

Mahayana Buddhism

Introduction

Mahayana (the greater vehicle) is one of two main branches of contemporary Buddhism, the other being the School of the Elders, which is often equated today with Theravada Buddhism.¹ It is called the greater vehicle because it maintains that its way offers liberation from *duhkha* (the misery and uncertainties of everyday life) and *samsara* (repeated lives of *duhkha*) to all people, not just monks; it moreover has the intent to liberate all beings (e.g., mountains, streams, insects), not just human beings.

This compassionate vision is represented by the image of the bodhisattva, which is opposed to that of the arhat whose goal is said to be only personal salvation. Regardless of the truth of this polemic, the Mahayana is characterized by a comprehensive reinterpretation of the goals and nature of early Buddhism, a reinterpretation taken to be a more profound understanding of the Buddha's Dharma than that of the School of the Elders. It first appears as a fledgling movement in Indian Buddhism near the beginning of the Common Era, and by the ninth century had become the leading influence on Buddhist schools in Central and East Asia, as it is today. In its early history its teachings appear mainly in sutras. Because of the many contrasts and contradictions within these writings, one scholar claims that there are "very few things that can be said with certainty about Mahayana Buddhism."²

This primer reviews the origins of Mahayana Buddhism, its central doctrinal beliefs and sutras, and its philosophical schools. Notes and references are added to aid further study.

Origins

Just when, where, and why Mahayana Buddhism first emerged as a reinterpretation of Buddhism remains obscure, for many once taken for granted understandings of its origins have been disproven or at least cast into doubt.³ A main cause of the confusion seems to be that ideas that eventually merged into Mahayana doctrine came from diverse sources whose intent was somewhat different, a situation that led to contradictions and divergent emphases. To add to the confusion, as these ideas developed over time, they became enmeshed in strident sectarian disputes, a not uncommon occurrence in Buddhism. Nonetheless, inklings of Mahayana thought appear at least by the first century BCE, gather energy through time, and become a recognizable, if disparate, doctrine by the first few centuries of the Common Era. Between the seventh and twelve centuries, large thriving Buddhist scholastic centers in India contained monks with Mahayana leanings, though they were generally in the minority and sometimes marginalized.⁴

Regardless of the details of the origin of Mahayana, it eventually spread as a doctrine most successfully into Central and East Asia, where major later traditions include Chinese Chan, Korean Son, Japanese Zen, Pure Land Buddhism, and Nichiren Buddhism. The Vajrayana traditions of Tiantai, Tendai, Shingon Buddhism, and Tibetan Buddhism, which added esoteric teachings and practices, are generally but not always included under the Mahayana umbrella. Mahayana teachings also spread into Southeast Asia, but eventually gave way to other religions, including Theravada Buddhism.

Doctrinal Beliefs

Although a “loosely bound bundle of many ... contradictions,” repeated themes occur in Mahayana sutras that became foundational beliefs in schools in this tradition. Unlike the

School of the Elders, which in its more recent Theravadan form has a canon (the Pali Canon), the Mahayana lacks a similar-type canon.⁵

The universality of buddhanature. A central understanding of Mahayana Buddhism is that all beings embody buddhanature, the potential for buddhahood, that when manifest makes one a bodhisattva and leads to awakening and buddhahood itself.⁶

The bodhisattva ethic. A central concept within Mahayana Buddhism is that of the bodhisattva, a person who devotes his or her life to becoming a buddha in this lifetime (or at least in a few lifetimes) so as to save all beings from *duhkha* and *samsara*. It is this compassionate goal that separates the Mahayana (according to Mahayanists) from the School of the Elders. The ethic introduces a new paradigm of the goal of practice into Buddhism. In non-Mahayana Buddhism the concept of a bodhisattva is confined to the historical Buddha Shakyamuni before his awakening.⁷

