

The Rise of Mahayana: Historical Development and Doctrinal Shifts in Early Buddhism

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Abstract

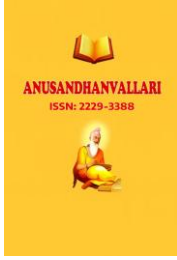
When Mahayana Buddhism appeared, it had a huge impact on the direction of Buddhist philosophy, doctrines and society in Asia. Roughly between 50 BCE and 200 CE, Mahayana (also known as the Great Vehicle) arose and served as a movement for broader and deeper changes within Buddhism compared to the earlier Theravāda which belonged to the Nikāya group. Even though the start of Mahayana has proven to be difficult to pinpoint, the paper argues that it rose as a result of slow changes in thought, institutions and practices that were shaped by writings, philosophical growth and changes in how monks and lay people interacted. Mahayana distinguishes itself by lifting up the Bodhisattva as the highest ideal instead of the Arhat which was more important in previous schools. A Bodhisattva is a person who puts off their own final liberation to help all living creatures, showing extreme ethical care for everyone. The role of this figure made the highest spiritual goal in Mahayana clear and it redefined how Buddhism viewed reaching enlightenment. Because the Bodhisattva path included cultivating six virtues (pāramitās) such as generosity and wisdom, it made religious empowerment available to anyone, including laypeople. The most important part of Mahayana philosophy is the way Śūnyatā (emptiness) is developed by Nāgārjuna and other prominent thinkers in the Madhyamaka school. Emptiness was recognized in Buddhism not only as the nonexistence of real existence in all things, but also as an insight into the dependent nature of everything, an important point in Buddhist philosophy (pratītyasamutpāda). Their ideas included fresh views on the cosmos, praised Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and discussed concepts such as skillful means (upāya) and Buddha-nature (tathāgatagarbha), so they expanded both the teachings and devotional elements in Buddhism. By looking at changes in Indian society at large, increased global trade and the involvement of laypeople in Buddhism, this study explains how Mahayana rose. It follows that Mahayana was adopted outside India, and these cultures helped it evolve but preserve its main ideas. All in all, the Mahayana movement led to major changes in Buddhism, redirecting its objectives, methods and views on the nature of reality. Rather than making a break, Mahayana changes and grows with the times while still holding onto and tweaking the original teachings.

Introduction

Mahayana Buddhism structured the spiritual and philosophical aspect of Buddhism which remains important for Asia and Buddhism around the world. While earlier accounts usually viewed Mahayana as a distinct school arising after Hinayana, nowadays scholars tend to see Mahayana developing gradually within Buddhism, thanks to new ideas, more texts and evolving society.¹ The term Mahayana which means “Great Vehicle,” shows that the movement aimed to help all beings and distinguished itself from earlier teachings which it referred to as Śrāvakayāna. There is uncertainty about when and how Mahayana started. Mahayana grew mainly as a network of movements without central authority, each with their own writings and beliefs—unlike Theravāda, whose history is more easily traced in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia². Most experts see the beginnings of Buddhist art

¹ Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2009)

1. ² Jan Nattier, “The Meanings of the Term Mahāyāna in Various Contexts,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (1989), pp. 143–171



between the first century BCE to second century CE, a time when cities grew, many Buddhist monasteries appeared and more lay people supported Buddhist projects. Persians and Indians were able to share Buddhist texts, teachings and artifacts via the Silk Road which boosted the spread of Mahayana outside of its place of origin³. A major change brought by Mahayana was the way its teachings were reorganized, putting the Bodhisattva on a pedestal as the top example of spiritual aim. Unlike the Arhat, who achieve liberation from suffering by moving on, the Bodhisattva opts to go through life and death again in order to support others reaching enlightenment. Ethical universalism focused on compassion (*karuṇā*) and wisdom (*prajñā*) is promoted in Mahayana sutras, mainly in the Prajnapramita texts with Lotus Sutra.

