



Chapter 6

THE EMERGENCE OF THE MAHAYANA

The first few centuries after the death of the Buddha were a time of constant change in Buddhism. Because the Buddha did not leave a written body of scriptures, as the tradition developed and became established first in India and then in other parts of Asia, the process of the formation of a canon—a standard set of the Buddha's teachings—was sometimes fractious. His immediate disciples had transmitted his teachings to one another, preserving them orally, and when his followers met to attempt to establish what he had actually said, what was *buddhavacana* (the Buddha's own speech), disagreements arose. There were also philosophical debates about what some of his teachings meant. Furthermore, because the Buddha did not leave a specific set of accept-

able ritual practices, debates inevitably arose as to what was and was not appropriate devotional behavior. Finally, there was the often-contentious issue of monastic discipline, or *vinaya*.

On one level, this fluidity might be seen to be a negative element in the developing tradition, since it sometimes led to serious schisms. On the other, though, it was precisely this openness to debate and discussion that helped Buddhism become established in India: because the Buddha had insisted that one's personal progress on the Path was up to one's own effort, very little in the religion could be taken as simply given. This, then, would have allowed the individual monk or layperson a great deal of religious freedom, and this may

well have been attractive, standing as it does in such stark contrast to the strictures of the Brahmanical religion of the period. That said, however, there were often serious schisms and divisions within Buddhism, the most serious and long lasting of which was the emergence of a new school sometime around the first century C.E. This new school called itself the Mahayana, the Great Vehicle.

Schism and Debate

It would be wrong, certainly, to think—as many scholars of Buddhism have—of the emergence of the Mahayana in the first century as some sort of doctrinal bomb that was suddenly dropped on the Buddhist world. Equally misleading is the other standard view of the rise of the Mahayana: that it was the result of

lay Buddhists' desires to make the Path more open to them and less oriented to the monk. In fact, the school that eventually became known as the Mahayana did not, initially, see itself as a school at all. Rather, it was most probably a relatively small group of monks who were trying to work out the meaning of the Buddha's teachings and found themselves at odds with some of the prevailing ideas of the time. Furthermore, it is important to state at the outset that the monks who identified with the emerging Mahayana did not see themselves as revolutionary iconoclasts. Indeed, we know that these monks continued to live in monasteries with other, non-Mahayana monks; in other words, their ideas were not simply critiques of existing doctrines and practices, but were also different interpretations, in keeping with the very spirit of Buddhism.

FROM A CLASSIC TEXT ❖ 6.1

One of the hallmarks of Buddhist doctrinal literature is the intense philosophical analysis that Buddhist authors engage in. Part of this stems from the basic idea in Buddhism that all things are interdependent, that they have a cause—as classically articulated in the paticcasamuppada (pratityasamutpada in Sanskrit) formula—and thus are devoid of any ultimate reality. In the Abhidhamma literature of the Pali Canon, the workings of karma particularly receive a great deal of analytical attention. In the following passage, the great Theravada commentator Buddhaghosa addresses the issue of karma, discussing in a clear and concise manner the various types of karma. His overarching point here is that all karma—positive and negative—ultimately have ignorance as their cause.

The kinds of karma are those already briefly mentioned, as consisting of the triplet beginning with meritorious karma and the triplet beginning with bodily karma, making six in all.

To give them here in full, however, meritorious karma consists of the eight meritorious thoughts which belong to the realm of sensual pleasure and show themselves in alms-giving, keeping the precepts, etc., and of the five meritorious thoughts which belong to the realm of form and show themselves in ecstatic meditation,—making thirteen thoughts; demeritorious karma consists of the twelve demeritorious thoughts which show themselves in the taking of life etc.; and karma leading to immovability consists of the four meritorious thoughts which belong to the realm of formlessness and show themselves in ecstatic meditation. Accordingly these three karmas consist of twenty-nine thoughts.

As regards the other three, bodily karma consists of the thoughts of the body, vocal karma of the thoughts of the voice, mental karma of the thoughts of the mind. The object of this triplet is to show the avenues by which meritorious karma etc. show themselves at the moment of the initiation of karma.

For bodily karma consists of an even score of thoughts, namely, of the eight meritorious thoughts which belong to the realm of sensual pleasure and of the twelve demeritorious ones. These by exciting gestures show themselves through the avenue of the body.

Vocal karma is when these same thoughts by exciting speech show themselves through the avenue of the voice. The thoughts, however, which belong to the realm of form, are not included, as they do not form a dependence for subsequent consciousness. And the case is the same with the thoughts which belong to the realm of formlessness. Therefore they also are to be excluded from the dependence of consciousness. However, all depend on ignorance.

Mental karma, however, consists of all the twenty-nine thoughts, when they spring up in the mind without exciting either gesture or speech.

Thus, when it is said that ignorance is the dependence of the karma-triplet consisting of meritorious karma etc., it is to be understood that the other triplet is also included.

But it may be asked, "How can we tell that these karmas are dependent on ignorance?" Because they exist when ignorance exists.

For, when a person has not abandoned the want of knowledge concerning misery etc., which is called ignorance, then by that want of knowledge concerning misery and concerning anteriority etc. he seizes on the misery of the round of rebirth with the idea that it is happiness and hence begins to perform the threefold karma which is its cause; by that want of knowledge concerning the origin of misery and by being under the impression that thus happiness is secured, he begins to perform karma that ministers to desire, though such karma is really the cause of misery; and by that want of knowledge concerning cessation and the path and under the impression that some particular form of existence will prove to be the cessation of misery, although it really is not so, or that sacrifices, alarming the gods by the greatness of his austerities,

and other like procedures are the way to cessation, although they are not such a way, he begins to perform the threefold karma.

Moreover, through this non-abandonment of ignorance in respect of the Four Truths, he does not know the fruition of meritorious karma to be the misery it really is, seeing that it is completely overwhelmed with the calamities, birth, old age, disease, death, etc.; and so to obtain it he begins to perform meritorious karma in its three divisions of bodily, vocal, and mental karma, just as a man in love with a heavenly nymph will throw himself down a precipice. When he does not perceive that at the end of that meritorious fruition considered to be such happiness comes the agonizing misery of change and disappointment, he begins to perform the meritorious karma above described, just as a locust will fly into the flame of a lamp, or a man that is greedy after honey will lick the honey-smeared edge of a knife. When he fails to perceive the calamities due to sensual gratification and its fruition, and, being under the impression that sensuality is happiness, lives enthralled by his passions, he then begins to perform demeritorious karma through the three avenues, just as a child will play with filth, or one who wishes to die will eat poison. When he does not perceive the misery of the change that takes place in the constituents of being, even in the realm of formlessness, but has a perverse belief in persistence etc., he begins to perform mental karma that leads to immovability, just as a man who has lost his way will go after a mirage.

As, therefore, karma exists when ignorance exists but not when it does not exist, it is to be understood that this karma depends on ignorance. And it has been said as follows:

“O priests, the ignorant, uninstructed man performs meritorious karma, demeritorious karma, and karma leading to immovability. But whenever, O priests, he abandons his ignorance and acquires wisdom, he through the fading out of ignorance and the coming into being of wisdom does not even perform meritorious karma.”

(Henry Clarke Warren. *Buddhism in Translations*. Harvard Oriental Series, vol. 3. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1896, 298–300. Translated from Chapter 6 of Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* [The Path of Purity].)

The Buddhist chronicles, as well as various inscriptions, provide evidence of the councils that were held in order to resolve some of these issues, as well as to come to some sort of doctrinal agreement. The first of these councils was held very soon after the death of the Buddha, during the rains retreat at Rajagriha,

and seems to have been a gathering of the Buddha's immediate followers intended to record, orally, exactly what he had taught. A few sources record a second, smaller, gathering the following year, although whether this was a different council or an extension of the first is unclear. The second major council, as

we have seen, was held in the city of Vaishali, sometime in the fourth century B.C.E., and centered on issues of monastic discipline, not doctrine, although doctrinal issues were no doubt indirectly involved. Sometime shortly after the council at Vaishali, however, a series of schisms arose in the Buddhist communities, disagreements over doctrinal issues.

Thus, by about the third century B.C.E., the Buddha's disciples had divided themselves into what Buddhist historical sources describe as at least eighteen different schools (perhaps more), each associated, roughly, with a particular region. There were the Mahasamghikas in and around Pataliputra; the Sarvastivadins in Kashmir and Gandhara; the Caitikas in Andhra; the Lokuttaravadins in Madhya Pradesh, and so on. Mostly, these were not in fact separate schools so much as groups of monks who held different opinions on relatively minor points—monastic discipline issues, as we have seen, and also philosophical interpretations of the Buddha's teachings. As this process of articulating more and more detailed and complex understandings of the Buddha's message progressed, some serious issues led to increasingly serious divisions within the *sangha*. We have already seen that early Buddhists spent a great deal of time dissecting reality and the concepts that are used to understand reality; indeed, this is at the very heart of the *Abhidharma*, the huge canonical body of doctrinal interpretation and philosophical speculation. One such issue revolved around the status of the *arhats*, those monks who had followed the Buddha's teachings to the point of enlightenment.

