



## Historical Overview of Mahâyâna Buddhism

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WE are now in a position to enter into a specific exposition of the Mahâyâna doctrine. But, before doing so, it will be well for us first to consider the views that were held by the Hindu Buddhist thinkers concerning its characteristic features; in other words, to make an historical survey of its peculiarities.

As stated in the Introduction, the term Mahâyâna was invented in the times of Nâgârjuna and Âryadeva (about the third or fourth century after Christ), when doctrinal struggles between the Çrâvaka and the Bodhisattva classes reached a climax. The progressive Hindu Buddhists, desiring to announce the essential features of their doctrine, did so naturally at the expense of their rival and by pointing out why theirs was greater than, or superior to, Hînayânism. Their views were thus necessarily vitiated by a partisan spirit, and instead of impartially and critically enumerating the principal characteristics of Mahâyânism, they placed rather too much stress upon those points that do not in these latter days appear to be very essential, but that were then considered by them to be of paramount importance. These points, nevertheless, throw some light on the nature of Mahâyâna Buddhism as historically distinguished from its consanguineous rival and fellow-doctrine.

### *Sthiramati's Conception of Mahâyânism.*

Sthiramati<sup>1</sup> in his *Introduction to Mahâyânism* states that Mahâyânism is a special doctrine for the Bodhisattvas, who are to be distinguished from the other two classes, viz, the Çrâvakas and the Pratyeka- buddhas. The essential difference of the doctrine consists in the belief that objects of the senses are merely phenomenal and have no absolute reality, that the indestructible Dharmakâya which is all-pervading constitutes the norm of existence, that all Bodhisattvas<sup>2</sup> are incarnations of the Dharmakâya, who not by their evil karma previously accumulated, but by their boundless love for all mankind, assume corporeal existences, and that persons who thus appear in the flesh, as avatars of the Buddha supreme, associate themselves with the masses in all possible social relations, in order that they might thus lead them to a state of enlightenment.

While this is a very summary statement of the Mahâyâna doctrine, a more elaborate and extended enumeration of its peculiar features in contradistinction to those of Hînayânism, is made in the *Miscellanea on Mahâyâna Metaphysics*,<sup>3</sup> *The Spiritual Stages of the Yogâcâra*,<sup>4</sup> *An Exposition of the Holy Doctrine*,<sup>5</sup> *A Comprehensive Treatise on Mahâyânism*,<sup>6</sup> and others. Let us first explain the "Seven General Characteristics" as described in the first three works here mentioned.

### *Seven Principal Features of Mahâyânism.*

According to Asanga, who lived a little later than Nâgârjuna, that is, at the time when Mahâyânism was further divided into the Yogâcârya and the Mâdhyamika school, the seven features peculiar to Mahâyânism as distinguished from Hînayânism, are as follows:

(1) *Its Comprehensiveness.* Mahâyânism does not confine itself to the teachings of one Buddha alone; but wherever and whenever truth is found, even under the disguise of most absurd superstitions, it makes no hesitation to winnow the grain from the husk and assimilate it in its own system. Innumerable good laws taught by Buddhas<sup>7</sup> of all ages and localities are all taken up in the coherent body of Mahâyânism.

(2) *Universal love for All Sentient Beings.* Hînayânism confines itself to the salvation of individuals only; it does not extend its bliss universally, as each person must achieve his own deliverance. Mahâyânism, on the other hand, aims at general salvation; it endeavors to save us not only individually, but universally. All the motives, efforts, and actions of the Bodhisattvas pivot on the furtherance of universal welfare.

(3) *Its Greatness in Intellectual Comprehension.* Mahâyânism maintains the theory of non-âtman not only in regard to sentient beings but in regard to things in general. While it denies the hypothesis of a metaphysical agent directing our mental operations, it also rejects the view that insists on the noumenal or thingish reality of existences as they appear to our senses.

(4) *Its Marvelous Spiritual Energy.* The Bodhisattvas never become tired of working for universal salvation, nor do they despair because of the long time required to accomplish this momentous object. To try to attain enlightenment in the shortest possible period and to be self-sufficient without paying any attention to the welfare of the masses, is not the teaching of Mahâyânism.

