

Notes:

Lesson 17 Mahayana Buddhism



1. Theravada Buddhism focused primarily on meditation and concentration, the Eighth Noble Path; as a result, it centered on a monastic life and an extreme expenditure of time in meditating.

2. This left little room for the bulk of humanity to join in, so a new schism erupted within the ranks of Buddhism in the first century CE, one that would attempt to reformulate the teachings of Buddha to accommodate a greater number of people.

3. They called their new Buddhism, the "Greater Vehicle" (literally, "The Greater Ox-Cart") or **Mahayana**, since it could accommodate more people and more believers from all walks of life. They distinguished themselves from mainstream Theravada Buddhism by contemptuously referring to Theravada as **Hinayana**, or "The Lesser Vehicle."

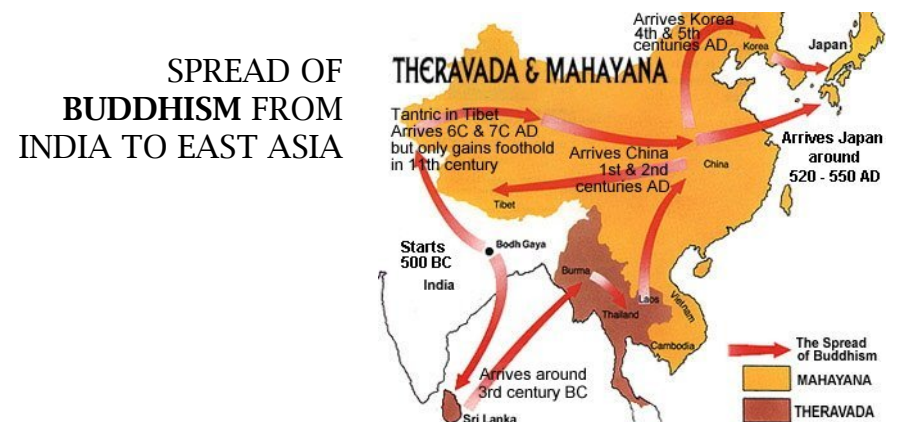
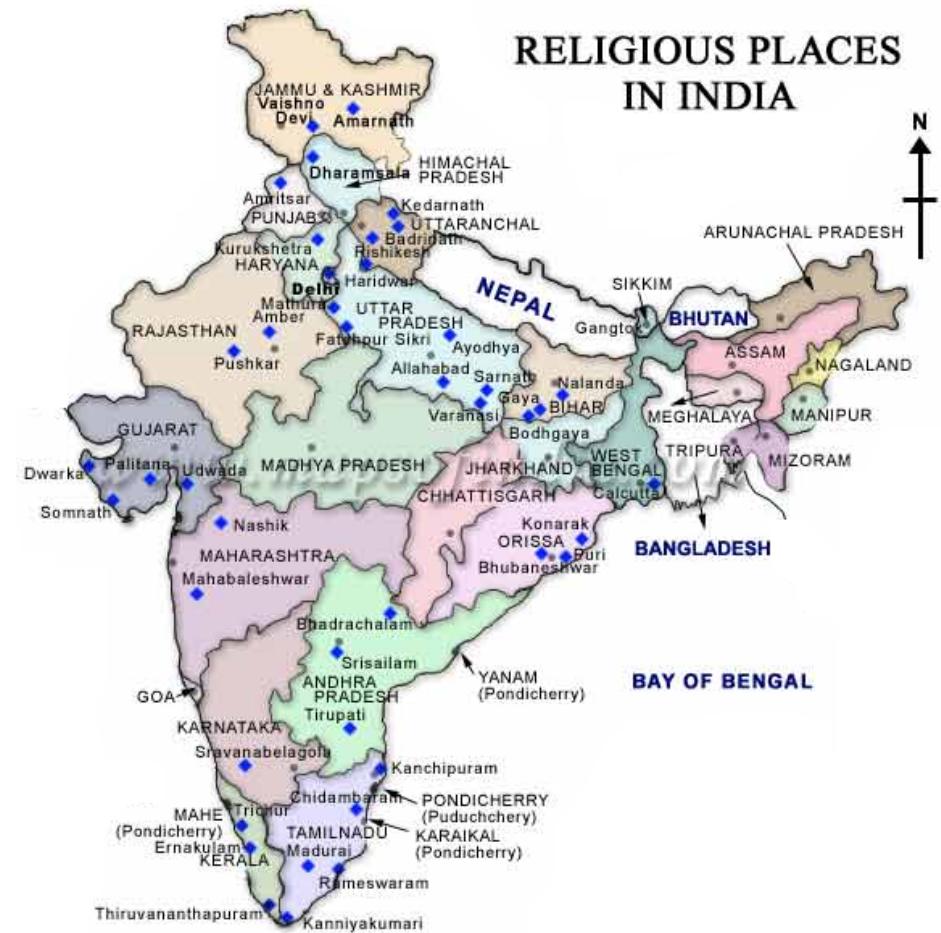
4. The Mahayanists, however, did not see themselves as **creating** a new start for Buddhism, rather they claimed to be **recovering** the original teachings of Buddha, in much the same way that the Protestant reformers of sixteenth century Europe claimed that they were not creating a new Christianity but recovering the original form.

