

Module 3: Historical Survey of Buddhist Thought

Lecture No. 7 (17 November, 2004)

Mahayana: Emergence and Development

A. Causes and conditions for the emergence of Mahayana

Many theories have been put forth regarding the question of the emergence of Mahāyāna. Yet the fact is, like any phenomenon in this conditioned world, the emergence of Mahāyāna was brought about by many conditions, not just one single cause. Moreover, some scholars recognized rightly that the so-called 'Mahāyāna' originated not as a school but as a loosely-held movement which only gained strength and developed as changes within Indian Buddhism surfaced. The points listed below can be considered the main conditions that led to the emergence of Mahāyāna (movement) and eventually the rise of Mahāyānese schools.

1. Nikāya Buddhism

Ābhidharmika culture and sectarian philosophy

Biographies of the Buddha (this can also be discussed under (2))

These have roots in dissident views since First Council, personal styles of great disciples of the Buddha led to informal fellowships – causes for the '*sanghabheda*' after Second Council

2. Stūpa Worship and other popular culture

Hirakawa's theory - *stūpa*-worship and '*stūpa*-managers'

Paul William's refutation (many of the inscriptions on excavated *stūpas* mentioned donations from monks and nuns; many Mahāyānese sūtras displayed hostility toward *stūpa* worship and advocated sūtra-dissemination as superior to *stūpa* worship) and theory

'From the first century BCE changes within Buddhism seem to have issued in a new literature claiming to be the Buddha's words, written by monks (and nuns) in response to the perceived moral and spiritual decline within the Buddhist community. This literature is not a unitary or even organized movement. However the monks, nuns and a minority of lay practitioners who accepted this new literature formed a series of cults, presumably based on different sūtras and their attendant practice. All evidences suggest that at this point there was yet the awareness of a 'Mahāyāna' identity and the movement was among a minority in the Buddhist community. However as time passed, there came to be animosity to those who failed to heed the advocates of reformation and the conflicts resulted in the identification of Mahāyāna as opposed to the Inferior Way - Hīnayāna.'

(Nikaya Buddhism – emphasized on philosophy, removed from mass devotees, the efforts of preachers - *Dārṣṭāntikas*, *Aśvagōsha*, *Mātrceta*)

3. Filling the vacuum left by the *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha

in eternal memory of the Buddha – Ven. Yinshun

insecurity: internal and external threats

This last condition may be considered the driving force behind (1) and (2). In terms of chronology (passage of time), this may be considered the remote cause, followed by (2) and (1) can be seen as the impetus for the development of Mahāyāna.

4. The Saṃgha as an institution

- monastic-centered vs laity
- patriarchal characteristic of the Saṃgha
- the conservatives vs the liberals (interpretations of Dharma-vinaya)
- spiritual practice vs social outreach (individual need vs social needs)
- the 'elites' vs the common believers (philosophic monks and the common Buddhists)
- all these being symbolized by the 'Arhant versus Bodhisattva conflict'

5. Other possible conditions: external influence

Influence from outside of Buddhist community: renaissance of Brahmanism under the Suṅga Dynasty which destroyed the Mauryan Empire after Aśoka's death (founded circa 180 BCE and lasted for 112 years) – Hinduism: inter-absorption (the power of the 'sacred words', divine protection – the Buddha is out of saṃsāric existence so could no longer cater to our prayers); pressure for popularization due to 'competition', interaction with local religious practice; Greek and other foreign influence (Śāka, Parthia and Uighur which founded Śāka, Parthia and Kuṣāṇa rules respectively); Judaeo-Christian influence from traders

B. Mahāyāna Literature and development of sects

1. Mahāyāna literature – the compilation of the first Mahāyānese sūtras

Time frame: circa 1st century B.C.E, Śāka rule in India (Śāka was known as 塞迦 in Chinese records)

Earliest Mahāyāna-sūtras:

六波罗密经 (*Ṣaṭpāramitā*), 菩萨藏经 (*Bodhisattvapiṭaka*), 三品经 (*Triskandhadharmaparyāya*) and *Tao-chih-ta-ching*.

