Major Characteristics of Mahayana Buddhism

1. New sūtras, written in Sanskrit and/or Chinese
   - **Lotus Sūra** (*Myōhō renge kyo*): one of the most popular Buddhist sutras in East Asia
     - *upāya / hōben* ("skillful means"): the Buddha revealed his teachings in different ways to different people at different times, depending on their capabilities and the conditions of the times – hence the great variation in doctrines among the various sutras and schools.
     - *universal Buddha-nature*: the Buddha is eternal and omnipresent; hence all sentient beings are, or will become, Buddhas (also developed by philosophical theories, below).
     - *soteriological value of stūpa-worship* (reliquaries)
   - **Prajñā-paramitā (Perfection of Wisdom) sūtras**: emphasizing the concept of emptiness. "The principal ontological message of the Prajñāpāramitā is an extension of the Buddhist teaching of no-Self to equal no essence, and therefore no inherent existence, as applied to all things without exception" (Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, p. 46).
     - **Heart Sūra**: chanted every day in Chan / Zen monasteries. Includes the line "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form."
     - **Diamond Sūra**
   - **Pure Land Sūras** (3): Amitabha Buddha's vows, basis of Pure Land Buddhism.
   - **Avatāmsaka / Kegon** ("Flower Garland") Sūra: focuses on Vairocana (Dainichi) Buddha (see below) -- basis of Huayan Buddhism.
   - **Platform Sūra**: story and teachings of Huineng, the 6th Patriarch of Chan / Zen. The only sūra that does not claim to be the words of the Buddha. Written in Chinese.
   - **Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūra**: story of the enlightened layman, Vimalakirti
   - **Lankāvatāra Sūra**: reflects Yogacāra (Consciousness-Only) philosophy

2. New model of enlightenment: the Bodhisattva
   - enlightened being who vows to remain in *samsāra* (any level) to help all sentient beings achieve enlightenment
   - characterized by wisdom and compassion
   - Bodhisattva vow:
     - However innumerable the sentient beings, I vow to save them all.
     - However inexhaustible the passions (*kleśas*), I vow to extinguish them all.
     - However immeasurable the dharmas, I vow to master them all.
     - However incomparable the truth of the Buddha, I vow to attain it.
   - **Six Bodhisattva Virtues or Perfections (paramitā)**
     - i. giving (*dāna*)
     - ii. morality (*śīla*)
     - iii. patience (*ksānti*)
     - iv. energy (*vyāra*)
     - v. meditation (*dhyāna*)
     - vi. wisdom (*prajñā*)
3. New devotional / "theistic" dimension (faith, worship)

- **Bodhisattvas (bosatsu)**
  - Maitreya / Miroku (Buddha of next age)
  - Manjūśrī / Monju (Wisdom)
  - Avalokiteśvara / Kannon (Compassion)
  - Ksitigarbha / Jizō (Children in underworld)
  - Samantabhadra / Fugen (Universal Virtue)

- **Buddhas (butsu)**
  - Śākyamuni / Shaka (Historical Buddha)
  - Amitābha / Amida (Infinite Light)
  - Amitāyus / Muryōju (Infinite Life)
  - (Mahā-)Vairocana / Dainichi (Cosmos)
  - Bhaisajyaguru / Yakushi (Medicine, Healing)

4. New philosophical developments

- Emptiness (sunyatā / kū): all dharmas (things or elements) are "empty of own-being:" they have no independent, autonomous, existence; their very existence or being depends on other things; they are inherently conditional, not absolute. Hence emptiness = interdependence. Nagarjuna (2nd c. CE): "Emptiness is equivalent to 'dependent origination' (pratīyā-samutpāda)."

- **Universal Buddha-nature:**
  - **Three Body (trīkāya) doctrine:** aspects of Buddhahood
    - Nirmāna-kāya: "Transformation body": historical Sakyamuni
    - Sambhogak-āya: "Reward body": spiritual being, perceptible only to other spiritual beings (including humans reborn in Pure Land) – hence their "reward"
    - Dharma-kāya: "Truth body": abstract principle, ultimate truth
  - **Inherent enlightenment (hongaku):** enlightenment possible in this life; all beings are manifestations of Buddha; "ordinary mind is the Way"

- **Nirvāṇa = Samsāra:** nirvāṇa and samsāra are both characterized by emptiness; nirvāṇa is samsāra correctly understood (Nagarjuna).

- "Interpenetration" of all phenomena: the ultimate principle of all things is emptiness; every individual thing fully manifests the ultimate principle of everything else. Developed in Huayan school. Indra's Net.

5. New possibilities of enlightenment for laypeople

- Through the virtue of "generosity / giving" (dāna) -- the first of the 6 Bodhisattva Perfections or Virtues -- lay people can gain karmic merit by donating to temples, having scriptures copied, building and maintaining stūpas (reliquaries), etc.
- Enlightenment is possible in this life, without becoming a monk or nun
- Symbolized by Huineng (6th Patriarch) and Vimalakirti
6. **New Chinese schools and their Japanese counterparts:**

♦ **Pure Land** (Jingtu / Jōdō 淨土). Based on vow of Amitabha Buddha (in the *Pure Land Sūtras*) to cause anyone who called on his name (faithfully) to be reborn into a Western Paradise or Pure Land, where they would live in the company of Amitabha for a very long time, and then be reborn one final time as a human and achieve *nirvāṇa*.
  - Founded in Japan by Hōnen (1133-1212)
  - Jōdō Shinshū (True Sect of Pure Land) founded by Shinran (1173-1263)

♦ **Tiantai / Tendai** 天台 (Heavenly Terrace, the name of the mountain in southeast China where the temple of the school's founder, Zhiyi [6th century], was located). Based on the *Lotus Sutra* and the concept of the "true suchness" (*zhengru 真如*) of things: the "mean" between the fundamental emptiness of things and their "provisional existence."
  - Brought to Japan by Saicho (Dengyō Daishi, 762-822) in 805, who founded Enryakuji on Mt. Hiei (just outside Kyoto)

♦ **Huayan / Kegon** 華嚴 (Flower Garland, the Chinese name of the *Avatāmsaka Sūtra*). Central concept: the mutual "interpenetration" of all things, based on their true nature, the principle of emptiness. Chief Buddha: Vairocana / Dainichi.
  - Dominant school during Nara period; Tōdaiji.

♦ **Chan / Zen** 禪/禅 (from *chan-na* 禪那, the Chinese transliteration of *dhyāna*, or meditation). Focus on meditation, "sudden enlightenment," and the recorded sayings of Tang dynasty (7th-10th c.) masters more than *sūtras* featuring Buddhas.
  - Rinzai sect: Founded in Japan by Eisai (1141-1215)
  - Sōtō sect: Founded in Japan by Dōgen (1200-1254)