5. The Mahayanists claimed that their canon of scriptures represented the **final teachings of Buddha**; they accounted for the non-presence of these teachings in over **five hundred** years by claiming that these were **secret teachings** entrusted only to the **most faithful followers**.

6. Whatever the origins of Mahayana doctrines, they represent a significant departure in the philosophy. Like the Protestant Reformation, the overall goal of Mahayana was to extend religious authority to a **greater number of people** rather than concentrating it in the **hands of a few**.

7. The Mahayanists managed to turn Buddhism into a more esoteric religion by developing a theory of **gradations of Buddhahood**. At the top was Buddhahood itself which was preceded by a series of lives, the **bodhisattvas**.

- Step 1. Refrain from doing evil deeds and engage in practicing good deeds.
- Step 2. Uphold precepts and cultivate concentration and wisdom.
- Step 3. Cultivate the mind of compassion of the Bodhisattvas and follow their path.



Samsara	The world of change and re-becoming.
Samskara	Desires, one of the five skandhas.
Satya	Truth.
Shunyata	Emptiness, used to describe that which is dependent, conditioned and liable to change.
Sila	Morality.
Skandhas	The five elements of which the self is made up.
Sutra	Literally “thread”, used of a teaching of the Buddha. The Buddhist scriptures are divided into sutras.
Svabhava	Inherent existence (things lack this).
Tanha	Craving, the cause of suffering.
Tathagata	One who has gone beyond, used of the Buddha.
Vajrayana	Diamond vehicle or thunderbolt vehicle, incorporating Tantric elements.
Vedana	Feelings, one of the five skandhas.
Vijnana	Consciousness, one of the five skandhas.
Vipassana	Form of meditation which seeks to develop insight into the nature of reality.

8. This idea of the *bodhisattva* was one of the most important innovations of Mahayana Buddhism. The *bodhisattva*, or "**being of wisdom**," was originally invented to explain the nature of Buddha's earlier lives. Before Buddha entered his final life as Siddhartha Gautama, he had spent **many lives** working towards **Buddhahood**.

9. In these previous lives he was a *bodhisattva*, a kind of "**Buddha-in-waiting**," that performed acts of incredible generosity, joy, and compassion towards his fellow human beings. An entire group of literature grew up around these previous lives of Buddha, called the *Jataka* or "**Birth Stories**."

10. While we do not know much about the earliest forms of Buddhism, there is some evidence that the earliest followers believed that there was only the one Buddha and that no more would follow.

11. Soon, however, a doctrine of the *Maitreya*, or "**Future Buddha**," began to assert itself. In this, Buddhists believed that a **second Buddha would come and purify the world**; they also believed that the first Buddha prophesied this future Buddha.

12. If a future Buddha was coming, that meant that the second Buddha is already on earth passing through life after life. So someone on earth was the *Maitreya*.

13. It could be the person serving you food. It could be a child playing in the street. It could be you. What if there was more than one *Maitreya*? Five? Ten? A billion? That certainly raises the odds that you or someone you know is a future Buddha.

14. The goal of Theravada Buddhism is practically unattainable. In order to make Buddhism a more esoteric religion, the Mahayanists invented two grades of Buddhist attainment below becoming a Buddha. While the Buddha was the highest goal, one could become a *pratyeka-buddha*, that is, one who has **awakened to the truth but keeps it secret**.

15. Below the *pratyeka-buddha* is the *arhant*, or "**worthy one**," who has learned the truth from others and has realized it as truth. Mahayana Buddhism establishes the *arhant* as the **goal for all believers**.

16. The believer hears the truth, comes to realize it as truth, and then passes into *Nirvana*. This doctrine of **arhanthood** is the basis for calling Mahayan the "**Greater Vehicle**," for it is meant to include everyone.