Hirakawa: 'These texts are thought to be very early because they are cited in some of the first Mahāyāna scriptures to be translated. The 六波罗密经 is quoted in such texts as Lokakṣema's 179 C.E translation of the *Larger Sukhāvativyūhasūtra* (T362)...'

Paul William cited a Sanskrit text (not translated into any language) *Ajitasenavyākaraṇanirdeśasūtra* discovered in a mound near Gilgit, Afghanistan as proto-Mahāyāna.

Ven. Yinshun also pointed out the development of Mahāyāna literature from proto-Mahāyāna influenced by doctrinal elements in different sects.

2. Classification by subject matter

- the *Prajñāpāramitā* Literature:

largest text: *Mahāprajñāpāramitā* (大般若波罗密经, T220) 600 fascicles, 16 assemblies

oldest text: 道行般若经 circa first century B.C.E

Other related sūtras: **Akṣobhyatathāgatasyavyūha* T313) **Virmalakīrtinirdeśa* (T474-476) explanation of non-substantiality in this sūtra is famous

- the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* (circa 350-400) Vairocana, ten stages, 普贤行愿品 善才童子 53 参, 一念三千
- the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra* circa later half of first century A.D

- the Pure Land sūtras
- the *Ratnakūṭa* and *Da-fang-deng-da-ji-jing* groups

3. Mahāyāna sects

While there may be the above mentioned genres of Mahāyāna texts circulating in India since 1st century B.C, and ‘cults’ or ‘fellowships’ established centered on some of these texts, in actual fact, only two prominent schools arose as ‘Mahāyāna-sects’ as distinct from the ‘Hīnayāna-sects’.

3.1 Madhyamaka/Mādhyamika School (中观)

Time frame : circa 1st century A.D.
Founders : Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva
Doctrine : *śūnyatā*, dialectics (*catuṣkoṭi*)

Literary sources: *Mūlamādhyamikakārikā* (中观论颂), *Vigraha-vyāvartanī* (迴諍论); some attribute the huge commentary of the Large *Prajñāpāramitā* Sūtra – the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-upadeśa* (大智度论) to Nāgārjuna

Āryadeva was Nāgārjuna’s successor. He wrote the *Catuhśataka* (400 Verses, 百论 T1569)

Other important works: commentaries to *Mūlamādhyamikakārikā* especially the *Prasannapadā* (*Clear-worded*, recent Chinese translation titled 明句论) by Candrakīrti (月称, 1150 B.E)

Śāntideva (circa 700 A.D) - *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (Entrance to the path of enlightenment)

Śāntirakṣita (circa 760) – *Tattvasamgraha* (Compendium of Reality)

Kamalaśīla (793) – three works on *Bhāvanākrama*

Subjects:

Svatāntrika (自续派) – representative: Bhāvaviveka (清辨)

Prasāṅgika (应成派) – representatives: Buddhapālita, Candrakīrti (月称)

3.2 Yogācāra/Vijñaptimātratāvāda/Vijñānavāda (唯識)

Time frame : circa 3rd century A.D
Founders : Asaṅga and Vasubandhu
Doctrine : absolute idealism

Literary sources:

Scripture: *Sandhinirmocana* (解深密经), *Lankāvatāra* (入楞伽经), *Mahāyānasūtrāṅkāra* (大乘庄严经), *Madhyāntavibhāga* (辨中边论)

Commy: Vasubandhu’s *Twenty Verses* + autocommentary, *Thirty Verses* + Sthiramati’s commy; Asaṅga’s *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* with commentaries;

Doctrines:

Absolute idealism

‘The object is nothing apart from the consciousness of it. The subjective alone is real. The blue is a form of consciousness, and as such is real. Its externality is only a mode of its appearance. It appears to be ‘out there’, possessing independence and self-existence; that however is only the way in which consciousness projects its contents. The subjective is governed by its own laws; it is independent of the object. One state of consciousness gives rise to another owing to its

inherent dynamism (inspiration from Sautrāntika's *bīja* theory). The causal law operates between moments of consciousness and not between consciousness and its object (rejection of Sarvāstivādin theory of dharma).'