(5) *Its Greatness in the Exercise of the Upâya.* The term *upâya* literally means expediency. The great fatherly sympathetic heart of the Bodhisattva has inexhaustible resources at his command in order that he might lead the masses to final enlightenment, each according to his disposition and environment. Mahâyânism does not ask its followers to escape the metempsychosis of birth and death for the sake of entering into the lethargic tranquility of Nirvana; for metempsychosis in itself is no evil, and Nirvana in its coma is not productive of any good. And as long as there are souls groaning in pain, the Bodhisattva cannot rest in Nirvana; there is no rest for his unselfish heart, so full of love and sympathy, until he leads all his fellow-beings to the eternal bliss of Buddhahood. To reach this end he employs innumerable means (*upâya*) suggested by his disinterested lovingkindness.

(6) *Its Higher Spiritual Attainment.* In Hînayânism the highest bliss attainable does not go beyond Arhatship which is ascetic saintliness. But the followers of Mahâyânism attain even to Buddhahood with all its spiritual powers.

(7) *Its Greater Activity.* When the Bodhisattva reaches the stage of Buddhahood, he is able to manifest himself everywhere in the ten quarters of the universe<sup>8</sup> and to minister to the spiritual needs of all sentient beings.

These seven peculiarities are enumerated to be the reasons why the doctrine defended by the progressive Buddhists is to be called Mahâyânism, or the doctrine of great vehicle, in contradistinction to Hînayânism, the doctrine of small vehicle. In each case, therefore, Asanga takes pains to draw the line of demarcation distinctly between the two schools of Buddhism and not between Buddhism and all other religious doctrines which existed at his time.

### *The Ten Essential Features of Buddhism.*

The following statement of the ten essential features of Mahâyânism as presented in

the *Comprehensive Treatise on Mahâyânism*, is made from a different standpoint from the preceding one, for it is the pronouncement of the Yogâcâra school of Asanga and Vasubandhu rather than that of Mahâyânism generally. This school together with the Mâdhyamika school of Nâgârjuna constitute the two divisions of Hindu Mahâyânism.<sup>9</sup>

The points enumerated by Asanga and Vasubandhu as most essential in their system are ten.

(1) It teaches an immanent existence of all things in the *Âlayavijñâna* or All-Conserving Soul. The conception of an All-Conserving Soul, it is claimed, was suggested by Buddha in the so-called Hînayâna sutras; but on account of its deep meaning and of the liability of its being confounded with the ego-soul conception, he did not disclose its full significance in their sûttras; but made it known only in the Mahâyâna sûttras.

According to the Yogâcâra school, the *Âlaya* is not an universal, but an individual mind or soul, whatever we may term it, in which the “germs” of all things exist in their ideality.<sup>10</sup> The objective world in reality does not exist, but by dint of subjective illusion that is created by ignorance, we project all these “germs” in the *Âlayavijñâna* to the outside world, and imagine that they are there really as they are; while the *Manovijñâna* (ego-consciousness) which is too a product of illusion, tenaciously clinging to the *Âlayavijñâna* as the real self, never abandons its egoism. The *Âlayavijñâna*, however, is indifferent to, and irresponsible for, all these errors on the part of the *Manovijñâna*.<sup>11</sup>

(2) The Yogâcâra school distinguishes three kinds of knowledge: 1. Illusion (*parikalpita*), 2. Discriminative or Relative Knowledge (*paratantra*), and 3. Perfect Knowledge (*parinispanna*).

The distinction may best be illustrated by the well-known analogy of a rope and a snake. Deceived by a similarity in appearance, men frequently take a rope lying on the ground for a poisonous snake and are terribly shocked on that account. But when they approach and carefully examine it, they become at once convinced of the groundlessness of this apprehension, which was the natural sequence of illusion. This may be considered to correspond to what Kant calls *Schein*.

Most people, however, do not go any further in their inquiry. They are contented with the sensual, empirical knowledge of an object with which they come in contact. When they understand that the thing they mistook for a snake was really nothing but a yard of innocent rope, they think their knowledge of the object is complete, and do not trouble themselves with a philosophical investigation as to whether the rope which to them is just what it appears to be, has any real existence in itself. They do not stop a moment to reflect that their knowledge is merely relative, for it does not go beyond the phenomenal significance of the things they perceive.

