

3 EMERGENCE OF THE PURE LAND PATH

The Mahayana Movement

IN the preceding chapter, we have seen that the bodhisattvas' path to enlightenment is also, at every step, a path of return to this world, and that their wisdom naturally and necessarily unfolds as the compassionate activity of guiding others to enlightenment.

This view of religious attainment as a process of simultaneously transcending and returning is rooted in a conception of wisdom or true reality that began to be formulated from about the first century of the common era. This new conception of enlightenment held the implication that genuine religious practice is essentially directed to attainment for all beings—without distinction between oneself and others—and it manifested itself in a self-conscious break with the immediately preceding Buddhist traditions.

Since Buddhist paths lead out from samsaric existence to attainment of nirvana, they are often assumed to entail renunciation of mundane life. This image of Buddhist practice is reinforced by the legend of the Buddha Gautama Siddhartha (c. 560-480), often known by the title Sakyamuni, "sage of the Sakya tribe." He is said to have been a prince who abandoned his family and throne in order to seek awakening through discipline and austerities in the forest. Even after his enlightenment at the age of thirty-five, he continued a life of mendicant wandering until his death at the age of eighty. His religious pursuit, then, presents a thoroughgoing repudiation of the values of mundane society.

During Sakyamuni's lifetime, however, there were strong bonds between the disciples who had renounced homelife and the laity that, while venerating the Buddha and his teaching and giving support to the following, remained in the secular world. In the person of the Buddha, who embodied the transcendent, both his mendicant disciples and lay followers were able to find salvation. Nevertheless, for five centuries following Sakyamuni's death, his teachings were transmitted only orally, undergoing constant reformulation in the different communities, and in this tradition as a whole, the negative aspect of his teaching—that of transcending the mundane world—was emphasized. The religious ideal came to be defined as the arhat, the "worthy one" who has overcome passions and crossed to the other shore. For such a saint, there will be no more rebirth in samsara after the present life. Further, religious practice came to be formulated as the three learnings—strict precepts, meditation, and wisdom—which essentially required ascetic withdrawal; hence, renunciation of mundane life was viewed as the true Buddhist path. Permanent monastic centers grew up with formal orders, and the distinction between lay and monk solidified.

Around the beginning of the common era, groups of Buddhists appeared who took a critical stance toward the immediately preceding tradition, which they viewed as having fallen into formalism, scholastic analysis, and sectarian

disputation. These critics had sought to realize the awakening that Sakyamuni attained and performed practices according to the Buddhist tradition up to that time, but though they strove, they could not reach perfect enlightenment. They found that monastic renunciation aiming at personal emancipation was a narrow and finally inadequate method of practice. Therefore they abandoned the tradition and, seeking a new path, at length discovered one by which full, genuine attainment was possible. They called this new path the “great vehicle” (Mahayana) and asserted that it was superior to the existing institutions, which they labeled the “lesser vehicle” (Hinayana), because it holds as its goal the attainment of authentic enlightenment by all beings.

The new formulation of practice in the earliest Mahayana Buddhism was, as we have seen termed *prajnaparamita*—wisdom that has gone beyond or attained the other shore. According to Mahayanists, the Hinayana sages withdrew from society and ordinary life, performed practices and disciplines, and gained emancipation or extinction of passions by realizing the nonsubstantiality of their own person—the fact that the ego-self is no more than an illusory construction. Mahayana Buddhists, however, by practicing *prajna*, realized the no-self or emptiness that pervades not only the self, but all things and all persons. Thus, for them, nirvana was not separate from the samsaric existence of all things; “Samsara is itself nirvana.” To define their own position, Mahayana Buddhists asserted:

Foolish beings are attached to samsara, and those belonging to the two vehicles (the Hinayana path) are attached to nirvana. Bodhisattvas see no distinction between samsara and nirvana. (*Mahayanasamgraha*)

While “foolish,” unenlightened people cling to their samsaric existence, practitioners of the Hinayana path are said to strive only for attainment of nirvana. The “two vehicles” refers to two types of Hinayana sage: “hearers” (*sravaka*) who study the verbal teaching—originally referring to direct disciples of Sakyamuni—and “solitary Buddhas” (*pratyekabuddha*) who gain emancipation without the guidance of a teacher. The Mahayana Buddhists asserted that their own conception of nirvana, being free of all attachments—even to nirvana—differed from that taught by the Hinayana traditions, and that it was the supreme, perfect nirvana.