At the same time as this shift in ethics, Mahayana Buddhism focused on new philosophical thinking, with *sūnyatā* (emptiness) being the key idea that nothing truly exists by itself⁴. Nāgārjuna, the founder of the Madhyamaka school, described deputy origination (*praṭītyasamutpāda*) in a systematic way and used it to support his critique of metaphysical realism and nihilism. Later Yogācāra followers advanced Mahayana philosophy by emphasizing that reality originates from consciousness and presented new doctrines such as the storehouse consciousness (*alaya-vijñāna*) and the three natures (*trisvabhava*) in perception. This paper looks at the historical and doctrinal changes that brought about Mahayana Buddhism and places them within the context of society, philosophy and literature. Exploring how Mahayana beliefs evolved, new texts were developed and the movement spread across Asia, the study shows that Mahayana continued the main teachings of early Buddhism and put them into new forms to address various emerging issues.

Historical Background and Emergence of Mahayana Buddhism

Mahayana Buddhism grew out of the wider changes found in Indian Buddhism gradually, starting in first century BCE upto century CE. During this phase or the “Middle Period” of Indian Buddhism, there were major changes in teachings, religious communities and the political and social arena. Mahayana emerged within the framework of existing Nikāya (early school) teachings, often practiced as a secret cult by monks and later made its presence known in written, ritual and philosophical forms⁵. The around 3rd century BCE, when Emperor Aśoka sponsored Buddhism, the religion began to spread and become more institutionalized throughout the Indian subcontinent and to other places. So, after Mauryan authority ended, Buddhism had to adjust to the needs of regional kingdoms like the Śuṅgas, Kuṣāṇas and Satavāhanas⁶. The Kuṣāṇa Empire (1st to 3rd centuries CE) was especially important for spreading Mahayana ideas among Buddhists. Because of the support of kings like Kaniṣka I, Buddhist monasteries enjoyed large endowments and artists across Gandhāra and Mathurā were very active. New Mahayana thought was forged at that time, mainly through the creation of new Sanskrit sutras like the Prajñāpāramitā texts, Śrīmālādevī Sutra & Lotus Sutra⁷. They introduced new ideas such as there being many Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, the concept of pure lands and any person could attain Buddhahood. Using new phrases such as

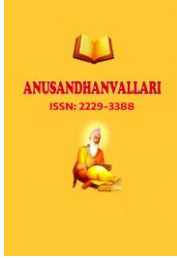
³ Étienne Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism: From the Origins to the Śāka Era*, trans. Sara Webb-Boin (Louvain-la-Neuve: Université Catholique de Louvain, 1988), pp. 589–610.

⁴ Richard Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road: Premodern Patterns of Globalization*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 42–56

⁵ Gregory Schopen, “The Mahāyāna and the Middle Period in Indian Buddhism: Through a Chinese Looking Glass,” Vol. 32, No. 2 (2000), pp. 1 to 25

⁶ Paul Harison, “Who Gets to Ride in the Great Vehicle? Self-Image and Identity Among the Followers of the Early Mahāyāna,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (1987), pp. 67–90

⁷ Romila Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, revised ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 260–273



“bodhisattva-yāna” and “ekayāna” pointed out that the focus now shifted from liberating individuals to helping everyone on a grand scale.

Buddhism experienced a shift in its social gathering at this point. Because monks communicated more with laypeople, Buddhism shifted towards being more active and valued merit-making, devotion and different forms of Buddhas, especially in Mahayana. Some scholars such as Gregory Schopen, suggest that Mahayana became popular in part because it responded to what lay followers needed from their faith such as new sutras offering elaborate dreams of salvation. The development of the Silk Road made it possible for religious ideas to be shared which helped Mahayana grow⁸. When Buddhism traveled to Central Asia and China, Mahayana writings were translated, sent and understood in a different cultural environment. Because of this, the identity of the Mahayana movement grew stronger and it became the main branch in East Asia. The 2nd century translations of Lokakṣema helped bring the main concepts of Mahayana to China. Mahayana was on the rise, yet it continued to welcome more than one approach. For a long time, Mahayana existed alongside various Nikāya schools and often Mahayana monks and monks from other traditions practiced and studied in the same monastic centers⁹. It shows that the borders between different Buddhist traditions in ancient India were blurry and questions the idea of clear sectarian division. Altogether, Mahayana Buddhism formed because of various factors such as institutional changes, new philosophical ideas, leaving literatures, shifts in sponsorship and cross-region diffusion. The new developments provided an ideal setting for the rise of a Buddhist system that considered the universe broadly, ethics for everyone and deep philosophical issues which helped it become popular throughout Asia¹⁰.