But is an object in reality such as it appears to be to our senses? Are particular phenomena as such really actual? What is the value of our knowledge concerning those so-called realities? When we make an investigation into such problems as these, the Yogâcâra school says, we find that their existence is only relative and has no absolute value whatever independent of the perceiving subject. They are the “ejection” of our ideas into the outside world, which are centred and conserved in our *Âlayavijñâna* and which are awakened into activity by subjective ignorance. This clear insight into the nature of things, i.e., into their non-reality as *âtman*, constitutes perfect knowledge.

(3) When we attain to the perfect knowledge, we recognise the ideality of the universe. There is no such thing as an objective world, which is really an illusive manifestation of the mind called *Âlayavijñâna*. But even this supposedly real existence of the *Âlayavijñâna* is a product of particularisation called forth by the ignorant *Manovijñâna*. The *Manovijñâna*, or empirical ego, as it might be called, having no adequate knowledge as to the true nature of the

Ālaya, takes the latter for a metaphysical agent, that like the master of a puppet-show manages all mental operations according to its humour. As the silkworm imprisons itself in the cocoon created by itself, the Manovijñāna, entangling itself in ignorance and confusion, takes its own illusory creations for real realities.

(4) For the regulation of moral life, the Yogâcâra with the other Mahâyâna schools, proposes the practising of the six Pâramitâs (virtues of perfection), which are: 1. *Dana* (giving), 2. *Çîla* (moral precept), 3. *Ksânti* (meekness), 4. *Vîrya* (energy), 5. *Dhyâna* (meditation), 6. *Prajñâ* (knowledge or wisdom). In way of explanation, says Asanga: “By not clinging to wealth or pleasures (1), by not cherishing any thoughts to violate the precepts (2), by not feeling dejected in the face of evils (3), by not awakening any thought of indolence while practising goodness (4), by maintaining serenity of mind in the midst of disturbance and confusion of this world (5), and finally by always practising *ekacitta*<sup>12</sup> and by truthfully comprehending the nature of things (6), the Bodhisattvas recognise the truth of *viññânamâtra*, the truth that there is nothing that is not of ideal or subjective creation.

(5) Mahâyânism teaches that there are ten spiritual stages of Bodhisattvahood, viz., 1. Pramuditâ, 2. Vimalâ, 3. Prabhâkarî, 4. Arcismatî, 5. Sudurjayâ, 6. Abhimukhî, 7. Dûrangamâ, 8. Acalâ, 9. Sâdhumatî, 10. Dharmameghâ<sup>13</sup>. By passing through all these stages one after another, we are believed to reach the oneness of Dharmakâya.

(6) The Yogâcârists claim that the precepts that are practised by the followers of Mahâyânism are far superior to those of Hînayânists. The latter tend to externalism and formalism, and do not go deep into our spiritual, subjective motives. Now, there are physical, verbal, and spiritual precepts observed by the Buddha. The Hînayânists observe the first two neglecting the last which is by far more important than the rest. For instance, the Çravaka’s interpretation of the ten Çikṣas<sup>14</sup> is literal and not spiritual; further, they follow these precepts because they wish to attain Nirvana for their own sake, and not for others’. The Bodhisattva, on the other hand, does not wish to be bound within the narrow circle of moral restriction. Aiming at an universal emancipation of mankind, he ventures even violating the ten çikṣas, if necessary. The first çikṣa, for instance, forbids the killing of any living being; but the Bodhisattva does not hesitate to go to war, in case the cause he espouses is right and beneficent to humanity at large.

(7) As Mahâyânism insists on the purification of the inner life, its teaching applies not to things outward, its principles are not of the ascetic and exclusive kind. The Mahâyânists do not shun to commingle themselves with the “dust of worldliness”; they aim at the realisation of the Bodhi; they are not afraid of being thrown into the whirlpool of metempsychosis; they endeavor to impart spiritual benefits to all sentient beings without regard to their attitude, whether hostile or friendly, towards themselves; having immovable faith in the Mahâyâna, they never become contaminated by vanity and worldly pleasures with which they may constantly be in touch; they have a clear insight into the doctrine of non-âtman; being free from all spiritual faults, they live in perfect accord with the laws of Suchness and discharge their duties without the least conceit or self-assertion: in a word, their inner life is a realisation of the Dharmakâya.