For instance, there arose the question as to whether an *arhat* could, once enlightened, slip out of that state. One group of monks, the Mahasamghikas, were quite critical of the *arhat*, and saw him as a lesser being, capable of falling out of enlightenment. In contrast, they pointed to the Buddha, whose enlightenment was absolute. They were also highly critical of what they called the *shravakas*, or "hearers," a label that may have been intended to portray their monastic rivals as mere passive receivers of the teachings. But at the heart of the debate was the question whether or not the Buddha continued to be an active force in the world. The Mahasamghikas tended to argue that he was. The other main group that emerged during this period, the Sarvastivadins, tended to see the Buddha as present in the form of his teachings, but not as an active force. They would, eventually, see their opponents' view as a logical impossibility, and occasionally charge them with what was, essentially, a heretical doctrinal position.

At any rate, the Mahasamghikas offered up a rather bold interpretation of the whole issue of the person and presence of the Buddha, an interpretation that grew into the very heart of the Mahayana's teachings—the doctrine of the bodhisattva.

The Bodhisattva: A New Model of the Ideal Being

At the very core of the emergent Mahayana school is the concept of the bodhisattvas.

They are the enlightened beings who, unlike the *arhats*, choose not to pass out of existence upon their physical death, but continue to be active presences in the world, coming to the aid of those beings still trapped in *samsara*. It is difficult to pinpoint when exactly this idea emerged in Buddhist circles, but it is clear that it is an idea that emerged out of the sometimes contentious discussions about the nature of the Buddha and his continued presence in the world.

As briefly discussed in Chapter 5, this is first articulated in the context of the doctrine of the various bodies, or *kayas*, of the Buddha, a doctrine that seems to predate the actual emergence of the Mahayana. The first of these bodies—which are not in fact conceived of strictly as physical forms, but rather more like the different ways in which the Buddha continues to be present in the world—is the *Dharmakaya*. This is the Buddha's form as

wisdom, truth, and the real nature of reality. This is that which characterizes the Buddha as the Buddha, and it was later actually called “Buddhaness” by Mahayana thinkers. As such, then, the *Dharmakaya* is not strictly limited to the teachings left by the Buddha—although it has them as its essence—but is understood to be the whole collection of wonderful qualities that are known as “the Buddha.” This form of the Buddha necessarily continues after his death. The second body is called the *Rupakaya*, or “form body” (also referred to as the *Nirmanakaya*, or transformation body). This is the earthly form, or manifestation, of the Buddha. Later Mahayana theologians added to these two a third body, a more rarefied form called the *Sambhogakaya*, or “enjoyment body,” which is the form of the Buddha that those who have attained enlightenment “enjoy” and interact with.

Personalities in Buddhism 6.1

ASANGA

Asanga was the founder of an important school of Mahayana Buddhism, the Yogacara, in the fourth century C.E. He was born a Hindu, a member of a brahmin family in the North, and then converted to Buddhism and became a monk of the Sarvastivada school. According to various legendary accounts, he soon left his monastery and began an intense meditational regime, focusing on Maitreya, hoping to gain a vision of the bodhisattva in order to receive direct teachings from him. He eventually gave up in frustration, though. As he was going down from the mountaintop, he realized that he had given up too easily, and returned. He repeated this same scenario several times until, eventually, having perfected both wisdom and compassion, he received a vision of the bodhisattva who taught him the Mahayana.



Historically, Asanga, along with his brother Vasubandhu, stands as one of the most important figures in Mahayana Buddhism, credited with rejuvenating Mahayana philosophy. He is said to have founded several monasteries and to have taken on dozens of pupils. Asanga is credited with writing a number of important commentaries on the *Perfection of Wisdom* literature, and also with writing the *Yogacarabhumi-shastra*, the *Mahayana-samgraha*, and the *Abhidharma-samucaya*.

Asanga responded to what was seen as the tendency toward nihilism in Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka thought, with its intense emphasis on logic and absolute emptiness, and developed what would eventually be called the Yogacara school, which is also sometimes known as the "conscious-only" (Cittamatra) school. While the Madhyamaka philosophers insisted that no ultimately real thing could exist, Asanga asserted that only the mind is ultimately existent. Asanga and his followers defined three modes by which we perceive our world. First, through attached and erroneous discrimination, wherein things are incorrectly apprehended based on preconceptions; second, through the correct understanding of dependently originated nature of things; and third, by apprehending things as they truly are, independent of any other thing. This led to the important philosophical principle—influential in the development of Tibetan Buddhism and also Zen—of "mind-only," a theory according to which all existence is in fact nothing but an emanation of the human mind, of consciousness. Essentially, this means that human experience is nothing but false discriminations or imaginations.

Related to this idea of multiple bodies of the Buddha was the emergence of the concept of the bodhisattva, what is perhaps the hallmark of the Mahayana schools. Although a common word in the earliest of Buddhist texts, the earlier Buddhist schools held that once the Buddha had attained enlightenment, he taught the *dharma* to his disciples and then, on his death, attained final *nirvana*, thus ending his existence in the realm of *samsara* forever. The Buddha's immediate disciples, the *arhats*, who likewise mastered his teachings after his death, and like the Buddha, upon attaining

enlightenment entered *nirvana* after death. Perhaps most radical about the Mahayana monks' new doctrinal interpretations was that this ideal, the *arhat*, was, they argued, actually a contradiction of one of the most basic elements of the Buddha's teachings—compassion. The Mahayanists derisively labeled the *arhats* *Pratyekabuddhas*, or "solitary Buddhas," and posited that the Buddha and all other truly enlightened beings "postponed" final *nirvana* out of their compassion for the sufferings of other beings, choosing to remain in *samsara* to perfect their own Buddhahood



FIGURE 6.1. *Head of the Bodhisattva Maitreya. Maitreya is the future Buddha, and here is depicted as a royal figure. From Gandara, Pakistan, second to fourth century C.E.*

and work for the benefit of all other beings, until each one attains enlightenment.

There are a number of important elements to be noted here. For one thing, all beings were conceived by the Mahayana as at once having the innate potential to become a buddha, and also sharing a kind of universal enlightenment as well. The Path, then, was reconceived as being the path of the bodhisattva, a path that takes many, many lives, but is focused

on developing *bodhicitta*, the quality of the awakened mind, and thus the very quality of enlightenment, a quality that fundamentally shifts one's attention away from the self to a selfless concern for the well-being of others. Each bodhisattva takes a vow to help other beings, and continues to do so indefinitely, a vow that involves cultivating a list of six (later expanded to ten) perfections, or *paramitas*. These are:

1. Generosity (*dana*)
2. Morality (*shila*)
3. Patience and forbearance (*kshanti*)
4. Vigor, the endless and boundless energy that they employ in their helping of others (*virya*)
5. Meditation (*dhyana*)
6. Wisdom (*prajna*)
7. Skillful means (*upaya*)
8. Conviction (*pranidhana*)
9. Strength (*bala*)
10. Knowledge (*jñana*)

With the rise of the ideal of the bodhisattva came also the development of a complex pantheon of enlightened beings who figured prominently in the iconography of the emergent school. Indeed, with the rise of the Mahayana there was a kind of iconographic explosion in India, accompanied by the development of numerous new sculptural forms and devotional rituals.

Three of the most popular and most important bodhisattvas in the early Mahayana were Manjushri, Avalokiteshvara, and Maitreya.

Manjushri—Especially associated with wisdom, Manjushri is a key figure in numerous early Mahayana scriptures, and he has been the focus of significant devotional activity throughout the Mahayana world. His name literally means “gentle glory.” In sculptures, he is typically depicted as a handsome young man holding aloft a sword—the incisive sword of wisdom with which he cuts through delusion

and ignorance—in one hand and a lotus in the other. A consistent element in his iconography is the representation of a book—sometimes he holds the text aloft, sometimes it rises out of a lotus to one of his sides—which is described in the iconographic manuals that were often used by Buddhist artisans and also by worshippers as the *Perfection of Wisdom* text, of which he is the manifestation.

Avalokiteshvara—He is the quintessential Buddhist savior figure, and the embodiment of compassion, perhaps the most popular of all bodhisattvas in India. His name is indicative of his character: it means “the lord who sees all,” in the sense that he sees the suffering of all living beings and responds immediately. He saves his followers from a set of dangers that are metaphors for the perils inherent in the world of *samsara*: fire, drowning in a river, being lost at sea, murder, demonic attack, fierce beasts and noxious snakes or insects, legal punishment, attack by bandits, falling from precipices, extremes of weather, internecine civil or military unrest, and others. In the sculpture of the early Mahayana in India, he is depicted in dozens of forms: frequently, he has several eyes, denoting his compassionate omniscience, and sometimes multiple heads, as in the *dasanukha* (ten-faced) iconography; he also nearly always has multiple hands, in which he holds various implements that aid him in his salvific endeavors.

Maitreya—The Buddha of the future, the final manifestation of Buddhahood to appear in the world. According to some Mahayana scriptures, building on an idea mentioned in the early Pali texts, eventually the Buddha’s

teachings will lose their potency due to the natural decay of the world. When things become unbearable and no spiritual progress is possible, Maitreya will be reborn, who will provide for the welfare of all beings and promote a new set of teachings. In sculpture, he is often depicted as a crowned, royal figure (often with a Buddha image or *stupa* on his forehead), and he frequently displays the *dharmachakra mudra*, the gesture of religious discourse, since it is he who will deliver the final version of the *dharma* that will release all beings from *samsara*.

