

# Mahayana Buddhism

## I. INTRODUCTION

Mahayana Buddhism (Sanskrit for "Greater Vehicle"), along with Theravada Buddhism, one of the two principal branches of Buddhist belief. Mahayana originated in India and subsequently spread throughout China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, Central Asia, Vietnam, and Taiwan. Followers of Mahayana have traditionally regarded their doctrine as the full revelation of the nature and teachings of the Buddha, in opposition to the earlier Theravada tradition, which they characterize as the Lesser Vehicle (*Hinayana*).

In contrast to the relative conservatism of earlier Buddhist schools, which adhered closely to the recognized teachings of the historical Buddha, Mahayana embraces a wider variety of practices, has a more mythological view of what a Buddha is, and addresses broader philosophical issues. Two major Mahayana schools arose in India: *Madhyamika* (Middle Path) and *Vijñānavada* (Consciousness Only; also known as *Yogachara*). With the spread of Mahayana Buddhism beyond India, other indigenous schools appeared, such as Pure Land Buddhism and Zen.

## II. ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT

The most probable forerunners of Mahayana were the *Mahasāṅghikas* (Followers of the Great Assembly), a liberal branch of the Buddhist community that broke away from the more conservative mainstream some time before the reign of Indian king Ashoka in the 3rd century BC. Mahayana thinkers of later periods categorized the Mahasāṅghikas as one of the 18 schools of Hinayana Buddhism, but when Mahayana first emerged, it resembled Mahasāṅghika in several areas of doctrinal interpretation. The most significant Mahayana innovation was the view of the Buddha as a supernatural being who assumed a transformation body (*nirmanakaya*) to be born as the historical Buddha.

Precisely when and where Mahayana arose in India is unclear, but its origin can be traced to between the 2nd century BC and the 1st century AD. The early growth of Mahayana was promoted by Indian philosopher Nagarjuna, who founded the Madhyamika school. His influential writings provide some of the most persuasive early formulations of Mahayana. The Madhyamika school proliferated into a number of sects, and was carried to China in the early 5th century by Buddhist missionary Kumarajiva, who translated Nagarjuna's work into Chinese. By 625 Madhyamika had reached Japan by way of Korea, though everywhere it remained more influential among the scholarly elite than the common people.

The Pure Land school of Mahayana, based on the 1st-century *Sukhavatīvyūha Sūtra* (*Pure Land Sutra*; a *sūtra* is a writing that purports to record a discourse of the Buddha), was established in China in the 4th century by Chinese scholar Huiyuan, who formed a devotional society for meditating on the name of *Amitābha Buddha* (Buddha of Infinite Light). This sect grew and spread through the 6th and 7th centuries, especially among the common people.

The Vijñānavada (Consciousness Only) school maintained that consciousness alone is real. Vijñānavada first arose in India about the 4th century and was taken to China two centuries later by Chinese monk and pilgrim Xuanzang (Hsuan-tsang). A Japanese disciple, Dosho, who arrived to study with him in 653, conveyed it to Japan. A native Chinese Mahayana school, *Avatamsaka* (*Huayan* in Chinese), was established in the 7th century by Chinese monk Dushun around a Chinese translation of its basic text, the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* (*Garland Sutra*). The school reached Korea in the late 7th century, and between 725 and 740 was carried to

Japan, where it was known as Kegon. Another important Chinese school, the *Tiantai* (*Tendai* in Japanese), was founded by Chinese monk Zhiyi, who organized the entire Buddhist canon around the cardinal Mahayana scripture, the *Saddharmapundarika Sutra* (*Lotus Sutra*). This school became very influential in China and Korea, and also in Japan, where it served as a means for introducing Pure Land doctrines.