(Chatterjee, p.126; words in brackets mine)

Three levels of reality (three *svabhāvas*) [of consciousness]

依他起 (*paratantra-svabhāva*)

遍计所执 (*parikalpita-svabhāva*) = *bhrānti-vijñāna* (乱识)

圆成实 (*pariniṣpanna-svabhāva*)

'The Yogācāra approach is the conception of consciousness as pure Will. Consciousness denotes a determinate relation between the subject and the object (*paratantra* level). This relation will differ fundamentally according to the emphasis placed upon either of the two terms. It may be understood as a mere revelation of the object which exists in its own right (= *parikalpita* level, due to *bhrānti-vijñāna*). Or, the object may be construed as being nothing apart from its consciousness (*pariniṣpanna* level). The willed content owes whatever reality it possesses to the fact of its being willed. It exists solely in and through the willing of it (by the consciousness). In itself it is nothing. Consciousness however is not so dependent upon the content, since in that case it would have to depend upon a thing which is itself not established. The subject is the primary reality; the content is real only as its (the consciousness') form.' (Chatterjee, p.134)

'In realism and realistic systems, the object is the only reality; whatever is found in consciousness is traceable in the objective; consciousness of the object is itself *one more object*. It (Consciousness) has no unique position of its own. Consciousness is helpless before the object which is absolutely indifferent to the former. Knowing is the knowing of something objectively given. Consciousness herein is pure awareness. Hence, when the subject is nothing, consciousness is understood as knowledge, whereas when the object is nothing, consciousness is will.'

(Chatterjee, p.134-135)

ālaya-vijñāna – the 'absolute'

Inspired by

scriptural tradition: the Buddha's utterance recorded in AN: 心性本淨, 客尘所染 (A.I, p.10: *pabhassaram idam bhikkhave cittaṃ tañca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi upakkiliṭṭhaṃ...tañ ca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi vipṇamuttaṃ*), similes in scriptures like 心如工画师 (Āvatamsaka-sūtra)

the meditation experiences of *yogis*

Abhidharma traditions esp. the Sautrāntikas

Eight consciousnesses: the six sensual consciousnesses + *ādānavijñāna/manovijñāna* + *ālayavijñāna*

Generally, *ālayavijñāna* is the basis of our bondage (as the receptacle of all defilements, karmic potentials and where 'perfuming' (种子熏习) takes place) and liberation (transformation from *āsrāva* to *anāsrāva*).

Relationship between the Yogācāras and Mādhyamikas

In major Yogācāra texts the repeated explanation on what is real and what is *śūnyā* can be seen as a reaction against the Madhyamaka doctrine. The Mādhyamikas also put forth their refutation of the Yogācāra's doctrine (e.g. according to Tāranātha's account, when Sthiramati (a Yogācārin), wrote a commentary on *Mūla*^o, the disciples of Bhāvaviveka went to Nālanda University to debate with the former's students; Sthiramati's lay-disciple Candragomin also went to Nālanda University and challenged Candrakīrti to a long-drawn seven-year debate; another disciple of Sthiramati, Guṇamati, wrote a commentary on *Mūla*^o and criticized Bhāvaviveka, Bhāvaviveka's students in turn engaged Guṇamati in a perennial debate at Balapurī in South India.)

By the time of 7th century A.D, after a long period of conflict, there came to be reconciliation and synthesis between the two schools. Representative of this trend was Śāntarakṣita (寂護, a.k.a. 靜命) who accepted the Tibetan king, Khri-sroñ-lde-btsan's invitation to propagate Buddhism in Tibet.

