

## **Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism: Its Origin and Development**

In examining the origin and development of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism, this essay addresses five aspects: plausible origins of the Mahāyāna; ideas in earlier forms of Buddhism; how Mahāyāna built on these ideas; how Mahāyāna went beyond them; and whether later disparate expressions of Mahāyāna are united.

In exploring ways in which Indian Mahāyāna was a continuation of trends in earlier Buddhism, and in what ways it was innovative, five specific themes are traced: the *Bodhisattva* ideal, cosmology, *Abhidhamma* thought, skilful means and compassion, as well as level of antagonism toward the new vision of Buddhism.

### **I. Possible Origins of Indian Mahāyāna**

The origin of Indian Mahāyāna has been explored from several perspectives. Three possible origins are examined here: sectarian, laity, or forest-dwelling monks.

#### **A. Sectarian Origins**

In the past, scholars influenced by Christian ideas of schism and sectarian development, inferred that the rise of Mahāyāna occurred as a result of some type of schism in Buddhism. However, this view presents a number of difficulties.

First, as Bechert and Gombrich (1984, p.82) note, in early Buddhism, sects formed based on their understanding of certain points in the *vinaya*, and in particular of the *pratimoksa*. Doctrinal opinions were not involved. In its origins, therefore, Mahāyāna was not a sect. Rather, it was a religious movement or phenomenon which influenced monks, regardless of their sect. This is seen in how Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna monks lived in the same monasteries, as observed by the 7<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese pilgrim Hsüan-tsang (*ibid.*, p.82). By contrast, in the West, scholars may be accustomed to thinking of a sect as a body of opinion, a heterodoxy, due to their monotheistic cultural background. This has led to misunderstandings in interpreting Buddhist sect history (*ibid.*, p.82).

Furthermore, according to Gethin (1998, pp.56-7), as Mahāyāna literature appeared in ancient India, monks and nuns from various existing schools were more or less favourably inclined towards the new *sūtras*. An initial acceptance of emerging Mahāyāna literature existed. Members of the Sangha, who were drawn to the new *sūtras*, followed their interest. Yet, they remained within their existing schools and ordination lineages. As a result, monks and nuns continued to live alongside those who did not share their pursuits regarding the new teachings. At first, therefore, questions about the authority and status of the new literature was not decided along sectarian lines (*ibid.*, pp.56-7).

Moreover, as Gethin (1998, p.58) notes, only as Buddhism later developed in China and Tibet, did an *exclusive* Mahāyānist outlook come to be adopted. In these two areas, Buddhism's Mahāyānist forms prospered and further matured. As a result, the view of Mahāyāna Buddhism as a separate tradition of Buddhism (with its subdivisions and philosophical schools), is to a degree only a historical outcome of the history of Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism. By contrast, such development never occurred in India, and argues against sectarian origins of the Mahāyāna (*ibid.*, p.58) .

In short, since Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism did not arise as a result of *vinaya* differences, it is unlikely to have been the result of schism, and is therefore not a sect of Buddhism. Rather, as Williams (2012, p.76) observes, it was an occurrence that transcended the boundaries of different *vinaya* traditions – as well cutting across the boundaries of doctrinal schools. Moreover, as Bechert and Gombrich (1984, p.90) point out, Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism was a movement which promoted a new vision of Buddhism, centred on a new incentive and inspiration. It had a grander religious ideal, more sophisticated Buddhology, and more radical philosophical positions.

## B. Lay Origins

Another view has seen the Indian Mahāyāna movement as a lay reaction to monastic privileges and detachment. In the view of Bechert and Gombrich (1984, p.90), this can be based on the premise that the laity, in reflecting on perceived excessive privileges of monks, tried to gain fairer religious rights for themselves. And so, not long before the Christian era began, a new form of Buddhism appeared – the Mahāyāna. This view of lay origins also raises several questions.

First, to quote from Williams (2009, p.23), "most scholars have nowadays become extremely sceptical of the thesis of the lay origins of the Mahāyāna". As a case in point, Williams (2012, p.78) draws on the work Schopen (1987, pp.124-5) who has not found support for the widespread connection of the laity with the origins (or growth) of Mahāyāna. For Williams, and others, "this is important, for it contradicts a view widely held until fairly recently that the Mahāyāna represents primarily a move by the laity and those sympathetic to their aspirations, against certain rather remote and elitist monks" (*ibid.*, p.78).