Doctrinal Shifts and Innovations in Mahayana Thought

Mahayana changed the broader Buddhist tradition deeply by adding many writings and reforming soteriology, metaphysics and spiritual methods. The new ideas were formed by rethinking basic teachings in Buddhism, including dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda), non-self (anātman) and the Four Noble Truths. Building on concepts created by earlier groups, Mahayana thinkers used the same language and also brought new philosophical and cosmological dimensions¹¹. One major change brought by Mahayana was putting the ideal of becoming a Bodhisattva above all other spiritual aims. Unlike the Arhat who was a follower of early Buddhism, looking for liberation, the Bodhisattva made a promise to continue in saṃsāra until all beings are happy and free¹². Because of this shift toward putting all people, not just one, on equal footing for salvation, the Bodhisattva path was made important and Sanskrit text like Lotus-Sutra & Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā praised some benefits of being compassionate and wise for enlightenment. One more key development in doctrine was the idea of emptiness (śūnyatā), taught prominently by Nāgārjuna, who established the Madhyamaka school¹³. According to Nagarjuna, in his work the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, everything is empty of absolute existence since all phenomena arise only dependent on other conditions. The understanding of emptiness here was centered on things being dependent on other things.

⁸ Harry Falk, “The ‘Split’ of Buddhism: How the Early Buddhist Schools Came About,” Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology, Vol. 10 (2007), pp. 37–59

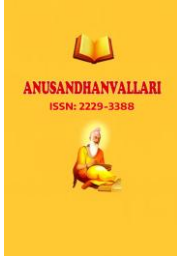
⁹ • Edward Conze, The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom, trans. and ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), Introduction and Ch. 1

¹⁰ Jan Nattier, A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to The Inquiry of Ugra, (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2003), pp. 20–55

¹¹ Conze, E. (1975). The large sutra on perfect wisdom. University of California Press.

¹² Williams, P. (2009). Mahayana Buddhism: The doctrinal foundations (2nd ed.). Routledge.

¹³ Garfield, J. (Trans.). (1995). The fundamental wisdom of the middle way: Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. Oxford University Press.



To put it another way, the Yogācāra school, linked to Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, introduced an idea that only mind exists and uses the terms “mind-only” (cittamātra) and “storehouse consciousness” (ālaya-vijñāna). Madhyamaka’s approach of breaking things down was different from Yogācāra which suggested that what is apparently seen as reality is actually a creation of consciousness affected by karmic habits. The relationship between Madhyamaka and Yogācāra in Mahayana Buddhism highlights its open-mindedness and rich ideas, since texts from both traditions pointed toward understanding reality. Mahayana also changed the way the Buddha is understood. Initially, the figure of the historical Buddha (Śākyamuni) was emphasized in Buddhism, but Mahayana texts depict the Buddha as having a cosmic nature and appearing as many bodies across many worlds¹⁴. The idea is expressed in the teaching of the “three bodies” (trikāya), the Dharmakāya (bodily truth) and Sambhogakāya (bodily enjoyment) and Nirmāṇakāya (bodily emanation) which links unaffected, spiritual side of a Buddha with the active and practical aspects. The cosmology surrounding the Buddha’s teachings made it easier for people to accept his divinity and see enlightenment as a possibility within everyone, thanks to Buddha-nature (tathāgatagarbha)¹⁵. Mahayana also changed the way Buddhism viewed the use of new scriptures. The Mahayana Buddhists did not accept the closed canon idea and argued that recent sūtras appeared for a reason, usually accusing them of having been Buddha’s esoteric teachings meant for those who advanced in later periods. Being flexible in approach allowed Mahayana to grow and include many writings, including the Avataṃsaka Sūtra, Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra and Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra and countless others. So, the key changes in Mahayana Buddhism are formed by combining old ideas with new ones¹⁶. Shifting the focus of early Buddhism to new ethical issues, bigger metaphysical thoughts and developing spiritual dreams helped Mahayana become a natural step forward for the tradition rather than a deviation.