The Mahayana school called *Dhyana* (Sanskrit for “meditation”; known in Chinese as Chan and in Japanese as Zen) was supposedly introduced into China in 520 by Indian monk Bodhidharma, but actually arose from cross-fertilization between Mahayana and Chinese Daoism (Taoism). Chan split into a number of schools and was introduced into Korea and into Japan in the 7th century, though its full development occurred later. Zen and Pure Land both spread into Vietnam (under Chinese rule at the time) in the 6th century. Beginning in the 7th century the Indian form of Mahayana Buddhism was gradually introduced into Tibet (see Tibetan Buddhism).

Mahayana thus was established as the dominant Buddhist school of East Asia by about the 7th century. Some Mahayana influences penetrated into Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and other Southeast Asian countries—for example, the great Cambodian monuments of Angkor Thum reflect a 12th-century Mahayana tradition. These influences were later superseded by Theravada, Hinduism, and Islam.

Buddhism in China suffered persecution under the emperor Wuzong in 845, and subsequently was overshadowed by the state cult of Confucianism, but remained an integral part of Chinese life. In Korea, where the Zen school (known as *Son* in Korean) had become dominant, Mahayana flourished in the Koryō (Goryeo) period (935-1392), but was restricted under the Chosōn (Joseon) (1392-1910). Japan supported a vibrant Mahayana culture, which after the 12th century gave rise to new Zen and Pure Land sects under such reformers as Japanese monks Dogen and Honen, as well as to Japan's only entirely indigenous Buddhist sect, Nichiren Buddhism. Japanese Mahayana lost much of its vitality in the Edo period (1603-1867), during which the Tokugawa shogunate used it for social control through registration of parishioners. The anti-Buddhist policy of Japan's new rulers in the first decade following the Meiji Restoration of 1868 foreshadowed much of Mahayana's experience in the 20th century, in which Communist regimes in China, Vietnam, and North Korea prohibited worship, and in which the Chinese annexation of Tibet led to considerable persecution of Mahayana practitioners. The easing of doctrinaire Communism led to a revival of Mahayana in some of these areas. Mahayana has also spread into new territory with the growing popularity in the West of Zen and other Mahayana schools.

### III. ORGANIZATION

Within the Mahayana tradition, the notion of the *sangha*, or Buddhist monastic community, is much broader and less restrictive than in early Buddhism. Mahayana takes as its ideal the path of the *bodhisattva*—one who aspires to *bodhi*, or enlightenment. Since this ideal can be pursued by both monks and lay believers, the Mahayana sangha includes both laity and monks. Monks follow the rules of one of the *Vinayas* (prescriptions for monastic life) in the Tipitaka, the sacred canon of Theravada, but do so through the Mahayana interpretation. Monks also take a vow to strive to become a bodhisattva, and those who pursue the esoteric practices of Tantric Buddhism receive Tantric vows and initiations (see Tantra). Although Mahayana monks generally follow the Buddhist rules of poverty and celibacy, some sects—notably the Japanese Shin sect of Pure Land Buddhism—permit clerical marriage. In pre-modern China, an aspiring monk was traditionally admitted on probation for one year before becoming a novice, often the limit of progress for those without government connections. The unordained laity includes those who take the bodhisattva vow but who do not become monks: some may live as ordinary householders; others join religious communities with their own specific vows or Tantric initiations.

Relations between Mahayana sangha and governments have varied among countries with strong Mahayana traditions. In the early Tang (T'ang) dynasty in China (7th and 8th centuries), Buddhism was organized under the state, with a government commissioner for religion. However, beginning in 845, Chinese Buddhists were persecuted by the government. In Vietnam, after independence from Chinese rule was achieved in the 10th century, a Confucian bureaucracy continued to supervise monasteries. In Japan, Buddhist temples were often powerful autonomous institutions with their own lands and armies of soldier-monks. After 1603 the Tokugawa regime took control of the temples and integrated them into the Japanese government.

