

# ELEMENTS OF MAHAYANA BUDDHISM

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## 1. CONTRASTS BETWEEN THERAVADA BUDDHISM AND MAH\_Y\_NA BUDDHISM

| <u>Theravada</u>  | <u>Mah_y_na</u>   |
|---|---|
| Style: Conservative, traditional  | Style: Liberal, adaptive, constantly changing   |
| Path of the <i>_r_vaka</i> ("disciple")   | Path of the <i>bodhisattva</i> ("Buddha-to-be")   |
| Inspiration: the teachings of Gautama   | Inspiration: the "career" of the <i>bodhisattva</i> who became Gautama the Buddha   |
| Source: the <i>suttas</i> of the Pali canon   | Source: the Pali <i>J_takas</i> and Sanskrit sutras   |
| Emphasis: monastic self-discipline  | Emphasis: liberating Wisdom ( <i>Prajñ_</i> ); devotion   |
| Goal: <i>nirv_na</i>  | Goal: <i>bodhi</i> ("enlightenment")  |
| Buddhas: only one in each age   | Buddhas: innumerable  |
| Wisdom: understanding reality in terms of <i>anicca</i> , <i>anatta</i> ; possible for any <i>_r_vaka</i> | Wisdom: experiencing <i>_unyat_</i> ("emptiness"); possible only for a Buddha, but Buddhahood now becomes a goal for the practitioner |
| Meditation: <i>vipassana</i> ("insight") and <i>sati</i> ("mindfulness")                                  | Meditation: many forms, including visualization and devotional practices  |
| <i>Sangha</i> : required for serious practice   | <i>Sangha</i> : still central, but laity can also achieve goal  |
| Social ethic: <i>mett_</i> ("lovingkindness")   | Social ethic: <i>karun_</i> ("compassion")  |

## 2. MAH\_Y\_NA CONCEPTS OF BUDDHAHOOD

The Buddha was not just a man who had a special experience during meditation: he was a being who had labored for many lifetimes as a *bodhisattva*, as seen in the *J\_taka* tales (part of the Pali canon). Having thus perfected himself by countless acts of selfless compassion, he entered this world to complete his path by attaining "complete perfect enlightenment." There are numerous beings who have attained Buddhahood in such a way. Among them, the most important Buddhas are

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|-------------------|--|
| <b>_akyamuni:</b> | "our Buddha," Gautama; preacher of all the Mah_y_na sutras           |
| <b>Maitreya:</b>  | the Buddha-to-come for this world, in both Theravada and Mah_y_na    |
| <b>Amit_bha:</b>  | the provider of "salvation" in Pure Land Buddhism                    |
| <b>Vairocana:</b> | central in Vajray_na Buddhism (mostly in Tibet and Japanese Shingon) |

There are also great *bodhisattvas*, of whom the most important are

|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| <b>Avalokitesvara:</b> | = Chinese Kuan-yin, Japanese Kannon; consort T_r_ important in Tibet |
| <b>Mañju_r_:</b>       | the <i>bodhisattva</i> of Wisdom ( <i>Prajñ_</i> )                   |

## 3. THE MAH\_Y\_NA SCRIPTURES

No "canon" per se: just a variety of texts presenting Mah\_y\_na teachings, especially a new set of sutras, sometimes called "extended scriptures," since they are longer than Theravada *suttas*. Most Mah\_y\_na texts are in Sanskrit (not

Pali); some exist today only in Chinese or Tibetan translations. Composed ("revealed") from ca. 1st c. BCE to ca. 6th c. CE. Every sutra is a sermon preached by "our" Buddha, *akyamuni*, usually in one of the "Buddha-realms" (not on earth); the sermons are generally preached to a glorious audience of gods, buddhas and bodhisattvas, as well as famous disciples.

In one Japanese sect (Nichiren Buddhism), one Mah\_y\_na scripture — the *Lotus Sutra* — came to be regarded as salvific (i.e., the immediate source of salvation).

#### 4. THE PRAJÑ\_-P\_RAMIT\_ LITERATURE

The earliest Mah\_y\_na scriptures (in fact, the earliest of all Mah\_y\_na literature) were the *Prajñ\_-p\_ramit\_* scriptures. The PP sutras stress the realization of "**emptiness**" (*unyat\_*) — ineffable reality (which = *tathat\_*, "thusness," and *buddhat\_*, usually translated "Buddha-nature"). Doctrine: ultimately, there is no essential distinction between *samsara* and *nirvana*. Why? Philosophically, *nirvana* can be characterized as "empty" (*unya*). But all the constituents of existence (*dharmas*) are also "empty." So, ultimately there is no distinction between the *tathat\_* of sentient beings and the *tathat\_* of a Buddha. This concept had a profound effect on Mah\_y\_na thought and religion, especially East Asian forms such as Ch'an ("Zen"). Two PP sutras (the Diamond Sutra and Heart Sutra) became fundamental for Zen.

Major Prajñ\_-p\_ramit\_ Scriptures:

1. *Ashas\_hasrik\_PP S\_tra* "The Sutra of the Perfection of Wisdom in 8000 Lines"
2. *Vajraccedika PP S\_tra* "**The Diamond Sutra**"
3. *Mah\_PP-hridaya S\_tra* "**The Heart Sutra**"

Important Writings related to the Prajñ\_-p\_ramit\_ Scriptures:

1. *Sam\_dhi-r\_ja S\_tra* "The Sutra of the King of Concentration"
2. *Vimalak\_rti-nirde\_a-s\_tra* "The Sutra of the Teachings of Vimalak\_rti"

#### 5. OTHER MAJOR MAH\_Y\_NA SCRIPTURES

The Pure Land Scriptures:

1. *The Larger Sukh\_vat\_-vy\_ha S\_tra*
2. *The Smaller Sukh\_vat\_-vy\_ha S\_tra*
3. *The Amit\_yur-dhy\_na S\_tra* "Sutra of Contemplation on Amit\_bha"

Other Major Scriptures:

1. *Saddharma-pundar\_ka S\_tra* "**The Lotus Sutra**"
2. *Avatamsaka S\_tra* "The Flower-Garland Sutra"
3. *\_r\_m\_l\_-dev\_S\_tra* "The Sutra of Princess \_r\_m\_l\_"

#### 6. MAH\_Y\_NA PHILOSOPHICAL SCHOOLS IN INDIA

**M\_dhyamika:** Founded by N\_g\_rjuna (2nd c.). All phenomena are "empty" of any "self-nature" (*sva bh\_va*). "2 levels of truth": "relatively," all phenomena are distinct; "ultimately," all is *unyat\_*

**Yog\_c\_ra:** Founded by Asanga and Vasubandhu (4th c.). All phenomena are just processes in the mind, so only mind is truly real.

Both M\_dhyamika and Yog\_c\_ra were taught at N\_l\_nda, a Buddhist "university" (destroyed ca. 1200). Both were transmitted to East Asia, but became eclipsed by various new schools of Buddhist thought.