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Mahayana Buddhism

According to tradition three Buddhist Councils were held to resolve the doctrinal differences among Buddhist leaders. Only regarding the fourth that was held in Kashmir there is historical evidence. From then nowadays Buddhism came to be divided into the Mahayana and Hinayana schools. The brahmins and their lay supporters had by now largely turned away from the older gods. In north-western India the rule of Greeks, Sakas and Kushans in turn threw open the gates to the west. It was these new elements that sought a new outlook in Buddhism. Thus the claim arose that a new Great Vehicle (Mahayana) was found would carry many souls to salvation. Mahayana soon became popular in many parts of India as it fitted with the mood of the times and the needs of many simple people better than did the lesser Vehicle (Hinayana). The lesser Vehicle remained intact in Ceylon and soon in Thailand and other parts of South-East Asia it became the national religion. Mahayana on the other hand itself (soon divided by various schisms) was carried by succession of Indian monks to China and thence to Japan.

Regarding Mahayana's chronological authenticity it is generally held that it originated around the first century B.C. in Andhra. Soon it was expounded by a group of Buddhist philosophers. The outstanding among them was Nagarjuna. It was he who conceived **the doctrine of the void (Shunyata)** meaning that every thing which is around us is emptiness and whatever we perceive is mere illusion. This void is in fact the nirvana or end to the cycle of birth and rebirth which every Buddhist seeks.

A new feature of the Mahayana Buddhism is **the concept of the future Buddha**. The Buddha himself probably taught that he was the last of the long succession of earlier Buddhas. The carvings on the stupas of Barhut and Sanchi depict crowds of worshippers before the symbols of the Buddha. A little later sculptors began to carve images of the Buddha. A little later sculptors began to carve images of the Buddha himself. Soon the Buddhist sects took to worshipping images. Under the new (foreign) rulers of north-western India, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism came in contact and probably through this the idea of future Buddha became part of the orthodox Buddhists. Thus the cult of Maitreya or the future Buddha was widespread among all Buddhist sects by the time Menander came to Patliputra.

Romila Thapar holds the view that this aspect of **Maitreya Buddha** had its origin outside India. The Maitreya Buddha saves the world. This idea is further linked to the concept of the suffering **saviour of the Bodhisattva** who redeems humanity through his own suffering. In these twin concepts we clearly see the beliefs that were current in Palestine of the day. These beliefs reappear in later day Christianity as Jesus Christ the son of God, who was born to redeem the

suffering of man and the future promise of second coming.

The concept of the Maitreya Buddha came to be linked with the older conception of Buddhism, the previous **incarnations of Buddha known as Bodhisattavas**. The Bodhisattava concept reached its consummation with the final birth of Gautama in the Sakyas. However as Maitreya and other unnamed Buddhas after him are yet to come there must be Bodhisattavas existing in the universe. These Bodhisattavas might be adored and prayed with out any misgiving. Thus the Bodhisattava doctrine believed in the heavens filled with mighty forces of goodness and presented Buddhism with a new mythology. It was this development that constituted the hall mark of Mahayana the Great vehicle.

The universe of the Great vehicle contains numerous Bodhisattava. The chief of them from the earthly point of view is Avalokitesvara Padmapani. His special attribute is compassion. Vajrapani a stern Bodhisattava is the foe of sin and evil. The great Maitreya the future Buddha is worshipped as Bodhisattava. Every thing from the humblest worm onwards is in a sense a Bodhisattava since all beings will attain nirvana and become the Buddha.

The great Vehicle was not content with creating this pantheon of noble and beneficent Bodhisattavas. **It was claimed that Gautam Buddha was not a mere man but the earthly expression of a mighty spiritual being.** The Buddha's Body of bliss is the presiding deity on the most important Mahayana heaven Sukhavati where they are reborn in the buds of lotuses which rise from a lively lake before the Buddha's throne. This divine Buddha is usually called Amitabha or Amitayus. He too shares the compassion of the Bodhisattava.

The Mahayana sect produced soon new versions of the Pitakas of scriptural texts of Buddhism they are all writings in Sanskrit which became the official language of Mahayana. Many of these texts are ostensibly sermons of the Buddha.

The new Buddhist philosophical school of Mahayana came into existence during the **200 B.C. 300 A.D.** period. Asvaghosha's name is associated with the school. Some of his famous works contain the philosophy of Mahayana. The book called *Sradhotpada-Sastra* is attributed to him. Mahayana doctrine has two philosophical schools **Madhyamika and Yogachara**. For quite some time Buddhism began to slowly develop into a theistic religion with the Buddha as the object of the cult. Exponents of the Madhyamika were Nagarjuna and his disciple Aryadeva. It was with Nagarjuna that Mahayana developed its own system of philosophy. Later Aryadeva wrote a commentary on the work. It appears from evidence that the Satavahanas were great patrons of Buddhism.

The philosophy of Madhyamika is commonly characterized as **Sunyavada-the philosophy of relativism**. According to this the phenomenal world is a mere illusion from the view-point of ultimate truth.

The second school called Yogachara is of later origin two brothers **Asanga and Vasubandhu** are generally believed to have been the first exponents of this system. This school also formulates

two kinds of Truths, the Ultimate and the Relative and looks upon phenomenal world as an illusion. It asserts however that this illusion is mental illusion and therefore considers consciousness as real.

There is nothing strange about the emergence of Mahayana. The earlier form of Buddhism was rather arid unlike the Mahayana. The Mahayana requires us to take part in the world and evolve new social and religious ideals. The Mahayana happens to be more emotional and filling than Hinayana which reduces Nirvana and ethical life to great aridity.

The Mahayana Buddhism is theistic similar to the theistic beliefs of Shaivism and Vaishnavism preaching loving devotion to personal God whom the devotee loves with all his heart and easy spontaneous grace. On the metaphysical side it led to a school of thought similar to the conception of an absolute with regard to which all determination would prove to be negation. Reason and language only applied to finite and nothing can be said of the infinite.