

## 1 The emergence of Mahayana Buddhism

**[Introductory note by the Dharma Teaching Coordinator:** This handout needs some major revision. It is very largely based on early teaching by Sangharakshita which—as far as historical facts are concerned—is not fully up to date. Nevertheless, even then it is remarkable for Sangharakshita's intuitive grasp of how certain developments may have been precipitated. Scholarship over the last 20 to 30 years has led to an understanding that the arising of the Bodhisattva vehicle was a very complex, multi-layered development in which several strands very slowly came together in what we now call 'Mahayana.' All this was not known when Sangharakshita wrote his major books and gave the lectures on which this handout is based.

As a teacher in an FWBO centre you will probably want to present a more accurate picture of early Buddhist history. To do this, you will fare better using the material for week two of Sagarashosha's course *Introduction to Buddhism*, in particular handout 2.1 (<http://fwbo-centre-support.org/lightingtheflame/table-of-content/introducing-buddhism/buddhism-courses-level-1/introduction-to-buddhism/>). Alternatively, you might wish to compile extracts from Paul Williams' book *Mahayana Buddhism*.) — We hope to be able to replace this handout before long. Dhammaloka, February 2008']

These notes cover a broad sweep of Buddhist history, especially in India. Most new developments, such as the emergence of the Tantra/Vajrayana (which is now associated mainly with countries like Tibet and Bhutan), can be traced back to India. I hope you will have the patience to bear with it. There are various reasons why it is helpful to have some awareness of the unfoldment of Buddhism:

- it avoids confusion from the shifting meaning of key terms like "arahant";
- it makes it easier to understand texts and poems (such as the sevenfold puja); and
- it helps clarify the difference between Buddhism's essence (ie. Enlightenment) and its culturally influenced outward expression.

If you are a Buddhist, in a way understanding something of the history of Buddhism is appreciating something of your own history.

### **Lecture excerpt (edited): *The Nature and Development of Buddhism***

Buddhism existed in India for one thousand five hundred years, roughly from 500 BC to 1000 AD. There were three great periods of development, each being dominant for about five hundred years. These three great periods are known in Buddhist literature by the terms: Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana (also known as the Tantra). Hinayana literally means the lesser vehicle; Mahayana means the great vehicle; Vajrayana means the diamond or adamant vehicle. Each have their own religiocultural language. Although the essence of Buddhism (ie. Enlightenment) remained the same the outward forms changed as civilization and cultures changed. Some mode of expression that might have been suitable in the Buddha's day became unsuitable five hundred or a thousand years later.

During the first five hundred years the dominant form was the Hinayana. This has an ethicopsychological emphasis. It speaks mainly in terms of ethics and analysis of various mental states. It led eventually to a very elaborate and complex system of classifying and correlating different mental states (the *abhidharma*). Sometimes you come across the term Theravada, which means the school of the elders. This is the only surviving form of eighteen Hinayana schools. It survives in countries such as Myanmar, Thailand, Lao, Cambodia and Sri Lanka.

The Mahayana speaks a language which is devotionalmetaphysical. It has a rich and colourful devotional side. Although worship of bodhisattvas {bodhisattvas are explained later} occupied a prominent part in religious life, there was also a deep philosophical investigation.

Then in the third five hundred year period the dominant language was that of the Tantra/Vajrayana. It works largely through symbols and sees the world in terms of energy. It survives in aspects of Tibetan Buddhism (which is also found in parts of northern India, parts of Nepal, Bhutan, Mongolia and also in the US, Europe etc etc). It also survives in Japan where it is known as Shingon (not to be confused with Shin). The Shingon form of Buddhism was founded in Japan by Kukai (Kobo Daishi). There will be more about the Tantra/vajrayana in week five.

When Buddhism started speaking in devotional/metaphysical language associated with the Mahayana, it didn't forget the ethical/psychological language of the Hinayana. When it started speaking the yogic/ritualistic language of the Vajrayana it didn't leave aside the earlier languages of the Mahayana and Hinayana. So in the history of Buddhism there is a process of incrementation. The tradition became richer but also more complex. Its communication became more subtle and more wideranging.

