

1 **Mahāyāna Buddhism**
The “great vehicle”

2 **Overview—Schools of Buddhism**

Week 1: Early tradition—Theravāda (Southeast Asia)

Week 2: Mahāyāna (China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam)

Week 3: Vajrayāna (Tibet & Japan)

Week 4: “American Buddhism”

3 **Understanding Context:**
Tensions within the Early Tradition

- Where is the Buddha now?
- What is Nirvana? Who can realize it?
- How to reconcile no-self (*anātman*), karma, and transmigration?
- Monastic path vs. the lay path—a spiritual hierarchy?
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4 **Understanding Context:**
Early Disputes & the “Great Schism”

2nd & 3rd century BCE schisms: Sthaviras (“elders”) vs. Mahāsāṃghikas (“great assembly”)

- Status of the Buddha—supramundane or not?
- Status of the *arhat/arahant*—equal to a Buddha or not?
- Efficacy of popular devotion (e.g., stūpa & relic worship; *dāna*; merit transference)
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8 **Origins and Meaning**

- Mahāyāna = “great vehicle”
- Hinayāna = “small vehicle”
 - pejorative label; Theravada or Nikāya Buddhism preferred
- “Second turning of the Wheel” (sermon on Vulture Peak)
- Origins obscure; 1st-5th centuries CE
- Continuity AND difference

9 **Basic Characteristics**

1. New literature
2. Bodhisattva ideal: one whose being (*sattva*) is enlightenment (*bodhi*)
3. New conceptions of Buddha
4. New philosophy (*śūnyatā*)
5. Tolerance: wide variety (*upāya*)
6. More “lay friendly” (*devotional* Buddhism)

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11 Mahāyāna Literature

- Composition continues until 8th century
- Acceptance/rejection determined dividing line
- Authorship linked to re-conceptualization of Buddha

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13 The Bodhisattva

- Remember the *Jataka* tales?
- One whose being (*sattva*) is enlightenment (*bodhi*)
- Crucial virtues: wisdom (*prajñā*) and compassion (*karuṇa*)
- Critical of *arhat* ideal of Theravāda tradition

14 Critique of the Arhat

"How do the persons belonging to the vehicle of the disciples ...train themselves? They think: 'One single self we will lead into *nirvana*.' Then they undertake exercise for the sake of taming themselves, quieting themselves, bringing themselves to *nirvana*. Certainly, the bodhisattvas should not train themselves like that. They should undertake exercises with the idea: 'I will place myself in the condition of enlightenment, and, for the sake of helping all the world, I will also place all beings in the condition of enlightenment. The immeasurable world of beings I will lead to *nirvana*.'"

Prajñāpāramitā (Perfection of Wisdom)

15 Bodhisattva Path

- a) Begin with arousal of *bodhicitta* (mind of awakening)
- b) Vow: "May I achieve Buddhahood for the sake of all other beings!"
- c) Foster 6 Perfections: generosity, moral conduct, patience, courage, mental concentration, and wisdom
- d) 10 Stages to Buddhahood
- e) Celestial bodhisattvas (9th/10th stages)

16 The Bodhisattva Path

- Path becomes more important than destination
- Numerous advanced bodhisattvas
 - Maitreya: future Buddha in Tuṣita Heaven

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 - Maitreya: future Buddha in Tuṣita Heaven
 - Avalokiteśvara (compassion)
 - (Ch: Kuan-yin; J: Kannon)

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21 **Lotus Sutra—25th Chpt.**

The Buddha declares: “Good man, imagine the [countless] millions of beings who are undergoing various trials and sufferings. If they hear of this bodhisattva Avalokitesvara [Perceiver of the World’s Sounds] and single-mindedly call his name, then at once he will perceive the sound to their voices and they will all gain deliverance from their trials.”

22 **The Bodhisattva Path**

- Path becomes more important than destination
- Numerous advanced bodhisattvas
 - Maitreya: future Buddha in Tuṣita Heaven
 - Avalokiteśvara (compassion)
 - (Ch: Kuan-yin; Jp: Kannon)
 - Manjuśrī (wisdom)

23 **Mañjuśrī (J: Monju)
Bodhisattva of Wisdom**

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“Because living beings have different natures, different desires, different actions, and different ways of thinking and making distinctions, and because I [the Buddha] want to enable them to put down good roots, I employ a variety of causes and conditions, similes, parables, and phrases and preach different doctrines.”

26 **Reconceptions of Buddha**

- Becomes “deified”?
- Impulse arises as move from B’s time
 - idealize Buddha: supernatural powers, emit light, simultaneous appearance
 - effort to bring closer
- A new cosmology: from one world system to innumerable world systems (*asankhyeya*)
- Each world system its own Buddha-realm (i.e., infinite buddhas)

- Tri-kāya theory (Three body)—effort to clarify relationship between different buddhas

27 **Lotus Sūtra**

- Chpt. 16: Buddha says, "In all the worlds, gods, humans and antigods all say that the present...Buddha left the palace...and at a place not far from the city of Gayā...attained the supreme enlightenment. And yet...since in fact I achieved Buddhahood it has been incalculable, limitless hundreds of thousands of myriads of millions of hundred billions of world periods."
- I.e., Buddha "eternally enlightened" because manifestation of an eternal buddha nature.

28 **Features of Mahāyāna**

3. Reconception of Buddha
 - Loses singularity—Billions of worlds, so....
 - Create "Pure Lands" for suffering beings
 - E.g., Amitābha Buddha

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30 **Amitābha's Vow**

May I not gain possession of perfect awakening if, once I have attained buddhahood, any among the throng of living beings in the ten regions of the universe should single-mindedly desire to be reborn in my land with joy, with confidence, and gladness, and if they should bring to mind this aspiration for even ten moments of thought and yet not gain rebirth there.

31 **Reflecting on the Origins of Mahayana**

1. Bodhisattva ideal—following Shakyamuni (recall Jataka tales of perfecting virtues over many lifetimes)
2. "Recollecting the Buddha" practice (*buddhanusmṛti*) new "revelations"
"Sitting where one is, one sees Amitabha Buddha and hears the sutra expounded by him. [And] when one emerges from that *samadhi* one is able to expound this to others"
3. Advent of writing (facilitated long sutras)
4. New cosmology multiple savior buddhas
5. Theistic influence of "Hinduism" in northern India (ca. 1st century BCE) e.g., *Bhagavad Gita*
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33 **Mahāyāna Tolerance**

- Lay/monastic distinction softened
- Doctrine of skillful means (*upāya*)
 - many teaching/practices appropriate for different beings; NOT hierarchical
 - expedient devices

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35 **Nirvana as *Upāya*: Parable of the Phantom City (*Lotus Sutra*)**

Buddha like a leader who conjures up a majestic city to provide weary travelers a place to rest.

"This city is not real. It is merely something conjured up.... [Similarly] The Buddhas in their capacity as leaders preach *nirvana* to provide a rest. But when they know you have become rested, they lead you onward to the Buddha wisdom."

36 **Criticisms of Nirvana**

- Remember: Buddha himself said little
- Always sounded eternal: ≠ impermanence
- Always sounded transcendent: ≠ karmic causality
- Psychological Problem: so attractive ⇒ clinging
- Social problem: person who achieves Nirvana is inaccessible; no benefit to others

37 **"Schools" of Mahāyāna Buddhism**

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