

# Major Characteristics of Mahayana Buddhism

- **New sūtras, written in Sanskrit and/or Chinese**
  - ◆ **Lotus Sūtra:** one of the most popular Buddhist sutras throughout East Asia
    - *upāya* (“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-pāramitā (Perfection of Wisdom) sūtras:** emphasizing the concept of emptiness. "The principal ontological message of the *Prajñā-pāramitā* 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.
  - ◆ **Avatāmsaka / Huayan (“Flower Garland”) Sūtra:** focuses on Vairocana (Luoshana) 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 (*pāramitā*)
  1. giving (*dāna*)
  2. morality (*śīla*)
  3. patience (*ksānti*)
  4. energy (*virya*)
  5. meditation (*dhyāna*)
  6. wisdom (*prajñā*)

### 3. New devotional / "theistic" dimension (faith, worship, *bhakti*)

#### ◆ **Bodhisattvas**

- Maitreya / Mile (Buddha of next age)
- Manjūśrī / Wenshu (Wisdom)
- Avalokiteśvara / Guanyin (Compassion)
- Ksitigarbha / Dizang (Children in underworld)
- Samantabhadra / Puxian (Universal Virtue)

#### ◆ **Buddhas**

- Śākyamuni / Shijie (-mouni) (Historical Buddha)
- Amitābha / Amituo (Infinite Light)
- Amitāyus / Wuliangshou (Infinite Life)
- (Mahā-)Vairocana / Luoshana (Cosmos)
- Bhaisajya-guru / Yaoshi (Medicine, Healing)

### 4. New philosophical developments

- ◆ Emptiness (*śūnyatā* / *kong* 空): 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 (2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE): “Emptiness is equivalent to ‘dependent origination’ (*pratītya-samutpāda*).”

#### ◆ **Universal Buddha-nature:**

- **Three Body (*trikāya*) doctrine:** aspects of Buddhahood
  - (1) *Nirmāna-kāya*: "Transformation body": historical Sakyamuni
  - (2) *Sambhōga-kāya*: "Reward body": spiritual being, perceptible only to other spiritual beings (including humans reborn in Pure Land) – hence their “reward”
  - (3) *Dharma-kāya*: "Truth body": abstract principle, ultimate truth
- **Inherent enlightenment (*benjue*):** 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 and achieve Buddhahood by donating to temples, having scriptures copied, building and maintaining *stūpas* (reliquaries), etc.
- ◆ “Transfer of merit”: karmic merit can be dedicated to others
- ◆ 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:

- Pure Land (Jingtu 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*.
- Tiantai 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."
- Huayan 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.
- Chan 禪 (from *chan-na* 禪那, the Chinese transliteration of *dhyāna*, or meditation; Zen in Japanese). Focus on meditation, "sudden enlightenment," and the recorded sayings of Tang dynasty (7th-10th c.) masters more than sutras featuring Buddhas.