

## WHAT IS MAHAYANA BUDDHISM ?

WHAT is Mahāyāna Buddhism? Why do we have more than one Buddhism? Why should Buddhism be divided into Northern and Southern, or Manāyāna and Hinayāna? We might ask as well, Why is Christianity divided? For in Christianity do we not find the Roman Catholic Church, the Greek Church, and the Protestant Church with all its different sects? Yet all of these different branches and sects assert Christ as the mainspring of their religious life and claim to interpret the spirit of their faith and to derive from Christ's teachings the basis of their tenets of belief. It is exactly the same in Buddhism. Just as Christianity has changed according to the different periods of time and peoples with whom it has come in contact, so has the primitive Buddhism received new developments as different minds reflected and studied the Buddhist teachings. All these sects and schools of Buddhism, however, claim the Buddha as their inspiration and believe that in their teaching and presentation the spirit of the Buddha is reflected and that the kernel of thought is developed but not radically changed.

When the Buddha was alive, he preached for many long years, but like Christ he wrote nothing himself, and his sermons and discourses were not written down until one hundred years after his death. The monks of the Southern school who wrote in Pali soon began to emphasise the ethical teaching of the Buddha and did not develop the metaphysical and speculative elements. But other monks who wrote in Sanskrit did emphasise this latter element, and from their writings the Northern school resulted.

Later when Buddhism was brought to China and later

still to Japan, the teaching was still further developed into what we may call Eastern Buddhism. There are certain differences in these schools of Buddhism, but there are also a great many points of similarity, and as mentioned before they all claim that the great Buddha Shakyamuni himself was the inspirer of their doctrine, and to represent the spirit of the Buddha's teaching, if not always the letter of what is sometimes called primitive Buddhism.

Scholars generally divide Buddhism into two great branches, the *Hīnayāna* or Southern which is prevalent in Ceylon, Burma, and Siam, but which differs in many points from what scholars call the primitive Buddhism of the Pali texts, and *Mahāyāna* or Northern found in China, Nepal, Tibet, Mongolia, and Japan. As the *Mahāyāna* of Japan has developed so differently from the *Mahāyāna* of Tibet, it has seemed well to present the Buddhism we find in the Far-east as Eastern Buddhism.

Why is one school of Buddhism called *Mahāyāna* and the other *Hīnayāna*, *yāna* meaning vehicle? *Hīna* means little and *Mahā* means great. Difference had existed in the Buddhist schools for some time before king Kanishka, and when in his reign a council was held the cleavage of thought and teaching was fully recognised and the *Mahāyānists* gave themselves the name of *Mahāyāna*, the great vehicle, because they taught that through their doctrine of *Bodhisattvaship* a greater number of disciples could be carried to the goal of Nirvana than could the smaller vehicle of the Southern school with its narrower conception of *Arhatship* or salvation for the few.

In India both schools of thought lived side by side for some time, but later the separation became more marked as the *Mahāyāna* teaching travelled North and East with Sanskrit as its medium and the *Hīnayāna* remained stationary, geographically and intellectually in the South.

According to the Mahāyānists, the teachings of Hīnayāna are but the beginning of the Buddha's instruction and the Mahāyānist teachings the extension of the Buddha's doctrine pushed to the end, not content to stop where the Hīnayāna does. The teachers of Mahāyāna explain that the development of doctrine corresponds to the successive periods of the Buddha's life after his enlightenment, the Hīnayāna teachings belonging to the first part of his preaching activity. There were other periods of his life and in each period his teaching unfolded itself more fully. The Mahāyānists revere the great Buddha Shakyamuni, but they also revere certain great Buddhist sages, who, seeing into the heart and spirit of the Buddha's teaching, reflected upon it, taught it, and matured it. Scholars and adherents of the Hīnayāna school deny this and assert that the Mahāyānists had no right to do this, that the simple ethical teaching of the Hīnayāna was the direct doctrine of the Buddha, and that the Mahāyāna is only a degenerated form of Buddhism. Be that as it may, the fact remains that the Mahāyāna represents the spirit of the Buddha and a living religion to many men, and therefore worthy of study. Some scholars claim that the Hīnayāna teachings are the true primitive Buddhism, but as practised in Southern countries this is not quite true. There are different sects among the Hīnayānists, and one of their sects, the Mahāsāṅghika, is in many respects more in agreement with the Mahāyāna than with the Hīnayāna. The Buddhism of Burma also has many points of contact with Mahāyāna.

What are some of the main points of difference between the Mahāyāna and the Hīnayāna Buddhism ?