Additionally, in the context of ancient India, Williams (2012, p.78) concludes that "enduring religious innovation was made by religiously and institutionally significant groups of people who had the time to do so." This supports the claim that Mahāyāna did *not* result from lay ambitions or a lay movement, perhaps inspired by the rich mercantile class (*ibid.*, p.78).

Furthermore, while it is conceivable that Mahāyāna could have originated without writing, it implies, however, that in time a stable and respected Buddhist organization would need to preserve writing that would inevitably occur. Williams (2012, p.78-9) argues that "it is difficult to see in the case of Buddhism what that organization could be if not members of the

regular organisation which preserves Buddhist texts, the Sangha." It is reasonable to state that the Sangha would not preserve radical, innovative texts that originate in a lay movement that would not be endorsed by the Sangha itself (*ibid.*, p.78-9).

Fourth, Williams (2012, p.79) draws on the work of Harrison (1987), who has explored the translations into Chinese of Mahāyāna *sūtras* by Lokaksema in the late second century C.E. This is some of the earliest surviving Mahāyāna literature. Harrison shows that early Mahāyāna involvement in relation to these sources is significantly that of monks, as well as nuns – and not the laity.

In summary, the notion of lay origins for Indian Mahāyāna lacks evidence showing laity involvement in Mahāyāna beginnings; is contrary to the fact that religious innovation was not made by the laity; does not take into account that the Sangha would not preserve radical new texts not affirmed by the Sangha itself; and ignores the fact that early Mahāyāna literature involved monks and nuns, not the laity.

### C. Forest-Dwelling Monks' Origins

The role of forest-dwelling monks is a plausible view that has emerged regarding the beginnings of Indian Mahāyāna.

In drawing on the research of Harrison (1995, 65), Williams (2012, p.79) proposes that some thrust for the early development of the Mahāyāna came from forest-dwelling monks. Many Mahāyāna *sūtras* evidence an uncompromising and committed ascetic attempt to return to the original inspiration of Buddhism – that is, the search for awakened cognition or Buddhahood. This is far from the *sūtras* being products of a lay, urban, devotional movement. In fact, Williams notes, Mahāyāna may partly represent an austere, almost ascetic, 'revivalist movement' (*ibid.*, p.79).

As an example of a Mahāyāna *sūtra*, one of the earliest dated ones is the obscure *Maitreyamahāsimhanāda Sūtra* (the 'Lion's Roar of Maitreya'). Drawing on the work of Schopen (1999, p.313), Williams (2012, p.79) states that this *sūtra* promotes a *conservative* monastic vision of Buddhism. It highlights the inferiority of the laity and advocates austere practice in the forest as the ideal. It also deplures less austere monks for their involvement in inferior practices. Schopen, quoted by Williams (*ibid.*, p.79), tentatively concludes that the early *Maitreyamahāsimhanāda Sūtra* is not connected to the rise of any movement. Rather, there is continuity with a narrow set of conservative Buddhist ideas on monastic practice.

In short, this third view may be summarized, using Gethin's insights, when he states that more recent scholarship (in favour of the new *sūtras*) suggests that the origins of the Indian Mahāyāna may be seen in the activity of forest-dwelling ascetic monks, attempting to return to the ideals of original Buddhism (Gethin, 1998, p.225).

## II. Ideas and Tendencies in Earlier Forms of Buddhism

Of the ideas and tendencies among the early schools of Buddhism, notes Harvey (2013, p.108), and that came to be adopted by practitioners, five are focused on in this essay: the *Bodhisattva* ideal, cosmology, *Abhidhamma* thought, skilful means, and lack of antagonism.

### A. *Bodhisattva* Ideal

The various early schools of Buddhism, writes Harvey (2013, p.99), outlined the heroic ideal of the *Bodhisattva*. Associated with the *Bodhisattva* was the development of moral and spiritual perfections, enabling them to become a perfect Buddha (*ibid.*, p.99). These perfections were illustrated in the *Jatakas*, or 'Birth Stories', which recounted the noble deeds, in past lives, of the being that became the Buddha Gotama (*ibid.*, p.99).

