

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THERAVADA AND MAHAYANA

Historical Background

The term used Theravada identify themselves and its meaning as the “Traditional of the Elders” as the elders being the senior Buddhist monks. It is based upon the scholarly tradition of the Mahavihana at Anuradhapura, a fifth century CE. According to the Sri Lanka chronicles: of Dipavamsa (Chronicle of the Island, 4th AC), Mahavamsa (Great Chronicle, 5th AC) and the Samantapasadika (Commentary on the Vinaya), the term Theravada was first introduced into the history of Buddhism after the first Buddhist Council (synod) held at Rajagaha. What was approved and agreed upon at this Council was designated as “Orthodoxy of the Elders”. Theravada Buddhism is embraced in Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam and Burma (Myanmar). It is sometimes called Southern Buddhism.

It is universally belived that the Mahasanghikas were the forerunners of the Mahayana. This school was to the large extent responsible for the evolution of the popular form of Buddhism. The Mahasanghikas can, therefore, be said to be the precursors of the Mahayana movement, through which Buddhism came to attract more people than it would otherwise have done. Mahayana Buddhism has strong influence in Tibet, China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Mongolia. Mahayana is not a single group but a collection of Buddhist traditions such as Zen Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism and Tibet Buddhism are all forms of Mahayana Buddhism.

Canonical Texts

The Mahayana school has the rich Sanskrit literature. Among the books with great reverence included Prajnaparamita, saddharmapundarika, lilitavistara, lankavatara or saddharmalankavatara, tathagataguhyaka and ashtasahasrika. The most important of these works is saddharmapundarika (loutus of good religion) containing all the characteristic features of mahayana school of thought. The conception of a human sakyamuni is here replaced by that of Buddha, God of gods, the self-created, and the creator of the whole world.

Literature

This school of Buddhism believes that it has remained closest to the original teaching of the Buddha. From the Pali Nikaya it stress on the fact that one should always train one’s mind and body in strict accordance with certain ethical standards. It has no room for theistic way of life. Man’s salvation, lay not as prayers and worship but in his own effort and wisdom.

However, when we examine Mahayana as a whole we can see two distinctive characters. Mahayana emerged as the assertion of the deeper trust and faith in the Buddha leading to the firm resolve to imitate his career as Bodhisattva to help all towards salvation. At the same time, it emerged as a dialectic critique of views including the delusions of empirical common sense as well as analytical theories presupposing it. The Bodhisattva ideal and the propounded deep philosophical standpoints of Sunyata thus became the hallmark of Mahayana. With the Bodhisattva ideal was naturally bound up the idea of Buddha as a unique and

superhuman principle manifesting itself in many ways to bestow grace on all beings.

Arahant Ideal

Theravada and Mahayana are both rooted in the basic teachings of the historical Buddha, and both emphasize the individual search for liberation from samsara. The methods and practices for doing that, however, can be very different.

In the Theravada Canon, Gotama was seen as born a human, though one with extraordinary because of the perfections built up as a bodhisattva. Once he had attained enlightenment, though, he had gone beyond the deep rooted unconscious traits that would make him neither a god or human but a Buddha. The main purpose of practicing bodhisattva vows is to attain Buddhahood to benefit all living beings.

The concept of theravada arahant is one who has been radically transformed by complete destruction of attachment, hatred and delusion. The actions are pure and spontaneous. While he may experience physical pain as a result of past kamma, no mental anguish can arise for it is not identified with as mine. Even the threat of death does not ruffle him. The Buddha is himself is called an arahant but has a more extensive knowledge than other arahants. For example, he could remember as far back into previous lives as he wanted while other arahants had limitations on such a power. From his vast knowledge, he selects what is spiritually useful. Having rediscovered the path, he skillfully makes it known to others thus enabling them to be arahants.

Buddhology

As Mahayana Buddhism developed doctrinally it came to propose an elaborate Buddhology (notions concerning the nature of the Buddha) to explain how Buddhas and Bodhisattvas function in the world to save sentient beings. These doctrines held that Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, through their long aeons of spiritual practice, had accumulated vast funds of religious merit that they could freely transfer to others in order to help them to salvation. The mechanism of this transfer of merit (parinama) at a certain point in the stage (Bhumi) as the path on Bodhisattva could assume a form at will in any of the realms of being for the beneficent welfare. A Bodhisattva could if, he chose, be born in one of the various hells to be a denizens. On their part sentient beings were encouraged in many texts to pay homage to various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas by meditating on them, making offerings to them, and reciting their names. Consonant with this rendered certain "celestial" bodhisattvas of the very highest attainment, chief among figures were Avalokitesvara, Mansjuri, Maitreya and Ksitigarbha. These Mahasattvas, the great beings became the subjects of an elaborate iconography that emphasizes their majesty, insight and concern to save others. Believing that the salvation of one entails the salvation of all beings, Mahayana bodhisattvas vow to postpone their own liberation and to remain in the world as Sakyamuni did following his enlightenment exercising compassionate concern for others until all beings have been saved.