Our concern here is not to assess the historical validity of this view, but to explore the self-understanding that the Mahayana movement exhibited. It should be noted that the Mahayana criticism of the preceding tradition centered on what it viewed to be an inadequate grasp of the depth of blind passions in human beings. Mahayana Buddhists found that, because of a failure to probe fully into the tenacious nature of self-attachment, the earlier paths did not free them from the final residue of passion in the form of clinging to the concept of nirvana. Moreover, because of this, the enlightenment that was attained was not the ultimate awakening.

Mahayana Buddhists therefore established the practice of prajna, by which they sought to transcend the very dichotomies of samsara and nirvana, blind passions and enlightenment, and self and others. Through the realization of this nondualistic wisdom, they sought to “see suchness” or things just as they are and attain dharma-body (*dharmakaya*) or true reality. One of the central consequences of this new stance is the identification of self-benefit (reaching nirvana). Thus, realizing dharma-body includes the spontaneous and intrinsic benefiting of all who remain in samsaric existence. This is expressed as entering samsara and freely assuming various forms or “Buddha-bodies” to guide others to enlightenment.

The Bodhisattva Career

The path of realization based on the Mahayana conception of wisdom was elaborated as the career of the bodhisattva. In the early Buddhist tradition, the term “bodhisattva”—literally, “enlightenment-being”—meant “Buddha-to-be” and was used chiefly to refer to previous births of the Buddha Sakyamuni. There grew a sizeable body of tales, known as Jataka, which related the practices and altruistic deeds of self-sacrifice that he had performed in various life forms, including animals, and in them he is referred to as “bodhisattva.” It was in the Mahayana tradition, however, that the concept of the bodhisattva took on a definite structure, becoming an ideal model for all practitioners in contrast to the Hinayana ideal of the arhat.

The bodhisattva’s career as described in Mahayana sutras begins with the awakening of the mind of enlightenment (*bodhicitta*), the determination to become a Buddha whatever hardships one may encounter over the course of many lifetimes of endeavor. This resolution is formally expressed in vows that are proclaimed before a Buddha, and typically, the bodhisattva receives from the Buddha a prophesy of eventual fulfillment of those vows. The bodhisattva’s aspiration has been formulated as the four great universal vows:

However innumerable beings are, I vow to save them;
However inexhaustible the passions are, I vow to extinguish them;
However immeasurable the dharmas are, I vow to master them;
However incomparable the Buddha-truth is, I vow to attain it.

Here, we see that attaining enlightenment and saving all beings are understood to be one. In addition to these four vows common to all bodhisattvas and expressive of their essential nature, they each make their own individual vows, which define the concrete modes in which their future enlightenment will manifest itself. A typical element of such individual vows is the establishment, through their vast accumulation of merit, of a Buddha land or field of influence (*buddhaksetra*) in which they will carry on their activity to bring beings to enlightenment.

Upon making their vows to attain perfect enlightenment and save all beings. Bodhisattvas undertake the practices and disciplines for their fulfillment,

which must continue through countless lifetimes. It is said that vast aeons—“three great innumerable kalpas”—are required for the completion of a bodhisattva’s practices. The process of practice has been formulated in ten stages, in which non-retrogression is attained in the first (or in some schemes, seventh). Further, “With all the virtues and roots of good that they accumulate thus, they do not seek the sustained bliss for their own sake, but think only of freeing all sentient beings from pain” (T’an-luan, quoted in *Realization*, 17). In the seventh stage, bodhisattvas perfect the skillful means by which to lead beings to enlightenment. They are able to go anywhere in the universe instantly and at will, and freely manifest themselves in any form. Where there are Buddhas, they pay homage and illuminate their great assemblies of listeners, and where there is no Buddha, they introduce the dharma to beings. With their powers to aid ignorant beings along the path to Buddhahood, such great bodhisattvas as Maitreya (Miroku), the future Buddha who will be the next to appear in this world-system, and Avalokitesvara (Kannon), whose name means “lord who looks down” on beings with compassion, are widely revered by Mahayana Buddhists.