The doctrine of emptiness. Although the doctrine of emptiness (*sunyata*) is present in non-Mahayana forms of Buddhism, the doctrine is especially prominent in Mahayana Buddhism where it takes on an expanded definition. In non-Mahayana forms of Buddhism emptiness generally refers to the absence of a self (*atman*) in persons; the doctrine expands in Mahayana to include the emptiness of all things and concepts, not just persons. Emptiness in these contexts does not mean that a self or a thing does not exist in some sense. It refers instead to the absence of a separately existing essence (*atman*) in a self, a thing, or a concept, for all things arise through interconnections with all other things (the doctrine of dependent origination) and concepts by their nature are empty. As a consequence, there are ultimately no divisions into “this” and “that” or “good” and “bad,” for words and concepts are only devices used to create the world we

live in. Again, it is a task of practice to understand the nature of this reality and its implications for how we construct our conventional delusional reality.⁸

The nature of a Buddha. In early Buddhism the Buddha was the historical Siddhartha Gautama, a man who became enlightened and died in old age. In Mahayana the Buddha became a supernatural being who manifested himself in three different forms: the *nirmanakaya* (his historical form on Earth), the *sambhogakaya* (the form in which he appears to other kinds of beings in other, often supernatural, worlds), and the *dharmakaya* (the essence of the universe, the absolute basis of reality). This is the doctrine of *trikaya* (three bodies or ways of a Buddha). This emerging view of the nature of a buddha erased the idea that a buddha ceases to exist at his death (*parinirvana*). Coupled with the idea that an infinite number of worlds exist, the conclusion was reached that there are an infinite number of buddhas (Amitabha and Vairocana are example), each in its own world. Many Mahayana sutras feature one or more of these buddhas, as well as the movement of bodhisattvas and other spiritual beings from one world-realm to another. In some forms of Mahayana the Buddha to whom devotion is directed is not Shakyamuni Buddha, but another Buddha, such as Amitabha Buddha in Pure Land Buddhism.⁹

Awakening versus nirvana as an ideal. As in many religions, in early Buddhism the major goal of practice was to escape the painful world one was repeatedly born into by attaining nirvana, the release from *samsara*. By contrast, the major goal of practice in Mahayana Buddhism became less the attainment of nirvana than awakening to the true nature of reality. Still, if one accepts the doctrine of emptiness, then even terms like awakening and nirvana represent a false duality, for all dualities like good and bad are

necessarily false. However, since we must live in the delusional world we create, later Mahayana thinkers developed the distinction between absolute and conventional reality, the latter referring to the world of distinctions we create and the former to the empty reality in which distinctions do not exist. In Mahayana Buddhism this distinction is to be realized through contemplation and meditation. An implication of the distinction is that one should learn to be fully awake in the present moment “just as it is.” In some branches of Mahayana like Zen there is no progress along a spiritual path other than this realization and its manifestation.

The use of skillful means. A fundamental practice of buddhas and bodhisattvas in Mahayana Buddhism is the concept of skillful means (*upaya*). The dilemma in Mahayana is how to lead all beings in their cosmic diversity to awakening. Buddhas and bodhisattvas in the past developed a wide variety of skillful means to accomplish this. Popular examples of the use of skillful means in Mahayana sutras are most famously present in the Lotus Sutra (for example, the Burning House and the City in the Distance parables). At the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center, teaching communal classes on meditation and the basics of the Dharma is in this sense a skillful means for leading people onto and along the Buddhist path.

The transfer of merit. In our everyday understanding of karma we believe that it is our own past and present intentional activities and thoughts that determine the nature of our future rebirth and present condition. An important supplement in Mahayana Buddhism is that one can transfer the merit that one has gained to another, especially to one’s deceased parents (often by paying money to a priest of a local temple to preform

rituals and other ceremonies to bring about the transfer).¹⁰ Another Mahayana innovation is the application of merit toward one's own attainment of awakening.

