

Maitreya Buddha: A Baha'i View

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Abstract:

Both within the Buddhist tradition and outside it, the Maitreya myth continues to exert an irresistible hold on practitioners and scholars alike. For almost 2,500 years, Buddhist practitioners have universally accorded Maitreya a degree of reverence second only to Gautama, the historical Buddha. His future Buddhahood has served to comfort his followers during the dark age of a declining dharma, and ensured continuity in the form of a golden age of renewal. Fragmentary translations of Maitreya texts and commentaries into Western languages, begun in the nineteenth century, have been augmented more recently by a surge of interest in the myth by scholars from diverse disciplines and area studies. Many Baha'is, having read 'Abdu'l-Baha's description of Buddhist prophecies as "symbols and metaphors" and Shoghi Effendi's unequivocal statement linking Baha'u'llah with Maitreya, share the same fascination. It is a fascination that springs simultaneously from both within and without; from a practitioner's sense of religious participation in the fulfillment of prophecy and from a deep interest in the progress of scholarly work in the field.

The intent of this paper is (1) to provide an introduction to the salient features of the core Maitreya myth as it was recorded in the early Buddhist texts, and (2) to offer an interpretation of how the prophecies in this myth have been fulfilled by the coming of Baha'u'llah.