17. Finally, the Mahayanists completed the conversion of Buddhism **from a philosophy to religion**. Therevada Buddhism holds that Buddha was a historical person who, on his death, ceased to exist.

18. There were, however, strong tendencies for Buddhists to worship Buddha as a god of some sort; these tendencies probably began as early as Buddha's lifetime. The Mahayanists developed a theology of Buddha called the doctrine of "**The Three Bodies**," or *Trikaya*.

19. The Buddha was not a human being, as he was in Theravada Buddhism, but the manifestation of a universal, spiritual being. This being had three bodies. When it occupied the earth in the form of Siddhartha Gautama, it took on the Body of **Magical Transformation** (*nirmanakaya*).

20. This Body of Magical Transformation was an emanation of the **Body of Bliss** (*sambhogakaya*), which occupies the heavens in the form of a ruling and governing god of the universe. There are many forms of the Body of Bliss, but the one that rules over our world is *Amithaba* who lives in a paradise in the western heavens called *Sukhavati*, or "**Land of Pure Bliss**."

21. Finally, the Body of Bliss is an emanation of the **Body of Essence** (*dharmakaya*), which is the principle underlying the whole of the universe. This Body of Essence, the principle and rule of the universe, became synonymous with *Nirvana*. It was a kind of **universal soul**, and *Nirvana* became the transcendent joining with this universal soul.

Magga	The Middle Way – fourth of the Four Noble Truths.
Mahayana	Great Vehicle, Buddhist tradition originating in India but developed particularly in the Far East and the Himalayas.
Mandala	A spiritual diagram or map.
Mantra	A chant, repeated as an aid to devotion and meditation.
Maya	Illusion, used of the world of the senses.
Nirodha	Cessation. It describes the exhaustion of the karmic fuel of the fires of greed, hatred and ignorance, and is equated to nirvana.
Nirvana	The state in which the triple fire of hatred, greed and ignorance is extinguished.
Paramita	Perfection.
Prajna	Wisdom.
Pratitya samutpada	The arising and ceasing of things in dependence upon conditions.
Punabhava	Re-becoming or reincarnation.
Rupa	Body, one of the five skandhas.
Samadhi	Meditation.
Samatha	Form of meditation which seeks to develop calm, one pointedness of mind.
Samjna	Mental concepts, one of the five skandhas.

Buddha as Person	Buddha as Ideal	Buddha as Reality
Died at age 80	Archetypal Buddha symbol	Experience of Ultimate Truth
Nirmanakaya	Sambhogakaya	Dharmakaya
"Magical Transformation"	"Body of Bliss"	"Body of Essence"

BUDDHIST GLOSSARY

Abhidharma	Philosophical analysis of the Dharma.
Alayavignana	Store consciousness; mechanism by which we remember and are affected by events in the past.
Anatta	No inherently existing or independent self.
Anicca	The first mark of conditioned existence, that all things are subject to change.
Arhat	Worthy one, used to those who gained enlightenment following the Buddha's teaching.
Avidya	Spiritual blindness.
Bardo	Used of a transitional state, especially that between one life and the next.
Bhikku	Buddhist monk (nun).
Bodhicitta	The mind of enlightenment, person is determined to follow the path towards enlightenment.
Bodhisattva	Being of enlightenment, used of Gautama prior to his enlightenment.
Dhayana	Meditation; also the spiritual state achieved in meditation.
Dukkha	Suffering, unsatisfactory.
Hinayana	Lesser Vehicle, or Theravada.
Huayen	The interpenetration of all things.

22. The final developments of Buddhism in India involve the growth of **Tantric thought** in both Buddhism and Hinduism. Vedism (Hinduism) had always based itself on magic and ritualistic magic; in the fourth and fifth centuries BC, a new form of Hinduism, *Tantrism*, focused **primarily on magic**.

23. As applied Buddhism, Tantrism focused on the use of the physical world. Mahayana Buddhism divided into two central schools, the **Madhyamika**, or "**Doctrine of the Middle Position**," and the **Vijnanavada**, or "**Doctrine of Consciousness**." Each of these schools believed that all of physical reality was an illusion. The only thing that existed was **Void or Emptiness**.

24. The Vijnavadans believed that everything we perceived was self-generated and that all our perceptions were caused by previous perceptions in an elaborate chain of causation. This would explain why our perceptions tend to be uniform throughout our lives and why we tend to share our perceptions with others. But, in the end, it's all illusion. The world needs to be rejected as a world of illusion.