Supporting evidence for the *Bodhisattva* ideal in early Buddhism is given by Williams (2009, p.29). He refers to the *Ajitasena Sūtra* which must have belonged to a mainstream Buddhist sectarian tradition and was written by monks for the laity. This *sūtra* shows the supremacy of Buddhahood and the possibility of anyone, monk or lay, becoming a *Bodhisattva*.

A part of early Buddhism then, concludes Harvey (2013, p.111), acknowledged that the lengthy path to Buddhahood, over many lives, is the loftiest practice, since its aim is the salvation of countless beings. However, the *Bodhisattva* path had been practised by only a small number and was seen as a way for the valiant few (*ibid.*, p.112).

While the superiority of altruistic action via the *Bodhisattva* path (benefitting *both* oneself and others) is acknowledged in early Buddhism, it is also true, as Harvey (2013, pp.111-2) notes, that early Buddhists rather used Gotama Buddha's teachings to move towards *Arahatship*, whether it was to be attained in the present life or in a future one. Notwithstanding, the *Arahat* has destroyed the 'I am' conceit, the root of egoism and selfishness. He is imbued with loving-kindness and compassionately teaches others. Equally, he is not viewed as selfish, but acts for the benefit of the world, motivated by concern (*anukampa*) for others (*ibid.*, pp.111-2).

### B. Cosmology

In early Buddhism, according to Cousins (1997, p.386), meditation practices included recollection of the Buddha's qualities. Various visualization exercises and practices were devotedly directed toward the Buddha. In some early *suttas*, notes Harvey (2013, p.110), such as the *Mahāsamaya* (D.II.253-62), "the Buddha is a glorious spiritual being surrounded by countless gods and hundreds of disciples." The *Avadanas*, or 'Stories of Actions and Their Results', highlight the power of devotion to the Buddha (*ibid.*, p.100).

In relation to earlier Buddhist cosmology, the *Ajitasena Sūtra* also provides several details. Although internal evidence indicates it is a Mahāyāna *sūtra*, Williams (2009, p.27) postulates that it may originally have had no specific Indian Mahāyāna identity and so must have been a part of early Buddhism. The *sūtra* mentions an *Arhat* seeing all the Buddha Fields – the realms in which the Buddhas reside and teach. The *sūtra* also describes the miracles of the Buddha, and states that reciting the name of the Buddha saves one from the hell realm and suffering (*ibid.*, p.28-29).

#### C. *Abhidhamma* Thought

Early Buddhism, Cousins (1997, pp.86-87) points out, included insight meditation and related *Abhidhamma* thought. In fact, the *Abhidhamma* developed detailed analyses of the ever-changing world.

#### D. Skilful Means and Compassion

Earlier forms of Buddhism included altruistic action based upon skilful means and compassion. The Buddha's adept teaching methods were recognized, Harvey (2013, p.111) states, whereby he tailored his teaching according to audience temperament and level of understanding. He did this by selecting his specific instruction from a harmonious body of teachings.

#### E. Lack of Antagonism

The *Ajitasena Sūtra*, seen as non-Mahāyānan (but with Mahāyāna features), presents a further view of early Buddhism. In this gentle and harmonious *sūtra*, Williams (2009, p.29) observes, there is a lack of antagonism towards Hearers (*śrāvakas*) and *Arhatship*, as well as no disparaging of the monastic tradition.

### **III. How Mahāyāna Built on Ideas of Earlier Buddhism**

The ideas and tendencies that characterized early Buddhism were then built upon by Indian Mahāyāna.

#### A. *Bodhisattva* Ideal

In the Mahāyāna view, personal enlightenment (*Arahatship*) became seen as an inferior goal. Rather, as both Cousins (1997, p.386) and Harvey (2013, p.108) write, the full and wholehearted adoption of the heroic ideal – the *Bodhisattva* (*Buddha-to-be*) path, emphasizing compassion – was advocated, explicitly or implicitly, and that this should be aspired to by all.

Furthermore, according to Harvey (2013, p.112), the Mahāyāna now urged as many men and women as possible to join the valiant few walking the challenging *Bodhisattva* path. This call to the *Bodhisattva* path, adds Harvey, was now also inspired by the vision of the vast universe always needing Buddhas. While compassion had been part of the Buddhist path, it was now accentuated as the motivating factor for the whole *Bodhisattva* path (*ibid.*, p.112).

