

Mahayana

The Beginnings of the Mahayana

The production of Buddhist sūtras or texts claiming to be 'the word of the Buddha' is something that continued for many centuries after the death of the Buddha.

Although different schools of Buddhism gradually developed a sense of defined collections of scriptures having the authority of the word of the Buddha, the notion of a fixed canon seems to have remained somewhat loose. As the history of Theravāda Buddhism in Sri Lanka and South-East Asia illustrates, even where there exists a defined canon it is quite possible for 'non-canonical' sūtras to continue to circulate and be used.

But around the beginning of the Christian era there began to emerge scriptures that challenged certain established Buddhist teachings and ways of understanding, and which advocated what is represented as a superior path of practice leading to a superior understanding.

The defining idea of the vision of Buddhist teaching presented in these sūtras is that of the superiority of Gautama's awakening to that of his disciples. Gautama's awakening is characterized by the perfect development of *all* spiritual qualities, and as such it exceeds the accomplishment of his disciples.

The path followed by Gautama is thus the *mahā-yāna* – the 'great vehicle' – or the vehicle of the Bodhisattva (*bodhisattva-yāna*) ending in the perfect awakening of the fully awakened *samyak-sambuddha* as opposed to 'the inferior vehicle' (*hīna-yāna*), the vehicle of the disciple (*śrāvaka-yāna*), ending in arhatship.

The dating of the earliest Mahāyāna sūtras, like that of all ancient Indian texts, is extremely problematic. The earliest firm date we have for their existence is the late second century CE when a number of Mahāyāna sūtras were translated into Chinese by Lokaksema. Many Mahāyāna sūtras as we have them show evidence of a particular kind of literary history: an older core text is expanded and elaborated; thus the sutras translated by Lokaksema originated possibly a century or so earlier in India.

Most scholars push the date of the earliest Mahāyāna sūtras back into the first century BCE, but the production and elaboration of Mahāyāna sūtras certainly continued for a number of centuries.

For their part, however, the Mahāyāna sūtras present themselves as teachings which, having been originally delivered by the Buddha himself, were not taught until the time was ripe.

Modern scholars have sometimes sought to connect their production with particular areas of India (either the south or the north-west), but the evidence is problematic and inconclusive. Following the lead of certain later Mahāyāna writers themselves, some modern scholars have also sometimes traced the origins of the sūtras to a particular school of the ancient Sangha, namely the Mahāsāṃghikas; but more recent scholarship tends to stress the fact that Mahāyāna was not in origin a sectarian movement.

Rather than causing a schism within the Sangha, Mahāyāna teachings were esoteric teachings of interest to small groups of monks from various of the ancient schools. Again, while earlier scholarship has tended to represent Mahayana as a movement inspired by popular lay religiosity and stūpa worship, more recent scholarship has suggested that we might see the origins of the Mahāyāna in the activity of forest-dwelling ascetic monks attempting to return to the ideals of original Buddhism . . .

Important Mahayana Sutras

The most important Mahāyāna sūtras can be conveniently grouped according to the characteristic ideas they expound:

(1) Sūtras setting out the stages of the **bodhisattva path**: the *Bodhisattva-pitaka*, the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra*.

(2) The '**perfection of wisdom**' (*prajñā-pāramitā*) sūtras. These are among the earliest Mahāyāna sūtras, and of these the earliest is probably the *Astasāhasrikā* or 'Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines'. The characteristic teaching is the 'emptiness' of dharmas.

(3) The '**ideas only**' (*viññapti-mātra*) sūtras. These sutras introduce the idealist doctrine that the 'mind', 'ideas' or 'information' (*viññapti*) alone is real. The most important early Sūtra is the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* but its teachings along with associated theories are found developed in the next group of sūtras.

(4) The '**embryo of the Tathāgata**' (*tathāgatagarbha*) sūtras: the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*, *Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra*, *Lankāvatāra Sūtra*, *Śrīmālādevī-simhanāda Sūtra*.

(5) **Two sūtras of particular importance in East Asian Buddhism** are the *Saddharmapundarīka Sūtra* ('Discourse of the Lotus of the True Dharma', commonly referred to simply as the 'Lotus Sūtra'), which expounds the notion of the 'one vehicle', and the (*Buddha-*) *Avatamsaka Sūtra* (incorporating the *Gandavyūha* and *Daśabhūmika Sūtras*), which develops the notion of the 'interpenetration of all phenomena'.

(6) The '**pure land**' sūtras: the smaller and larger *Sukhāvatī-vyūha Sūtras*, the *Amitāyur-dhyāna Sūtra*. These sūtras describe the 'pure land' of the Buddha of Boundless Light and become the basis for the Pure Land school of East Asian Buddhism.

(7) **Meditation** sūtras: *Pratyutpanna-buddha-sammukhāvasthita-samādhi Sūtra*, *Samādhi-rāja Sūtra*, *Śūrangama-samādhi Sūtra*. These sūtras describe particular meditation practices.

Such a list indicates only in outline the nature and scope of a few of the most important Mahāyāna sūtras.

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