A range of divine and semidivine female figures, who function very similarly to the male bodhisattvas, is also discussed and described in Mahayana texts. It has been suggested that the existence of these female figures in the Mahayana pantheon is indicative of a more gender-inclusive attitude in Mahayana Buddhism. This is certainly possible, although it is not always clear from the texts. What can be said for certain is that in Mahayana symbolism and rhetoric, there is an elevation of female imagery and metaphor. Two of the most popular female figures are Tara and Prajnaparamita.

Tara emerges in the Mahayana as a divine savior who protects and nurtures her devotees; her name literally means "star," and she was perhaps originally associated, in particular, with guiding sailors, and is sometimes referred to as *jagat tarini*, the "deliverer of the world." She is depicted in numerous forms, sometimes seated with a book, sometimes standing displaying variations of the

abhayamudra (the gesture of no fear) or making a hand gesture of giving, and is intimately associated with the lotus, denoting her characteristic purity.

Prajnaparamita is the personification of the *Perfection of Wisdom* texts (*Prajnaparamita Sutras*), and is described as wisdom incarnate, the divine "mother" of all enlightened beings. She is typically seated, legs crossed, and has either two or four arms; she almost always forms the *dharmacakra mudra*, holding both a lotus (emblematic of the purity of her teachings) and the text of which she is the embodiment.

In addition to the bodhisattvas and the female divinities, the Mahayana also propounded, extending their understanding of the continued presence of the Buddha in the world, the concept that there were both multiple buddhas and also multiple planes of existence. This can become very complex. Essentially, they took the idea, which, as we have seen, appears very early in Buddhism, that the Buddha remains, in some sense, an active presence in the world, and simply expanded this. It is not just that the Buddha himself remains present; rather, his essential nature, his *buddhata* (literally, Buddhanness), remains, not only in the form of the bodhisattvas, but also in the form of other buddhas. These buddhas, who are at least theoretically infinite in number, reside in various higher realms, called Pure Lands.

Legitimizing “New” Scriptures and Doctrines

One issue that immediately arises with the Mahayana is, if what the Mahayana presents really is true doctrine, then why did the Buddha himself not speak about such matters? Why did he make no mention of these bodhisattvas? Indeed, the non-Mahayana monks, those who called themselves initially Sthaviravadins and later became known as the Theravadins, charged that the Mahayana was simply inventing new doctrines and new scriptures. As such, their ideas were at best misinterpretations and at worst heresy, because they did not meet the basic criterion for doctrinal legitimacy—they were not *buddhavaṇṇa*.

This was not a new problem in Buddhism. According to some early scriptures, as well as the Theravadin historical chronicles, the Buddhist canon was set at the first council, held at Rajagriha shortly after the Buddha's death. The Theravadins claimed that they strictly adhered to this canon—hence their name, the “doctrine of the elders.” In fact, though, there was much ongoing debate over the issue of what should or should not be considered “doctrine” in the centuries after the Buddha's death. Several different versions of the canon seem to have been in circulation, as well as different versions of the *Jataka* and *Avadana*—stories about the Buddha's prior lives and his activities in his final

manifestation on earth. The Sarvastivadins, for example, are known to have complained that there were monks who had added new—and false—*Vinaya* and *Abhidharma* texts to the canon. As the movement that eventually became known as the Mahayana grew, these complaints became more and more pointed. The Theravadins frequently charged that the monks of the Mahayana simply invented new scriptures, *sūtras* that were not the speech of the Buddha but the invention of poets.

Although it is dubious on purely historical evidence, the Mahayana in fact presents a corpus of “new” *sūtras* that it claims were spoken by Shakyamuni himself. There are different versions of how this might have been possible: One, for instance, has it that the Buddha originally taught the Mahayana doctrines but that eventually there were no competent teachers or students left to carry on the teachings, so he had them entrusted to his friends the Nagas—the mythical serpents of many Buddhist texts who protect the religion—until a skillful teacher emerged (often said to be the great South Indian philosopher Nagarjuna).

At any rate, even though it seems fairly certain that these *sūtras* were not the actual speech of the Buddha, it is equally certain that the monks of the Mahayana genuinely saw themselves as proponents of a doctrine that was more in keeping with the teachings of the Buddha than that offered up by their Theravada counterparts.

FROM A CLASSIC TEXT ❖ 6.2

Among the earliest of Mahayana Buddhist texts are the Perfection of Wisdom, or Prajnaparamita, Sutras, which were probably composed beginning in about 100 B.C.E. Some of these texts were extremely long—up to 100,000 verses—making them extremely difficult to memorize, transcribe, and transport. The Hrdaya Sutra, or Heart Sutra, is the shortest and perhaps also the most popular sutra in Mahayana Buddhism. It summarizes, in an extremely condensed form, the fundamental teaching of the larger Perfection of Wisdom texts. In particular, the Heart Sutra expresses the early Mahayana emphasis on the emptiness, or shunyata, of all things.

Adoration to the Omniscient!

This I heard: At one time the Bhagavat dwelt at Ragagriha, on the hill Gridhrakuta, together with a large number of Bhikshus and a large number of Bodhisattvas.

At that time the Bhagavat was absorbed in a meditation, called Gambhiravasambodha. And at the same time the great Bodhisattva Aryavalokitesvara, performing his study in the deep Prajnaparamita, thought thus: "There are the five Skandhas, and those he (the Buddha?) considered as something by nature empty."

Then the venerable Shariputra, through Buddha's power, thus spoke to the Bodhisattva Aryavalokitesvara: "If the son or daughter of a family wishes to perform the study in the deep Prajnaparamita, how is he to be taught?"

On this the great Bodhisattva Aryavalokitesvara thus spoke to the venerable Shariputra: "If the son or daughter of a family wishes to perform the study in the deep Prajnaparamita, he must think thus:

"There are five Skandhas, and these he considered as by their nature empty. Form is emptiness, and emptiness indeed is form. Emptiness is not different from form, form is not different from emptiness. What is form that is emptiness, what is emptiness that is form. Thus perception, name, conception, and knowledge also are emptiness. Thus, O Shariputra, all things have the character of emptiness, they have no beginning, no end, they are faultless and not faultless, they are not imperfect and not perfect. Therefore, O Shariputra, here in this emptiness there is no form, no perception, no name, no concept, no knowledge. No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. No form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and objects. There is no eye," &c., till we come to "there is no mind, no objects, no mind-knowledge. There is no knowledge, no ignorance, no destruction (of ignorance)," till we come to "there is no decay and death, no destruction of decay and death; there are not (the Four Truths, viz.) that there is pain, origin of pain, stoppage of pain, and the path to it. There is no knowledge, no obtaining, no not-obtaining of Nirvana.

Therefore, O Shariputra, as there is no obtaining (of Nirvana), a man who has approached the Prajnaparamita of the Bodhisattvas, dwells (for a time) enveloped in consciousness. But when the envelopment of consciousness has been annihilated, then he becomes free of all fear, beyond the reach of change, enjoying final Nirvana.

"All Buddhas of the past, present, and future, after approaching the Prajnaparamita, have awoke to the highest perfect knowledge.

"Therefore we ought to know the great verse of the Prajnaparamita, the verse of the great wisdom, the unsurpassed verse, the verse which appeases all pain—it is truth, because it is not false—the verse proclaimed in the Prajnaparamita: 'O wisdom, gone, gone, gone to the other shore, landed at the other shore, Svaha!'

"Thus, O Sariputra, should a Bodhisattva teach in the study of the deep Prajnaparamita."

Then when the Bhagavat had risen from that meditation, he gave his approval to the venerable Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, saying: "Well done, well done, noble son! So it is, noble son. So indeed must this study of the deep Prajnaparamita be performed. As it has been described by thee, it is applauded by Arhat Tathagatas." Thus spoke Bhagavat with joyful mind. And the venerable Sariputra, and the honourable Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, and the whole assembly, and the world of gods, men, demons, and fairies praised the speech of the Bhagavat.

Here ends the Prajnaparamitahridayasutra.

(*The Heart Sutra [Hrdaya Sutra]*, in *Buddhist Mahayana Texts*. Translated by E. B. Cowell, F. Max Müller, and J. Takakusu. Sacred Books of the East, vol. 49. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894, 147–149.)

