

MAHAYANA BUDDHISM - A BRIEF INTRODUCTION AND A  
COMPARISON WITH THERAVADA

The term 'Mahâyana' means Great Vehicle ('*maha*' meaning great and '*yâna*' meaning vehicle). The followers of Mahayana aim at Buddhahood as their goal of emancipation while others aim at either 'Arahathood' or 'paccekabuddhahood' as their goal. Mahayana view is that the latter goals do not ensure complete emancipation and hence are inferior goals. Mahayanists called themselves followers of the 'Great Vehicle' and others disparagingly, followers of the 'Lower Vehicle' (*Hinayana*). Theravada is the most prominent of the *Hinayana* sects.

Following the dispute over ten allegedly irregular practices of the monks of the Vajjian territory which led to the convening of the Second Buddhist Council at Vesali one hundred years after the parinibbana of the Buddha, the refusal of the concerned monks to accept the ruling of the council re-affirmed at a rival council called Mahasangiti convened concurrently some distance away from the venue of the Theravada Council with a larger gathering and their breakaway from the mainstream with the support of the lay patrons calling themselves 'Mahasanghikas' is considered, in Buddhist history, to be the first schism in the Buddhist Order which led eventually to the proliferation of sects.

Historical records differ regarding the reasons for the Second Buddhist Council. While the Southern tradition (Theravada) attributes the event to disagreement over the allegedly Un - Vinayik' practices of the Vajjian monks, records of the Northern School, mention a number of controversial doctrinal propositions put toward by one monk by the name of Mahadeva as the cause. A rationalization of the reasons has been made by scholars who impute a composite ground of disputes. In course of time differences in doctrinal interpretations have superseded questions of discipline. Vinaya had remained substantially free from open dispute thereafter.

Following the Second Buddhist Council, the success of the dissentient monks to assert their standpoint on matters of doctrine and discipline is treated as opening the flood-gates for more liberal interpretations of the teachings of the Buddha.

One subject that was developed by the liberal interpreters was the concept of the Buddha. Non-Theravada teachers were the first to compile the biography of the Buddha. In their misconceived and boundless fervor for glorification of the Buddha they elevated the personality of the Buddha from one of humanity to a state of transcendental absolute. This trend culminated in the conception of the *Trikaya* doctrine (*Dharmakâya* - embodiment of the teaching, *Nirmanakâya* - image of appearance in the world, and *Sambhogakâya* - Universal Buddha).

The segmentation of the Buddhist Order into sects which originated simultaneously with the Second Buddhist Council proceeded gathering momentum. The split widened in course of time and several sects came into existence after a succession of schisms and within nearly 200 years there had come into being eleven sub-sects under Theravada wing and seven under Mahasanghika wing. Despite the efforts of Emperor Asoka to strengthen the Theravada wing Non-Theravada sects developed gaining strength from many historical events and circumstances.

The Fourth Buddhist Council under the patronage of Kanishka (about 100 A.D.) provided an incentive to the non - Theravada sects. Mahayana as a distinct school came into prominence with the contribution of the great philosopher Nagarjuna (2<sup>nd</sup> Century A.D.). The Council made Sanskrit the vehicle of Mahayana Scriptures. A lineage of Sanskrit scholars produced a series of learned texts to explicate the Mahayana doctrines. Famous Universities (Nalanda, Vikramasila, etc) became seats of Mahayana Buddhist learning in later times.

The development of Mahayana as a distinct religious system evolved on two levels. While certain concepts which existed in the early Buddhism in germinal form were developed into full-blown

doctrines with a new emphasis, new doctrines were developed as new accretions.

The Bodhisatva Ideal is a notable distinguishing characteristic of the Mahayana System. Bodhisatva, by definition, is an aspirant to Buddhahood. Mahayanists converted Bodhisatvas into devine beings and personifications of rare virtues and thereafter Bodhisatva worship became a ritual of the Mahayanists.

Scholars of Buddhist History have identified a number of factors as possible causes of the origin of Mahayana Buddhism.

