

W1: What is Mahayana Buddhism?

Introduction

- Mahayana means 'Great Way'
- Enormity of Task
- Encompasses a period of 2000 years
- Almost entire Asian continent
- Not possible to be comprehensive
- Selecting some 'portals' on MY
- Outline of series: W2: the bodhisattva ideal; W3: Mahayana scriptures; W4: Mahayana philosophy; W5: Visions of Mahayana Buddhism (and book launch)

What is Mahayana Buddhism?

- One of the three great phases/divisions of Buddhism:

1 Nikaya Buddhism ('Hinayana' or Little Vehicle) or 'Sect Buddhism'

- First phase of Bsm from c.500 BCE.
- Emphasised renunciation, simplicity, nirvana
- Found today as Theravada (Doctrine of the Elders) in South Asia (Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Laos)

2 Mahayana Buddhism

- Began to emerge around Common Era
- Origins in India but grew/developed in Central Asia, China, Korea, and Japan
- Probably dominant for only a short time in India
- Still found in East Asia; for instance, Zen

3 Vajrayana (Tantric) Buddhism

- 'Magical Buddhism'; emphasised ritual, symbol, manipulation of psychocosmic forces
- Began to emerge around 500 CE
- Draws heavily on MY Buddhism
- Emerged in India but now found in the Himalayas, Mongolia, parts of Russia and China
- Also found its way to Japan (Shingon)

What are the Distinctive Features of Mahayana Buddhism?

- Mahayana is vast, multifaceted, diverse; e.g. Madhyamaka and Pure Land
- Is there a single Mahayana?
- Family resemblances/threads of continuity

1 Distinctive Literature

- 'A literature of the fantastic'; Mahayana Canon

- Vast literature
- 2 Distinctive conception of the Buddha(s);
 - Transhistorical Buddha(s)
 - 3 Distinctive Conception of the Spiritual Ideal – the bodhisattva
 - Cosmic context of awakening - infinite space and time
 - Celestial bodhisattvas
 - 4 Distinctive Soteriologies
 - E.g. Bodhisattva, Pure Land (Other Power), Chan (immediacy)
 - 5 Distinctive Philosophical Ideas
 - Madhyamaka, Yogachara, Buddha-nature, Skilful Means
 - 6 Distinctive Practices
 - Continuity with earlier tradition
 - Buddha cults, koans, sutra worship, new meditation practices

Conclusion

- Mahayana is an umbrella term that encompasses a vast array of spiritual material
- There are some common features (family resemblances) but a great deal of diversity

Suggested Reading:

Nagapriya. 2009. *Visions of Mahayana Buddhism: Awakening the Universe to Wisdom and Compassion*, Cambridge: Windhorse, introduction, Chapter 1 and 2.