Although it would be impossible to cover all of the significant points of Mahayana doctrine in this context, some of the most important ideas of this new school were the following:

Emptiness, or shunyata. A concept that first appears in the *Perfection of Wisdom* texts, this idea extends the Buddha's teachings about dependent origination, and posits that since all phenomena are dependent for their being on some other thing, they cannot be considered, in themselves, to have any essence or ultimate reality. The first-century thinker Nagarjuna introduces the most radical

understanding of this concept, arguing that just as the terms "long" and "short" take on meaning only in relation to each other and are themselves devoid of independent qualities (longness or shortness), so too do all phenomena (all *dharma*s) lack own being (*svabhava*). If a thing were to have an independent and unchanging own being, Nagarjuna reasons, then it would follow that it is neither produced nor existent, because origination and existence presuppose change and transience. All things, physical as well as mental, can originate and develop only when they are

empty of own being. Nevertheless, Nagarjuna contends, elements do have what he calls a conventional reality, so that we still interact with them, think thoughts, and so on, even if ultimately they are empty of reality. Related to this is the concept of skillful means, *upaya*, which refers to the bodhisattva's employment of whatever means necessary to help beings move toward enlightenment. Language, for instance, is itself empty, in that it depends on external references to make sense, but language is necessary in order to spread the *dharma*.

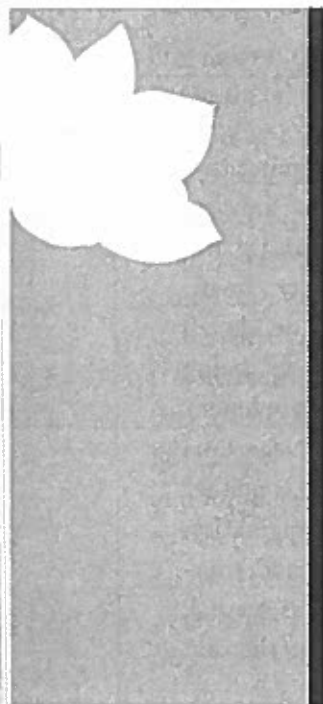
Wisdom. In the Pali texts of the Theravada, wisdom, or *panna*, is described as being the penultimate step on the Buddhist path; it is wisdom that leads, essentially, directly to enlightenment. For the Mahayana monks,

this wisdom—*prajna* in Sanskrit, in which they composed their *sutras*—became paramount, the focus of their understanding of the Buddha's *dharma*. Indeed, perhaps the earliest texts that can be said to be purely Mahayana were the *Perfection of Wisdom (Prajnaparamita) Sutras*, which range in length from only a few dozen verses to 100,000. Wisdom is not to be confused with knowledge, but is a radically different way of perceiving and responding to the world. It is that wisdom that enables one to see through illusion, which cuts through grasping and the suffering it engenders, and that leads to enlightenment. The bodhisattvas are, according to the Mahayana, those beings who have perfect *prajna*.

Personalities in Buddhism 6.2

NAGARJUNA

Often referred to as "the second Buddha" by Tibetan and East Asian Mahayana traditions of Buddhism, Nagarjuna proffered trenchant criticisms of Brahmanical and Buddhist substantialist philosophy, theory of knowledge, and approaches to practice. Nagarjuna's central concept of the "emptiness (*shunyata*) of all things (*dharmas*)," which pointed to the incessantly changing, and so never fixed, nature of all phenomena, served as much the terminological prop of subsequent Buddhist philosophical thinking as the vexation of opposed Vedic systems. The concept had fundamental implications for Indian philosophical models of causation, substance ontology, epistemology, conceptualizations of language, ethics and theories of world-liberating salvation, and proved seminal even for Buddhist philosophies in India, Tibet, China, and Japan, very different from Nagarjuna's own. Indeed, it would not be an overstatement to say that Nagarjuna's innovative concept of emptiness, though it was hermeneutically appropriated in many different ways by subsequent philosophers



in both South and East Asia, was to profoundly influence the character of Buddhist thought.

Few details about Nagarjuna's life are known, although there are many legends about him. He may have been born in the second century C.E., in South India, near the town of Nagarjunakonda in modern Andhra Pradesh. According to traditional biographers, he was born into a brahmin family and later converted to Buddhism.

Nagarjuna knew the Pali Canon, and seems to have considered himself an adherent to the Theravada *Nikayas*, although he is often regarded as a Mahayana Buddhist. The most influential of his many texts is the *Mulamadhyamakakarika* (Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way), which contains the essence of his complex thought in twenty-seven chapters.

Although he is traditionally celebrated in the Mahayana as the founder of that school of Buddhism, it is doubtful that Nagarjuna saw himself as radically breaking with tradition. Rather, he was responding to and extending a number of debates within the *Abhidharma* philosophical context. Nagarjuna pushed the basic teachings of dependent origination (*pratityasamutpada*, in Sanskrit), and argued that since all things are ultimately empty of what he termed *svabhava*, or "own nature"—in line with the fundamental truth of "no self" taught by the Buddha—then all things must, logically, be empty of being. He also propounded that the Buddha employed the "two-truth" doctrine; there is an absolute truth, and a conventional truth that is employed to make known the absolute truth. Thus, people conventionally talk about a person, with a personality, when in fact no such person can absolutely exist, since he or she has no permanent self. Nagarjuna put forth the concept of *shunyata*, and pushed it to its logical extreme, essentially propounding a profoundly deconstructive philosophy, which broke down all attempts to understand the world in terms of fixed substances and essences.

Just as it is uncertain when and where he was born, it is unknown when exactly Nagarjuna died. Tibetan biographies say that when Nagarjuna's patron died, the new king, a brahmin, wanted a spiritual advisor more in keeping with his own religious tenets. He asked Nagarjuna to commit suicide out of compassion. Nagarjuna agreed, decapitating himself with a blade of holy grass.

FROM A CLASSIC TEXT ❖ 6.3

Like the Heart Sutra, the Diamond Sutra (Vajracchedika Sutra) is a condensed version of the much longer Perfection of Wisdom (Prajnaparamita) texts that were among the earliest and the most important Mahayana Buddhist texts produced in India beginning in about 100 B.C.E. The Diamond Sutra was extremely popular in early Mahayana Buddhism—and continues to be today—no doubt due to its brevity and clarity of doctrine. Whereas the emphasis in the much shorter Heart Sutra is almost solely placed on the central Mahayana doctrine of emptiness (shunyata), the Diamond Sutra is somewhat more expansive in its discussion of doctrine. In the passages that follow, a particular characteristic of many early Mahayana texts is emphasized: the degree to which the text celebrates itself as the foremost expression of the Buddha's dharma, to the point that anyone who copies, writes, or hears the sutra gains more merit than virtually any other activity. Indeed, the text should be revered in the same way that a chaitya—a repository containing the physical relics of the Buddha—should be treated.

III

Then the Bhagavat thus spoke to him: "Any one, O Subhuti, who has entered here on the path of the Bodhisattvas must thus frame his thought: As many beings as there are in this world of beings, comprehended under the term of beings (either born of eggs, or from the womb, or from moisture, or miraculously), with form or without form, with name or without name, or neither with nor without name, as far as any known world of beings is known, all these must be delivered by me in the perfect world of Nirvana. And yet, after I have thus delivered immeasurable beings, not one single being has been delivered. And why? If, O Subhuti, a Bodhisattva had any idea of (belief in) a being, he could not be called a Bodhisattva (one who is fit to become a Buddha). And why? Because, O Subhuti, no one is to be called a Bodhisattva, for whom there should exist the idea of a being, the idea of a living being, or the idea of a person."

VIII

Bhagavat said: "What do you think, O Subhuti, if a son or daughter of a good family filled this sphere of a million millions of worlds with the seven gems or treasures, and gave it as a gift to the holy and enlightened Tathagatas, would that son or daughter of a good family on the strength of this produce a large stock of merit?" Subhuti said: "Yes, O Bhagavat, yes, O Sugata, that son or daughter of a good family would on the strength of this produce a large stock of merit. And why? Because, O Bhagavat, what was preached by the Tathagata as the stock of merit, that was preached by the Tathagata as no-stock of merit. Therefore the Tathagata preaches: 'A stock of merit, a stock of merit indeed!'" Bhagavat said: "And if, O Subhuti, the son or daughter

of a good family should fill this sphere of a million millions of worlds with the seven treasures and should give it as a gift to the holy and enlightened Tathagatas, and if another after taking from this treatise of the Law one Gatha of four lines only should fully teach others and explain it, he indeed would on the strength of this produce a larger stock of merit immeasurable and innumerable. And why? Because, O Subhuti, the highest perfect knowledge of the holy and enlightened Tathagatas is produced from it; the blessed Buddhas are produced from it. . . .”

XI

Bhagavat said: “What do you think, O Subhuti, if there were as many Ganga rivers as there are grains of sand in the large river Ganga, would the grains of sand be many?” Subhuti said: “Those Ganga rivers would indeed be many, much more the grains of sand in those Ganga rivers.” Bhagavat said: “I tell you, O Subhuti, I announce to you, If a woman or man were to fill with the seven treasures as many worlds as there would be grains of sand in those Ganga rivers and present them as a gift to the holy and fully enlightened Tathagatas—What do you think, O Subhuti, would that woman or man on the strength of this produce a large stock of merit?” Subhuti said: “Yes, O Bhagavat, yes, O Sugata, that woman or man would on the strength of this produce a large stock of merit, immeasurable and innumerable.” Bhagavat said: “And if, O Subhuti, a woman or man having filled so many worlds with the seven treasures should give them as a gift to the holy and enlightened Tathagatas, and if another son or daughter of a good family, after taking from this treatise of the Law one Gatha of four lines only, should fully teach others and explain it, he, indeed, would on the strength of this produce a larger stock of merit, immeasurable and innumerable.”