## B. Cosmology

Even though earlier Buddhism may have understood the seeing of Buddha Fields, Williams (2009, p.28) writes that "the notion of seeing *all* the Buddha Fields does appear to be Mahāyāna, as are the names of two of the realms, Sukhāvātī and Abhirati [emphasis mine]."

Additionally, according to Williams (2009, p.28), evidence suggests that visions and revelatory dreams were important in both the inception and ongoing history of Indian Mahāyāna. Moreover, seeing Buddhas and Buddha Fields was a potent impetus to religious practice for Buddhists during the formative years of the Mahāyāna.

In the Mahāyāna *sūtras*, Harvey (2013, p.110) further explains, the Buddha uses hyperbole and paradox, and reveals many heavenly Buddhas and high-level heavenly *Bodhisattvas*. These exist in numerous regions of the universe. Quoting Harvey, "a number of these saviour beings, Buddhas and in time *Bodhisattvas*, became objects of devotion and prayer" (*ibid.*, p.110).

However, in regard to the celestial *Bodhisattvas*, Harrison (1987, pp.79-80) qualifies that no passages in the early texts recommend devotion to them – they are symbols and not saviours. Over time, the *initial* message of Indian Mahāyāna became clearer: people ought *not* worship *Bodhisattvas*; they should become *Bodhisattvas* themselves.

## C. Abhidhamma Thought

In the Indian Mahāyāna perspective on the *Abhidhamma*, the aim was to dissolve rigid views (*ditthi*) and to bring about a fresher perception of the world. For example, Cousins (1997, pp.386-7) shows how apparent entities, such as the mind, were seen as merely changing collections of evanescent (quickly fading or disappearing) events. The direct intuition of this was the experiencing of emptiness. In breaking down the apparent unity of things, the purpose was to free the mind from rigidity. (In time, however, the Mahāyānists recognized that these analyses created a prison similar to the old one. Now the constituent parts were being taken as fixed entities, and this was just as entrapping as older notions of soul or spirit [*ibid.*, pp.386-7].)

#### D. Skilful Means and Compassion

As new philosophical understanding developed based on the experience of *emptiness*, greater emphasis was placed on skilful means and compassion.

Furthermore, Harvey (2013, p.111) comments how the Buddha was now clearly seen as having different levels of teaching for people with varying capabilities. This may have appeared confusing because some of the higher level instruction involved unlearning certain over-simplified lessons at the lower level.

While the Buddha's ultimate message was that all can become omniscient Buddhas, this would have been difficult to comprehend as a beginning teaching. For those with lesser capabilities, the Buddha therefore began with the four True Realities for the Spiritually Ennobled. The goal was to become an *Arahat* in order to attain Nirvāna. However, for those who listened further, the Buddha taught that true Nirvāna is achieved at Buddhahood – and that all can achieve this, even the *Arahats*, who may have thought that they had reached the goal (Harvey, 2013, p.111).

#### E. Lack of Antagonism

A lack of opposition to mainstream Buddhist traditions in the earliest pre-Mahāyāna (proto-Mahāyāna) tradition is seen, for example, in Lewis Lancaster's examination of the earliest Chinese versions of the *Astasāhasrikā* (8,000-verse) *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra* (Williams, 2009, p.29).

Harrison (1987, p.68), drawing on the first Chinese translations of Mahāyāna *sūtras* (a small body of eleven texts), produced in the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E., also concludes that during this period there was no rigid division of the Buddhist Sangha into two hostile camps.

Later Chinese sources, based on William's (2012, p.71) observations, show that Chinese pilgrims to India found 'non-Mahāyāna' and 'Mahāyāna' monks in the same monasteries. The only difference seen between the two groups was that Mahāyāna monks showed reverence to figures of *Bodhisattvas* (compassionate beings on the path to full Buddhahood), while non-Mahāyāna monks chose not to.

So, while Indian Mahāyāna was emerging as an alternative aspiration and spiritual path from about the first century B.C.E., Williams (2009, p.29) concludes that a clear separate group identity among Mahāyāna followers took centuries to unfold. The *Ajitasena Sūtra* is an example of a Mahāyāna *sūtra* before the idea of 'Mahāyāna' as a distinctive institutional identification. It nevertheless shows a gradual shift of ideas occurring prior to the later polarization and unification of Mahāyāna (*ibid.*, p.29-30).

