7.2.2: Mahayana Buddhism

Mahayana expressions of Buddhism either predominate or have a strong presence in Central and Far East Asia and in Vietnam. Although they no longer are a significant presence in India, the seeds (if not the actual manifestation) of almost all forms of Mahayana sprouted there. The scriptures of Mahayana were originally in Sanskrit, a highly developed literary language. They include not only the bulk of the works found in the Theravada Pali collection but many others as well, which are often more elaborate, more developed philosophically, more systematic, and more polished as literature. There are two different canonical collections of the Mahayana scriptures, one in Chinese and one in Tibetan. Some Mahayana scriptures present themselves as the teaching of the Buddha reserved for his more advanced followers. In any case, their content goes far beyond that found in the Pali collection. A characteristic feature of many of the sectarian developments within Mahayana (at least within China and points further East) has been an identification with one (or a select few) of the Mahayana scriptural texts, allowing those texts to determine their version of Buddhist doctrine at the expense of drawing upon other scriptural texts. (This was due, in part, to the unsystematic way scriptural texts reached China over a period of several centuries and attained Chinese translation, distribution, and reception.)

As mentioned earlier, there have been many branches of Mahayana. Despite their many differences, they generally hold or take for granted certain common understandings. Mahayana teaching differs from Theravada teaching in several respects. Its traditional view of itself as the "greater vehicle" (mahayana), that is, the "more inclusive vehicle," in contrast to "the lesser vehicle" (hinayana) underscores its conviction that all people, laypersons and monastics alike, are equally on the path toward Enlightenment. Not only those who have turned away from the world to the monastic life have hope of reaching the goal. Mahayana has thus tended to minimize or erase the boundary between lay and monastic life and not to place the latter on a qualitatively higher spiritual level. In many Mahayana sects monks have been permitted to marry and have families. Second, Mahayana differs in terms of what it takes to be the ultimate goal. For Theravada the goal is Enlightenment, or nibbana, as embodied in the arahat ("one who is worthy" from having attained Enlightenment), as distinct from a Buddha who not only attains Enlightenment but blazes the trail and enables others to find the way. Mahayana construes the goal of the arahat as an individualistic or selfish pursuit—"Enlightenment for oneself"—whereas to
Mahayanist thinking the worthier goal is "Enlightenment for all living beings" as embodied in the bodhisattva ("a buddha in the making"). In contrast with the arahat, the bodhisattva compassionately places the welfare and salvation of all living beings ahead of his own ultimate bliss. Indeed, for Mahayana, compassion is at the heart of the ultimate reality to which Enlightenment is an awakening.

A third important difference is Mahayana's rejection of the idea that nirvana is an elsewhere, as if it were temporally, spatially, and conceptually distinct from, and in opposition to, the world of ordinary human life, the realm of suffering and rebirth (samsara). For it to be so conceived would, so they believe, make it conditional and finite. So also, our own ultimate nature (our ultimate potentiality), being at one with Enlightenment, should not be conceived as distinct from and in opposition to our present true nature (which is not to be identified with our unenlightened sense of ourselves and our experience). In other words, there is no real distance between the one and the other, our present true nature and our ultimate nature. On the contrary, to be Enlightened is to see and experience reality, both finite and infinite, as it ultimately is, no longer from the perspective of the finite, self-centered ego but from the perspective of our original true nature at one with all things and indistinct from the ultimate nature that is manifest in the Buddha. Correlatively, a fourth difference is a proliferation in Mahayana of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas compassionately ready to aid and help living beings along the path to Enlightenment. Yet what seems to Western eyes to be a polytheism, on closer investigation discloses itself to be something else. For the whole Mahayana pantheon of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, being metaphysically selfless or empty (sitnya) of finite being, is conceived ultimately to be the cosmic manifestation of "the one ultimate, unconditioned, infinite reality" at the root of all things: the Dharma Body (Dharmakaya) of the Buddha, of all Buddhas, of the universe itself.

