

Major Characteristics of Mahayana Buddhism

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

(also new commentaries [śūtra / lun 論], with identified authors)

- ◆ **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 *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.
- ◆ **Avatāmsaka / Huayan ("Flower Garland") Sūtra**: focuses on Vairocana (Luoshana) Buddha (see below) – basis of Huayan Buddhism.
- ◆ **Platform Sūtra**: story and teachings of Huineng, the 6th 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, Vimalakīrti
- ◆ **Lankāvatāra Sūtra**: reflects Yogacāra (Consciousness-Only) philosophy

2. New ultimate goal: full Buddhahood (Theravada goal: arhatship)

3. 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*)
 - i. giving (*dāna*)
 - ii. morality (*śīla*)
 - iii. patience (*ksānti*)
 - iv. energy (*virya*)
 - v. energy (*virya*)
 - vi. meditation (*dhyāna*)
 - vii. wisdom (*prajñā*)

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

- ◆ **Bodhisattvas** (*pusa* 菩薩)
 - Maitreya / Mile (Buddha of next age)
 - Manjūsī / Wenshu (Wisdom)
 - Avalokiteśvara / Guanyin (Compassion)
 - Ksitigarbha / Dizang (Children in underworld)
 - Samantabhadra / Puxian (Universal Virtue)
- ◆ **Buddhas** (*fo* 佛)
 - Śākyamuni / Shijia (-mouni) (Historical Buddha)
 - Amitābha / Amituo (Infinite Light)
 - Amitāyus / Wuliangshou (Infinite Life)
 - (Mahā-)Vairocana / Luoshana (Cosmos)
 - Bhaisajya-guru / Yaoshi (Medicine, Healing)

5. 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 (2nd c. CE): "Emptiness is equivalent to 'dependent origination' (*pratītya-samutpāda*)."
- ◆ **Universal Buddha-nature:**
 - **Three Body (*trikāya*) doctrine:** aspects of Buddhahood
 - (1) *Nirmāna-kāya* (*hua shen* 化身): "Transformation body": historical Sakyamuni
 - (2) *Sambhōga-kāya* (*bao shen* 報身): "Reward body": spiritual being, perceptible only to other spiritual beings (including humans reborn in Pure Land) – hence their "reward"
 - (3) *Dharma-kāya* (*fa shen* 法身): "Truth body": abstract principle, ultimate truth
 - **Inherent enlightenment** (*benjue* 本覺): enlightenment possible in this life; all beings are manifestations of Buddha; "ordinary mind is the Way"
- ◆ **Two Truths** (Nagarjuna): conventional and absolute
- ◆ ***Nirvāna* = *Samsāra*** (Nagarjuna): *nirvāna* and *samsāra* are both characterized by emptiness; *nirvāna* is *samsāra* correctly understood
- ◆ **"True suchness"** (*zhenru* 真如): the "middle" (*zhong* 中) truth between emptiness and provisional existence. Developed in Tiantai school.
- ◆ **"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.

6. 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.
- ◆ Enlightenment is possible in this life, without becoming a monk or nun
- ◆ Symbolized by Huineng (6th Patriarch) and Vimalakirti

7. 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*. Some interpret the Pure Land as a state of consciousness.
- ◆ Tiantai 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" (*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.