

Study material for the students of B.A I, Department of Philosophy, A. N. College, Patna

Buddha's Silence: Development of Mahayana and Hinyana Schools of Buddhism

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For a wider understanding of the Four Noble Truths and the basic teachings of Buddha it will be advisable to understand some later developments of Buddhism in brief due to his silence on the issues related to the transcendental realities. Buddhism, by and large, stands for the philosophy, religion and ethics which are contained in the early teachings of Buddha. Basically the Buddhist teaching is confined to the four noble truths so far as the course outline is concerned. But as we had discussed during the introductory classes that later on after the death of Buddha the teachings of Buddha has been interpreted differently by the later Buddhist monks and scholars. We know that Buddha used to maintain silence whenever metaphysical questions related to transcendental realities were raised before him. He avoided the issues related to the super sensible realities. Actually some scholars believe that Buddha wanted to develop the metaphysics or philosophy keeping in mind the ethical or conduct aspects of common people so that they get rid of the sorrows of their life. In this context he has developed the Four Noble Truths. In the second noble truth he has elaborated the causes of suffering i.e. the twelve links in the chain of causation as rooted in his doctrine of dependent origination. In the fourth noble truth he has expounded the noble eight fold path leading to the cessation of sufferings. Some scholars regard Buddha as a big counsellor for the removal the sufferings of human life. So it is also believed that he used to expand his teaching depending upon the spiritual and ethical dimensions or comprehensibility of his disciples. Again, the way the *Karuna* or Compassion aspect of Buddhism has been highlighted by the Mahayana School is worth knowing for the full understanding of Buddhism. Actually the religious or devotional dimensions of Buddhism cannot be understood without knowing the basic tenets of Mahayana Buddhism and its concepts of Boddhisattva. The triple body concept of Mahayana comes very close to the advaita Vedanta of Sankara. However the Theravada or Hinyana Buddhism remains confined to the early teaching of Buddha that a monk can attain salvation by his own

solitary meditation. No one is going to help him. He cannot get even the grace of Buddha. So Theravada also believed in individual liberation from sufferings. The understanding of the later interpretations of the early Buddhist teaching is also important for the students who are simultaneously preparing for the competitive examinations and who have planned to opt philosophy as paper in those examinations. Actually these interpretations widen the understanding of the basic course outlines of Indian philosophy in general and Buddhism in particular.

Buddhism flourished in India as Buddha travelled at the length and breadth of India after his enlightenment and awakening at Bodhi Gaya to teach people about truth of life and world as contained in his four noble truths. But Buddhism could not remain united for long after the *parinirvana* of Buddha. Buddha had not created any central seat of command during his life time for his religion and *sangha* order. In Buddhism the seed of schism was sown during the second Buddhist council which was held at Vaishali. This council took place roughly two hundred years after the *parinirvana* of the founder on the issue of teaching and discipline preached by the master (Buddha) so that it could reach to the masses.

Two hundred years after the Buddha's death, Buddhism found its devoted and enthusiastic patronage in the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka who transformed Buddhism into a religious movement and a religion of the layman. So during this period Buddhism was opened fully for the common people and did not remain confined mainly to the *Sangha*. During his time, Buddhism transcended the boundaries of India. To make it a popular religion he promoted a prevalent cult of worship of local holy places which were easily accessible to everyone without distinction. After the death of King Ashoka, the centre of Buddhism in India shifted to the northwest of the country.

By the first century B.C.E, out of the disputes and divisions among Buddhist teachers, a new movement had emerged which was named as *Mahayana* by its adherents. The Mahayana movement came into existence in India, but flourished in the nations of East Asia when Mahayana missionaries carried their interpretation of Buddhism from northwest India into China in the first century C.E. The followers of Mahayana though interpreted the teaching of Buddha differently yet always claimed that they adhere to the real teaching of the founder. In other words they rather emphasized that what they preach is

the real teaching of Buddha. The followers of Mahayana Buddhism claimed that Buddha had taught much more than what is contained in the Pali Canon, adopted by the Theravadins or the Theravada school or the Hinyana School of Buddhism.

The Mahayanists claim that the Buddha taught much in secret to disciples who could understand this higher truth. According to the followers of Mahayana school of thought Buddha's teaching was very comprehensive and diversified, and only a few monks and disciples could pick them all. Mahayana sees the element of selfishness in the approach of Theravadins or Hinayana saints who adhere to a lower ideal and are anxious to attain their own liberation only. Actually the Mahayanists called the ideal of individual liberation of the Theravadins as smaller vehicle and so called them Hinyana. Mahayana advocated the salvation of all sentient beings and regarded this as the higher ideal. Thus the Mahayanists preferred the high sounding name Mahayana or larger vehicle for their belief. They contend that the greatness of their faith lies in their ideal of the salvation.