There is also an expanded version of fifty-two stages, with the previous ten stages numbered as the forty-first to the fiftieth. In this system, the penultimate fifty-first stage is called “perfect enlightenment” (, *togaku*), and is the present stage of Maitreya; the final stage is complete Buddhahood. With the fulfillment of practices, bodhisattvas become Buddhas with the qualities they have defined in their vows, and their spheres of activity—their own Buddha lands—are established.

Implications of the Bodhisattva Path

There are several aspects of the structure of the bodhisattva’s career that should be noted. First, the directing of merit accrued from one’s good acts to other beings is an essential element of the bodhisattva’s practice. All Buddhists have believed that good acts hold the power to counteract the effects of evil deeds and lead to better conditions in the next birth. In the earlier Buddhism, it was generally assumed that only one’s own thoughts and acts could exert their influence on one’s future conditions, although the evidence of inscriptions suggests that sharing merit with one’s parents or teacher was also recognized. In the Mahayana tradition, however, bodhisattvas perform good acts and practices for long aeons and thus accumulate vast stores of merit, but their practice is always undertaken with the thought of saving all living things. Thus, their merit is always freely given to beings in samsaric existence. This concept of giving or transferring merit (, J. *eko*) is a direct expression of the very nature of bodhisattvas, for they undertake their practice in nondichotomous wisdom. Because of such wisdom, the liberation of all beings is foremost in their minds, and they are able to share the merit generated by their good acts with others.

Second is the existence of many Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Even in the early tradition, Sakyamuni’s attainment of Buddhahood was not regarded as the first occurrence of enlightenment or a unique event. In fact, in stories of

Sakyamuni's previous births, it is said that, like the later bodhisattvas, ages ago he made a vow to attain enlightenment under the Buddha Dipamkara. Nevertheless, the appearance of a Buddha was a momentous event in the history of the world, and it was assumed in early Buddhism that two Buddhas could not appear in one epoch of a world system, any more than two "universal monarchs" (*cakravartin*) could rule simultaneously. Thus, in all only a small number of Buddhas have appeared, and "it is rare to encounter and rare to behold a Tathagata, even in countless millions of kalpas" (*Larger Sutra*, Teaching, 3). As mentioned before, the path of religious attainment of the Hinayana sages—the "hearers" of the Buddha's teaching—led not to Buddhahood, with its role in the salvation of the world, but to becoming an arhat, one who has completely eradicated his blind passions and attained emancipation from birth-and-death, so that he will never return.

The Mahayana tradition, however, recognized the attainment of Buddhahood itself—not merely emancipation from passions—as the genuine goal of religious practice and proclaimed it, along with the engagement with samsara that it implied, as the supreme fulfillment for all sentient beings. It is natural, then, that Mahayana Buddhists recognized the existence of vast numbers of Buddhas and bodhisattvas throughout the cosmos. Our own universe—called the Saha world, or "world in which pain must be endured"—is the Buddha field of Sakyamuni, the sphere in which he chose to appear in order to save the beings within it. While acknowledging the rule that one Buddha will appear in this epoch of our world, Mahayanists envisioned myriads of universes throughout the cosmos and infinite numbers of Buddhas presently residing in them.