1. The Hīnayāna Buddha is an historical character, a teacher of men, a man himself who obtained enlightenment, pointer of the way to the Four Noble Truths. But in the Mahāyāna the Buddha is not regarded as an ordinary human being, but as a being of the greatest wisdom and spirituality.

The Buddha is a manifestation of Dharmakāya the Absolute.

2. The Hinayāna does not believe in any Absolute, any great spiritual reality underlying the universe. But in the Mahāyāna there is a religious object, the Dharmakāya Buddha or Amitābha Buddha, which is a being of will and intelligence, of thought and action, and the universe is an expression of this Dharmakāya. In the *Avatamsaka Sutra* we read: "The Dharmakāya, while manifesting itself in the triple world, is free from impurities and evil desires. It unfolds itself here, there, and everywhere responding to the call of karma. It is not an individual reality, it is not a false existence, but is universal and pure. It comes from nowhere, it goes to nowhere; it does not assert itself, nor is it subject to annihilation. It is forever serene and eternal. It is the one, devoid of all determinations. This Body of Dharma has no boundary, no quarters, but is embodied in all bodies. Its freedom and spontaneity is incomprehensible, its spiritual presence in things corporeal is incomprehensible. All forms of corporeality are involved therein, it is able to create all things. Assuming any concrete material body as required by the nature and condition of karma, it illuminates all creations. Though it is the store-house of intelligence, it is void of particularity. There is no place in the universe where this Dharmakāya does not prevail. The universe becomes, but this forever remains. It is free from all opposites and contraries, yet it is working in all things to lead them to Nirvana."

3. The Hinayāna will not discuss the ultimate questions of metaphysics and philosophy, but the Mahāyāna does discuss them in their most metaphysical and speculative aspects.

4. The Hinayāna regards the Mahāyāna as a degeneration of primitive Buddhism, but Māhāyāna regards the Hinayāna as an incomplete presentation of Buddhism, true as far as it goes, but not going far enough.

5. The greatest difference of all and the jewel in the

crown of Mahāyāna Buddhism, is the doctrine of the Bodhisattva. In the Hīnayāna the goal held out to every one is that of Arhatship. An Arhat is a man in whom the evil passions are all extinct, who will never be born again, and who has obtained enlightenment in this life, and who seeks salvation or enlightenment by meditation and a pure life for himself and himself alone. But in Mahāyāna the end is not that of individual saintship and entrance into Nirvana, but instead, in some future existence to become oneself a Buddha, a saviour of all beings. Such a being who is on the road to Buddhahood is a Bodhisattva (he whose essence, *sattva*, has become intelligence, *bodhi*). The Bodhisattva in distinction from the dispassionateness of the Arhat has a universal sympathy and compassion for others so great that he voluntarily renounces Nirvana in order to become the helper, the way-shower, the saviour of others. This doctrine of the Bodhisattva is the most characteristic feature of Mahāyāna. Gradually many of these Bodhisattvas took on divine aspects and became the divinities of Mahāyāna theology; but the idea that every one may aspire to Bodhisattvaship and even Buddhahood is held out as the goal of life. Ignorance and imperfection prevent our Bodhi from manifesting completely, but it is present latently and only needs developing. Bodhisattvas are always active, seeking to help, for even a Bodhisattva cannot but be conscious of the sorrow in the world and from his loving heart seek to alleviate it.

The Mahāyāna insists upon the identity of all life; the Dharmakāya is everywhere present; therefore, the merit acquired by one may be turned over for the benefit of another. This is *pariṇāmana* and is the great point of emphasis in the doctrine of the Bodhisattva. From the Dharmakāya come many Buddhas and Bodhisattvas which we find in the Mahāyāna pantheon, but never, when contemplating these gods and divinities, must it be forgotten that all beings are divine, all

may become gods, all are on the path of deliverance, and on each path, by whatever school or sect or teaching we go, a loving Bodhisattva stands upon that path to help, to guard, to point the way, to give of his own love and intelligence to every lowly follower.

Even in Hinayāna the idea of the Bodhisattva was found, but it was developed by Mahāyāna and is the very heart of its system. There are some writers who think that this conception of the Bodhisattva is inferior to that of the Arhat. This seems strange to Mahāyānists, for they cannot help but believe that however fine the conception of Arhatship may be, that of Bodhisattvaship is far greater and more worthy of the efforts of mankind.