The Mahayana monks hold that their accommodating spirit can be traced back to the catholic concern which the Buddha himself had for the enlightenment and salvation of all beings. The life of the founder sets an example and ideal that enlightenment should be sought not for one's own salvation but for being able to minister the moral needs of others. Mahayanists hold that Buddha himself kept wandering and teaching people for almost forty long years after his enlightenment. Modern Mahayana writers are proud of their faith and love to call it a living and progressive religion and regards the adaptability of Mahayana as the sign of its vitality.

Theravada Buddhism believes that Buddha taught a religion of intense self-effort which is devoid of the Super naturals, rituals, authority and tradition. Buddha condemned all forms of divination because, according to him, any appeal and reliance on the super naturals or the transcendent realities encourage monks to adopt shortcuts, easy answers and simple solutions that could only divert attention from the hard, practical task of self-advance. So Theravada is nontheistic but Mahayana has elevated Buddhahood to almost theistic status. The impact of the teaching of Mahayana led the common people to recognize a multitude of heavenly Buddhas and *Bodhisattvas* to

whom they can pray for help. Thus the Mahayana Buddhism allows much more scope for special cults and rituals than the Theravadins do.

Mahayana emphasizes the importance of religious experience and holds that *dharma* is not embodied only in scriptures. *Dharma* awakens the quest for enlightenment as the greatest value in life. Thus, Mahayana pantheon which consists of heavenly Buddhas and *Bodhisattvas* exemplifying specific spiritual qualities as saviour beings focuses devotion as way to *nirvana*. With this zeal Buddhism as a religion has experienced a reawakening and a resurgence which has led to some astounding missionary successes particularly in the East.

Further with the emergence of Mahayan Buddhism, a number unique features came into existence, such as (i) a combination of ethical and social concepts was incorporated into the concept of Bodhisattva, who is an altruistic and compassionate being, (ii) with this the Buddhist type of devotionism came into practice, and (iii) an innovation of various levels of understanding, truth, and reality was made. The belief in Bodhisattva bridged the gap between god and man. The gods were no more furious deities and arbiter of human destiny. They were humanized and made an embodiment of morality and purity. The static neutral cosmic principle (Brahman) was made compassionate and socially active. They were thus made socially relevant. In the new scheme man himself became the potential god, though not as the creator God but as virtuous person. He could also become a demon by becoming non-Virtuous. It is he who is responsible for shaping himself in any manner he likes.

### **Bodhisattva and Compassion**

In Mahayana Buddhism a saint or semi-divine being who has voluntarily renounced Nirvana in order to help others to salvation is called Bodhisattvas. In popular devotion bodhisattvas are worshipped as symbols of compassion. The enlightened person who prefer to defer his own personal liberation and dedicate their life for the liberation of all sentient beings are called *Bodhisattava* and the ultimate spiritual ideal of these Enlightened Beings is also known as the *Bodhisattava*. For Mahayan Buddhists, the *bodhisattva* (literally “a being intended for enlightenment”) has postponed his own final enlightenment and nirvana in order to help other beings in their spiritual

quests. To become a *bodhisattva*, a person must manifest the innate qualities necessary, and then take the Great Vow of compassion for all living beings. Any person is potentially a *bodhisattva*, because anyone may take the vow. However, it may take many lives to fulfil the vow.

### The Divine Authors of Salvation

Going beyond the Theravada teaching that there is only one Buddha, the Enlightened One in each age, Mahayana preached the concept known as the *trikaya* “three body doctrine”. In Theravada, Buddha is an historical figure who no longer exists but who left behind his *dharma* as a guide. By contrast, Mahayana regards the Buddha as a universal principle. Metaphysically, Buddha is said to be an eternal presence in the universe with three aspects, or “bodies”.

According to this doctrine there are three separate bodies or natures of the Buddha. One is Earthly Body or *nirmana-kaya* which the manifestation of the Buddha in our age in earthly form. The Earthly Body is differentiated, personal and limited by space and time. Siddhartha is the example of earthly body. Another is the Heavenly body of Buddha known as *sambhoga-kaya*. This is the Body of Spiritual Bliss so also known as Bliss Body. This is heavenly manifestation of Buddha Body particularly in Celestial or *Dhyani Buddhas* and *Bodhisattvas*. In other words the heavenly body is the abode of *Bodhisattvas* and *Dhyani Buddhas*. The Bliss Body is capable of taking names and forms and offering help to the earthly beings in removing their miseries, showing and guiding them along the path to *Nirvana*. From here they descend down to earth also when they are approached by the needy devotees through worship and prayer. The *Bodhisattvas* also come down to the earthly realm to help people by removing the ignorance of the later. The heavenly body is the form of Buddha such as Maitreya, Vairocana and, the most popular, Amitabha of Pure Land Buddhism and all such *Bodhisattvas* who inhabit fully spiritual realms.