Mahayana works often refer to the concept of the "great chiliocosm," which is made up of one billion universes. In the Mahayana cosmology, there are great chiliocosms countless as the sands of the Ganges throughout the ten quarters, and most are Buddha fields, or parts of Buddha fields, presided over by a Buddha who teaches dharma for the benefit of its inhabitants. Thus, the entire cosmos is a great panoply of numberless Buddha fields in which the drama of the salvation of all beings is carried out, with great Buddhas and bodhisattvas radiating the light of wisdom-compassion for all living things.

The third aspect to be noted is the transcendence of the dichotomy of monastic and lay in Mahayana thought. Monastic life had developed as the norm for religious practice in the early tradition, for the end was personal emancipation from samsaric existence. Practice was construed as observance of the monastic code and meditative practices, and withdrawal from ordinary lay life was itself seen as a crucial step in breaking bondage to samsara. Mahayanists, however, sought to realize a fully non-dichotomous wisdom; hence, while in actual practice they continued to recognize the efficacy of monastic life as a means to the goal, renunciation of lay life was not in itself an intrinsic or requisite aspect of emancipation from samsaric existence. They therefore reformulated the three learnings and advocated in their place the six paramitas—giving (*dana*), precepts or virtuous action (*sila*), patience (*ksanti*), effort (*virya*), meditation (*dhyana*), and wisdom (*prajna*). In this enumeratin of virtues, we find selfless

giving understood not simply as alms-giving or “charity,” but as the total, compassionate activity of bodhisattvas for whom meritorious action leading to enlightenment and the giving of their own merit to others are interfused. Other paramitas also emphasize the resolution to fulfill the bodhisattva vows for the enlightenment of all beings. Moreover, precepts or morality was not necessarily construed as the rigid monastic rule governing sequestered life apart from normal society, but as a more general code of proper action observable in varying degrees in lay life also. Thus, true practice and attainment transcends the dualism of monk and lay, and the arena of the bodhisattva’s practice is precisely the realm of samsara in which unenlightened beings wander. If methods for attainment of wisdom can be found and fulfilled while maintaining lay life, entrance into a monastic order or withdrawal from society is unnecessary. This attitude in Mahayana thought is clearly expressed in the figure of the layman Vimalakirti, whose realization of wisdom is depicted as surpassing that even of the arhats and bodhisattvas who have renounced the world.

The Fundamental Attitude of Mahayana Teachings

Because the essential spirit of Mahayana is manifested in concern for a Buddhist path for all beings, including the laity, it is sometimes asserted that Mahayana Buddhism arose as a movement among the laity itself. There are two important elements in this notion, which reflect in part a refusal to recognize the perspective of the Mahayana tradition itself. The first is the assumption that the Mahayana sutras were composed by members of the laity or from a lay perspective. The second element, which underlies the first, is the idea that the Mahayana movement is based on the worship of Sakyamuni Buddha, or of other Buddhas, rather than the actual realization of Buddhahood by practitioners.

Concerning the first, it must be acknowledged that the Mahayana sutras stem from a period many centuries after the Buddha’s death. The language Gautama spoke cannot be identified, although many scholars believe it was Magadhi, about which little is known. There is no teaching whatever that may be claimed as the direct words of the Buddha in his original language, and there is little question that Gautama’s disciples committed his words to memory but did not record them in writing. After his demise, the Buddha’s teachings and precepts were compiled and handed down orally, no doubt undergoing editing, alteration and expansion in the various dialects, locales, and Buddhist communities. It was not until the first century BCE, about four hundred fifty years after the Buddha’s death, that orally transmitted teachings were set down in writing, in Sri Lanka, in the literary language of Pali. This Pali redaction of the Buddhist canon, although partial, is the foundation of our knowledge of the teachings of the early Buddhist tradition.

It is also about the beginning of the common era that the earliest Mahayana sutras date, and they continue to appear until the seventh century. These works, like the Hinayana counterparts, take the form of expositions delivered by “Buddha,” but they do not appear in writing until centuries after

Sakyamuni's death, some more than a millenimum later. Moreover, they differ markedly in content from the earliest recorded teachings.

