

What is Mahayana Buddhism?

1) progressive and liberal-minded

this can be carried too far (see p. 276), as when Mahayana became so expansive that it ended up becoming re-absorbed into Hinduism and disappeared as a separate Way in India, the birthplace of Buddhism

2) more highly emotional and devotional

compassion, love, and devotion are all developed
innumerable transcendent beings are acknowledged

3) more positive vision of Nirvana and the Way, though Sunyata (absolute emptiness) is background for positive accounts of Nirvana

Emptiness (*sunyata*) is far clearer and brilliant than any linguistic description of Nirvana

4) cherishes monastic life AND householder life

5) developed altruistic aspect of Buddhism and emphasized Bodhisattva ideal

Mahayana acknowledge and embrace the big contradiction: **Compassion for all beings, even though no such beings exist!**

Hinayana is the seed, Mahayana is the flower.

Doctrines Common to all Mahayanists

1) Sharp distinction between real, historical Buddha and the transcendental Buddha of which the earthly Buddha was but one manifestation. There are countless Buddhas in all the myriad worlds in which suffering occurs.

2) Arhat ideal vs. the Bodhisattva ideal. Wisdom combines with compassion in quest to save all sentient beings from suffering.

3) Empirical (ordinary) reality is "empty." What we take to be "real" are in fact linguistic and thought constructions of our own making.

4) Not only are "persons" and other things empty of self-being or substance, but so are all dharms!

Hinayana vs. Mahayana

From Sangharakshita

Five basic Mahayana criticisms of the Hinayana tradition:

1) too conservative and literal minded--adhering to letter, not spirit of the Dharma

2) scholastic: over-occupied with analysis and classification of mental states

3) one-sidedly negative in approach to Nirvana--otherworldliness, austerities, giving up the world, etc.

4) over attached to merely formal aspects of monasticism--leads to hypocrisy, etc. Problem with a religion become the STATE religion (see status of Christianity in Europe)

5) spiritually individualistic

There are **four factors** leading to spiritual individualism:

a) human tendency toward "I and mine," that is, toward greed, leads people to begin treating the Dharma as something to be grasped, rather than as a vessel to be used and let go of once its work is done

b) language and grammar mislead: I went home and I attained Nirvana have some structure, but the latter involves a transcendental truth that cannot be expressed adequately in any language. It is not "I" who reaches Nirvana, since there is no "I."

c) compassion is underemphasized in Hinayana, but emphasized in Mahayana as being as important as (and coordinate with) Wisdom

d) Hinayanas more content to understanding Buddha-Word than in following the Buddha-Way. The way, however, calls for salvation for all suffering beings, not just for a particular individual.

Mahayana Schools Sangharkshita,

The four major Mahayana Schools may be understood as developments of four out of the five cardinal virtues: wisdom, faith, concentration, vigor (with mindfulness being overarching).

Wisdom New Wisdom School (Madhyamika)

Faith Buddhism of Faith and Devotion

Concentration Buddhist Idealism (Yogacara or Vijnanavada)

Vigor Tantra

Each school favors a particular sutra or set of sutras:

New Wisdom favors the *Prajnaparamitra* Sutra

Yogacara favors the *Lankavatara* and *Samdhinirmocana* Sutras

Devotional schools favor the *Sukhavativyuha* and *Amitayurdhyana* Sutras

Sastras: commentaries or elucidations of sutras.

Acaryas are authors of these sastras.

Other Important Mahayana Views

1) Dharmas have no own-being; they are a kind of illusion. In this respect, the Mahayanists add a fifth perverted view to the four developed by Hinayana. This fifth perverted view is "Assigning reality to what is illusory."

2) Discrimination, affirmation, or negation, and any assumption of a separate reality are all misguided; our "thought" can arrive at no positive conclusions about anything. Denial of all multiplicity, dualisms, etc. One must move to non-duality, beyond dualisms.

3) This leads to the conclusion that the four perverted views themselves are perversions because they make an untenable distinction, e.g., between what is "permanent" and what is "impermanent," "lovely" and "repulsive," etc.

4) One cannot even assume that conditioned dharmas are essentially distinct from the Unconditioned, for in absolute emptiness, the distinction between the conditioned and unconditioned vanishes. Greed, hate, and delusion result from our own imagination, which projects onto the world things that entice us. We project permanence, ease, self, and attractiveness onto data of experience that don't contain them.

5) There are three stages in removal of the perverted views: intellectual, emotional, transcending them altogether. At this point, one arrives at something like “no-practice,” a very high state, indeed.

On the Ontological Status of Dharmas

Three Buddhist approaches to the ontological status of dharmas:

1) Early Buddhism: form is like foam; feeling like a bubble; perception is like a mirage; impulses are like the trunk of a banana tree, which is empty once one has peeled away all the sheaths or layers; consciousness is like a magic-show, since it deceives and cheats us.

Conditioned dharmas are not totally real, but don't have much reality; they are frail, short-lived, fleeting, can't resist strength, have no real strength or depth in their own-being.

Common-sense world is unreal even when compared to the slim reality of dharmas

2) Madhyamikas did not hold that dharmas are absolutely non-existent, but instead emphasized that they are illusions, deceptions, maya, in the sense that all dharmas arise and fall together in a completely interpenetrated way (pratitya samutpada).

Dharmas cannot be said "to be" because they have no being of their own; they cannot be said "not to be" because they are not completely not there.

3) To most important Mahayana thinker, Nagarjuna, separate dharmas are illusory because they are logically impossible. To Yogacarins they are merely objectifications of the mind itself, but there is an “inconceivable basis” that is in some sense real.

Prajnaparamita Sutras on the ontological status of dharmas:

1) All dharmas are empty regarding own-being (svabhava-sunya); each dharma is dependent on something else

2) Dharmas are ultimately non-existent

3) Dharmas have only nominal existence; they're only words, products of conventional expression; emptiness of all dharmas cannot be expressed in words, so that the Buddha is the same as speechless silence.

4) Dharmas are without marks, i.e., distinguishing property--they are all empty

5) Dharmas are absolutely isolated; can't act on anything else or be acted on

6) Dharmas are not produced; are never really brought forth; are unborn; have never left original emptiness. In answer to question "Why is there anything at all?" Westerner answers, "God made them," but Mahayana concludes that they are absolutely uncreated and it is in this sense that they "exist."

7) Ordinary reality is analogous to illusory states, dreams, fantasies that have no "substance" behind their appearances, but are experienced AS IF they were real.