

MAHAYANA BUDDHISM

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The primary sources of Mahayana Buddhism can be traced to the Theravada literature itself. These ideas that were in existence from the time of the Buddha gradually developed and during the Kaniska Era organized itself under a new phase as Mahayana. The occurrence of such a doctrine was to be expected by this time. The reason for it can be grouped as follows:

- i. Events during the time of the Buddha and consequent results.
- ii. Political turmoil.
- iii. Religious rivalry.
- iv. Interpretation of the word of the Buddha, according to each one's inclination.

After the Buddha Era there was no powerful king in N. India. Especially after Kalasoka, dissension increased in N. India. Later, although Theravada spread during the time of Asoka, a short time after his demise there arose dissension in the sasana. Meanwhile N.W. India subject to various invasions after Alexander, from Greece, Bactria and Persia. These political disturbances gave rise to the spread amongst Indian society of religious views and customs of these countries. Whilst the Sun God was worshipped in Persia, Greece had faith in various gods. Consequently there arose in India too, a class of gods similar to their gods. Atinabha, the majestic Mahayana Buddha is similar to the Persian and Iranian Sun God.

Consequent to the cultural impact resulting from these political disturbances the original Buddhist doctrine in India took a different turn. The most powerful force against Buddhism from the time of the Buddha was the religion of the Brahmins. Because of this there was no place in India for a doctrine like Theravada that aimed at inner purity. Observing the popularity of the gods in Hinduism, the Buddha too, created Bodhisattvas who strove for the deliverance of mankind. Unlike the Bodhisattva in Theravada, the Mahayanic Bodhisattva lived among mankind and reached Parinibbana after annihilating their sorrow. Thus the prevalent religious rivalry also was an important factor in the appearance of Mahayana. The different interpretations of the word of the Buddha by various people, too, led to the beginning of Mahayana. During the time of the Buddha, groups formed themselves as bhanakas to hand down by

memory the word of the Buddha. Later they turned out as Aryan views. As a result in later years even the meaning given to the word Buddha became confused. The Astadasa Nikaya Sastra of Bhikkhu Vasumitra makes mention that five points regarding Arahants had been discussed at the second convocation. No mention is made of the Dasa Vastu (10 points). In that case it is clear from the points of the Dhamma accepted or rejected by the various sects that the first division among clergy occurred when the disciples who lived after the Buddha attempted to analyse the Dhamma.

After the convocation, during the reign of Kaniska, King of N. India from 73-123 A.D. Mahayana visibly rose up. The word Mahayana is first noticed in the Mahayana Suddhotpada Sutra of Acharya Asvaghosa who held a prominent place in the convocation of Kaniska. Similarly it is evident from the translation written in the 1st century A.D that there was written in the 1st century A.D. itself the Asta Sahasrika Pragna Paramita. Today the entire Buddhist world belongs to the two sections. Hinayana and Mahayana that appeared during the time of the Buddha. Bengal, Siam, Cambodia, Burma and Ceylon are regarded as countries where Hinayana Buddhism prevails whilst Nepal, Tibet, China, Japan and Mongolia are regarded as countries where Mahayana Buddhism prevails. Thus, when Mahayana ideas rose up as a doctrine during the Kaniska Era it spread very rapidly in India and the surrounding countries. It is mentioned in Naranatha's historical work that there was a section of bhikkhus studying Mahayana during the reign of Kaniska's son. Mahayana started from the south of India. Asta Sahasrika Pragna Paramita states that from its beginnings there it spread to the North and East. Naranatha records that at the same time a thera named Nanda living in Anga spread Mahayana Buddhism in Jambudvipa. Thereby many got accustomed to consider Hinayana as Buddhism of the South and Mahayana as Buddhism of the North. But one who makes a critical study of Buddhism can term Mahayana as southern Buddhism and Hinayana as Northern Buddhism. Historical facts point out that Mahayana had its origin in Southern India, and later spread towards the North and still later towards Tibet, China and other countries and that Hinayana started in the North, flourished there for some time and during the time of Asoka spread to the southern regions. Therefore it is evident that Mahayana originally sprang up from the Mahasanghikas of India, and by the reign of Kaniska became an accepted doctrine. It was during the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D. that Mahayana spread throughout the whole of N. India. Bhikkhu Fahien who came to India in the 5th century A.D. records that there were Mahayanists as well as Theravadins in Afghanistan, Punjab, Matura and Pataliputra but only Mahayanists in Bhutan. The rapidity with which they spread is also evident in the records of Hiuen Hsiang. He, too, records that only Mahayana had spread to Taxila, Orissa and Vidarbha. Mahayana thus flourished in N. India and spreading from N.W. India

reached as far as Japan. From India this doctrine was taken to China in about 67 A.D. where it strengthened and flourished.