25. The Tantric Buddhists, on the other hand, developed a different methodology from this insight that the **world is unreal**. Just because the physical world doesn't exist doesn't mean that one should reject it. On the one hand, if the physical world doesn't exist, that means that one cannot commit right or wrong.

26. As a way of proving that one is enlightened, all sorts of forbidden acts should be engaged in: fornication, thieving, eating dung, and so forth. On the other hand, if the physical world was unreal, one could still use the physical world and one's perceptions of it as a means towards enlightenment. All activities can be used as a meditative technique. This was called *Vajrayana*, or "**The Vehicle of the Thunder-Bolt**."

27. The Vajrayanans believed that each *bodhisattva* had **consorts** or **wives**, called *taras*. These female counterparts embodied the active aspects of the *bodhisattva*, and so were worshipped. One learned the teachings of Tantrism from a master, and then one joined a group of others who had been trained. There one would practice the rituals learned from the master.

28. For the Tantrists, the physical world was identical with the void and human perception was identical with *Nirvana*. Buddhism,

however, was slowly fading off of the Indian landscape; Tantrism came on the scene just as Buddhism began to slowly lose its vitality.

29. We don't know why Buddhism declined in the last half of the first millennium CE. By the time the Muslims began conquering India in the twelfth century, the number of monasteries had severely declined.

30. Buddhism, which once had spread across the face of India, was a vital force only in the areas of its origins. Scholars believe that the monasteries became detached from everyday life in India.

31. After centuries of patronage, the monasteries had amassed a wealth of endowments. Life inside the monasteries was very good. So the monasteries became very selective in admitting monks to the brotherhood.

32. For the everyday Indian, Buddhism increasingly became indistinguishable from Hinduism, which had undergone a transformation itself.

33. The average Hindu thought of Buddha as a god among their gods; we find numerous indications that Buddha was worshipped by Hindus as any other god. In fact, Hinduism eventually construed Buddha as a manifestation or **avatar** of the god **Vishnu** (Krishna, Ram are avatars of Vishnu).

34. Finally, the Buddhists lived in separate communities; Buddhism wasn't an integral part of everyday life in India, such as the rituals associated with Hinduism. When the Muslims began their conquest of India in 1192, they energetically set about trying to convert the regions to Islam.

35. Part of this conversion process involved suppressing indigenous religions. Since Hinduism was so fundamentally a part of Indian life, they didn't succeed in suppressing it. But when they destroyed the Buddhist monasteries and either executed or drove out the Buddhist monks, there was no-one left to take up the religion.

36. From 1192 to the present day, Buddhism ceased to be an organized religion in India, the fertile soil from which the religion grew.

37. Mahayana Buddhism flourished in India from the fifth century AD onwards, during the dynasty of the **Guptas**. Mahayana centers of learning were established, the most important one being the **Nalanda University** in north-eastern India.

38. Mahayana schools recognize all or part of the Mahayana Sutras. Some of these sutras became for Mahayanists a manifestation of the Buddha himself, and faith in and veneration of those texts are stated in some sutras (e.g. the Lotus Sutra and the Mahaparinirvana Sutra) to lay the foundations for the later attainment of Buddhahood itself.

39. **Native Mahayana Buddhism** is practiced today in China, Japan, Korea, Singapore, parts of Russia and most of Vietnam (also commonly referred to as "**Eastern Buddhism**"). The Buddhism practiced in Tibet, the Himalayan regions, and Mongolia is also Mahayana in origin, but with the heading of **Vajrayana** (also commonly referred to as "**Northern Buddhism**").

40. There are a variety of strands in Eastern Buddhism, of which the "**Pure Land**" school of Mahayana is the most widely practiced today. In most of this area however, they are fused into a single unified form of Buddhism.

Review Questions:

Write the answers in your notebook during lesson discussion in class.

1. What is the meaning of Mahayana?
2. What is the name given to the Theravada Buddhists?
3. Why was Mahayana called a "Greater Vehicle"?
4. Why was there a need for the rise of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy?
5. Where did the teachings of Mahayana Buddhist come from?
6. Why did Buddha tell his followers to keep it a secret?
7. Why was the secret exposed only after 500 years?
8. What is Bodhisattvas? Why is it called the most important innovation of Mahayana Buddhism?
9. What is Buddhahood?
10. What is the literature containing the previous birth stories of Buddha called?
11. Earlier Buddhists believed that there will be only one Buddha, no more will follow. What theology changed that notion?
12. Explain what is Maitreya?
13. What is Trikaya? How is it different from Trinity?
14. What are some reasons why Buddhism declined in India?