Although a new spirit had emerged, little evidence exists to suggest sectarian categories. Rather than use the term 'Mahāyāna', notes Harrison (1987, pp.73-74), authors focused on the issues associated with the unfolding movement: such as the teachings on emptiness (*śūnyatā*), the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*), the five other perfections, skill-in-means (*upāyakausalya*), and, especially, the work of the *Bodhisattva*, the one aspiring to Buddhahood. Also, the different types of *Bodhisattvas* are distinguished, especially the distinction between 'renunciant' or 'monastic' *Bodhisattvas* and 'house-holder' or 'lay' *Bodhisattvas*.

To sum up, and drawing on Cousins (1997, p.387), in the Mahāyāna, the *Bodhisattva* path, cosmology, and wisdom are skilfully interconnected (as had occurred to a degree in the earlier tradition). The ideal of the *Bodhisattva* path starts with the resolve to attain Buddhahood. Such a commitment results in great spiritual and karmic potency. Consequently, the realm of marvellous paradises and awe-inspiring spiritual beings to be visualized opens up. Equally, such astounding results reinforce the attractiveness of the *Bodhisattva* path. However, to follow the path, the perfections need to be developed (the greatest being the perfection of wisdom, which is the realization of emptiness). In this way, the Indian Mahāyāna kept a balanced combination, characteristic of the Buddhist spiritual path from its beginning.

#### IV. How Mahāyāna Went Beyond Ideas of Earlier Buddhism

In time, Indian Mahāyāna went beyond the ideas and tendencies of the early schools of Buddhism.

##### A. *Bodhisattva* Ideal

*Bodhicitta* involves the profound intention to liberate *both* oneself and all beings from suffering. This became the unique motivating power of a *Bodhisattva* – giving them their powers of wisdom and compassion. In addition, *bodhicitta* enables the *Bodhisattva* to break through the illusion of self and other. And so, it was understood that the *Bodhisattva* was to generate *bodhicitta* – the awakened mind, the compassionate aspiration for enlightenment.

##### B. Cosmology

Three bodies (*kāyas*) of the Buddha came to be understood as follows. First, the *Nirmāṇa-kāya* – the created body, the transformation body, the manifestation body – is seen in time and space to teach and liberate beings, such as the earthly Buddhas, especially as personified by Siddhartha Gautama. Secondly, the *Sambhoga-kāya* – the enjoyment body, the body of bliss, the reward body – is seen as referring to the Buddhas in their heavens, having been rewarded for their spiritual practice.

Thirdly, the *Dharma-kāya* – truth body – is seen as embodying the true nature of the Buddha, the principle of enlightenment, and the teachings of the Buddha, as well as being identified with *śūnyatā*.

### C. Abhidhamma Thought

Indian Mahāyāna came to teach the emptiness of all phenomena, including all parts. Nothing which has come into being has any permanence – that is, nothing has real existence in that nothing exists independently. Neither seen as nihilism nor pessimism, it is this non-fixity which makes liberation possible. In fact, liberation is the recognition of this emptiness. It is not an escape to somewhere else; rather, it is a transformed understanding of this world itself.

### D. Skilful Means and Compassion

The Mahāyāna became known as the *Bodhisattva-yāna*, or the 'vehicle of the *Bodhisattvas*' (Cousins, 1997, p.387). In this superior new vehicle, profound understanding was seen in the supreme wisdom taught; in compassion now directed at the salvation of countless beings; and in the goal of nothing less than omniscient Buddhahood (Harvey, 2013, p.110). Teachings on these subjects represented a far deeper level of exposition of the Buddha's message. Accordingly, skilful means and compassion reached new heights.

### E. Antagonism

Those who did not accept the new *sūtras* – the 'Vehicle of the Disciple' (*Sravaka-yāna*) and 'Vehicle of the Solitary Buddha' (*Pratyeka-buddha-yāna*); those who aimed to become *Arahats* and *Pratyeka-buddhas* respectively – began to criticize the new movement, that is, the *Bodhisattva-yāna*, or 'Spiritual Vehicle of the *Bodhisattva*'. Consequently, those accused responded to the criticism by emphasizing the superiority of the *Bodhisattva-yāna*, and referring to it as the *Mahā-yāna*, the 'Great Vehicle' or 'Vehicle (Leading to) the Great' (Harvey, 2013, p.110).