As far as practice is concerned, what the difference between Mahayana and Theravada amounted to was a loosening up of the tight pragmatic (means-end) synthesis of panna, sila, and samadhi that in the Theravada monastic tradition is so strongly oriented to making steady progress on the Eightfold Path to Enlightenment. Together these same principles of practice (prajna, sila, and samadhi in Sanskrit) are also present and central in Mahayana, but they each find a variety of creative expressions in different syntheses that constitute independent paths of drawing near to and coming into right relationship to ultimate reality as Buddhism understands it.

Two sectarian developments in Mahayana appear to have given first priority to Sita or the way of right action as the way to at-onement with ultimate reality: the Chinese Sect of the Three Stages (San-chieh-chiao) founded by Hsin-hsing (540-593), which did not survive the great persecution of 845, and those forms of Japanese sectarian Buddhism spawned by Nichiren (1222-1282), including Nichiren Shu, Nichiren Shoshu, Sokka Gakkai, Rissho Koseikai, and Reiyukai. Nevertheless, the distinctive Mahayana teachings mentioned above-in particular, the idea of compassion as a spontaneous outgrowth or manifestation of persons being grounded in ultimate reality here and now in the world of samsara--have given a certain proactive quality to Mahayana Buddhism with regard to human welfare and charitable works. In Far East Asia, for example, Mahayana Buddhists have been very much involved in public-spirited projects such as caring for the aged and sick, helping the poor, distributing food in times of shortage, and establishing public facilities such as bath houses and rest houses for travelers. It is important to realize, however, that Mahayana Buddhist right action is not merely a spiritual discipline for the sake of attaining Enlightenment. Mahayanists would understand it as an expression of our original (or ultimate) "Buddha nature" and thus as an expression (if only in anticipation) of Enlightenment.
The way of reasoned inquiry in Mahayana found a number of significant expressions constituting different schools of Buddhist philosophy (or theology, to refer to it according to the generic term introduced earlier). In contrast to Theravada, Mahayana has taken a more liberal attitude toward philosophical speculation and the idea of doctrinal development. The different philosophical schools in Mahayana have been especially associated with the so called Prajna-paramita (“the wisdom that has gone beyond”) scriptures and their commentaries. To belong to one of these "schools" of Buddhist philosophy is not just a matter of studying the relevant scriptures and commentary and subscribing to its basic assumptions and worldview. It is a matter of developing philosophical acumen, reasoning, and debating ability, and above all dialectical insight into one's own nature and the nature of other things, so that through deepening insight and liberation from false views one will come to realize experientially an at-onement with ultimate reality. Pursuing these paths in practice necessarily involved aspects of meditation (mystical quest) and ethical conduct (right action) as well. It is important to note that they have been associated with major study centers, often what amounted to Buddhist universities. Two of the most important philosophical schools are Madhyamika (Sanlun in China, Sanron in Japan), of which the greatest representative and founder was Nagarjuna (circa 150-250 C.E.), and Yogacara or Vijnanavada (Fa-hsiang in China, Hosso in Japan), of which the greatest representative was Vasubandhu (circa fourth century C.E.). Madhyamika is noted for its teaching of the emptiness (sunyata) of all things, that no things have substantial being—including the secular world of samsara. Indeed, for Madhyamika, one of the principal characteristics of ultimate reality (i.e., the Buddha nature and nirvana) is sunyata, or emptiness which is interpreted to mean without "ownness," egoless, nonsubstantial, not existing as a thing over against other existing things. Yogacara is noted for its assertion that all things are fundamentally a kind of mental projection from within us, and that progress toward Enlightenment involves the progressive purification and refinement of the "storehouse-" or "womb-consciousness" within, which is supposed ultimately to be none other than the Dharmakaya from which all Buddhas are born and of which they are all manifestations. Later in China still more schools of Buddhist philosophy developed. Remarkable are the Hua-yen school (Kegon in Japan), whose greatest representative was Fa-tsang (643-712), and the T'ien-t'ai school (Tendai in Japan), whose greatest representatives were Chih-i (538-597) and Saicho (767-822). Both were all-inclusive schools that sought to comprehend the place of each of the many apparently contradictory Buddhist schools of thought within an encompassing systematic understanding. Tendai's emphasis upon study is the most thorough in Japanese Buddhism; the basic course now lasting twelve years at one time lasted twenty-one. The same comprehensive philosophical orientation is found in some Vajrayana schools. In Tibet, the Gelukpa sect, with which the Dalai Lama is associated and which was founded by Tsong-kha-pa (1357-1419), is known for the strong emphasis it has placed on systematic doctrinal studies as an essential aspect of the path to Enlightenment. Study in both Tendai and Gelukpa revolves around public examinations and rigorous debate. Although these several philosophically oriented schools of Buddhism place central emphasis on the way of wisdom, it would be a mistake to suppose that any emphasized it to the exclusion of meditative practice (mystical quest) or conduct in accord with Dharma (right action), or other ways of being religious for that matter.

