

Differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism

| | Personalities | Theravada | Mahayana |
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| 1. | The Buddha | Only the historical Gautama (Sakyamuni) Buddha and past Buddhas are accepted. | Besides Sakyamuni Buddha, other contemporary Buddhas like Amitabha and Medicine Buddha are also very popular. |
| 2. | Bodhisattvas | Only Maitreya Bodhisattva is accepted. | Avalokitesvara, Mansjuri, Ksitigarbha and Samanthabhadra are four very well known Bodhisattvas besides Maitreya. |
| 3. | Trikaya concept | Very limited emphasis on the 3 bodies of a Buddha. References are mainly on nirmana-kaya and dharma-kaya. | Very well mentioned in Mahayana Buddhism. Samboga-kaya or reward/enjoyment body completes the Trikaya concept. |
| 4. | Sakyamuni Buddha's disciples | Basically historical disciples, whether arahats or commoners. | A lot of Bodhisattvas are introduced by Sakyamuni Buddha. Most of these are not historical figures. |

| | Beliefs / Training | Theravada | Mahayana |
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| 1. | Objective of training | Arahant or Pacceka-Buddha. | Buddhahood (via Bodhisattva path). |
| 2. | Concept of Bodhicitta | Main emphasis is self liberation. There is total reliance on one-self to eradicate all defilements. | Besides self liberation, it is important for Mahayana followers to help other sentient beings. |
| 3. | Nirvana (Nibbana in Pali) | No distinction is made between Nirvana attained by a Buddha and that of an Arahant or Pacceka Buddha. | Also known as 'liberation from Samsara,' there are subtle distinctions in the level of attainment for the three situations. |
| 4. | Buddha nature | Absent from the teachings of Theravada tradition. | Heavily stressed, particularly by schools inclined practices. |
| 5. | Dying and death aspects | Very little research and knowledge on the process of dying and death. Usually, the dying persons are advised to meditate on impermanence, suffering and emptiness. | The Vajrayana school is particularly meticulous in these areas. There are many inner and external signs manifested by people before they die. There is heavy stress in doing transference of merit practices in the immediate few weeks following death to assist in the deceased's next rebirth. |

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| 6. | Bardo | This in-between stage after death and before rebirth is not recognized in Theravada Buddhism. | All Mahayana schools teach this after death aspect. |
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| | Practice / Worship | Theravada | Mahayana |
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| 1. | Rituals and liturgy | There are some rituals but not heavily emphasized as in Mahayana schools. | Owing to local cultural influences, there is much more emphasis on the use of rituals; e.g. Rituals for the deceased, feeding of Petas, tantric formalities (in Vajrayana). |
| 2. | Use of Mantras and Mudras | Some equivalent in the use of Parittas. | Heavily practised in the Vajrayana school of Mahayana Buddhism. Other schools also have included some mantras in their daily liturgy. |
| 3. | One meal a day practice | This the norm among Theravada Sangha. | This is a highly respected practice but it is left to the disposition of each individual in the various Sanghas. |
| 4. | Vegetarianism | This aspect is not necessary. In places like Thailand where daily morning rounds are still practised, it is very difficult to insist on the type of food to be donated. | Very well observed in all Mahayana schools (except the Tibetans due to the geographical circumstances). However, this aspect is not compulsory. |
| 5. | Focus of worship in the temple | Simple layout with the image of Sakyamuni Buddha the focus of worship. | Can be quite elaborate; with a chamber/hall for Sakyamuni Buddha and two disciples, one hall for the 3 Buddhas (including Amitabha and Medicine Buddha) and one hall for the 3 key Bodhisattvas; besides the protectors, etc. |

| | Organization / Transmission | Theravada | Mahayana |
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| 1. | Organisation of Buddhist scriptures | The Pali Canon is divided into 3 baskets (Tipitaka): Vinaya Pitaka of 5 books, Sutta Pitaka of 5 collections (many suttas) and Abhidhamma Pitaka of 7 books. | The Mahayana Buddhist Canon also consists of Tripitaka of disciplines, discourses (sutras) and dharma analysis. It is usually organised in 12 divisions of topics like Cause and Conditions and Verses. It contains virtually all the Theravada Tipitaka and many later sutras attributed to the Buddha. |
| 2. | Language of Dharma teaching | Tipitaka is strictly in Pali. Dharma teaching in Pali supplemented by local language. | Buddhist canon is translated into the local language (except for the 5 untranslatable), e.g. Tibetan, Chinese and Japanese. Original language of transmission is Sanskrit. |
| 3. | Schools/Sects of the tradition | One surviving major school following years of attrition reducing the number from as high as 18. | 8 major (Chinese) schools based on the partial doctrines (sutras, sastras or vinaya) of the teachings. The four schools inclined towards practices like Pure Land/Amitabha, Ch'an, Vajrayana and Vinaya (not for lay people) are more popular than the philosophy based schools like Tien Tai, Avamtasaka, Yogacara and Madhyamika. |
| 4. | Non Buddhist influences | Mainly pre-Buddhism Indian/Brahmin influences. Many terms like karma, sangha, etc were prevailing terms during Sakyamuni Buddha's life time. References were made from the Vedas and Upanishads. | In the course of integration and adoption by the people in other civilizations, there were heavy mutual influences. In China, both Confucianism and Taoism exerted some influence on Buddhism which in turn had an impact on the indigenous beliefs. This scenario was repeated in Japan and Tibet. |
| 5. | Transmission route | Southern transmission: Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Laos and Cambodia and parts of Southeast Asia. | Northern transmission: Tibet, China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Mongolia and parts of Southeast Asia. |

Basic Points Unifying the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna

The ***Basic Points Unifying the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna*** is an important Buddhist ecumenical statement created in 1967 during the First Congress of the World Buddhist Sangha Council (WBSC), where its founder Secretary-General, the late Venerable Pandita Pimbure Sorata Thera, requested the Ven. Walpola Rahula to present a concise formula for the unification of all the different buddhist traditions. This text was then unanimously approved by the Council.

1. The Buddha is our only Master (teacher and guide)
2. We take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha (the Three Jewels)
3. We do not believe that this world is created and ruled by a God.
4. We consider that the purpose of life is to develop compassion for all living beings without discrimination and to work for their good, happiness, and peace; and to develop wisdom leading to the realization of Ultimate Truth
5. We accept the Four Noble Truths, namely dukkha, the arising of dukkha, the cessation of dukkha, and the path leading to the cessation of dukkha; and the law of cause and effect. (Paticca samuppada)
6. All conditioned things (sankāra) are impermanent (anitya) and dukkha, and that all conditioned and unconditioned things (dharma) are without self (anātma).
7. We accept the thirty-seven qualities conducive to enlightenment as different aspects of the Path taught by the Buddha leading to Enlightenment.
8. There are three ways of attaining bodhi or Enlightenment: namely as a disciple (śrāvaka), as a pratyekabuddha and as a samyaksambuddha (perfectly and fully enlightened Buddha). We accept it as the highest, noblest, and most heroic to follow the career of a Bodhisattva and to become a samyaksambuddha in order to save others.
9. We admit that in different countries there are differences regarding Buddhist beliefs and practices. These external forms and expressions should not be confused with the essential teachings of the Buddha.