XII

“Then again, O Subhuti, that part of the world in which, after taking from this treatise of the Law one Gatha of four lines only, it should be preached or explained, would be like a Chaitya (holy shrine) for the whole world of gods, men, and spirits; what should we say then of those who learn the whole of this treatise of the Law to the end, who repeat it, understand it, and fully explain it to others? They, O Subhuti, will be endowed with the highest wonder. And in that place, O Subhuti, there dwells the teacher, or one after another holding the place of the wise preceptor.”

XV

“And if, O Subhuti, a woman or man sacrificed in the morning as many lives as there are grains of sand in the river Ganga and did the same at noon and the same in the evening, and if in this way they sacrificed their lives for a hundred thousands of *niyutas* of *kotis* of ages, and if

another, after hearing this treatise of the Law, should not oppose it, then the latter would on the strength of this produce a larger stock of merit, immeasurable and innumerable. What should we say then of him who after having written it, learns it, remembers it, understands it, and fully explains it to others?

"And again, O Subhuti, this treatise of the Law is incomprehensible and incomparable. And this treatise of the Law has been preached by the Tathagata for the benefit of those beings who entered on the foremost path (the path that leads to Nirvana), and who entered on the best path. And those who will learn this treatise of the Law, who will remember it, recite it, understand it, and fully explain it to others, they are known, O Subhuti, by the Tathagata through his Buddha-knowledge, they are seen, O Subhuti, by the Tathagata through his Buddha-eye. All these beings, O Subhuti, will be endowed with an immeasurable stock of merit, they will be endowed with an incomprehensible, incomparable, immeasurable and unmeasured stock of merit. All these beings, O Subhuti, will equally remember the Bodhi (the highest Buddha-knowledge), will recite it, and understand it. And why? Because it is not possible, O Subhuti, that this treatise of the Law should be heard by beings of little faith, by those who believe in self, in beings, in living beings, and in persons. It is impossible that this treatise of the Law should be heard by beings who have not acquired the knowledge of Bodhisattvas, or that it should be learned, remembered, recited, and understood by them. The thing is impossible.

"And again, O Subhuti, that part of the world in which this Sutra will be propounded, will have to be honoured by the whole world of gods, men, and evil spirits, will have to be worshipped, and will become like a Chaitya (a holy sepulchre)."

(*The Vajracchedika*, in *Buddhist Mahayana Texts*. Translated by E. B. Cowell, F. Max Müller and J. Takakusu. Sacred Books of the East, vol. 49. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894.)

Compassion. The Mahayana texts place a great deal of emphasis on the selfless compassion of the buddhas and the bodhisattvas. It is, for instance, Avalokiteshvara's perfectly realized compassion that causes him to come to the aid of suffering beings. Again, this is not a new idea, but rather one that the Mahayana monks felt was overlooked or underemphasized by their Theravada counterparts. The Buddha himself, some texts argue, attained enlightenment out of his own compassion for the suffering in the world—recall that he

says, explicitly, that he is abandoning his throne as a prince and father not out of selfishness but out of compassion. He sets out not to save himself, but to save the world. Thus for Mahayana, this compassion is at the root of the Buddha's message. It is this compassion, furthermore, that enables the bodhisattva to lead him or her to stay in the world to assist other living beings who are still flounder in the sea of *samsara*.

Skillful Means. The idea that the buddhas and bodhisattvas are able to help beings us

any means necessary, and that they do so with the enlightened knowledge of what each being most needs and is most able to comprehend, is integral to Mahayana thought; this is skillful means, or *upaya*. A classic example of this is found in a later story, "The Parable of the Burning House." The bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara sees several children trapped in a burning house, and rather than yell "Fire, Fire," which he sees will only frighten them, he tells them that he has wonderful toys for them to play with outside of the house, and they run out, saved. In other words, the bodhisattva tailors the dharmic message to the particular pupil.

The Doctrine of the Two Truths. Related to the idea of skillful means, this is a sometimes-complex philosophical doctrine, most famously propounded by Nagarjuna, which holds, essentially, that there is an ultimate and a relative reality. The ultimate reality is that all things are empty, and thus unreal, only illusions created by ignorance. The relative reality, however, is our perception of them. Words, for instance, are ultimately empty, and are dependent on something else for their meaning; however, words are necessary, in a relative sense, in order to make the ultimate reality known.

FROM A CLASSIC TEXT ❖ 6.4

One of the central concepts of early Mahayana Buddhism is the principle of skillful means, or upaya. According to the doctrine of upaya, the Buddha and the bodhisattvas, out of their selfless compassion to save all beings from samsara, use any means possible to enlighten beings, including, if necessary, telling a lie. In the following passage, taken from the Lotus Sutra, one of the most influential of all Mahayana texts, the metaphor of the "burning house," one of the most famous metaphors in all of Mahayana Buddhism, is used to explain the need for skillful means.

Chapter 3

Let us suppose the following case, Sariputra. In a certain village, town, borough, province, kingdom, or capital, there was a certain housekeeper, old, aged, decrepit, very advanced in years, rich, wealthy, opulent; he had a great house, high, spacious, built a long time ago and old, inhabited by some two, three, four, or five hundred living beings. The house had but one door, and a thatch; its terraces were tottering, the bases of its pillars rotten, the coverings and plaster of the walls loose. On a sudden the whole house was from every side put in conflagration by a mass of fire. Let us suppose that the man had many little boys, say five, or ten, or even twenty, and that he himself had come out of the house.

Now, Sariputra, that man, on seeing the house from every side wrapt in a blaze by a great mass of fire, got afraid, frightened, anxious in his mind, and made the following reflection: I

myself am able to come out from the burning house through the door, quickly and safely, without being touched or scorched by that great mass of fire; but my children, those young boys, are staying in the burning house, playing, amusing, and diverting themselves with all sorts of sports. They do not perceive, nor know, nor understand, nor mind that the house is on fire, and do not get afraid. Though scorched by that great mass of fire, and affected with such a mass of pain, they do not mind the pain, nor do they conceive the idea of escaping.

The man, Sariputra, is strong, has powerful arms, and (so) he makes this reflection: I am strong, and have powerful arms; why, let me gather all my little boys and take them to my breast to effect their escape from the house. A second reflection then presented itself to his mind: This house has but one opening; the door is shut; and those boys, fickle, unsteady, and childlike as they are, will, it is to be feared, run hither and thither, and come to grief and disaster in this mass of fire. Therefore I will warn them. So resolved, he calls to the boys: Come, my children; the house is burning with a mass of fire; come, lest ye be burnt in that mass of fire, and come to grief and disaster. But the ignorant boys do not heed the words of him who is their well-wisher; they are not afraid, not alarmed, and feel no misgiving; they do not care, nor fly, nor even know nor understand the purport of the word "burning"; on the contrary, they run hither and thither, walk about, and repeatedly look at their father; all, because they are so ignorant.

Then the man is going to reflect thus: The house is burning, is blazing by a mass of fire. It is to be feared that myself as well as my children will come to grief and disaster. Let me therefore by some skilful means get the boys out of the house. The man knows the disposition of the boys, and has a clear perception of their inclinations. Now these boys happen to have many and manifold toys to play with, pretty, nice, pleasant, dear, amusing, and precious. The man, knowing the disposition of the boys, says to them: My children, your toys, which are so pretty, precious, and admirable, which you are so loth to miss, which are so various and multifarious, (such as) bullock-carts, goat-carts, deer-carts, which are so pretty, nice, dear, and precious to you, have all been put by me outside the house-door for you to play with. Come, run out, leave the house; to each of you I shall give what he wants. Come soon; come out for the sake of these toys. And the boys, on hearing the names mentioned of such playthings as they like and desire, so agreeable to their taste, so pretty, dear, and delightful, quickly rush out from the burning house, with eager effort and great alacrity, one having no time to wait for the other, and pushing each other on with the cry of "Who shall arrive first, the very first?"

The man, seeing that his children have safely and happily escaped, and knowing that they are free from danger, goes and sits down in the open air on the square of the village, his heart filled with joy and delight, released from trouble and hindrance, quite at ease. The boys go up to the place where their father is sitting, and say: "Father, give us those toys to play with, those bullock-carts, goat-carts, and deer-carts." Then, Sariputra, the man gives to his sons, who run swift as the wind, bullock-carts only, made of seven precious substances, provided with benches, hung

with a multitude of small bells, lofty, adorned with rare and wonderful jewels, embellished with jewel wreaths, decorated with garlands of flowers, carpeted with cotton mattresses and woollen coverlets, covered with white cloth and silk, having on both sides rosy cushions, yoked with white, very fair and fleet bullocks, led by a multitude of men. To each of his children he gives several bullock-carts of one appearance and one kind, provided with flags, and swift as the wind. That man does so, Sariputra, because being rich, wealthy, and in possession of many treasures and granaries, he rightly thinks: Why should I give these boys inferior carts, all these boys being my own children, dear and precious? I have got such great vehicles, and ought to treat all the boys equally and without partiality. As I own many treasures and granaries, I could give such great vehicles to all beings, how much more then to my own children. Meanwhile the boys are mounting the vehicles with feelings of astonishment and wonder. Now, Sariputra, what is thy opinion? Has that man made himself guilty of a falsehood by first holding out to his children the prospect of three vehicles and afterwards giving to each of them the greatest vehicles only, the most magnificent vehicles?