(8) The intellectual superiority of the Bodhisattva is shown by his possession of knowledge of non-particularisation (*anânârtha*).<sup>15</sup> This knowledge, philosophically considered, is the knowledge of the absolute, or the knowledge of the universal. The Bodhisattva’s mind is free from the dualism of samsâra (birth-and-death) and nirvâna, of positivism and negativism, of being and non-being, of object and subject, of ego and non-ego. His knowledge, in short, transcends the limits of final realities, soaring high to the realm of the absolute and the abode of non-particularity.

(9) In consequence of this intellectual elevation, the Bodhisattva perceives the working of birth and death in nirvâna, and nirvâna in the transmigration of birth and death. He sees the “ever-changing many” in the “never-changing one,” and the “never-changing one” in the “ever-changing many.” His inward life is in accord at once with the laws of transitory phenomena and with those of transcendental Suchness. According to the former, he does not recoil as ascetics do when he comes in contact with the world of the senses; he is not afraid of suffering the ills that the flesh is heir to; but, according to the latter, he never clings to things evanescent, his inmost consciousness forever dwells in the serenity of eternal Suchness.

(10) The final characteristic to be mentioned as distinctly Mahâyânistic is the doctrine of Trikâya. There is, it is asserted, the highest being which is the ultimate cause of the universe and in which all existences find their essential origin and significance. This is called by the Mahâyânists Dharmakâya. The Dharmakâya, however, does not remain in its absoluteness, it reveals itself in the realm of cause and effect. It then takes a particular form. It becomes a devil, or a god, or a deva, or a human being, or an animal of lower grade, adapting itself to the degrees of the intellectual development of the people. For it is the people’s inner needs which necessitate the special forms of manifestation. This is called Nirmânakâya, that is, the body of transformation. The Buddha who manifested himself in the person of Gautama, the son of King of Çuddhodâna about two thousand five hundred years ago on the Ganges, is a form of Nirmânakâya. The third one is called Sambhogakâya, or body of bliss. This is the spiritual body of a Buddha, invested with all possible grandeur in form and in possession of all imaginable psychic powers. The conception of Sambhogakâya is full of wild imaginations which are not easy of comprehension by modern minds.<sup>16</sup>

These characteristics enumerated at seven or ten as peculiarly Mahâyânistic are what the Hindu Buddhist philosophers of the first century down to the fifth or sixth century of the Christian era thought to be the most essential points of their faith and what they thought entitled it to be called the “Great Vehicle” (*Mahâyâna*) of salvation, in contradistinction to the faith embraced by their conservative brethren. But, as we view them now, the points here specified are to a great extent saturated with a partisan spirit, and besides they are more or less scattered and unconnected statements of the so-called salient features of Mahâyânism. Nor do they furnish much information concerning the nature of Mahâyânism as a coherent system of religious teachings. They give but a general and somewhat obscure delineation of it, and that in opposition to Hînayânism. In point of fact, Mahâyânism is a school of Buddhism and has many characteristics in common with Hînayânism. Indeed, the spirit of the former is also that of the latter, and as far as the general trend of Buddhism is concerned there is no need of emphasising the significance of one school over the other. On the following pages I shall try to present a more comprehensive and impartial exposition of the Buddhism, which has been persistently designated by its followers as Mahâyânism.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>His date is not known, but judging from the contents of his works, of which we have at present two or three among the Chinese Tripitaka, it seems that he lived later than Açvaghosa, but prior to, or simultaneously with, Nâgârjuna. This little book occupies a very important position in the development of Mahâyânism in India. Next to Açvaghosa’s *Awakening of Faith*, the work must be carefully studied by scholars who want to grasp every phase of the history of Mahâyâna school as far as it can be learned through the Chinese documents.

<sup>2</sup>Be it remarked here that a Bodhisattva is not a particularly favored man in the sense of



chosen people or elect. We are all in a way Bodhisattvas, that is, when we recognise the truth that we are equally in possession of the Samyaksambodhi, Highest True Intelligence, and through which everybody without exception can attain final enlightenment.