Salvation

The Pali Canon maintained that there is only one SammaSambuddha in any one epoch within our world system. The career of the being destined to become the Buddha Gotama was held to have begun with a vow (pranidhana) to attain enlightenment taken before another Buddha Dipankara aeons ago. During countless subsequent births the bodhisattva labor to perfect himself in a variety of virtues (parimitas) principal among which were wisdom and selfless giving. This path was conceived as the exclusive domain of a very small number of beings whose appearance in the world as Buddhas was deemed as rare appearance of the udumbara blossom. The liberation of beings seems to have entailed insight into the same truths as SammaSambuddha discovered.

In the Tripitaka there is absolutely no reference whatever to the existence of a Creator God. On several occasions the Buddha denied the existence of a permanent soul (atta) whether in a form of force or a being. We have noticed that Gotama suffered from sickness and was subjected to the ravages of old age. Invariably the last stage of his existence was death (parinibbana). There is no exception even for a person who had attained to the highest perfection. Based on observation, Buddha did exist as a human being, because he experienced sickness, old age and death just as any other mortals. The Theravada school of thought regard Buddha a great teacher of mankind because of his surpassing wisdom and great morality even without the supernatural powers which were closely associated with his life.

The concept of **tikaya** is closely associated with Mahayana Buddhism. The Lokuttaravadins had definite notions about the supermundane qualities and powers of the Buddha such as their physical bodies, majestic powers and lives are limitless. The view of the Lokuttaravadins concerning the superhuman qualities of the Buddha was generally shared by the Mahasanghikas.

a) Dharmakaya

After the Parinibbana of Tathagatha, the followers wanted the Buddha to continue without passing away. This was evident on the dialogue between Ganaka Mongallana and Ananda when the former asked how Buddhist can exist without a Master. In the Itivuttata, the Buddha advice was "A monk sees the dhamma and seeing the dhamma he sees me". In the Mahanattipadopama Sutta declared that, "He who sees causality sees the dhamma and he who sees the dhamma sees causality." Those two statements are combined in the Anyasalistamba Sutta to give the simple equation : Causality = Dhamma = Buddha. Now the followers established a permanent Buddha which represented by the Dharmakaya. The general explanation of Dharmakaya is explained as permanent, undifferentiated and comprehending Truth. The Dharmakaya is the inner enlightened body of Buddha. To the ignorant it is formless, but to those who understand it the Dharmakaya has form and preaches the Law. According to Mahayanist the Dharmakaya is absolutely formless and tranquil. Reality is probably the best way to describe the Dharmakaya in one word. It is that which must be realized by every being for himself. It is the goal of Bodhisattvas and others, although as a note only a Bodhisattva can hope to realize it fully. In the Larkavatara, the Dharmakaya signifies the Buddha personality when it is perfectly identified with the Dharma or the absolute truth itself.

b) Nirmanakaya

With this framework, the Mahayanist advocate that such a great person as the Buddha who was looked upon as the “teacher of gods” could die. In the 3rd week after Enlightenment, the Buddha created an image just like himself to accompany him walk on the Ratana Cankamana. Another occasion was when the Buddha went to Tusita Heaven to preach to his mother Abhidhamma. He created an image of himself to preach the devas when he returned to earth for meals. The devas were unable to discriminate the real and the image Buddha. The followers then established the historical Buddha to be everlasting and eternal creation, Nirmanakaya. The Transformation Body is used in manifestation by Sakyamuni and other human Buddha to partake the characteristics and quality of morality and is subject like that of other mortals to sickness, old age and death. He is possessed of all the marks of physical excellence, having strength combined with beauty and his mind is a union of intelligence and compassion. The Nirmanakaya is the vehicle for the activity of the Tathagatha, and wherever and whenever he sees best to manifest himself he does so. His earthly career span on his birth, marriage, renunciation, penance, enlightenment and ministry to passing away are but acts put up to show that Enlightenment is a possibility.

c) Sambhogakaya

The vijnaptimatra stated that those who have realized the unity of Buddhahood were considered as existing in a state of bliss, free from all illusion and relative truth. As this is the body of enjoyment, it is the celestial aspect of Buddhahood. It is this body which plays the role of a preacher of various Mahayana Sutra to a great assembly of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Sravakas and Celestial Beings mostly at Grdhrakuta or Sukhavativyuha in one of the heaven. According to Suvarnaprabhasa Sutra, this is the body assumed by the Buddha to impart higher and metaphysical truth to the advanced Bodhisattvas.

