

Mahayana is one of the major sects or schools of Buddhism. The name Mahayana stands for Great Vehicle. It has its set of canon of scriptures, liturgies and rituals which differentiate it from other schools. There are different factions within Mahayana, but they are built on the same philosophies and doctrines of Buddha.

History and Life of Mahayana Buddhism

Mahayana owes its history from India but later spread to China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Tibet, Nepal, Taiwan and Mongolia as opposed to other schools such as Vajrayana and Theravada. Mahayana originated from Mahasanghikas, who passed as forerunners in 100 CE in India (Baruah, 2000). The power and popularity of Mahasanghikas gave rise to the new sect of Mahayana. Mahayana became popular with monastic rules in China, Taiwan, Tibet and Vietnam. It spread gradually and managed to revolutionize earlier Buddhism order. The power and popularity of Mahayana also led to variation in the arrangement and understanding of Sutra and Vinaya. Sutra represented Buddha discourses while Vinaya comprises of the original rules of Buddhism. In the process of bringing the new Buddha order, Mahasanghikas also differed with the First Council by discarding a number of portions in the canon. Mahasanghikas then gave rise to Mahayana.

Mahayana developed from a number of lineages namely, Amitabha (pure land), Avatamsaka (Hua Yen), T'ien, T'ai and C'han. The families brought about various doctrines of prayers, devotion, meditation and spiritual awakening. Mahayana was designed to compete with the school of Theravada in order to reduce overemphasis of individual awareness. The founders of Mahayana majored on the introduction of a different sect to preach the idea of enlightenment for all beings (Williams, 2009).

Consequently, Mahayana developed into different sub-schools that embraced varying practices and doctrines. The teaching of Mahayana became dominant in India, China and Tibet then spread gradually to Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Mongolia. The countries host dominant Buddha worshippers in the world today.

Basic Teachings of Mahayana

Teachings of Mahayana are anchored on meditation, ritual and chanting. Followers choose the best practice that suits them well in order to worship Buddha to the best of their abilities. The teachings of Mahayana were established through power and popularity, but they are all aimed at actualizing the general teachings of Buddha (Baruah, 2000).

Mahayana teaches Amitabha, which stands for Pure Land Buddhism. The teachings of Amitabha put a lot of emphasis of unconditional faithful devotion to Buddha. Believers of Amitabha are reborn in new forms in a pure land. They then receive enlightenment and get closer to Nirvana. Chinese and Japanese Buddhists practice Amitabha by reciting Nianfo and Nembutsu respectively. The recitations engage the mind entirely.

Nichiren teachings of Mahayana are dominant in Japan Buddha traditions. The teachings are founded on mindful chanting. It is believed that chanting through the mind brings supernatural power of Lotus Sutra. Lotus Sutra evokes and brings enlightenment to Mahayana monks.

Mahayana teachings are also found under its primary systems namely Madhyamika and Yogacara (Williams, 2009). Madhyamika teachings emphasize on views of existence and non-existence, self and non-self as well as eternity and non-eternity. It helps to bring out the truth and reality of the world through a degree of relativity. Madhyamika accounts are anchored on the existence of a middle path that guides all beings to enlightenment. On the other hand, Yogacara School calls attention to yoga or meditation. It is believed that yoga is the most effective method of reaching highest truth of Bodhi. Bodhisattva hood is divided into ten stages. Each step invokes spiritual fulfillment to the monk, and they must pass each stage for them to attain Bodhi. The ten steps delay a monk from achieving the highest truth. It instills compassion for other beings in the process.

The doctrine of anatman or nature of the self-terms all physical forms such as ego and personality as void. They have a degree of delusion and emptiness that prevent an individual from attaining the bliss of Nirvana. The teaching explains why Mahayana does not believe in enlightenment of an individual but of all beings through a sense of compassion and connection with other persons.

Buddha has three bodies namely, nirmanakaya, sambogakaya and dharmakaya according to Mahayana teachings of Trikaya. Trikaya doctrines comprise of attainment of absolute truth, manifestation of the body in the world and bliss of enlightenment for all beings.

What Makes Mahayana Unique From Other Schools of Buddhism?

Mahayana contains a collection of literature called Tripitaka (Williams, 2009). Other schools such as Theravada term Tripitaka as illegitimate. Tripitaka contains the doctrines of Buddha history. Mahayana then developed an assortment of canons of sutras and other texts from Tripitaka that are not comprised in other schools of Buddhism. Mahayana contains iconic characters such as bodhisattvas, protective divinities, demons and transcendent of dharmakaya and Sambogakaya in its literature. The myriad features miss in the literature of other schools. When

other schools emphasize on Sanskrit, Mahayana Buddhism uses a variation of terms such as dharma and sutra notes Williams (2009).

Mahayana gave rise to Vajrayana. This is because Vajrayana doctrines integrate elements of Hindu yoga with Buddhist doctrines. Though Vajrayana is closely linked to Buddha teachings of Tibet, most of its features come from Mahayana. Therefore, Vajrayana is an extension or variation of Mahayana Buddhism.

Mahayana has a number of indigenous lineages such as C'han, Amitabha, T'ien T'ai and Avatamsaka that arose from as early as 100 CE. C'han recognizes the existence of Bodhidharma as its father (Baruah, 2000).

In conclusion, it is evident that Mahayana is one of the major divisions of Buddha schools. It has a history and Indian related lineage that gives the school a distinct feature from other schools such as Vajrayana and Theravada. Mahayana is a unique school of Buddhism because it comprises a set of different doctrines of meditations and spiritual awakening that lead to enlightenment of all beings.

References

Baruah, B. (2000). *Buddhist sects and sectarianism (1st ed.)*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons.

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