(i) **Influence of some elements of Early Buddhism as found in the Nikayas:**

It has been pointed out that some concepts that were later developed as discrete doctrines were already found in germinal form in Early Buddhism. The Bodhisatva concept, wisdom as the path of Access to Nibbana, miraculous powers of the Buddha are a few of the concepts which were developed into discrete doctrines by the Mahayanists.

(ii) **Popular appeal of rites and ritual :**

Early Buddhism did not encourage the practice of ritual and worship of sacred objects, a feature that captures the imagination and religious fervour of the ordinary folk. The development of this feature at the hands of Mahayanists attracted new adherents.

(iii) **Monastic parochialism of Theravada monks**

The development of Mahayana tradition is also presented as a reaction against the proneness of Theravada monks who were dedicated to meditation in solitude to lead a cloistered, placid and inert monastic life cut off from the currents of social interaction abandoning the lay devotees who had no spiritual mentors to guide them.

The appellations 'Mahayana' and 'Hinayana' were invented by the Sects under 'Mahayana' umbrella for their self-glorification and derogation of others whom they baptized as 'Hinayana'.

The Mahayana view was that the 'Sravakayâna' (the vehicle of the Disciples Atahantship) and *paccekabuddhayâna* (the vehicle of the silent Buddhas) can take one up to a milestone short of the final goal and thereafter they have necessarily to follow the Mahayana path which is the path of the Bodhisatva to reach the final goal. The Mahayana goal of Nibbana was a new spiritual goal (see below).

While the Theravada tradition basically represented the Buddha as a Supreme historical being certain references in the Theravada texts which highlight the exceptional virtues and super knowledges of the Buddha have been utilized and developed by the Mahayanists to invest the Buddha with a divine docetic character. Utterances of the Buddha by which Buddha sought to highlight the supremacy of the Dhamma over and above the person of the Buddha have been magnified by the Mahayanists to convert the personality of the Buddha to a transcendental figure manifesting through the Dhamma as embodied in the concept of the 'Dharmakaya' .

In addition to the transcendental Buddha, Mahayanists created a multitude of Bodhisatvas who even after fulfilling the requirements for Buddhahood remain in Sansara out of their altruistic sentiment to serve humanity and promote their spiritual progress. The development of the concept of the Bodhisatva to a universal ideal was a special task of the Mahayanists. Bodhisatvas should perfect their self-development through selfless service. Bodhisatvas are held in greater esteem than Arahats in the Mahayana system. According to both systems, Buddhas appear at appropriate epochs in human history for the common weal of beings. While the role of the Buddha in Theravada remained as that of a Supreme Teacher (*satthâ*). "A pointer of the Way" (*Akkhâthâro*), a Torch Bearer (*Ukkâ dharo*), the Mahayanists elevated the Buddha to the position of a "Saviour"

The main differences between the Theravada and Mahayana systems of Buddhism may be summarized as follows :

(i) **The goal of liberation from Sansara :**

While the Theravadins seek liberation from Sansara mainly through the goal of Arahantship, through *paccekabuddhahood*

and Buddhahood are not excluded, Mahayanists seek liberation from Sansara exclusively by attaining Buddhahood.

(ii) **Appearance of Buddhas in the world :**

According to Theravadins, a single Buddha appears in the world at the appropriate time while according to Mahayana there is no limit to the number of Buddhas that can appear in the world at a time.

(iii) **The personality of the Buddha**

The Gotama Buddha according to Theravada was a natural human being a human person who was born, who lived, and who passed away as a human being subject to all human experiences possessing certain super knowledges while according to Mahayana, the Buddha was a transcendental superhuman (divine) being, a projection of the Absolute. Mahayana Buddhas are immortal and they appear in the human world and simulate as human beings to win the confidence of human beings.

The Buddha was supramundane, infinite and eternal always withdrawn into a trance, never asleep. Buddha can address a multiplicity of audiences simultaneously. Expressions of a temporal or worldly nature are inapplicable to the Buddha.

(iv) **The character and status of the Arahant**

The Arahant in Theravada is morally, ethically and spiritually perfect and Arahantship is tantamount to Nibbana final and irreversible. Mahayana sects held that Arahantship is a temporary repose and Arahants are subject to imperfections and defilements and could fall away from their attainments. They are not fully emancipated, had doubts and a residue of ignorance and are subject to temptation.

