaching direct from Maitreya Buddha. They thought all the material creatures are illusion, there only exists manas (mind), ultimately the great manas. They practiced yoga to attain this recognition. Vijnāna-vādin is thought to have prepared philosophical and practical basis for Esoteric Buddhism.

## 4. 2 Development

Short after Maitreya became the savoir-buddha of Mahāyana, Mithra the Sun God of Bactria and Parthia was incorporated into Mahāyan as Amitābha. In the Pure Land sect Maitreya became the earthly representative of Amitābha. In the propagation to China, in the area near China, Amitābha, Kwan-yin, Mahāsthāmaprāpta formed triple-buddhas (*Amitāyus Meditation Sūtra* 觀無量壽經 (Jp.: *Kan-Muryōju-kyō*)).

### Remark

- (1) In the scripture *Greater Sukhāvāṭīvyūha* 大無量壽經 (Jp.: *Dai-Muryōju-kyō*), which is one of the trilogy of Pure Land sect (Amitābha sect), Maitreya is represented as a mir of Iranian tradition.
- (2) In *Saddharmapundarīka-sūtra* 法華經 (Jp.: *Hoke-kyō*), which was written in the same time as *Greater Sukhāvāṭīvyūha* 大無量壽經 was written, also represents Maitreya as a mir.
- (3) In Amitābha sect (Pure Land sect), Zurvan was also incorporated into its pantheon as Amitāyus 無量壽 (Meaning “he who possesses infinite life”, i. e. Aion in Skt.). In Mahāyāna Buddhism, Amitābha (Mithra) and Amitāyus (Zurvan) are identical.
- (4) Manichaeism was affected by Pure Land sect (Amitābha sect). When Mani went abroad to India, he met Buddhist monks. It is highly probable that these monks belonged to either Pure Land sect (Amitābha sect) or Bamiyan sect.

## 4. 3 Another Possibility was Blocked

200 years after the syncretism and adoption of Mithra began, Buddhists adopted Ahura Mazda as Buddha-Mazda 般若仏 who had a fire halo. But the worship of Buddha-Mazda was thoroughly destroyed by the Sassanid and ceased to exist.

## 4. 4 Culmination of Mithra-ization

Learning much from this disaster, Esoteric Buddhists incorporated Mithra into their pantheon as Great Sun Buddha, i. e. Mahāvairocana Buddha 大日如来, and made Amitābha and Maitreya as His avatars (emanations). Mahāvairocana’s scripture is *Dainichi-kyō* 大日經. For there are no Sanskrit or Tibetan origin of it, it seems that this scripture is written in China. Esoteric Buddhism is called Mi-jiao/Mikkyō 密教 in Chinese/Japanese. Mi/Mitsu “密” is the Chinese character used to transcript “Mi(h)r”. Jiao/kyō “教” means “teaching” in Chinese. Therefore Mi-jiao/Mikkyō 密教 means “teaching of Mi(h)r”.

## 4. 5 Transformation into Miroku's Religion

Buddhism (Maitreya cult, Amitābha sect, Esoteric Buddhism) and Manichaeism came to China in a mixture. They co-existed long in China. But after the harsh suppression and destruction by Tang dynasty in 843 AD (Kaišō-no Haibutu 会昌の廃仏), Esoteric Buddhism

ceased to exist in China. The remnants of Maitreya cult, Amitābha sect and Manichaeism merged into one and became a new religion “Mile-jiao” (Miroku-kyō) 弥勒教, whose Lord God is Ancient Lord God Mi-lə (Miroku) 弥勒, who is the perfect union of Mithra, Maitreya and Amitābha. Mi-lə-jioa became the largest popular religion in medieval China until 13<sup>th</sup> AD. (Qewl 5 “History of Chinese Mithraism – Eastward Propagation of Mithraism ”; ケウル 5 「弥勒教の歴史 ——ミトラ教の東方伝播」)

### Note

Esoteric Buddhism was transmitted to Japan before the suppression and destruction (Kaišō-no Haibutu) in China. It gained much popularity among Japanese, and is still popular today.

## Appendix

Table 1 Correspondence of the names

Sanskrit & Pāli*	Persian	Japanese & Chinese
Amitābha	Celestial Mithra	Amida 阿弥陀
Amitāyus	Zurwan	Muyrōju 無量寿
Avalokiteśvara	Sraoša, Anāhitā	Kannon 觀音 (Ch. Kwan-yin)
Buddha-Mazda	Ahura Mazda (Wurmzd)	On-mochi-shi 温勿司
Metteya/Maitreya/Ajita	Earthly Mithra, saosyant	Miroku 弥勒 (Ch. Mi-lə)
Mahāvairocana	Celestial Mithra	Dainichi 大日, Mitsu 密 (Ch. Mi)
Mahāsthāmaprāpta	Rašnu	Daiseiši 大勢至

Table 2 Correspondence of the titles

Sanskrit & Pāli*	Japanese & Chinese
*Amitāyus Meditation Sūtra	Kan- Dai-Muryōju-kyō 觀無量寿經
Greater Sukhāvativyūha	Dai-Muryōju-kyō 大無量寿經
* Mahāvairocana Sūtra	Dainichi-kyō 大日經
Lesser Sukhāvativyūha	Amida-kyō 阿弥陀經
*Maitreya Sūtra Trilogy	Miroku-sanbu-kyō 弥勒三部經
*Manichaean Hymn Scroll	Mani -kyō kabusan 摩尼教下部讚
Saddharmapundariika-sūtra	Hoke-kyō 法華經
*Sūtra for Wise and Folly	Kengu-kyō 賢愚經

\*Some Buddhist scriptures (sūtra) were written in China, therefore these have no Sanskrit/Pāli titles. In these case, English title is described.

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End