Sariputra answered: By no means, Lord; by no means, Sugata. That is not sufficient, O Lord, to qualify the man as a speaker of falsehood, since it only was a skilful device to persuade his children to go out of the burning house and save their lives. Nay, besides recovering their very body, O Lord, they have received all those toys. If that man, O Lord, had given no single cart, even then he would not have been a speaker of falsehood, for he had previously been meditating on saving the little boys from a great mass of pain by some able device. Even in this case, O Lord, the man would not have been guilty of falsehood, and far less now that he, considering his having plenty of treasures and prompted by no other motive but the love of his children, gives to all, to coax them, vehicles of one kind, and those the greatest vehicles. That man, Lord, is not guilty of falsehood.

(*The Saddharma-Piṇḍarika, or The Lotus of the True Law*. Translated by H. Kern. Sacred Books of the East, vol. 21. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1884.)

It should be clear that these doctrines really are not new. Indeed, the Mahayana monks did not see themselves as presenting something new at all, but felt that they were, essentially, returning to the real heart of the Buddha's message, a message that they felt some monks—most notably those concerned with the philosophical complexity

of the *Abhidharma*—had lost the essence of. Ironically, perhaps, as the Mahayana expanded in India and eventually spread to other parts of Asia, especially China and Japan, it too became more and more philosophically complex, and thus in a sense was guilty of the very philosophical excess that it was, originally, attempting to correct.

Personalities in Buddhism 6.3

VASUBANDHU

Along with his brother, Asanga, Vasubandhu is credited with founding the Yogacara school of Mahayana Buddhism in the fifth century. Vasubandhu was born in Gandhara, in northwest India, into a brahmin family. As a student, he astounded his teachers with his insightful mind. He entered the *sangha* and devoted himself to mastering Buddhist scholastics, particularly the Vaibhashika (or Sarvastivadin) *Abhidharma* literature. However, he began to see serious flaws in the logic of this *Abhidharma* corpus. Vasubandhu is said to have materially supported himself by lecturing on Buddhism; during the day he would lecture on Vaibhashika doctrine and in the evening condense the day's lectures into verses. These became the *Abhidharmakosha* (the Treasury of *Abhidharma*). When collected together, the six hundred plus verses gave a thorough summary of his entire philosophical system.

In the *Abhidharmakosha*, Vasubandhu analyzes seventy-five *dharma*s, the fundamental components of human experience. He divides them into various categories, offering detailed definitions of each one and examining their karmic interrelatedness as well as karmic qualities.

According to his biographers, Vasubandhu then spent several years traveling about South Asia, studying with various teachers. He apparently had little contact with his brother, Asanga, who had converted to the Mahayana school. According to the eighteenth-century Tibetan historian and biographer Bu-ston, Vasubandhu said as follows about his brother and his philosophical leanings: "Alas, Asanga, residing in the forest, has practised meditation for twelve years. Without having attained anything by this meditation, he has founded a system, so difficult and burdensome, that it can be carried only by an elephant." Asanga, however, expounded to his brother the superior teachings of the Mahayana, and Vasubandhu converted. He then began composing a series of commentaries on crucial Mahayana texts: on the *Akshayamatinirdesha* and *Dashabhumika Sutras*, on the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, the *Mahayanasamgraha*, the *Nirvana Sutra*, and the *Vimalakirtinirdesha* and *Shrimaladevi Sutras*. He received patronage from two Gupta rulers in India, Skandagupta (455–467 C.E.) and Narasimhagupta (467–473 C.E.). He was celebrated as a great debater, in particular, to the point that the ruler Chandragupta II is said to have rewarded him with 300,000 gold coins for victory in a debate over the Samkhyas. According to his biographers, Vasubandhu used this money

to build three monasteries, one for the Mahayanists, one for the Sarvastivadins, and one for nuns.

Vasubandhu has been one of the most influential of all Mahayana thinkers. After Nagarjuna's writings, Vasubandhu's extensive commentaries are among the most important Mahayana Buddhist texts, and continue to be essential in the training of monks, throughout the Buddhist world. In that text, Vasubandhu articulates an extremely important Yogacara point, that since without consciousness nothing can be apprehended, it is therefore consciousness that is the necessary condition for existence. Thus, from the Yogacara perspective, what we believe to be external objects are actually nothing more than mental projections, and so what we think, know, conceptualize, or experience, all really only occur to us in our consciousness, and nowhere else. Vasubandhu's philosophical writings became essential texts in the formation of not only Tibetan Buddhism, but also the Pure Land and Ch'an/Zen schools in China and Japan. Indeed, he came to be regarded as a bodhisattva in some traditions in India, China, and Tibet.

Conclusion

In a sense, it would seem that the new Mahayana and the older Theravada schools would have seen each other as adversaries, and in some important ways this was indeed the case. Each school polemically attacked the other, charging them with propounding heretical doctrines and practices. However, this is only part of the picture. First, it was only later that the two schools really became distinctly defined. Initially, as we have seen, they were simply different subsets of a single Buddhism, groups of monks with different interpretations of the Buddha's message. Second, it is clear from inscriptional evidence that monks who identified themselves as Theravadins (or Sthaviravadins) and those who identified themselves as Mahayanists (or

Mahasamghikas) lived in the same monasteries. This implies, then, that they saw themselves not as enemies, but as coreligionists, each pursuing the same goal along slightly different, but ultimately parallel, paths.

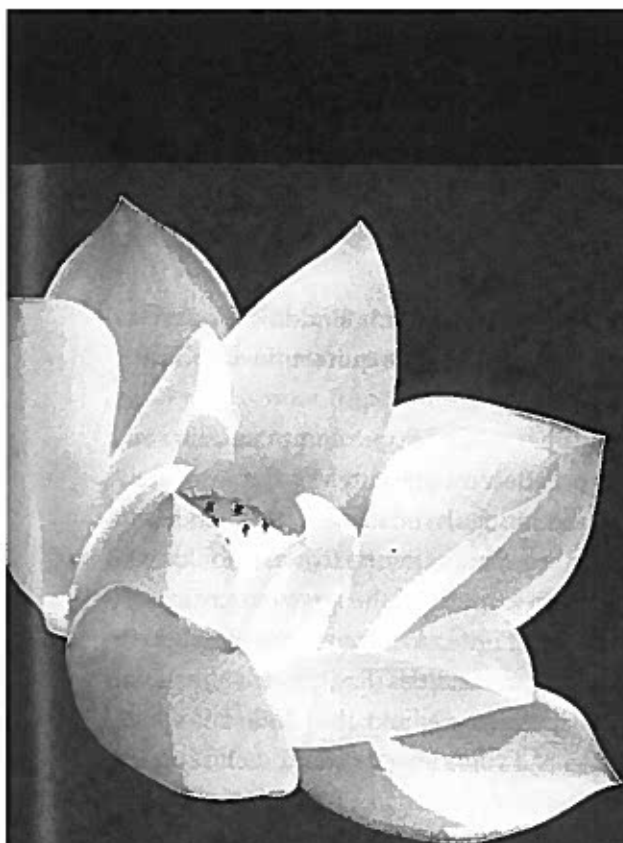
This is in keeping with the fundamental spirit of Buddhism, in that the Buddha recognized, quite explicitly, that there were necessarily different ways to progress toward enlightenment and that different people had different abilities to comprehend and follow his teachings. It may be that the Mahayana was successful in India and elsewhere precisely because it appealed to a different group of people than those who were drawn to the Theravada. Unfortunately, the historical evidence to really demonstrate this point is rather sketchy. What can be said with certainty, however, is that the emergence of the

Mahayana is best understood in the context of a constantly changing Buddhism. From the moment it emerged in India, Buddhism adapted to a variety of contexts, and as it adapted, it nec-

essarily changed. But as the Buddha so consistently emphasized, change is the very nature of the world.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- 1 Why is the Mahayana called "the Mahayana"?
- 2 What is new about the Mahayana conception of the Bodhisattva?
- 3 What is the Mahayana conception of wisdom?
- 4 What is emptiness?



Chapter 7

CONCLUSION

The Decline of Buddhism in India and Its Rise Elsewhere

Buddhism has always been a missionizing religion. As we have seen, as Buddhism became more established in its homeland, India, it also spread to other parts of Asia: Sri Lanka to the south; Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia to the southeast; China and Japan to the east; Nepal and Tibet to the north. As it did so, Buddhism changed in significant ways, adapting to its various local contexts. New philosophical ideas, new ritual practices, and new art forms were developed. Thus, in China, Taoist and Confucianist ideas were incorporated into Buddhism, and in Tibet the indigenous Bon tradition became an integral part of Tibetan Buddhism. Buddhism also eventually made its way to the West, where it underwent even more dramatic changes.

Ironically, as Buddhism expanded outside of its homeland, it also began to decline there. In this final chapter, we will explore some of the reasons for the gradual disappearance of Buddhism in its homeland, and then turn to a discussion of how Buddhism has continued to flourish outside of India, particularly in the West.