(V) **The role of the Arahant**

Mahayanists accused Arahants of selfishness because they were concerned with their own liberation only. The Mahayana counterpart of the Arahant was the Bodhisatva who was the

embodiment of selflessness dedicated to the service of all beings at all times even undergoing tortures.

The enlightenment of the Arahant which came to be designated as the '*Srāvaka bodhi*' (the cessation of *Āsavas*), was rated lower than the Supreme and perfect Enlightenment (*Anuttara samyak sambodhi*) of Buddhahood attained by the Bodhisatva. Arahants should continue their spiritual development till they attain Buddhahood.

(vi) **The path of Spiritual Development of the Bodhisatva to full Enlightenment.**

The Bodhisatva in the Theravada tradition attains Enlightenment after the fulfilment of the Ten perfections (*Pārami*). In the Mahayana the fulfilment of '*pāramita*' should be followed by the fulfilment of ten additional requirements called '*Bhūmi*' (Stages). The stages of spiritual growth represented by '*Bhumi*' are a feature which distinguishes Mahayana from Theravada. They are stages of progress towards the attainment of perfect knowledge.

A being must first develop a Thought of Enlightenment (*Bodhi citta*), become a Bodhisatva and commence the Bodhisatva career which comprises the ten *Bhumis* which are the following :

1. *Pramudita* - the stage of great rejoicing due to freedom from low birth and enjoying the company of Bodhisatvas.
2. *Vimalā* - 'Freedom from impurity' by the cultivation of wholesome mental dispositions.
3. *Prabhākari* - 'Luminous stage' gaining penetrating insight into the nature of things
4. *Archismati* - Brilliant stage
5. *Sudurjayā* - Stage of 'Hard to conquer'

6. *Abhimukhi* - Perfectly pure steady and turning to the knowledge of Buddhahood.
7. *Durangama* - leading to the only path - morality
8. *Acala* - 'Immovable' Acquisition of the highest knowledge of the realities of phenomena
9. *Sādhumati* - Comprehends the true nature of all Dhammmas
10. *Dharmamega* - Acquires all virtues and gains omniscience

(The '*Bhumi*' in the Mahayana System are profound concepts signifying the highest spiritual attainments leading to full Emancipation. The explanations given above are extremely brief indications of their meaning)

(vii) **Transference of Merit**

According to Mahayana merit acquired by one can be transferred to another without limitation and the Bodhisatva can acquire the effects of unwholesome deeds (*Pāpa kamma*) of others in order to redeem them of the woeful consequences. According to Theravada merit can be transferred to certain classes of 'Ghostly beings' (*petas*). The concept 'Transference of Merit' (*Puḍḍānumodana*) to 'Departed relatives' and Celestial Beings is a generally accepted ritual of popular Buddhism.

(viii) **The nature Nibbana**

Nibbana in the Theravada School is the final deliverance from sansaric suffering whereas in the Mahayana School, Nibbana is becoming conscious of the Absolute Nature, the blossoming of the Buddhahood which is always within oneself (*Tathagatagarbha*). A further distinction is that while the Theravada views Nibbana as the final deliverance from the 'View of Defilements' (*Klesavarana Vimutti*), Mahayana has included a further refinement as 'Liberation from the Veil of Non-knowledge' (*Ñyeyavarana Vimutti*).



(ix) **The Role of the Bodhisatta**

The Bodhisatta in Theravada is an Aspirant to Buddhahood who is engaged in a sustained endeavour to fulfil the requisite perfections for attaining Buddhahood over a countless sequence of births. He is an ethical being seeking his perfection. His service to humanity is incidental to his own objective. The Mahayana Bodhisatva is a supreme embodiment of selflessness overflowing with compassion dedicated to serve humanity with absolute altruism. Bodhisatvas eventually become "Saviours". The perfection of Bodhisatvahood is, in itself, a goal to be achieved before the realization of Buddhahood.

(x) **Perfections (*Pâramitâ*)**

Fulfilment of perfections (*Pâramita* in Mahayana and *Pârami* in Theravada) is a feature common to both systems but their significance differs in each system. In the Theravada the fulfilment of perfections leads to Full Enlightenment whereas in the Mahayana the fulfilment of perfections should be followed by a further system of training called *Bodhisatva Bhumis* (see above).