The last is the Body of the Cosmical or Absolute Buddha called *dharmakaya*, who is present in all reality. From this perspective, *each* human and every other being has the nature of the Buddha. The Theravada Buddhism believes in only one *bodhisattva* i.e. Maitreya, a “Buddha in the making,” in the current

era. In fact Maitreya as a *Bodhisattva* is acceptable to both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism and is believed to be the next Buddha in earthly form.

To the common people, the Mahayana offered the good news of the existence of multitudes of saviours, real and potential, whose chief desire was the cure of the sufferings of all the sentient beings. The pure benevolence of these saviours was the best of all assurances.

*Manushi Buddhas* are the saviours like Gautama who came on earth as human beings in the past and attained enlightenment, instructed people regarding their true way of life. After accomplishing their objective and duties they attained Nirvana. Now prayer cannot reach them. *Manushi Buddhas* are basically and primarily enlightened teachers. *Bodhisattvas* are great saviours. They are innumerable company of supernatural beings who hear prayers and come actively to people's aid. Mahayana believes that they have already attained enlightenment and they sit enthroned in the heaven looking down on the needy world. They descend down to earth when they are needed to guide people of their true path and spiritual goal. Some widely acknowledged and worshipped *Bodhisattvas* are Maitreya, ManjuSri, Avalokiteshwar, Kshitigarbha etc. These *Bodhisattvas* are worshipped with great enthusiasm except Maitreya who is well honoured but little worshipped probably because of the faith that he is going to be the next Buddha so he cannot transfer or share his merit to the needy as he is storing and preserving the merits for his future earthly career.

*Dhyani Buddhas* differ from *Bodhisattavas* in having fully achieved their Buddhahood (like *Manushi Buddha*), but they differ from *Manushi Buddhas* also in not having achieved their Buddhahood in human form. They dwell in the heavens and there is an indefinite interval between their heavenly abode and final entry into nirvana. During this indefinite interval they actively minister to human needs. In fact to meet the human needs they compassionately postpone their ultimate goal of *Nirvana*. So what Gautama did for the human beings between his enlightenment and *parinirvana*, the *Dhyani Buddhas* do between their heavenly abode and final entry into *nirvana*. There are three well adored *Dhyani Buddhas*. They are *Vairocana*, *Bhaisajyaguru* and *Amitabh Buddha*. *Amitabh Buddha* is known as *Amida* in Korea and Japan. He is regarded as one of the greatest gods of Asia. In this devotional version of Mahayana Buddhism the wisdom aspect of Theravada

Buddhism is completely transcended. This devotional form of Buddhism developed when number of Buddhist felt that the existing statements of the doctrine had become stale, irrelevant and useless. With their conviction that the Dharma requires ever new reformulations, so as to meet the need of new ages, populations, social circumstances they set out to produce a new theistic and devotional form of the Buddhist literature.

So the main issue that divided the Hinyana and Mahayana is the motto and conviction with which the Hinyanists, the eleders followed the words of Buddha in letter and spirit, "Be lamps unto yourselves; work out your salvation with diligence." So their progress will be the fruit of wisdom or insight or the enlightenment about the cause of suffering as gained through meditation. The Mahayanitsts, on the other hand, emphasized that compassion is the more important feature of enlightenment. They argued that to seek enlightenment by oneself and for oneself is a contradiction in terms. Their argument is based on the belief that human beings are more social than individual and thus compassion and love is the greatest thing in the world.

In view of the above discussions we can say that the devotional, theistic and cultic elements which the Buddhist religious tradition picked up and formulated in its own way for the fulfilment of the basic religious aspirations of the masses is a relatively new trend which is humane in its ideal and approach as it vindicates the path and ways for others also and prescribes them to follow the path. It though brings Godhood in the realm of Buddhism but it leaves room for ethical perspectives by assigning important place to freedom of will. Like some theistic religions it does not have the tendency to negate morality. So despite being devotional Mahayana Buddhism bears the impact of early Buddhism and contains the elements of morality within its domain. It has only departed from the philosophy of individual liberation by self-help and solitary meditation for the monks who lived a secluded life towards the ideal of liberation for all the sentient beings. Actually the Supreme Ideal of Universal Well-being of Mahayana is based on the concept that the same person can have two states of mind at two different stages of the evolution of his consciousness. The transition from subjectocentric to holistic is a change in his attitude and value. This is a change in the priority of values, from lower to higher. The external world remains the same in itself in both the states, but the values assigned to it changes.

**Note:** Following books have been Consulted and also referred by me in course of the preparation of this study material. The students may also consult these books if they want to enlarge this discussion.

Students are encouraged to contact me telephonically if they have any problem in understanding the features of these two schools of Buddhism and also the relevance of these two schools of Buddhism. Typing error, if any, is regretted.

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