The way of mystical quest also found a diversity of expressions in Mahayana unlike those found in Theravada. Party this was due to the philosophical developments unique to Mahayana and to its more liberal attitude toward new methods of achieving the same ultimate goals. Partly it appears to have been due to the quite different cultural sensibilities of China, Japan, and Tibet, for example, into which Mahayana Buddhist teaching was received. An emphasis on progressive inner calmness and penetrating insight for the sake of liberation from ego-centered motivations and delusions is shared with Theravada, but the specific techniques of meditation that occur in Mahayana vary remarkably from one subtradition to another. A full grasp of the extent of this diversity and reliable accounts of the differing


Updated: Wed, 26 Feb 2020 00:50:10 GMT
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techniques involved has yet to be achieved, for much is still relatively unknown to Western scholarship. And some subtraditions that we know were once strong and influential now have no current living masters from whom the meditation practice at its best can be learned. At present the most accessible (both in terms of living masters and good written accounts in English) are the different forms of Zen meditation (Ch'an in China, Son in Korea, Thien in Vietnam) and Vajrayana meditation.

Meditation and the quest for Enlightenment came to have less priority than other factors in most of Chinese Buddhism. In opposition to this development, Ch'an Buddhism (Zen in Japanese, both of which translate the Sanskrit dhyana, "meditative trance") gained the reputation in China of being the meditation sect. It probably arose in the early eighth century, although legend traces it back to the arrival in China from India of the monk Bodhidharma in 470 C.E. The prime focus of Ch'an (and that of its progeny in Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and elsewhere) is upon the way of mystical quest. Although conceiving itself as a return to the original authentic teaching of the Buddha in India, it seems to owe much to a distinctly Chinese Daoist sensibility and in its specific Japanese forms to an indigenous Japanese aesthetic sensibility. In any case, the objective is to realize nirvana in the midst of samsara by intuitively awakening to a deep spontaneous bodmind-world unity in the present moment (the "Buddha-mind," "one's original nature"). This appears to be substantially the sort of thing that philosophical Daoists speak of as becoming one with the cosmic Dao that courses through all things. The experience has a markedly aesthetic dimension. First, because it expresses itself in a variety of artistic media. Second and more important, because the spontaneous body-mind-world unity is itself an experience of aesthetic sublimity "enlightenment with the eyes open" rather than with them closed, or, in different words, "a perfect fusion of aesthetic perception and noumenal awareness, of stillness and motion, utility and grace, conformity and spontaneity." Above all, Ch'an Buddhists pursue this objective through seated meditation and the direct personal guidance of a master within a monastic setting.