Mahayana’s Historical Spread: Routes, Agents, and Regional Adaptations

Asian religious and cultural history tells an remarkable uplift in Mahayana Buddhism following their spread in recent centuries. Starting in India roughly around the 1st century CE, Mahayana developed into a new way of thinking and grew both substantially and geographically, with aid from complex systems of trading, translating and scholarly work by Buddhist monks. Unlike the restrained spread of early Buddhism (Theravāda), Mahayana turned into a flexible tradition that did well in Central Asia, China, Korea, Japan, Tibet and elsewhere. Mahayana Buddhism spread differently in every place, as it adjusted its beliefs and methods to what people in each place believed and practiced¹⁷. Mahayana spread well across geographical boundaries due to the Silk Road. Because of trading and conversion, silk, spices and Mahayana texts were transported together. Monks including Lokakṣema around 150 CE played an important part in bringing early Mahayana teachings from Sanskrit to Chinese¹⁸. The Prajñāpāramitā and Ugraparipṛcchā sūtras were translated by him which started the development of Mahayana in the East and were the first written proof of Mahayana found outside India. Buddhism traveled widely through the region of Central Asia. These regions Khotan, Bamiyan and Dunhuang brought together Indian

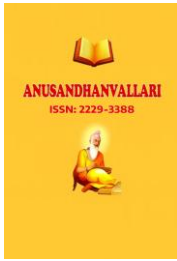
¹⁴ Ruegg, D. S. (1989). Buddha-nature, mind and the problem of gradualism in a comparative perspective: On the transmission and reception of Buddhism in India and Tibet. University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies.

¹⁵ Harrison, P. (1990). The Samādhi of Direct Encounter with the Buddhas of the Present: A Study and Annotated Translation of the Pratyutpanna-Buddha-Sammukhāvasthita-Samādhi-Sūtra. Oxford University Press

¹⁶ <https://www.routledge.com/Mahayana-Buddhism-The-Doctrinal-Foundations/Williams/p/book/9780415356534>

¹⁷ Zürcher, E. (2007). The Buddhist conquest of China: The spread and adaptation of Buddhism in early medieval China (3rd ed.).

¹⁸ Harrison, P. (1993). The founding of the Chinese Buddhist canon: Translation activity and the birth of Chinese Mahayana. In Lopez, D.S. (Ed.), Buddhism in Practice (pp. 295–310).



Mahayana writings, local art and Zoroastrian, Hellenistic and local Himalayan beliefs. The next stage saw monastic centers producing and protecting manuscripts and also funding artwork and images that supported growth of the Mahayana Buddhist teachings¹⁹. Some of the Bamiyan Sanskrit fragments and the Chinese Dunhuang scrolls bring out the importance of many languages and regions in spreading Mahayana Buddhism.

Mahayana spread in the nearby region of China in second century CE, helped by itinerant monks and the support of emperors and it was during the Tang dynasty that schools such as Tiantai, Huayan and Chan (which became Zen) arose by merging Indian ideas with the philosophy of Daoism. Mahayana Buddhists in China started following Pure Land Buddhism which focuses on praying to Amitābha Buddha and hoping to be reborn in his paradise²⁰. Mahayana Buddhism arrived in the Korean peninsula and Japan due to Chinese cultural influence. During the period of Nara & Heian in Japan, Tendai & Shingon were popular schools and Shingon gained influence from the Mahayana tradition (Vajrayāna) that monks such as Kūkai brought from India. During the Kamakura period (1185–1333), more people followed Zen and Pure Land traditions instead of decidedly scholarly Mahayana Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism also began in Tibet, in the Himalayan region, because Indian masters such as Śāntarakṣita, Padmasambhava and Atiśa supported its spread²¹. Samye and Nalanda's monastery universities were part of Tibetan Buddhism's scholarly tradition which included ideas from both Madhyamaka and Yogācāra schools. The characteristic Tibetan Buddhism of today is based on Vajrayāna or Tantric Mahayana which focused on using symbols and yoga with deities²². Therefore, Mahayana did not grow only in India but became a tradition with many places where its ideas were developed and understood differently. By merging with other cultures, translating texts and giving new interpretations, Mahayana was able to unite its ideas with many cultures while not losing its core²³. Along with having spiritual impact, Buddhism influenced the literature, art, architecture and ways of thinking in Asia for many years.