Based on Williams (2012, p.71), the earliest date for the new *sūtras* is from the second or first century B.C.E. They were seen as the 'word of the Buddha' (or *a* Buddha) – and it was claiming this status that led them to being disputed as genuine *sūtras* by others (*ibid.*, p.71). As time went on, some Mahāyāna *sūtras* expressed antagonism toward those who failed to respond to the message of the new texts. They intentionally used the term, 'Inferior Way', a *Hinayāna*.

## V. Later Disparate Expressions of 'Mahāyāna'

The Mahāyāna emerged into history, Harvey (2013, p.108) notes, as a loose confederation of groups, each associated with one or more of a number of new *sūtras*. The question arises whether anything unites the disparate later expressions of Mahāyāna. Both a disunited view *and* a united perspective may be presented.

On the one hand, it may be concluded that the disparate later expressions of 'Mahāyāna' were *not* united. According to Harvey (2013, p.108-9), as ideas of the different *sūtras* (the new *sūtras* were also dissimilar in style and tone) were drawn on, later Mahāyānists integrated their ideas and systematized them in competing ways, depending on which text was seen to contain the most complete truth. This process continued in Northern and Eastern Buddhism, which also took on different emphases in their own development.

Williams (2012, p.76) supports a disunited view when he writes that "Mahāyāna is very diverse . . . It is used as a 'family term' covering a range of not necessarily identical or even compatible practices and teachings. Thus Mahāyāna could not itself be a school of Buddhism either. It lacks that sort of unity."

On the other hand, Harvey (2013, p.109) suggests that the disparate later expressions of the Mahāyāna were united. An underlying theme for this position is in the sense that the new *sūtras* were the 'word of the Buddha'. First, the new *sūtras* were seen as inspired expressions coming from the Buddha, now understood as still contactable through meditative visions and vivid dreams. Secondly, the new *sūtras* were recognized as the outcomes of the same kind of perfect wisdom which was the basis of the Buddha's own teaching of the *Dharma* (Pali: *Dhamma*). Thirdly, in later Mahāyāna, the new *sūtras* were viewed as teachings hidden by the Buddha in the world of serpent-deities (*nagas*), until there were humans capable of seeing the deeper implications of his message, and who would recover the teachings by means of meditative powers. Importantly, each explanation saw the new *sūtras* as arising, directly or indirectly, from meditative experiences.

Williams (2012, p.76) concurs with Harvey, as far as a united perspective, when he writes that Mahāyāna "is united perhaps solely by a vision of the ultimate goal for those capable of it, of attaining full Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings (the 'bodhisattva ideal') and also (eventually) a belief that Buddhas are still around and can be contacted (hence the possibility of an ongoing revelation)".

In concluding, while both a disunited view and a united perspective may be valid, one may also *harmonize both outlooks*. The Mahāyāna (Great Path or Vehicle), with its set of new teachings, is an extraordinary *reinterpretation of the Dharma*. In this, there has been both *continuity* and *change*. On the one hand, the Buddha's basic and essential principles of the Four True Realities for the Spiritually Ennobled have been retained.

On the other hand, many of the Buddha's original teachings have been brought to new levels of understanding, and some even transcended. Furthermore, the Buddha is now understood as accessible (no longer unreachable at peace); he is powerfully and eternally involved in leading all to enlightenment out of his compassion. Finally, the path involves engaging with the world out of compassion, rather than only renouncing the world.

### Conclusion

In exploring the origins of Indian Mahāyāna, three views have been presented. *Sectarian origins* raised questions about understanding Buddhist sect formation, initial acceptance of emerging Indian Mahāyāna literature, origins of Indian Mahāyāna as a separate tradition, and the new vision of Buddhism. *Lay origins* exposed difficulties concerning lack of evidence for lay origins of Indian Mahāyāna, religious innovation not made by laity, preservation of innovative texts, and lack of evidence from earliest extant Mahāyāna literature. Finally, the role of *forest-dwelling monks* presented a plausible origin for Indian Mahāyāna due to evidence from Mahāyāna *Sūtras*, including the *Maitreyamahāsimhanāda Sūtra* ('Lion's Roar of Maitreya').