Although some five differing schools of Ch'an existed at one time, primarily two have survived: the so-called Northern or "Sudden Enlightenment" School (Lin-chi in China, Rinzai in Japan) and the so-called Southern or "Gradual 2 Enlightenment" School (Ts'ao-tung in China, Soto in Japan). Though these remain distinct in Japan, the two have become much less distinct in China in recent centuries, and in Korea and Vietnam as well. In any case, the former specialized in the use of kung-an (koan in Japan) meditation, riddles designed to tease, frustrate, and ultimately bring about a complete breakdown of the process of ordinary intellectualizing and a breakthrough to Enlightenment. This and other practices in effect amounted to a reintegration of the way of reasoned inquiry in balance with that of mystical quest. The latter school-and its most important Japanese spokesperson, Dagen (1200-1253), in particular—generally opposed the seeking of "breakthrough" experiences and the expectation of "sudden" Enlightenment. Indeed, it has opposed any notion of seeking Enlightenment as a "thing-to-be-acquired." It has concentrated instead on simply carrying out everyday activities—"chop wood, carry water," but above all just sitting in the meditation posture—in which the Buddha-mind is already said to be realized. This would seem to amount to a balanced integration or fusion of the way of right action with that of mystical quest.

Despite the emphasis on intuitive spontaneity, communal monastic activity in Ch'an Buddhism is a comprehensively organized ritual pattern, stripped down to its essentials and heightened aesthetically by both its choreographed style and its architectural setting. Thus aspects of sacred rite subtly figure within its pursuit of the way of mystical quest. Ch'an's commitment early on to manual labor to support itself and be less dependent on lay support resulted in a concern to integrate meditation with physical work-nirvana in samsara again and thus as aspects of right action figure generally within its way of mystical quest as well, and not just in the Southern School. Indeed, these two dimensions
found further elaboration and development in Japanese Rinzai Zen, where a number of traditional arts (do) have been adapted to become meditative disciplines integrating mystical quest, sacred rite, and right action and expressing the "Buddha-mind": calligraphy, dry-brush ink painting, poetry, Noh drama, pottery, flower arranging, gardening, swordsmanship, archery, and Tea Ceremony, among others.\(^{30}\)

A separate sect of Japanese monastic Buddhism, Tendai, which has been already mentioned, makes use of a form of marathon running as a meditative discipline, among several other forms of strenuous ascetic practices.\(^{31}\) Tendai is noted for its inclusive orientation toward, and encouragement of, a great diversity of meditative practices.

Many of the same sorts of expression of sacred rite found in Theravada are also in evidence within Mahayana, with some exceptions. The monastic way of life within Mahayana Buddhism has for the most part never had quite the elevated sacred status relative to that of laypersons that it has had in Theravada. The result is that relations between lay and monastic Buddhists in Mahayana are not structured and governed so strongly by sacred rituals. Also, at least in China and Japan, as in India, many forms of Mahayana Buddhism came to exist alongside, and to respect, pre-Buddhist ritual systems relating to domestic and communal life (e.g., Confucian and Taoist in China, Shinto in Japan).

Consequently, for the most part Mahayana monastics have not assumed the priestly functions that Theravada monastics have in Southeast Asia. (Tibetan Buddhism is an exception to this generalization.) Nevertheless, one area of life where they often did come to assume that role was in relation to rituals of death and burial. This was largely because of the much more highly developed conception of life after death in Buddhism than that possessed by pre-Buddhist religions. At times there developed elaborate ceremonial worship in connection with Buddhist temples. Sacred rite clearly came to have a primary role within Vajrayana Buddhism, which will be discussed below. And especially in connection with the highly developed Japanese aesthetic sensibility, as was mentioned above, sacred rite plays a fairly significant role in the different traditions of Japanese Buddhism, especially Zen.

By far the most popular forms of Mahayana Buddhism, especially throughout Far East Asia, have been expressions of the way of devotion.\(^{32}\) It is inconceivable that these traditions could have arisen in a Theravada as opposed to a Mahayana context, for they center upon the theology of the compassionate bodhisattva and Mahayana scriptural texts that tell of the great Bodhisattvas and Buddhas, their marvelous works, and their vows to help those who call upon their aid. Especially prominent among them are the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara (known also in China and Japan as the female Bodhisattva Kuan-yin or Kannon), the Buddha Amitabha (Ami-to-fo in China, Amida in Japan), and the coming Buddha Maitreya. These devotional forms of Mahayana address directly many of the existential concerns of, and circumstantial constraints upon, the layperson householder: hope in the midst of oppressive circumstances, promise of divine assistance in progressing toward Enlightenment, and divine mercy for coping with the heavy responsibilities of ordinary life. Mahayana expressions of the way of devotion have neither led to nor centered upon a monastic institution, as most other forms of Buddhism have done. Some monastic expressions of Mahayana, however, have gone beyond mere tolerance to support and encourage them. They appeal to simple folk who know their own limitations and who (at least in their own thinking) lack the talent and opportunity to take up the rigors of monastic discipline.\(^{33}\)