Sutras

The earliest evidence for Mahayana thought is in sutras. Most likely written by monks, the earliest date to 100 BCE to 100 CE. Although written as if they were sermons by Shakyamuni Buddha, scholars generally agree that they are not the actual words of the Buddha. Because of their contradictory teachings, it seems likely they were composed by different groups of people in India and in cases in China. Nonetheless, they show a gradual growth toward a coherent and more systematic doctrine through time. Unlike Pali Canon sutras in general, the central figure in a Mahayana sutra is often a cosmic Buddha, the discourse mystical, and the place of the sermon in one or another otherworldly buddha realm. Participants in the assembly can include very large numbers of bodhisattvas, demons, serpent-like supernatural beings (*nagas*), and other non-human living things. The sutras generally include an emphasis on the emptiness of all things and the use of skillful means to bring others to enlightenment. Popular Mahayana sutras include the Heart and Diamond sutras, the Vimalakirti Sutra, the Platform Sutra of Huineng, the Lankavatara Sutra, and the Lotus Sutra. They are largely preserved in the Chinese Buddhist canon, the Tibetan Buddhist canon, and in Sanskrit manuscripts and fragments of manuscripts. Around one hundred Mahayana sutras exist today in Sanskrit or in Chinese and Tibetan translation.¹²

Philosophical Schools

In India prominent Mahayana philosophical schools include the Madhyamaka, founded by the monk and scholar Nagarjuna (150 – c. 250 CE), the Yogacara, founded by the

half-brothers Asanga and Vasubhandu (c. fifth century), a Yogacara-Madhyamaka blend, a tathagatagarbha school focused on buddhanature, and a school of logic and epistemology associated most prominently with Dignaga (c.480-540 CE). While Yogacara and Madhyamaka were represented in China as the Fāxiàng and Sanlun schools, respectively, indigenous schools developed that were often based on specific Buddhist scriptures like the Lotus Sutra, Lankavatara Sutra, Mahaparinirvana Sutra, Avatamsaka Sutra, and Pure Land Sutra. In East Asia these schools include Tianti (J. Tendai), Huayan (J. Kegon), Chan (J. Zen), and Pure Land.¹³

Notes

1. For introductions to Mahayana Buddhism see Williams (2009) and Silk (2018). The School of the Elders was once commonly called Hinayana Buddhism (the lesser vehicle), a pejorative label. Some writers place Vajrayana (Tibetan) Buddhism in a separate category, an option not chosen here. Today slightly more than half of all Buddhist practitioners are associated with the Mahayana tradition. Rather than the greater vehicle the translation is sometimes rendered the greater knowing.
2. Schopen (2004:492). The misery and uncertainty of life (*dukkha*), which is more often translated as “suffering” or unsatisfactoriness, is the first of the four noble truths. While Mahayana disparages the School of the Elders, the School of the Elders in turn does not consider Mahayana to be Buddhism (which of course includes Zen). The School of the Elders is more commonly called Theravada Buddhism today, an identity that is confusing for Theravada is the surviving remnant of what once were many schools within what is being called here the School of the Elders.
3. For a review of interpretations of Mahayana origins that have not been sustained and new views of its origin, see Schopen (2004) and Drewes (2010). Also see Werner et al. (2013), Harrison (1995), Sasaki (1997), and Silk (2002). Buddhism was largely (but not entirely) eclipsed in India by c.1200 in part due to a decrease in patronage and donations, an increase in popularity of Hinduism, and Islamic conquest and rule, among other proposed reasons.

4. It should be stressed that some of these themes, such as emptiness, the use of skillful means, the bodhisattva ethic, and the distinction between the bodhisattva and arhat spiritual ideals, are already present in early Pali Canon texts.
5. For a comprehensive scholarly review of Mahayana doctrinal beliefs, see Williams (2009). For the quotation see Schopen (2004:492).
6. King (1991).
7. Shantedeva (2011). The concept of buddhanature has a variety of interpretations in Mahayana Buddhism.
8. For quite different introductions to emptiness, see Armstrong (2017) and Tsering (2009). The absolute and the conventional are the two realities in the two truths doctrine of Buddhism.
9. For a useful short review of the three bodies of the Buddha, see Trikaya in the on-line *New World Encyclopedia*. Retrieved July 13, 2018.
10. For a review see Schroeder (2001).
11. For the importance of the transfer of merit for one's deceased parents, see Williams (2005:38-58).
12. For examples of Mahayana sutras see the MZMC primer series on the MZMC Web site.
13. For a review of Mahayana schools, see Dunne (2005). For primers on Madhyamaka, Yogacara, and Huayan, see the MZMC primer series

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