<sup>3</sup>*Mahâyâna-abhidharma-sangâti-çâstra*, by Asanga. Nanjo, No. 1199.

<sup>4</sup>*Yogâcârya-bhûmi-çâstra*, Nanjo, No. 1170. The work is supposed to have been dictated to Asanga by a mythical Bodhisattva.

<sup>5</sup>By Asanga. Nanjo, 1177.

<sup>6</sup>*Mahâyâna-samparigraha-çâstra*, by Asanga. Nanjo, 1183.

<sup>7</sup>Perceiving an incarnation of the Dharmakâya in every spiritual leader regardless of his nationality and professed creed, Mahayanists recognise a Buddha in Socrates, Mohammed, Jesus, Francis of Assisi, Confucius, Laotze, and many others.

<sup>8</sup>Ancient Hindu Buddhists, with their fellow-philosophers, believed in the existence of spiritually transfigured beings, who, not hampered by the limitations of space and time, can manifest themselves everywhere for the benefit of all sentient beings. We notice some mysterious figures in almost all Mahâyâna sûtras, who are very often described as shedding innumerable rays of light from the forehead and illuminating all the three thousand worlds simultaneously. This may merely be a poetic exaggeration. But this Sambhogakâya or Body of Bliss (see Açvaghosa's *Awakening of Faith*, p. 101) is very difficult for us to comprehend as it is literally described. For a fuller treatment see the chapter on "Triakâya."

<sup>9</sup>Though I am very much tempted to digress and to enter into a specific treatment concerning these two Hindu Mahâyâna doctrines, I reluctantly refrain from so doing, as it requires a somewhat lengthy treatment and does not entirely fall within the scope of the present work.

<sup>10</sup>That Açvaghosa's conception of the Âlaya varies with the view here presented may be familiar to readers of his *Awakening of Faith*. This is one of the most abstruse problems in the philosophy of Mahâyâna Buddhism, and there are several divergent theories concerning its nature, attributes, activities, etc. In a work like this, it is impossible to give even a general statement of those controversies, however interesting they may be to students of the history of intellectual development in India.

The Âlayavijñâna, to use the phraseology of Samkhya philosophy, is a composition, so to speak, of the Soul (*purusa*) and Primordial Matter (*prakrti*). It is the Soul, so far as it is neutral and indifferent to all those phenomenal manifestations, that are going on within as well as without us. It is Primordial Matter, inasmuch as it is the reservoir of everything, whose lid being lifted by the hands of Ignorance, there instantly springs up this universe of limitation and relativity. Enlightenment or Nirvana, therefore, consists in recognising the error of Ignorance and not in clinging to the products of imagination.

<sup>11</sup>For a more detailed explanation of the ideal philosophy of the Yogâcâra, see my article on the subject in *Le Muséon*, 1905.

<sup>12</sup>"One mind" or "one heart" meaning the mental attitude which is in harmony with the monistic view of nature in its broadest sense.

<sup>13</sup>These ten stages of spiritual development are somewhat minutely explained below. See Chapter XII.

<sup>14</sup>The ten moral precepts of the Buddha are: (1) Kill no living being; (2) Take nothing that is not given; (3) Keep matrimonial sanctity; (4) Do not lie; (5) Do not slander; (6) Do not insult; (7) Do not chatter; (8) Be not greedy; (9) Bear no malice; (10) Harbor no scepticism.

<sup>15</sup>Mahayanism recognises two "entrances" through which a comprehensive knowledge of the universe is obtained. One is called the "entrance of sameness" (*samatâ*) and the other the "entrance of diversity" (*nânâtva*). The first entrance introduces us to the universality of things

and suggests a pantheistic interpretation of existence. The second leads us to the particularity of things culminating in monotheism or polytheism, as it is viewed from different standpoints. The Buddhists declare that neither entrance alone can lead us to the sanctum sanctorum of existence; and in order to obtain a sound, well-balanced knowledge of things in general, we must go through both the entrances of universality and particularity.

<sup>16</sup>The doctrine of Trikâya will be given further elucidation in the chapter bearing the same title.

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