Major Characteristics of Mahayana Buddhism

1. New sūtras, written in Sanskrit and/or Chinese
   (also new commentaries [śāstra / lun 論], with identified authors)

   ♦ **Lotus Sūtra**: one of the most popular Buddhist sutras throughout East Asia
     • *upāya* ("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-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.

   ♦ **Avatārsaka / 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 sūra 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 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*)
     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)
  - Manjùśrī / 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)
  - Bhaiṣajyaguru / Yaoshi (Medicine, Healing)

5. New philosophical developments

- **Emptiness** (*śunyatā / 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. *Nirmāṇa-kāya* (*hua shen 化身*): "Transformation body": historical Sakyamuni
    2. *Sambhoga-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

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

- "True suchness" (*zhènrú 真如*): the “middle” (*zhòng 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 nirvāṇa. 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" (zhēnru 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.