Both systems have a Scheme of Ten perfections with a common core of five which are the following

*Dana* (charity), *Sila* (Morality), *Khanti* (patience), *Viriya* (Energy), and *Paòòâ* (Wisdom) The five perfections specific to Theravada are *Nekkhamma* (Renunciation), *Sacca* (Truthfulness), *Adhitthana* (Resolution) *Metta* (Loving kindness) and *Upekkha* (Equanimity).

The five perfections specific to Mahayana are *Dhyâna* (Ecstasy) *Upâya* *Kausalya* (Skillfulness in converting others) *Pranidhâna* (aspiration), *bala* (Power) and *jnâna* (knowledge).

It may be seen that both systems have a common core of basic virtues. Differences lie in the additional subjects. A noteworthy perfection found in the Mahayana – specific segment is 'Upaya *kaushalya*' which means skillfulness or wisdom in the choice of means and expedients for converting, a strategy useful to a teacher or preacher engaged in missionary activity.

It is evident that the two schools are not doctrinal polarizations in a fundamental sense. This is borne out by the acceptance by both schools, of the central themes of the Buddha's teaching. While Early Buddhism foreshadowed the origination of Mahayana, a variety of factors contributed to its later development into a distinct system. It stands to the credit of both schools that they developed in an atmosphere of utmost harmony, free from rancour and rivalry, a feature rare in the segmentation of world religions.

The segmentation of the Buddhist Order which originated with the second Buddhist Council proceeded gathering momentum. Historical records indicate that the split was triggered not only by disputes on rules of Discipline but also by differences in matters of doctrine.

Within a period of 200 years eleven sub – sects had appeared under Theravada Wing (which Mahayanists christened as Hinayana) and seven had appeared under Mahayana Wing. Notwithstanding the efforts of Emperor Asoka to strengthen the Theravada Wing Mahayana sects developed gaining atrength from a variety of historical factors and circumstances.

The Fourth Buddhist Council (held about 100 A.D. in Jalandhar according to one authority, in Kashmir according to another) provided an impetus to the Mahayana movement. The Council decided to adopt Sanskrit as the vehicle of Mahayana texts. The lineage of Sanskrit Scholars that appeared with the literary resurgence of later times produced scholarly texts to explicate Mahayana doctrines. Famous Indian Universities (Nalanda, Vikramasila, Jagaddala, etc.) became seats of Mahayana learning in later times.

While the extent of agreement between the two schools on the cardinal doctrines of the Buddha's teaching is sufficient to displace any view that they are two distinct religious systems, poles apart in character, it should be noted that Mahayana has developed a number of religious ideals and doctrines specific to itself. Scholars have identified that the creation of the Bodhisatva Ideal and the elaboration of the doctrine of "Emptiness" (*Sunyata*) as the two great contributions

of Mahayana to human thought (Details of these doctrines are not relevant to the present discussion).

Buddhism underwent changes in doctrinal content even in the land of its birth leading to segmentation into sects. As Buddhism spread far out from the land of birth, the geographical separation, the ethnic and cultural identities of the new adherents and the blending of the new faith with the religio-ritualistic fabric of each country promoted the evolution of each segment into a new religion with an identity of its own. As the Encyclopaedia of Buddhism observes "This meant that apart from its success in introducing its new spiritual culture into the new environment, each form of Buddhism also gathered a local identity because of which it became identifiable as the 'national religion' of each country, while at the same time conforming to a regional identity and also to a broader identity between the two principal schools of Buddhism, the Theravada and the Mahayana, all accepting the same teacher and the same fundamental teachings.

### QUESTIONS

1. Set out the main differences between the Theravada and Mahayana doctrines.
2. Trace the events that led to the division of the Buddha Sasana into different sects.
3. Trace the developments that led to the emergence of Mahayana doctrine as a separate school of Buddhism.
4. "Theravada and Mahayana accept the same Teacher and the same fundamental teachings'. Comment.
5. Evaluate the contribution of the Mahayanists to global Buddhism.
6. Explain the concept of "Bodhisatva Bhumi" in the Mahayana School.