The Mahayana sutras, then, cannot be considered Sakyamuni's direct words. We must assume that people other than Sakyamuni composed them, and that the original authors of the early forms of the Prajnaparamita sutras were the earliest Mahayana Buddhists. In order to understand the Mahayana movement, however, it is important to grasp the attitude behind the composition of the sutras. Many scholars assert that Mahayana thought is lay-oriented, meaning that its attitude is essentially one of worship of Buddhas, and that the typical aspects of the Mahayana tradition developed out of cultic practices first centered on Sakyamuni.

After Sakyamuni's death, his cremated remains were divided into eight and enshrined in stupas or mounds that were built in various parts of India. These stupas became centers for devotional worship of Sakyamuni, and several centuries later, the Buddhist King Asoka (r. 268-232 BCE) ordered the original stupas opened, their contents redivided, and new stupas constructed throughout India. Thus, it appears that stupa worship became increasingly popular and widespread. Through such worship, the figure of Sakyamuni became highly idealized, so that he came to be attributed with supernatural powers. Stories of his previous births were elaborated in which he is portrayed performing selfless, compassionate acts in order to fulfill his resolute vow to attain Buddhahood. In stories that relate, for example, that he once killed himself so that a starving tigress might eat his body, it is not difficult to imagine incipient forms of the Mahayana bodhisattva ideal.

Further, it is often said that out of the inclination to take the Buddha as an object of worship, numerous celestial Buddhas and bodhisattvas were conceived. Thus, the Mahayana conception of many Buddhas is sometimes considered the product of longing and devotion on the part of followers, who sought thus to gain merit and improve their worldly condition.

We must bear in mind, however, that the self-awareness expressed in the advocacy of the "great vehicle" turns not simply on the inclusion of lay as well as monk—on "great" merely as all-embracing—but rather on a new conception of nirvana. Its critical stance reveals a firm conviction of having rediscovered the path to genuine enlightenment, which had been lost amid scholastic debate. Moreover, it proclaims not escape from samsara, but the attainment of Buddhahood as the proper religious goal for all beings. This attitude reflects not a lay devotion actively elaborating and idealizing Buddhas as objects of worship, but rather confidence in the possibility of all beings' attainment of Buddhahood based on personal experience. The earlier tradition was rejected not because it concentrated on monks and nuns and looked down on those who remained in mundane life, but because it failed to lead its practitioners beyond the final hurdle of egocentric attachment to emancipation.

The Mahayana sutras do not represent the direct words of Sakyamuni; nevertheless, their perspective is not that of people who, while capable only of worshipping the Buddha, nevertheless took it on themselves to write out for him what they believed he should have said. They reveal not an attitude of lay

believers and worshipers, but rather the awareness of having realized prajna. Enlightened people—people who possessed the realization of already having attained Buddhahood themselves through the guidance of Sakyamuni’s teaching—expressed their own awakening, their own experience, in the form of the sutras and thereby provided a path for others. We find that among the Mahayana Buddhists, people other than Sakyamuni were considered Buddha if they actually realized and taught perfect enlightenment.¹ For Hinayana Buddhists, a sutra is the teaching of Buddha because it was taught by Sakyamuni, but Mahayana Buddhists recognized the reality of people other than Sakyamuni attaining and teaching enlightenment, and they regarded such teachings as that of Buddha. Thus, although not the direct words of Sakyamuni, the Mahayana sutras took the form of the teaching of “Buddha.”

Further, the Mahayana conception of many Buddhas may also be rooted in the historical actuality of people other than Sakyamuni having been able to attain enlightenment, and not in the proliferation of objects of worship by believers. If people who have realized enlightenment appear, having attained Buddhahood through methods that can be transmitted and that lead anyone who practices them to Buddhahood, then the possibility of many people everywhere having attained Buddhahood would suggest that there are in fact Buddhas throughout the universe. It may be said that, for Mahayana Buddhists, the Buddhas are not objects of faith, they are oneself, one’s own true reality. They are not absolute objects, but the actual subject, the genuine subjectivity functioning as self-knowledge.