Let us sum up the main characteristics of Mahāyāna. According to Sthiramati in his *Introduction to the Mahāyāna*,\* “The essential difference of the doctrine of the Bodhisattva as distinguished from the other Buddhist schools consists in the belief that objects of the senses are merely phenomenal and have no absolute reality, that the indestructible Dharmakāya which is all-pervading constitutes the norm of existence, that all Bodhisattvas are incarnations of the Dharmakāya, who not by their evil karma previously accumulated, but by their boundless love for all mankind, assume corporeal existences, and that persons who thus appear in the flesh, as avatars of the Buddha supreme, associate themselves with the masses in all possible social relations, in order that they might thus lead them to state of enlightenment.”

According to Asanga who is considered, with his brother Vasubhandu, to be the greatest teacher of the psychological school of Buddhism, the seven features peculiar to Mahāyāna are :\*\*

“(1) *Its Comprehensiveness.* The Mahāyāna does not con-

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\* See D. T. Suzuki's *Outlines of Mahāyāna Buddhism*, p. 61 et seq.

\*\* Op. cit., pp. 62-65.

fine itself to the teachings of one Buddha alone ; but wherever and whenever truth is found, even under the disguise of most absurd superstitions, it makes no hesitation to winnow the grain from the husk and assimilate it in its own system. Innumerable good laws taught by Buddhas of all ages and localities are all taken up in the coherent body of the Mahāyāna.

“(2) *Universal Love for all Sentient Beings.* The Hinayāna confines itself to the salvation of individuals only ; it does not extend its bliss universally, as each must achieve his own deliverance. The Mahāyāna, on the contrary, aims at general salvation ; it endeavors to save us not only individually, but universally. All the motives, efforts, and actions of the Bodhisattvas pivot on the furtherance of universal welfare.

“(3) *Its Greatness in Intellectual Comprehension.* The Mahāyāna maintains the theory of non-atman not only in regard to sentient beings but in regard to things in general. While it denies the hypothesis of a metaphysical agent directing our mental operations, it also rejects the view that insists on the noumenal or thingish reality of existence as they appear to our senses.

“(4) *Its Marvellous Spiritual Energy.* The Bodhisattva never gets tired of working for universal salvation, nor do they despair because of the long time required to accomplish this momentous object. To try to attain enlightenment in the shortest possible period and to be self-sufficient without paying any attention to the welfare of the masses, is not the teaching of the Mahāyāna.

“(5) *Its Greatness in the Exercise of the Upaya.* The term *upaya* literally means ‘expediency.’ The great fatherly sympathetic heart of the Bodhisattva has inexhaustible resources at his command in order that he might lead the masses to final enlightenment, each according to his disposition and

environment, the Mahāyāna does not ask its followers to escape the metempsychosis of birth and death for the sake of entering into the lethargic tranquillity of Nirvana; for metempsychosis in itself is no evil, and Nirvana in its coma is not productive of any good. And as long as there are souls groaning in pain, the Bodhisattva cannot rest in Nirvana; there is no rest for his unselfish heart, so full of love and sympathy, until he leads all his fellow-beings to the eternal bliss of Buddhahood. To reach this end he employs innumerable means (*upaya*) suggested by his disinterested loving-kindness.

“(6) *Its Higher Spiritual Attainment.* In the Hinayāna the highest bliss attainable does not go beyond Arhatship which is ascetic saintliness. But the followers of the Mahāyāna attain even to Buddhahood with all its spiritual powers.

“(7) *Its Greater Activity.* When the Bodhisattva reaches the stage of Buddhahood, he is able to manifest himself everywhere in the ten quarters of the universe and to minister to the spiritual needs of all sentient beings.”

A modern Japanese writer on Buddhism, Yenryo Inouye, who died a few years ago, gives the characteristics of the Mahāyāna as follows:

1. Salvation or enlightenment is for all. All may become Bodhisattvas and ultimately attain Buddhahood and Nirvana.

2. Bodhisattvas voluntarily renounce Nirvana in order to work for the enlightenment of their fellow-beings.

3. Everything in the universe is the manifestation of the Dharmakāya.

4. The world of suffering of Hinayāna Buddhism may be converted through union in the Dharmakāya and through enlightenment.

5. While not ignoring ethical precepts, the emphasis in Mahāyāna is laid upon meditation for wisdom in individual

deliverance and upon lovingkindness in stepping in the footprints of the Buddha.

In this article certain differences between Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna Buddhism have been pointed out. Let us not forget however the similarities between the two. These are : the idea of impermanency of all things, karma, rebirth, the law of cause and effect, the middle path, the prevalence of sorrow and ignorance, the possibility of attainment of and the reality when attained of Nirvana, which is the dispersion forever of sorrow, suffering, and ignorance.

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