Why Buddhism Died Out in India

As various Mahayana Buddhist schools developed in India after the first few centuries of the Common Era, the Buddhist pantheon expanded tremendously, especially with the introduction of the various bodhisattvas. It

has been generally assumed that the bodhisattvas were one of the reasons Buddhism continued to thrive in India during this period. They offered the Buddhist layperson an image of compassion, a comforting aid in the long journey toward enlightenment. Although it may be true that the Mahayana image of the bodhisattva helped Buddhism gain a degree of popular support, it is probably an oversimplification. For at the same time, Buddhism had become an increasingly philosophical affair in India, and as monks became more concerned with scholastic issues—incredibly complex philosophical issues, the abstruse minutiae of logic—they also became increasingly removed from the life of the layperson.

Beginning in the fifth and sixth centuries, huge monasteries began to be built in India, some of them housing upward of 10,000 monks, monasteries that were very much like modern universities in the West. It would be inaccurate to suggest that all Buddhist monks in medieval India were scholastically oriented, or even that they were actively engaged in philosophical speculation such as that found in the large *Abhidharma* compendiums or the voluminous Mahayana doctrinal examinations. Many monks continued to live very much as the Buddha himself proscribed, as simple, itinerant ascetics who interacted with laypeople largely on a local level as they passed through their villages, or resided on a semipermanent basis in small village temples and monasteries. However, the monasteries of northeastern India were the heart of Buddhism as an institution—even if there was no centralized institutional

control, ever, in Indian Buddhism—and as such they tended to be quite uninvolved with lay matters.

This has several important practical ramifications. Because the laity was not intimately involved in scholastic matters, they tended to direct their *dana* activities to local monks outside of the context of the large monastic universities. In order to survive, therefore, these monastic universities had to seek material support elsewhere, and they found it where monks had traditionally found such support: with the king.

Buddhist kings had long been prominent in the various kingdoms of northern India, beginning with the Kushana dynasty in the early centuries of the first millennium and extending to the Palas, a lineage of kings who ruled much of northern India beginning in the eighth century. By the tenth or eleventh century, though, this support was beginning to wane, and the Pala kings began to shift their royal patronage to Hinduism, particularly Vaishnava Hinduism.

This is not the place to delve into the complexities of Vaishnava Hinduism. However, there are several aspects of this form of Hinduism that may have made it particularly attractive to Indian kings. First, there is the simple fact that devotional Hinduism was on the rise. This may have been due, in part, to the fact that Vaishnava devotionism significantly downplayed caste, and was thus open to all Hindus. Salvation was, at least theoretically, not a matter of birth or the ability to perform particular rituals in a particular way—rituals that were largely the province

of the high-caste brahmins—but a matter of individual devotion and piety.

Perhaps more importantly, because devotional Hinduism downplayed the significance of caste, kings and other political figures may have found it especially attractive. In other words, they may have seen an opportunity for religious status—which was closely tied to political legitimacy in India—in much the same way that kings in the sixth century B.C.E. had found Buddhism to be an attractive religious affiliation. But in the case of Vaishnava Hinduism, there was an added element to this openness: in the root text of the Vaishnava movement within Hinduism, the *Bhagavadgita* (as well as in the larger *Mahabharata* of which it is a part), the heroes are kings, and thus *kshatriyas*. The god Krishna, an *avatara* (literally, “descent”) of the great god Vishnu, comes to the aid of the kings and helps them restore *dharma*, or order, in the world. Indeed, these texts elevate the status of the king in the religion by making an explicit link between the king’s duty to maintain social order and religious progress, and the model king is, in this context, thought to be one who acts as Vishnu himself does—protecting *dharma*. During this period, not surprisingly, Vishnu is typically depicted in Hindu sculpture as a ruler, with a crown and other royal regalia.

As Indian rulers increasingly patronized Hinduism, it became more and more difficult to maintain and administer the large Buddhist monasteries, in part because there simply were not sufficient funds and materials to do so. Indeed, Buddhism may have died out in India—which it did sometime around the

end of the twelfth century—mainly because it had become too large to sustain itself.

Although the rise of Vaishnava Hinduism and the concomitant wavering royal support for monastic Buddhism clearly had a tremendous impact on the religion’s ability to survive and thrive in its homeland, this was not the only factor in Buddhism’s demise in India. Indeed, there were powerful internal factors that seem to have contributed to the gradual erosion of Buddhism in India. For, although Buddhist monasticism had indeed become a highly scholastic, highly philosophical endeavor, not all Buddhist monks found this to be the proper religious path. In addition to the simple village monks just mentioned, some monks also began, probably as early as the eighth century, to be highly critical of the scholastic character of Buddhism, and often unleashed powerful rhetorical attacks on their scholastic brethren.

What is more, some of these monks took an alternate route to enlightenment, abandoning the monastery altogether and taking up residence in the forests and jungles to live as solitary seekers. Some of these monks became known as Siddhas, the “masters,” or “powerful ones.” Initially, the Siddhas were probably solitary individuals, dissenting monks who set off on their own spiritual journeys. But just as the Buddha’s earliest followers eventually banded together to form communities of monks, so too did the Siddhas, establishing a large body of philosophical principles and, especially, ritual practices that collectively became, eventually, a new sub-school of Buddhism—the

Vajrayana, or the Diamond Vehicle, more popularly known as Tantra.

These monks emphasized the fundamental transformative effects of meditation, taking the notion of the bodhisattvas' special powers several steps further than their more mainstream Mahayana counterparts. Through very elaborate meditational and ritual practices, the Siddhas felt that they could transform themselves, not just mentally, but physically as well. Through deep meditation and ritual interaction with specific buddhas and bodhisattvas—practices that included ritual offerings, chanting of powerful verbal formulas (*mantras*), hand gestures (*mudras*), symbolic sexual practices, and visualizations (*sadhana*s)—these monks felt that they could effect a quicker pathway to enlightenment.

It is important to recognize that these monks and their practices were never what could be called "popular religion" in India (although as their teachings and practices spread to Tibet, they became very popular indeed, to the point that the Vajrayana became, and remains to this day, the dominant school of Buddhism there). This is in part due to the simple fact that the Siddhas' teachings and practices were highly esoteric in nature. A monk had to go through a long and arduous initiation process in order to be accepted into the Siddhas' religious world. Furthermore, the Siddhas were intentionally iconoclastic, trying to shock the more mainstream monks out of what Siddhas viewed as their scholastic complacency and their reliance on pure logic for enlightenment. It is not so much the case, then, that the Siddhas drew laypeople away from the larger monastic

institutions in India; rather, they introduced a significant degree of dissent within a monastic community that was already in a growing state of crisis. Furthermore, because Hinduism also developed a Tantric tradition alongside that of Buddhism, with a great deal of ritual and philosophical overlapping, it may be that the lines separating the two traditions became increasingly blurred, which may have resulted in further decreased lay and royal support for Buddhist monks and monasteries.

In the final analysis, though, it is impossible to say exactly how and why Buddhism died out in India. There was no single cause, but a complex confluence of forces from both within the monastic communities and outside. At any rate, by the end of the twelfth century Buddhism was essentially dead in India. But, as it was dying in the country of its emergence, it was thriving elsewhere—in Nepal and Tibet, in China and Japan, in Sri Lanka, and throughout Southeast Asia. Significantly, beginning in the second half of the twentieth century, Buddhism began to make a modest comeback in India, in large part because the social relevance of the Buddha's message was seen as a powerful liberating force for India's outcast population. Thus, shortly after India's independence from Britain, B. R. Ambedkar, the chairman of India's Constitutional Committee—often called the father of the Indian Constitution—himself an untouchable, publicly converted to Buddhism, along with thousands of other untouchables, beginning a movement that would eventually grow to some six million converts.

Furthermore, monks from outside of India—from Sri Lanka and Tibet, mostly, but also from Europe and America—began to establish new monastic institutions in and around Bodhgaya, where the Buddha had attained enlightenment. Additionally, with his exile from Tibet in the 1950s, the Dalai Lama, the spiritual and political leader of Tibet's Buddhist population, set up residence in western India, and was there joined by thousands of Tibetan Buddhists, who found in Buddhism's homeland a new religious freedom. Thus, it may be that just as Buddhism emerged in a world of religious and social flux in India precisely because the Buddha offered a compelling spiritual message for such a context, it may well reemerge for the same reason.

Buddhism in the West

Buddhism first entered the Western consciousness with colonialism. In the nineteenth century, particularly, intellectual interest in Buddhism developed in Europe and North America, leading to the creation of a distinct scholarly field focused on the translation of Buddhist texts from their original languages, as well as their philosophical analysis. Thus, initially at least, Western interest in Buddhism seems to have been largely an academic affair. However, an offshoot of this interest was the gradual availability of books on Buddhist beliefs and practices for the general public. As these ideas became increasingly available, many Europeans and Americans began to turn

to Buddhism. Although there have never been huge numbers of Buddhists in the West—estimates vary, but probably no more than 5 million of the world's 500 million Buddhists live in the West—they have been an important religious presence. It is worth asking, though, what it has been that Westerners have found so appealing about Buddhism.