Development of Tathāgatagarbha 如来藏 doctrine within Yogācāras:

The doctrine of the *tathāgatagarbha* ('Buddha-embryo') is a major topic. It became one of the most powerful doctrines in latter-phase Mahāyāna, influencing the development of Vajrayāna doctrines and practice.

This doctrine can be seen as a logical outcome of concepts like 'original mind', 'subtle mind', *ālayavijñāna*, Buddha-nature (and even the Sarvāstivādin theory of temporal phase of a cause 'grasping' fruit) put together.

Yogācāra's effort to contain unconventional esoteric teachings:

e.g. reference to sexual yoga already existed even in early Yogācāra texts like Asaṅga's *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra* and quoted as scriptural contents in Sthiramati's *Mahāyānasamgraha* e.g.

'Further, it is said in the sacred scriptures: the Great Bodhisattva, on accomplishing five practices would be called a Brāhmacārin, accomplishing the uttermost pure Brāhmacārya. What are the five? One, he should always seek to abandon greed with greed; two, he should give up restraints/abstinence; three, when greed (lust) arises in him, he should strengthen it; four, he should be fearful of antidotes to greed; five, the two pairs should repeatedly meet'

In the above quotation, the fifth item refers to coitus but the Yogācārin, not conforming to sexual yoga, interpreted it using the so-called '*pariṇāma-abhisamḍhi* (转变秘密)', explaining it away as 'the repeated practice and attainment of *śamathā* and *vipaśyanā* in the worldly and supramundane paths'.

Ven. Yinshun commended this courageous attempt of the Yogācārins in a time when the mainstream tended toward tantric practice. ‘When the minds of sentient beings degenerate like water rushing downstream, the Yogācārins were not able to accomplish the task of deterring the degeneration of Buddhism. Yet they nevertheless put in their hearts and all they had in defending the last vestige of the Noble Dharma.’

C. Common Mahāyāna Doctrines and Concepts

1. Bodhisattva Ideal – the path toward Complete Buddhahood (*samyak-sambuddha*)

- Faith
- *Pranidha* – vows of liberating all sentient beings
- Practice as spiritual praxis and as skilful means (*upāyakauśalya*)
- six *pāramitās*
- the Ten Vows of Samantabhadra Vs the Seven-limb Prayer in Tibetan practice: the Tibetan version might have preserved the ancient form upon which the Ten Vows of Samantabhadra are based
- Gradual path of enlightenment (the Ten stages): refer to attached table from Hirakawa

2. *śūnyatā* - *pratīyasamutpāda* + *nairātmyā*

saṃsāra = *nirvāṇa* (spiritual sense, not ontological)

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3. Ven. Yinshun, 初期大乘佛教之起源与开展 *The Origins and Development of Early Mahāyāna-Buddhism* (Taipei: Zhengwen Publishers, 1980)
4. Pual Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism* (London: Routledge, 1999, reprint)
5. Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India – three phases of Buddhist Philosophy*, (Delhi, Munshiram Manharlal Publishers, 1996)

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1. Kenneth K. Inada, *Nāgārjuna - Mūlamādhyamikakārikā* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1993, first Indian edition)
2. Tsongkapa, *The Principal Teachings of Buddhism (with a commentary by Pabongka Rinpoche)*, tr. Geshe Lobsang Tharchin and Michael Roach (Delhi: Classics India Publications, 1998, first Indian edition)
3. Ven. Yinshun, 中观论颂讲记 (Accelon CD-rom version 1.0: 印顺文教基金, 2000)
4. David J. Kalupahana, *Mūlamādhyamikakārikā of Nāgārjuna – the Philosophy of the Middle Way* (Delhi: MLBD, 1991, first Indian edition)

Recommended reading: T.R.V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*

On Yogācāras

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