Indian Mahāyāna was a *continuation* of trends in earlier Buddhism as follows:

First, early Buddhism had placed high value on the motivation of concern for others. The *Arahat* was seen as one who went forth for the welfare of the world. While the superiority of altruistic action was recognized, in Mahāyāna the compassionate aspiration of the *Arahat* is brought to a higher, sublime level in the *Bodhisattva*.

Second, in earlier Buddhism, the Indian deities Brahmā and Indra (known as Sakka) played an important role according to the Pali *suttas*. Their names and much of their nature originated from devotional responses to the Buddha. Notwithstanding, the Mahāyāna combined earlier meditation and cosmology elements in a new way and developed a cosmology emphasizing faith. The Buddha was now seen as a glorified, transcendent being. Earlier Indian deities were eclipsed by new figures – Buddhas and spiritually advanced *Bodhisattvas*.

Third, in earlier Buddhism, there was insight meditation and related *Abhidhamma* thought. In the Mahāyāna, on the other hand, a fresh philosophical understanding of emptiness developed – the *emptiness* of phenomena and supreme wisdom were now emphasized.

Fourth, in early Buddhism, the idea of "one way" existed. For example, in the *Mahāsatipatthāna Sutta*, the Buddha is said to have stated, "There is, monks, this one way" (Walshe, 2012, p.335 [626]). Nevertheless, it is certainly evident that the Mahāyāna revealed that the Buddha has 'one vehicle' (*eka-yāna*), the Buddha-vehicle, but has used the skilful means of three: the vehicles of the Disciple, Solitary Buddha, and Bodhisattva.

Finally, some of the earliest extant Mahāyāna literature (Chinese translations of Mahāyāna *sūtras* by Lokaksema in the late second century C.E.), does not show any antagonism towards monasticism, the Sangha, in early Buddhism.

However, Indian Mahāyāna was also innovative.

First, in Mahāyāna, the *Bodhisattva* strives to bring all beings throughout time and space to final liberation (nevertheless, it should be stated that in the Pali *Buddhavamsa* (II A), there is also an account of such a vow made by Sumedha). *Bodhicitta* becomes a continuous activity (not only an aspiration). The *Bodhisattva* does not retreat from the world, but remains compassionately involved. In his wisdom, he recognizes the true nature of reality; in his compassion, he has a tenderness of heart and empathy.

Second, in Mahāyāna, the idea of the Buddha and his Dharma evolved into a more elaborate system called the *Trikāya*, or the three bodies (*kāyas*) of the Buddha. It explained how the Buddha manifests in the world of form to work for the liberation of all beings.

Third, with a new perspective on scriptural legitimacy, the Mahāyāna adopted open, on-going revelation. As a result, a large number of new *sūtras* were produced in India up to around 650 C.E. Often composed by several authors elaborating a basic text, these works frequently comprised hundreds of pages.

Fourth, in relation to skill in means, the Mahāyāna was viewed as superior in three ways: its *motivation* (compassion directed toward the salvation of countless beings); its *goal* (omniscient Buddhahood); and its *profundity* (supreme wisdom). Teachings on these subjects represented a far deeper stage of elucidation of the Buddha's message.

Finally, the new texts advocated a vision termed *Mahāyāna* – the 'Great Way', the 'Way to the Great', or the 'Greatest Way'. In time, this Great Way was increasingly contrasted with an Inferior Way (*Hināyāna*) – and sometimes the contrast was highlighted with unkind and even harsh language.

In concluding, while later disparate expressions of Mahāyāna occurred, a unity remains amidst its diversity – a unity seen in the underlying Dharma that has been breathtakingly reinterpreted through the sensibilities of both continuity and change.

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## Appendix

The conclusions reached in this essay may be *impressionistically* illustrated by a parallel drawn between the relationship of Mahāyāna to earlier Buddhist traditions, and the relationship of Christianity to earlier Judaism.

In this analogy, the Jews living in Jerusalem about 2,000 years ago could be compared to "non-Mahāyānans". A number of groups or fraternities had formed, including the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots. Their lives were based on the Hebrew Scriptures – commonly referred to as the Old Testament, central to which was the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments) and the Old Covenant (formulated about 1,500 years earlier in the time of Moses).

