

# Major Characteristics of Mahayana Buddhism

## 1. New sūtras, written in Sanskrit and/or Chinese

- ◆ **Lotus Sūtra** (*Myōhō renge kyō*): one of the most popular Buddhist sutras in East Asia
  - *upāya* / *hōben* ("skillfull 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 Sūtra**: chanted every day in Chan / Zen monasteries. Includes the line "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form."
  - **Diamond Sūtra**
- ◆ **Pure Land Sūtras** (3): Amitabha Buddha's vows, basis of Pure Land Buddhism.
- ◆ **Avatānsaka / Kegon ("Flower Garland") Sūtra**: focuses on Vairocana (Dainichi) Buddha (see below) -- basis of Huayan Buddhism.
- ◆ **Platform Sūtra**: story and teachings of Huineng, the 6<sup>th</sup> Patriarch of Chan / Zen. The only *sūtra* that does not claim to be the words of the Buddha. Written in Chinese.
- ◆ **Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūtra**: story of the enlightened layman, Vimalakirti
- ◆ **Lankāvatāra Sūtra**: 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 (*vīrya*)
  - 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)
  - Bhaisajya-guru / Yakushi (Medicine, Healing)

### 4. New philosophical developments

- ◆ Emptiness (*śūnyatā / kū*): all *dharma*s (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 (2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE): "Emptiness is equivalent to 'dependent origination' (*pratītya-samutpāda*)."
- ◆ **Universal Buddha-nature:**
  - **Three Body** (*trikāya*) doctrine: aspects of Buddhahood
    - Nirmāṇa-kāya*: "Transformation body": historical Sakyamuni
    - Sambhōga-kāya*: "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"
- ◆ *Nirvāna* = *Samsāra*: *nirvāna* and *samsāra* are both characterized by emptiness; *nirvāna* 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 (6<sup>th</sup> 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 *nirvāna*.
  - 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 [6<sup>th</sup> century], was located). Based on the *Lotus Sutra* and the concept of the "true suchness" (*zhenru* 真如) of things: the "mean" between the fundamental emptiness of things and their "provisional existence."
  - Brought to Japan by Saichō (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/禪 (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)