### ***Notes on the arising of Mahayana Buddhism***

#### *Buddhism at the time of the Buddha*

The Buddha's original disciples were men and women of tremendous insight and compassion, some of whom became arahants (ie. Enlightened). The difference between the Buddha himself and his Enlightened disciples (*arahants*) was simply that the Buddha was the "shower of the way", who re-discovered the Dharma anew, while the Enlightened disciples, the *arahants*, had been guided by the Buddha. The "way" had been pointed out to them.

Both the Buddha and his disciples were deeply compassionate in nature. For example there is the story from last week's notes of how the Buddha said to his Enlightened disciples "I am free from all bonds human and divine. You also are free from all bonds human and divine. Go now and teach all beings for the benefit and the happiness of the whole world, out of compassion, out of love for all living beings. Go forth and teach." They travelled up and down the length and breadth of India spreading the teaching of the Buddha.

#### *Untoward tendencies in the following centuries*

Over the next few centuries the mainstream tradition (that later became known as the Hinayana, or "little way") suffered the following untoward tendencies:

identifying wisdom with scholarship;

seeing wisdom as primary, and love only as a means to wisdom;

regarding monks as the only Buddhists who are seriously trying to get Enlightened;

over-emphasis on the letter of monastic rules; and

a self-centred attitude to spiritual life (without being especially concerned to help others).

Paradoxically, these tendencies are at variance with the Buddhist suttas (scriptures) these followers of the Hinayana adhered to. (For example the *Metta sutta*, that underpins the *Metta Bhavana* practice taught at the Centre, emphasises the cultivation of *Metta* as the way to Enlightenment.) It seems that the followers of the Hinayana concentrated just on certain aspects of the Buddha's teaching, and tended to forget about the personal example of the Buddha.

#### *The Mahayana reasserts the original spirit*

The Mahayana was, in part, a reaction to these undesirable tendencies. Followers of the Mahayana tended to see the spirit as being at least as important as the letter, that Enlightenment was just as much about compassion (*karuna*) as about wisdom, and that being a monk did not in itself mean that a person was more sincere or advanced than a layperson.

The two main schools of the Mahayana were the *Yogacara* (practitioners of "yoga", ie. of meditation) and the *Madhyamaka* (practitioners of the "Mean"). These will be covered in the following two weeks of this block.

#### *A new interpretation of the term "arahant"*

In early Buddhist literature the term arahant has an entirely positive connotation, with no suggestion of love and compassion being wanting. Although many followers of the Hinayana had become self-centred in orientation, they continued to regard the original scriptures (the Pali canon) as fundamental, and these scriptures spoke of the *arahant* as embodying the goal of the spiritual life as.

Because followers of the Mahayana did not have some of the advantages of modern scholarship, they did not have a historical perspective on changes in the Buddhist tradition. The only way they could make sense of the fact that followers of the Hinayana were generally self-centred in their approach, and regarded the *arahant* as their ideal, was to interpret the term *arahant* in a different way. They used the term to mean someone who is Enlightened (ie. someone who has reached Nirvana), and yet who is flawed an underlying attitude of selfishness. The Mahayana tradition said the "bodhisattva" (in contrast to the *arahant*) is an embodiment of spiritual perfection, and as such it is

the ideal of becoming a bodhisattva is the most wholesome ideal for all people on the spiritual path.

However nobody could actually be Enlightened, in the sense of having reached Nirvana, and at the same time be flawed by self-centredness. [If someone is really Enlightened they will be inherently compassionate and loving. If they are not compassionate and loving they are obviously not Enlightened.] Therefore the Mahayana's usage of the term *arahant* it is not something that anybody could actually experience, even though it may have a certain utility as a theoretical doctrinal category.

Sangharakshita has emphasised that if someone experiences Reality, the Transcendental, then an inherent aspect of this experience will be a desire to care for others. Therefore he in his later thinking he equates irreversibility on the path to becoming an *arahant* (technically known as the stage of "Stream Entry"), as being the same as irreversibility on the path to becoming a bodhisattva (technically known as the stage of the "eighth bhumi").

***Some related questions to think about***

Can learning about Buddhist history help my spiritual practice? If so, how?

What effect does rejoicing in the good qualities of others have on me? Do I have any in-built resistance to rejoicing in others' good qualities?

What will be the flavour and emphases of modern western Buddhism?

Does Buddhism exert any influence on society as a whole in New Zealand?