

Mahāyāna Tradition

The Mahāyāna (ཐཱ་ག་པ་ཆེན་པོ་) tradition is a system of Buddhist ideas and practices which began to rise around the beginning of the Common Era and spread to many Buddhist countries across Far East Asia, South East Asia, Central Asia and the Himalayas. Mahāyāna, which literally translates to ‘great vehicle’ stands in contrast to the Theravada tradition of seeking liberation for oneself, today forms the dominant Buddhist tradition in Bhutan and the Himalayas, China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Taiwan and some parts of India and Russia.

Both traditional scholars and modern academics generally agree that Mahāyāna tradition did not start as a distinct sect or school but as a movement of new ideas and practices among people who were members of monastic and philosophical schools which already existed. The movement is said to have started about a century before the Common Era with the rise of Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras and reached its peak by the middle of the first millennium. However, traditional adherents of Mahāyāna argue that the Mahāyāna teachings were delivered by the historical Buddha but did not become popular in the human world as it was not the right time. The teachings are said to have been taken to other realms and later brought back when the time was ripe. A similar narrative is also used to explain the rise of the tantric Buddhist teachings, which developed as a tier of Mahāyāna Buddhism in the later half of the first millennium.

The Mahāyāna movement, true to its claim as the great vehicle, distinguished itself from mainstream Buddhist thoughts and practices through a number of expansive theories and practices. It reinterpreted and reformulated the teachings of the Buddha by taking common Buddhist concepts and practices to a new depth and extent. Thus, one finds the profound view (ཐོག་མོན་ལྷ་བ་) and vast praxis (རྒྱ་ཆེན་སྤྱོད་པ་) traditions of Mahāyāna movement.

From a philosophical point of view, the Mahāyāna thinkers took the theory of non-self or *anātma* (བདག་མེད་) from its basic understanding of lacking an individual self and what belongs to self (བདག་དང་བདག་གིས་འཛིན་པ་) to the absence of self-existence in all things (ཚོས་ཐམས་ཅད་རང་བཞིན་མེད་པ་). Mahāyāna sūtras such as the *Perfection of Wisdom* Sūtras and Mahāyāna masters such as Nāgārjuna championed the theory of how all things, including Buddhahood, are empty of inherent independent existence. They

expanded the notion of non-self and emptiness to apply to all forms of existence, and indeed also to non-existence. Thus, they expounded a greater and deeper understanding of non-self or emptiness which is free from all notions of existence, non-existence, both and neither.

On the ethical front, the Mahāyāna movement took the mainstream Buddhist practice of non-violence further. They argued that not only should a practitioner seeking perfect enlightenment abstain from causing harm to other beings but he or she must actively strive to eliminate the suffering of sentient beings. It ardently promoted compassion and altruism to free all sentient beings from suffering as an essential component of the path to enlightenment. Thus, the Bhutanese and other Himalayan Buddhist masters often claim that the altruistic intention of Bodhicitta (སེམས་བསྐྱེད་) is the defining difference between a Mahāyāna and a non-Mahāyāna practitioner (ཐེག་པ་ཆེ་ཚུང་སེམས་བསྐྱེད་ལྱད་).

This focus on compassion led to a more complex and fluid moral system. Instead of a clear-cut moral code of dos and don'ts, the Mahāyāna practitioners were required to use the best sense of judgement or wisdom and compassion (ཐབས་དང་ཤེས་རབ་) to conduct themselves, such as taking the life of one individual to save many more. It adopts a wider range of skillful means and mediums for spiritual practice and also more vigorously engages the non-celibate laity in Buddhist spirituality.

The early Buddhist schools mainly expounded a soteriological theory of how general practitioners can only reach the state of *arhat* (དགེ་བཅོམ་པ་) or a foe destroyer who has destroyed all inner enemies of negative emotions. Only a few individuals of exceptional caliber are said to become the Buddha. The Mahāyāna soteriologists in general argued that all sentient beings can reach the state of Buddha and some Mahāyāna thinkers even claimed that all sentient being have the Buddha nature latent in them. According to the latter thought, the Buddhist spiritual practices merely helped remove moral and cognitive stains which obscured the innate Buddha nature, which formed the true of essence of all sentient beings. The *nirvāṇa* of the *arhats* is only a temporary relief from suffering but not the ultimate stage of spiritual transformation. Buddhahood, which is endowed with omniscience, compassion and many powers, should be the ultimate goal of spiritual endeavours.

In terms of scriptural literature, the Mahāyāna movement came about with the rise of many *sūtras* which were also in size much bigger than

early *sūtras*. The *sūtras* also expanded the pantheon of Buddhas which existed before it by adding a wide range of enlightened divinities including a large number of Buddhas, and many Bodhisattvas or altruistic beings working on the path to Buddhahood. The Buddhas are also presented with their specific realms, powers and activities. The development of Mahāyāna thus led to a major expansion of Buddhist artistic, literary and cultural expressions. In yet another development, the Mahāyāna system gradually went through a syncretic process resulting in the new tier of tantric or Vajrayāna form of Buddhism after the middle of the first millennium. When Buddhism reached Bhutan and the Himalayas, it received all three tiers of mainstream monastic order, the expanded Mahāyāna tradition and the syncretic Vajrayāna system.

Thus, Buddhism in Bhutan today contains all three phases of Buddhist development in India. However, the Mahāyāna ideas and practices such as altruistic intention, compassion, emptiness, Buddha Nature, and the Mahāyāna rituals dominate the Buddhist system in Bhutan and inform many cultural practices. It is for this reason that Bhutan frequently brands itself as the last bastion of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

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