Mahayana generally offers more hope of enlightenment for the lay believer than Theravada: the compassionate bodhisattvas can supposedly transfer their merit to worshipers; Zen is notoriously disdainful of the formalities of creed and hierarchy; the Pure Land is an interim paradise on the road to salvation attainable by the pious. Consequently, Mahayana lay movements have abounded through the centuries. Pure Land sects in particular tend to actively evangelize. In China, Pure Land groups were sometimes associated with secret societies and peasant revolts. In Japan, Pure Land Buddhism became the people's version of Buddhism and periodically spawned *millenarian* movements (movements that looked for the establishment of an earthly paradise). The Japanese *Nichiren* sect also focused on the common people and produced many lay societies of worshipers. The extreme of Mahayana lay participation is perhaps Japan's *Sōka Gakkai* movement, an entirely lay group with definite secular aims and a policy of aggressive evangelization.

#### IV. DOCTRINE

Mahayana goes beyond the core doctrine contained in the Theravada *Tipitaka* in several important respects. It accepts as canonical other sutras not in the *Tipitaka*; this literature is known as the *Buddhavacana* (*Revelation of the Buddha*). The most notable *Buddhavacana* texts are the *Saddharmapundarika Sutra* (*Lotus of the Good Law Sutra*, or *Lotus Sutra*), the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, the *Avatamsaka Sutra* (*Garland Sutra*), and the *Lankavatara Sutra* (*The Buddha's Descent to Sri Lanka Sutra*), as well as a collection known as the *Prajñāparamita* (*Perfection of Wisdom*). The *Lotus Sutra* helps to explain the Mahayana view of Buddhist revelation through its rendition of one of the Buddha's sermons. In a parable, the Buddha shows how he grants provisional revelations appropriate to the limited faculties of particular beings, until finally they are ready to receive his full revelation. The sutra recounts how 5000 listeners depart in arrogance before the parable is preached, thus projecting the cause of schisms in the community of the faithful back to the days of the Buddha.

Mahayana attitudes toward Buddhist teachings are in part a consequence of the Mahayana view of the Buddha. Whereas Theravadins regarded the Buddha as a supremely enlightened man, most Mahayana thought treats him as a manifestation of a divine being. This view was formalized as the doctrine of the threefold nature, or triple body (*trikaya*), of the Buddha. The Buddha's three bodies are known as the body of essence (*dharmakaya*), the sum of the spiritual qualities that make him *Buddha*; the body of communal bliss, or enjoyment body (*sambhoga-kaya*), a godlike form revealed to the Mahayana initiate during contemplation; and the body of transformation (*nirmana-kaya*), a mortal body that appears in the transient world of death and rebirth to lead *sentient* beings (beings that possess senses) to enlightenment. The body of communal bliss appears in various manifestations, notably that of the five cosmic Buddhas, the eternal Buddhas that comprise and sustain the cosmos: Vairocana, Aksobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitabha (or Amida), and Amoghasiddhi. The body of essence is seen as the universal ground of being, revealed for many Mahayana believers in the *Lotus Sutra*; other sects regard it as present within oneself and accessible through meditation. The historical Buddha is believed to be one transformation body emanated by the body of essence. Consequently, his teachings can be supplemented or superseded by further revelations.

Mahayana posits an infinite number of Buddhas, or transformation bodies and enjoyment bodies of the essential Buddha, appearing in innumerable worlds to help sentient beings reach enlightenment. These Buddhas are paralleled by bodhisattvas, enlightened beings who, through compassion, delay their final passage to the transcendent state of nirvana in order to labor on behalf of universal salvation. A bodhisattva can transfer his supreme merit to others, and is thus regarded in Mahayana as superior to the *arhat*, the ideal Theravadin who has achieved enlightenment but can do little else for other beings. A Mahayana worshiper can aspire to become a bodhisattva, rising through ten stages of perfection, and approaching ever closer to Buddha's body of essence, until finally bodhisattva and essential Buddha are one. Certain bodhisattvas are themselves worshiped as virtual deities. These include *Avalokiteshvara* (*Guanyin* in China, where he came to be regarded as the female protector of women, children, and sailors), the personification of compassion, and *Maitreya* (the only bodhisattva also recognized by Theravadins), the future Buddha who waits in the Tshuita Heaven to be reborn and lead all beings to enlightenment. Even the Buddha Amitabha, creator of the Pure Land who leads mortals to his paradise, began as a monk who became a bodhisattva.