Many of these devotional Buddhist traditions appeal to the Buddhist teaching that between the coming of one Buddha and another the understanding and practice of the Dharma (the teachings of the Buddhas) inevitably degenerates so that fewer and fewer people are able to reach Enlightenment on their own with the resources left behind by the previous Buddha. They find convincing the thought that we are now well into the third and most degenerate stage of develop-
opment, meaning that there is little anyone can do to make significant progress toward Enlightenment despite her or his best intentions and that our only resort is the supernatural "other power" of the Bodhisattvas and Buddhas who have promised to help those who call upon their aid. Above all, appeal is made to the Buddha *Amitabha* (*Ami-to-fo* in Chinese, *Amida* in Japanese), who, out of his infinite store of merit built up from eons of practice, has created a Pure Land where there is no evil, a supremely happy place enabling straightforward realization of Enlightenment for whoever is reborn there by aid of his grace. According to certain Mahayana scriptures, long before becoming the Buddha *Amitabha*, the Bodhisattva *Dharmakara* made certain vows to the effect that, upon becoming a Buddha, whoever hears his name—even though the person may have done evil-calls upon his help, repents, and reforms will be assured of rebirth in the Pure Land. Worship for Pure Land Buddhism (in China *Ching-t’u-tsung* founded by T’an-luan [476-542], and in Japan *jado-shu* founded by Honen [1133-1212] and *jado-shin-shu* founded by Shinran [1173-1262]) is often congregational as well as individual, focusing on praise and gratitude to Amita, stories of his saving help, and chanting his name. Even though all this may appear (especially to Western eyes) to be a strange departure from other forms of Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism has had some articulate and sophisticated apologists from time to time who show how it fits into the larger Buddhist frame of reference and how the distinctive Pure Land concepts correspond to traditional Buddhist notions (e.g., how the Pure Land is a state of mind one can experientially enter here and now in devotional meditation or how the Pure Land is itself something to be magically visualized in a complex meditation). While Pure Land Buddhism has given first priority to the way of devotion, it has nevertheless at times incorporated in a subordinate way aspects of right action, mystical quest, sacred rite, and reasoned inquiry.

Concerning expressions of shamanic mediation in Mahayana Buddhism, not much is covered in most accounts, except for the Vajrayana traditions that will be shortly taken up. As in Theravada, in those places where shamanic phenomena seem to be present there is a certain tendency, at least among Western interpreters, to regard them as a contamination of authentic Buddhism from contact with indigenous, non-Buddhist traditions. Here too much remains unknown, and much of the knowledge we do have is colored by assumptions that may have biased inquiry. In any case there is evidence of widespread vision quests, especially in connection with mountain pilgrimages, and other practices suggestive of shamanism: magical spells, fire rituals, visionary experiences, divination, and so forth. As mentioned in connection with Theravada, there are references from time to time to the extraordinary powers that Mahayana Buddhists of allegedly great attainment have employed on behalf of others. One specific tradition that should be mentioned here is that of the colorful mountain ascetics (yamabushi) of Japan called Shugendo ("the way [of mastering [shu] extraordinary religious power [gen]""). In this case we clearly have a full-fledged case of the way of shamanic mediation whose frame of reference is explicitly Buddhist. They go into the mountain wilderness in Japan to practice rigorous shamanic austerities to acquire power for combating evil spirits, for healing, and for divination on behalf of others.