Nirvana

The Theravada concept of Nibbana is succinctly presented largely from the Samyutta Nikaya and the Questions of King Milinda. Nirvana is and is realized through the conquest of ignorance and craving. Though its nature is beyond the possibility of description by any analogies derived from the world of ordinary experience. From the Theravada notion it is the state which one enters by oneself when he has overcome the fetters. If this is the true concept of Nibbana then the Bodhisattva who most deserves the bliss of perfect attainment never enjoys it because he turns back and shares the suffering of those still caught in the stream of life and death. The answer is that if this concept is retained then, indeed, for the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas there is no Nirvana.

However, to the Mahayanist, as the bodhisattva goes through the various stages leading towards Tathagathahood he comes to realize for the true state of spiritual perfection. Now the Theravadin has not clearly understood that state. Rightly conceived, it is one in which the particularities of ordinary experience and the illusory distractions of the discriminating mind are left behind and the religious aspect of this is that it is a state in which compassionate oneness with others has transcended all thoughts of oneself as a separately distinguishable entity. Thus the perfected Bodhisattva becomes aware that just by being a Bodhisattva he

has already in Nirvana as it is truly understood. For him Nirvana and Samsara are not two different realms. Nothing is outside Nirvana. Paradoxically put the spiritual insight here is that to renounce Nirvana for oneself, in love for others, is to find oneself in Nirvana, in its real meaning.

Philosophy

Mahayana was elaborated and formulated as a system of Buddhist philosophy by two great philosophers who might be considered as the founders of the two principal Mahayana schools. Nagarjuna (2nd AC) established the Madhyamika system with his famous Mulamadhyamika-karika in which sunyata (voidness) philosophy is discussed and his enormous commentary on prajnaparamita. Asanga (4th AC) established the Yogacara vijnanavada system with his monumental work Yogacarabhumi-sastra, consisting of seventeen books.

The Madhyamika school teaches that sunyata is in reality the middle path which avoids the two basic views of existence and non-existence, eternity and non-eternity, self and non-self. It teaches that sunyata is absolute, the central idea of its philosophy. Sunyata is the relative existence of things. Essentially pratitya samutpada is equated with sunyata. In reality it is non-origination.

There is no difference between the phenomenal world (samsara) and nirvana or sunyata. The Madhyamika-karika deals with two kinds of truths: samvrti and paramartha. The former refers to ignorance and delusion that gives a false impression while the latter is the realization that worldly things are non-existence like an illusion or an echo. Paramartha-satya cannot be attained without resorting to samvrti-satya. Samvrti satya is only a means while paramartha satya is the end. From the relative standpoint (samvrti), Pratitya-samutpada explains worldly phenomena, but looked at from the absolute standpoint (paramartha) as it means non-origination at all times and is equated with nirvana or sunyata. A study of the Madhyamika works reveals that dialectic is the core of Madhyamika philosophy.

The Yogacara maintains that only the mind is real while external objects are not. The school is also known as the vijnanavada on account of the fact that it holds vijñaptimatra (nothing but consciousness) to be the ultimate reality. It repudiates all belief in the reality of the objective world maintaining that citta or vijana is the only reality, while the alayavijana contains the seed of phenomena, both subjective and objective. Like flowing water alayavijana is a constantly changing stream of consciousness. In other words, all dharmas exist in alayavijana in a potential state.

The yogacara recognizes three degrees of knowledge: illusory (parikalpita), empirical (paratantra), and absolute (parinispanna). Parikalpita is the false attribution of an imaginary idea to an object produced by its causes and conditions. It exists only in one's imagination and does not correspond to reality. Paratantra is the knowledge of an object produced by its causes and conditions. This is relative knowledge and serves the practical purposes of life. Parinispanna is the highest truth (tathata), the absolute. Thus the yogacara has three varieties of knowledge for two of the Madhyamika.

The madhyamika differs from the yogacara only in that it attributes quality of reality. The former holds that reality is sunyata while the latter believes it a pure consciousness while the truth propounded at Banares has an ethical meaning, the mahayana truth is based on metaphysical concepts.