Another important Mahayana doctrine is the emptiness (*sunyata*) of all things. In the formulation of Indian philosopher Nagarjuna, the familiar world of experience is the product of thought forms imposed on the

Absolute, which is entirely *unconditioned* (not subject to limitations of any kind). These thought forms are the categories that reason creates in its attempt to apprehend the nature of reality. Since all phenomena in the world of experience depend upon these constructs of reason, they are purely relative and therefore ultimately unreal. The Absolute, on the other hand, is empty in the sense that it is totally devoid of artificial conceptual distinctions. This teaching was variously interpreted, with the Vijñānavada school maintaining that nothing exists outside the mind. The teaching's most influential version holds that there is an eternal, mutually sustaining dialectic between the Absolute and relative reality: although phenomena are false and void in absolute terms, they are true and real in relative terms. The Mahayana goal was to transcend these opposites in ultimate enlightenment. This doctrine made Zen and other schools turn from the practice of renunciation and withdrawal to embrace the world in the belief that nirvana could be found within the transience (*samsara*) of ordinary life.

Within the Buddhist tradition, Mahayana has produced important innovations in three principal areas. The first area concerns the spiritual goal of Buddhism. The ideal of the arhat (taught by the historical Buddha to his immediate disciples) was replaced in Mahayana by the bodhisattva ideal, regarded as superior and open to all followers. Every person who professes Mahayana Buddhism can take the bodhisattva vow, which expresses the aspiration to attain enlightenment just as the Buddha did and to help all beings on their way to nirvana. The bodhisattva path can be undertaken in either a monastic or a secular context, depending on individual circumstances.

The second area of Mahayana innovation concerns the interpretation of the Buddha's nature. In addition to producing a systematic doctrine of the various Buddha bodies, Mahayana practitioners have accepted the existence of countless Buddhas who preside over countless universes. These divine beings are far different from the single supremely gifted yet mortal human sage whom Theravada Buddhists revere as the sole originator of their faith.

The third area of Mahayana innovation covers doctrine and philosophy. Early Buddhists rejected the existence of any permanent self or soul (*atman*) and taught the no-soul (*anatman*) theory. However, they also accepted the reality of the elements (*dharmas*) of existence. A famous example of this duality is the early Buddhist parable of the cart: the components of a cart exist, but the cart itself, being a mere concept, does not exist. Similarly, the components or aggregates of living beings exist, but the single permanent entity (*atman*) postulated as uniting them does not. The Mahayana sutras and their interpreters rejected this realistic and limited interpretation. They reaffirmed the nonexistence of the soul, but also denied the existence of the components. They argued that since there is no permanent foundation beneath or within all things, the things themselves do not and indeed cannot exist. This doctrinal position is encapsulated in Madhyamika school's doctrine of sunyata, discussed earlier. The concept of emptiness in its basic scope means that all things and their characteristics are deprived (empty) of reality and individual existence. In its mystic dimensions, emptiness is seen as a meditational process through which one purges one's mind. The Vijñānavada school of Mahayana also accepted this notion, but for the purposes of spiritual practices taught that the mind alone exists and that the whole external world is an illusion projected by the mind. The dispelling of that illusion through meditation was presented as the path to enlightenment. In order to retain the basic assumption of Buddhism, the Vijñānavada school taught that after a full realization of the nature of all things, the mind dissolves in emptiness.

A final important Mahayana teaching, never embodied in a formal school but nonetheless permeating all layers of the Mahayana approach, concerns the Buddha nature (*tathagata-garbha*) of all living beings and their capacity to become Buddhas. Although certain isolated texts taught that some living beings are barred from deliverance, Mahayana Buddhism maintains that any sentient thing can gain Buddhahood—that gods, humans, and animals alike have the seeds of Buddha nature within them.