Let us begin with a simple example, that of the Theosophical Society's adoption of Buddhist ideas. The Theosophical Society was founded in 1875 by Henry Steele Olcott, an American lawyer and Civil War colonel, and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, a Russian émigré who claimed ties to the Russian aristocracy. The Theosophical Society was initially involved with a kind of generalized Eastern spirituality, and especially the occult—Blavatsky put herself forward as a psychic, able to perform physical and mental psychic feats, including levitation and telepathy. Olcott and Blavatsky became increasingly associated with Buddhism, and the two moved to India in the 1880s, Olcott eventually playing a leading role in the Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka at the end of the nineteenth century. Although Olcott was not a scholar, his short summary of Buddhism, *The Buddhist Catechism*, first published in 1881, was widely read in America and England. In this short text, Olcott presents a portrait of Buddhism as a highly rational philosophy, devoid of ritual and superstition.

Olcott's work was hardly the only such account of Buddhism to present such a view of Buddhism to the West; nor was it the most popular. Sir Edwin Arnold, a schoolteacher-turned-poet and journalist, produced a

rapturous account of the life of the Buddha, *The Light of Asia*, which became one of the most popular books in Victorian England. It was first published in 1871 and went through over one hundred printings; at the time it was published, it sold about as many copies as Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and was translated into numerous languages. Although Arnold's book was hardly greeted with unanimous approval in the West—it was denounced, for instance, as “mischievous” and “shallow,” and attacked as an affront to Christianity—*The Light of Asia* fed a growing interest in things Asian both in England and in America. What Western audiences seemed to have found so appealing about the book was the combination of, on one hand, the sheer exoticism of India, and on the other the rational portrait of the Buddha and Buddhism. Over the next few decades, dozens of such books were published in the West.

Thus, in the last part of the nineteenth century, Buddhism was championed by many

in England, Europe, and America as a highly rational religion rivaling—and for many, surpassing—Protestant Christianity. The Buddha was frequently held up as something like an ideal Victorian gentleman, a great reformer compared to Martin Luther, a man who fought for the abolition of caste and who railed against a corrupt priesthood. Leaving aside the accuracy of such a portrait, it was certainly attractive to many Westerners who found fault in their own religious traditions. This particular image of Buddhism was not the only one that found purchase in the West. Beginning in the early part of the twentieth century, Zen Buddhism in particular became an object of fascination in the West and continues to be a significant presence on the Western religious landscape. Indeed, one need only enter a bookstore in any mall in America to see the presence of Zen: one is confronted almost immediately with a mind-boggling array of “Zen and the Art of” books, topics ranging from fixing motorcycles to changing diapers.

Personalities in Buddhism 7.1

PADMASAMBHAVA (Guru Rinpoche)

Regarded by many Tibetans as the second Buddha, and considered to be an incarnation of the *dhyana* Buddha Amitabha, Padmasambhava is credited with bringing Buddhism to Tibet in the ninth century C.E. Tibetan mytho-history holds that King Trisong Detsen invited Padmasambhava, then a monk in India, to Tibet in order to battle the demons who had overrun the country.

As is the case with the Buddha, Padmasambhava's life story is punctuated with myths and miracles. Traditional accounts of his life hold that he was discovered by the



ruler of a kingdom in northern India, who came upon a large closed lotus—a prominent symbol for absolute purity and enlightenment in Buddhism—in a lake. The lotus was marked with the symbols of Amitabha, and blossomed to reveal an eight-year-old boy, Padmasambhava (literally, “lotus born”). The king, Indrabhuti, adopted him and raised him to become his successor, just as the historical Buddha was raised. Like the Buddha, Padmasambhava too pursued a spiritual, rather than political, path, despite his adopted father’s wishes. He left the palace and went off in search of enlightenment; in the course of his meditations, he developed great powers, such as the ability to instantly memorize any text, immortality, and invincibility.

According to the Tibetan tradition, Padmasambhava used his special powers to subdue and convert the evil demons, redirecting their negative energies to service in the *dharma*, a fundamental tenet of Tantra, or Vajrayana Buddhism. His journey through the Tibetan landscape, during which he subdued and bound specific demons at specific places, has profound consequences for virtually all subsequent Tibetan Buddhists, determining the manner in which such demons—embodiments of negative human emotions and energy—are perceived and treated in visualizations and other ritual practices.

The Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism traces its origin to Padmasambhava. According to this tradition, Padmasambhava, upon seeing that his followers were not yet ready to receive all of the many teachings he had to reveal, hid hundreds of treasures—scriptures, images, and ritual implements—throughout Tibet, including instructions for their revelation for the benefit of future generations. The Nyingma school holds that hundreds of masters have revealed the treasures over the centuries to their disciples, thereby maintaining a direct link to Padmasambhava himself. In some monasteries, his life story is retold throughout the year, with a particular incident recounted once in a month. In contemporary Tibet, the story of Padmasambhava’s life is known by virtually all Buddhists, and painted and sculpted images of him are ubiquitous.

Zen Buddhism has its roots in China. Buddhism entered China probably in the first century C.E., via the Silk Route. In China, certain Buddhist schools put particular emphasis on meditation, and became known as “Ch’an,”

a transliteration of the Sanskrit word *dhyana*, which means “meditation.” They also were no doubt influenced by indigenous Taoist notions of the essential harmony of the natural world. This, however, was only one aspect of Chinese

Buddhist thought and practice. As Buddhism developed in Japan, Ch'an Buddhist ideas also took hold—known as Zen, the transliteration into Japanese of the word *dhyana*—but again, this was only one strain of Japanese Buddhist thought and practice.

So, how is it that Zen has become such a prominent presence in Western culture? In part, this has to do with how it was brought to the West in the first place. In contrast to the earlier introduction of Buddhism to the West by Westerners, Zen made its way into Western consciousness via the efforts of an elite group of Japanese intellectuals. Beginning in the last part of the nineteenth century, these Zen Buddhists—most notably the Japanese scholar D. T. Suzuki, who, not insignificantly, himself eventually married a Theosophist—have offered the West a sanitized and decontextualized form of Buddhism, what might even be called a kind of “virtual” Buddhism.

Suzuki, for his part, first came to America in 1897, where he worked with Paul Carus, editor of the journal the *Open Court*, in LaSalle, Illinois. Carus's journal sought to promote the conjoining of science and religion and, more particularly, advocated a kind of universal monism common to all religions. For Carus, Buddhism was the closest of the world's religions to live up to this model, and Suzuki seems to have been particularly influenced by Carus in his conception and presentation of Zen for a Western audience. Suzuki's books—most notably his *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, which includes a thirty-page commentary by the psychoanalyst Carl Jung—emphasize the transcendent and

mystical nature of Zen. Suzuki, in repackaging Zen for a Western audience, attempted to extract what he saw as the essence of Zen from the larger, culturally embedded practice of Zen Buddhism.

In so doing, Suzuki and his followers put particular emphasis on *satori* (awakening) as the goal of the Zen Buddhist, which was touted as a sudden enlightenment experience that could happen at any time, even in the midst of everyday life, and transform mundane experience into something profoundly spiritual. Certainly, *satori* is an important element in Zen Buddhist teachings, but many scholars have seen Suzuki's portrayal of Zen spirituality as overly romantic and overly simplistic, representing a new hybrid mix of the traditional Soto and Rinzai schools and Western psychoanalysis. Western Zen is thus thoroughly removed from the traditional life of the Japanese temple, where not only meditation, but also every manner of ritual practice would have been integral to the religion.

More recently, Tibetan Buddhism (also called Vajrayana) has gained prominence in the West. This is no doubt the result of the incredible personal charisma of the Dalai Lama. Many of the people responsible for the rising popularity of Tibetan Buddhism are themselves refugee Tibetan monks, but the forms of Buddhism they have shared with Westerners sometimes bear little resemblance to Vajrayana practices in Tibet. There is, for instance, often a conscious downplaying of the complex ritual practices of Tibetan Buddhism, and a subsequent emphasis on the more “spiritual” dimensions of the religion.

Certainly, it can be said that the interest in and popularization of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism in America and Europe is in part a response to frustrations about “organized” religion in these contexts. There are, however, no easy explanations for the attraction of Buddhism in the West. The growth of these forms of Buddhism in the West, for instance, also must be seen in the larger context of globalization.

Conclusion

On one level, the sort of hybridization that we see in Western versions of Zen or Tibetan Buddhism is inevitable, but it is also important to see this as part of the long history of

Buddhism in the world. As much as some Buddhists and scholars may want to preserve “original” Buddhism, this is ultimately not only unrealistic, but also misguided. The Buddha himself recognized that different contexts required different versions of his teachings. Some people, he recognized, would be able to comprehend the more technical and philosophical aspects of the *dharma*; for others, however, a more basic mode of teaching was necessary. The Buddha thus tailored his message to each particular audience. Buddhism has thus always been a fluid, changing religious tradition, and it continues to dynamically change in its many modern contexts. This is in no small degree Buddhism’s enduring appeal.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- 1 What are some of the main reasons Buddhism died out in India?
- 2 How did Buddhism spread to the West?