At this time, Jesus, a Jew, was born in most humble circumstances. The biblical texts give scant information about his life until he reached the age of thirty. At that time, as a teacher of the law (a Rabbi; not a lay person), he began to reinterpret Jewish ideas, using Jewish texts, and adding to them.

In this analogy, Jesus would be the first "Mahāyānan" – his was a greater vision. The Sacred Word shows that he was a man of prayer and meditation, spending time in seclusion and retreat. His small group of followers (disciples) were Jewish ("non-Mahāyānan"). They peacefully listened to and accepted the new "Mahāyānan" teachings of Jesus, but still followed their Jewish practices ("non-Mahāyānan" understanding). For example, they kept the Sabbath, observed Holy Days, and practiced tithing. This could be compared to a fledgling group of "non-Mahāyānans" embracing some "Mahāyānan" teachings.

After one or two generations following the tragic death of Jesus, the followers of Jesus comprised the Jerusalem church. Continuing with our analogy, this church had two groups living peacefully side by side. There were those who were still essentially "non-Mahāyānan", because they lived based on the Jewish teachings. But, alongside them were those who were interested in the pursuit of Jesus' "non-Mahāyānan" teachings.

A dramatic event then occurred around 33-36 A.D. A Paul of Tarsus (a most devout "non-Mahāyānan" in our analogy, and a highly qualified Teacher of the Law, not a lay person) experienced a life-changing vision of the risen Jesus. This miraculously showed that Jesus was not dead; he had "risen", and was still around. The understanding was that Jesus could still be contacted, and is still teaching out of his immense compassion from his celestial realm – and, after all, Jesus had appeared to and instructed Paul.

As a result of this supernatural encounter (described both in Paul's own letters and in a book known as the Acts of the Apostles), Paul becomes a follower of Jesus (a "Mahāyānan", in our analogy).

After his dramatic experience, Paul went to Arabia for three years – no doubt spending time in reflection and meditation in relation to what he had encountered. During this time, he received further revelations.

Upon return from his three-year retreat, he travelled to Jerusalem. At that time, he was well received and the Church elders extended their "right hand of fellowship" to him. While some were puzzled at Paul's conversion, there was no outright antagonism toward him.

Paul then left Jerusalem and began writing prolifically and preaching throughout the Roman Empire, establishing new churches.

Meanwhile, those in Jerusalem did not all accept Paul's teachings. A tension arose between those who held to the Old Covenant ("non-Mahāyānans"), and the New Covenant ("Mahāyānan") teachings of Paul.

An example of the tension is the Council of Jerusalem (around 50 A.D.) during which it was decided that Gentile converts to Christianity (as a result of Paul's teaching) were not obligated to keep most of the Law of Moses (the Old Covenant). From the revelation Paul had experienced, he proclaimed a New Covenant, one that superseded the Old Covenant and was built on superbly better promises.

Just as the later Mahāyānan writings disparaged those who persistently clung to the former, limiting non-Mahāyānan beliefs, so too Paul's writings were at times sharply critical of those who refused to embrace the new, liberating teachings of the New Covenant.

Also, as with the Mahāyānan teachings based on the new *sūtras* which transcended earlier ideas, Paul's teachings turned previous Jewish ideas "on their head". However, there was *both* continuity and change. The New Covenant teachings placed the cherished Old Covenant teachings into a new perspective.

The parallels between the new Mahāyānan understanding and new teachings of the Apostle Paul are remarkable. For example, as Buddhism spread beyond the borders of India, it needed to adapt to changing circumstances. The Mahāyānan understanding aided this.

In the same way, as Christianity, in part transformed by the understanding of Paul, moved beyond the confines of Jerusalem into the greater Hellenistic world, new challenges arose that needed to be met. The greater understanding and vision of the New Covenant accommodated this.

In both traditions, Buddhism and Christianity, visions, revelations, and messages have been received from beyond and proclaimed either as "the word of the Buddha" or "the word of God (Jesus)".

In closing, as de Barry writes, "probably we have here a case of religious minds of two widely separated cultures thinking along similar lines, as a result of similar, though not identical, religious experience" (de Barry, 1969, p.86). For this reason, the parallels between the two historical faith developments remain instructive.

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