Mahayana's Impact and Legacy

The influence of Mahayana Buddhism extends to the religious, philosophical and cultural worlds throughout Asia and elsewhere. Through emphasizing the Bodhisattva ideal, Mahayana spread a belief in liberating all beings and made Buddhist teachings open to all levels of society²⁴. Mahayana has shown its flexibility by adaption in China, Japan, Tibet and other cultures that featured Confucian, Daoist, Shinto and Bon traditions. Because of Mahayana, a distinctly visual and written culture of temples, mandalas and poetry emerged, reflecting its vast worldview and deities. By putting importance on upāya (tactics for spreading the Buddha's teachings), the school could adopt expressions fitting each location and these continue to be active today, for example, Zen's simple style, Tibetan Tantric rituals and Pure Land's prayerful practices²⁵. Today, Mahayana's ideas about interdependence, compassion and altruism are important worldwide and have influenced moral codes, activism and care for nature. Those such as the Dalai Lama, Thichh Nhat Hanh & D.T. Suzuki have updated Mahayana teachings for people living in the present, highlighting its relevant answers to existential, psychological and social problems. With

¹⁹ Whitfield, S. (1999). *Life along the Silk Road*. University of California Press.

²⁰ Hansen, V. (2012). *The Silk Road: A new history*. Oxford University Press.

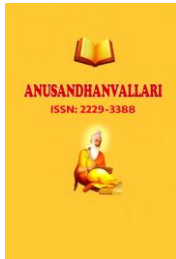
²¹ • Lai, W. (1985). *Chinese Buddhism and the emergence of Chan*. In Prebish, C. (Ed.), *Buddhism: A modern perspective* (pp. 103–122)..

²² Blum, M. (2002). *The origins and development of Pure Land Buddhism: A study and translation of Gyōnen's Jōdo Hōmon Genrushō*. Oxford University Press

²³ Stone, J. I. (1999). *Original enlightenment and the transformation of medieval Japanese Buddhism*. University of Hawaii Press.

²⁴ D. S. (1995). *Curators of the Buddha: The study of Buddhism under colonialism*. University of Chicago Press

²⁵ Snellgrove, D. (1987). *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and their Tibetan successors*. Shambhala.



global immigration, research into its texts and interactions with other religions, Mahayana does not just exist as a memory, but as a changing tradition, open to study and making a difference²⁶.

Conclusion

The transformation and growth of Mahayana Buddhism were deep, touching the whole Buddhist tradition and involved change in concepts, culture and the nature of religious belief. In the early centuries, Mahayana appeared as Buddhist schools were forming and it proposed a major shift in spiritual thinking by making the Bodhisattva central and having salvation aim for harmony and empathy rather than Liberation (as in the previous school of Arhatship). The shift in doctrine, as shown by *śūnyatā* (emptiness), *tathāgatagarbha* (Buddha-nature) and *upāya* (skillful means), brought a new and creative approach to Buddhist ideas about salvation, the world and ethics. Mahayana Buddhists were urged to help relieve the suffering of others rather than only achieve personal freedom from suffering which later came to inspire socially involved forms of Buddhism. Historically, Mahayana grew by showing remarkable flexibility. Because of trading routes on land and water, Mahayana spread to the surrounding areas, where it was influenced by the way people and religions were distinct in Central Asia, China, Korea, Japan and Tibet. Lokakṣema and Kumārajīva translated main scriptures into Chinese, Mahayana concepts were shaped by Daoist and Confucian teachings in East Asia and Zen, Pure Land, Tiantai and Vajrayāna schools arose, reflecting Mahayana's flexible and adaptable nature. Even though there were many differences, all these traditions agreed on honoring compassion, non-dual teaching and the chance of enlightenment for every individual. Over many generations, Mahayana influenced theology, monasteries and also led to a flourishing of Asian culture—temples, artistic works, literature, rituals and meditation styles—that have a lasting influence both in Asia and the West. Today, Mahayana's main values have gained new importance as Buddhists from everywhere consider environmental care, justice for all, caring for mental health and meeting challenges of different faiths. Also, studies of Mahayana have increased, helping scholars grasp its textual background, philosophical thought and cultural mix. Because Mahayana is a living tradition, it is important not only for its spread or original teachings, but also for its ability to link meditation to kindness, understanding of emptiness to ethical living and intelligence to acceptance. It has become clear that Mahayana emerged as a progressive movement that redesigned how Buddhists thought and acted, rather than splitting the religion apart. It keeps adapting, motivating others and remaining meaningful in a global setting, proving that Buddhism has a powerful ability to progress, talk to people of various backgrounds and bring about change everywhere.

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