The word Hinayana was not well known amongst the ancient Buddhists. It is not found in the Pali Tripitakas. It first came into use in ancient Sanskrit Buddhist literature. Mahayana has been termed Buddhayana, Mahayana, Bodhisattrayana in these texts; whilst Hinayana has been termed Sravakayana, Pratyaka Buddhayana. Taking these words into account it is evident that there is a wide difference between the two. The difference is also very clearly seen in the two words Mahayana and Hinayana which have been formed by the respective addition of 'Maha' and 'Hina' to the word 'yana' meaning vehicle. Therefore it can be cited that the principal difference between the two is that in Mahayana the sole aim is to become a Buddha and attain Nibbana whereas Hinayana caters to those who have the good fortune to annihilate defilements by listening to a sermon preached by the Buddha or practising accordingly. Mahayana has been planned for superior individuals who can reach Enlightenment without another's help and can lead others to deliverance by preaching what they have perceived. In short Mahayana provides a Buddha whereas Hinayana provides a Buddha or a Paccheka Buddha.

According to the Theravada literature the number of Buddhas born during an infinite period of years is infinite. Hence our literature mentions twenty eight Buddhas such as Tanhankara, Medankara, etc. The list of Buddhas mentioned in Mahayana literature far exceeds that of Hinayana. The names therein, too are quite different from ours. The Mahayana Sutra named Samadhi Raja Sutra, preached to the bhikkhus by the Buddha whilst residing on the rock Gijjakuta refers to many Buddhas such as Ganesvara, Tejesvara, Matisvara, Agnisvara, etc. Therein a life span of 10 million years is attributed to Buddhas Ganesvara and Matisvara, One Buddha is mentioned to have lived for 7 days. "*Brahmanassa dvipadottamassa ratrindivam sapta abhusi ayu*".

Although the Buddhists in Lanka, Siam, Cambodia and Burma where Theravada prevails, aspire to attain Nibbana by developing the mind through the eradication of defilement by practising virtue, the Mahayanists on the other hand, by placing their faith in Buddha and Bodhisattva hope to attain Nibbana after overcoming the sorrows of existence. According to their view the Buddha does not obtain deliverance till all beings attain Nibbana but is born on earth from time to time under different names and preaches the doctrine and causes beings to attain Nibbana. The abovementioned Buddhas differ not only in names but also in respect of birth, period of appearance on earth and life span. The Mahayanists attribute 3 bodies to the Buddha, namely 'Nirmanakaya', 'Sambhogakaya' and 'Dharmakaya'.

Although Mahayana Buddhism sprang up later, yet its influence on Theravada can be seen from the current Bodhisattva views and forms of worship, etc. Of these, too, the influence of devotion is great. As a result, not only the doctrine of the Buddha but also the life story of the Buddha became different. As the Buddha's life began to get removed from human life it gradually moved away from the attention of lay devotees. However, the Mahayanists succeeded in bringing out another aspect to win the minds of the people, namely, belief in the Bodhisattva. This is quite different from the Bodhisattva aspect in Theravada. This belief which prevailed over the life of the Buddha penetrated even in a small degree to the Theravada.

In Theravada there is only one means of gaining deliverance. Mahayana texts mention two ways, the easy and the difficult. Expectation of deliverance by adherence to forms of worship and other religious services is contrary to Theravada.

The Mahayanists do not see to their own condition but see to that of others. This is also contrary to the views of Hinayana. In Hinayana one obtains self deliverance and makes others realise it. The scholar Asanga says that these two names are suitable in every respect since attention to oneself predominates in Hinayana and attention to others predominates in Mahayana. According to the Mahayana Hinayanists are taught only the eradication of defilements. This means that their highest aim is the non-existence of the individual, or in other words, the cessation of an individual existence. Hinayanists expect deliverance by attaining Arahantship. In Mahayana everyone become a Bodhisattva. Everyone aspires to supreme Buddhahood. They like to worship images. They seem to pay more regard to material offerings than to practice. The Hinayana Bodhisattva is entirely different from the Bodhisattva aspect in Mahayana. Their principal aims can be stated thus:

- i. Eradication of all defilements.
- ii. Deliverance of all beings from the sorrow of existence.
- iii. Service to others.
- iv. Seeking the truth and making the world practise it.

Accordingly, as it was respectfully accepted by the common man Mahayana Buddhism rapidly spread throughout all Asia, including the South East. The reasoning power and the subtle knowledge of Mahayana scholars were instrumental for this. The religion we call Mahayana today is not that ancient Mahayana. The Mahayana of old is a deep philosophical system. Forms of

worship and offerings were not given such prominence. Today Mahayana lays more stress on forms of worship and offerings. In many countries such as Ceylon where Theravada now prevails, Mahayana prevailed for many centuries. Traces of it can be seen even today among the society as well as in religious and literary works. Mahayana Buddhism advanced more rapidly than Hinayana Buddhism to bring about the welfare of the common man.