

MAHAYANA BUDDHIST LITERATURE

Overview From about 200 or 100 BCE, a new and very different form of Buddhism arose in India, primarily in the northwest region. Known as the Mahayana or the 'Greater Vehicle' (to salvation), this was a Buddhism that claimed to be the culmination of the tradition begun by Gautama Buddha in the 6th c. BCE. In some ways, we can understand the appearance of Mahayana Buddhism as an attempt to answer some of the difficult questions presented by early Buddhist doctrine. Was the Buddha a god? If he was divine, why did he abandon the world by going into *nirvana*? Is worship of the Buddha a contradiction of its central tenet that there is no self (*atman*)? Early Buddhism doctrine was not exactly atheistic—the gods were useful—but it certainly did not encourage the worship of gods. The historical Buddha was a man who reached enlightenment through his own strenuous efforts. Doctrinally, he was not a god. However, it is clear that from the beginning that there was a tendency to regard the Buddha as divine and to worship him as if he were another deity, like those in the Hindu pantheon. The stupas built to commemorate his death were said to contain his relics and soon became places of worship and pilgrimage. Some of these changes, generally toward a divinisation of the Buddha, can be traced to certain historical factors. From about 300 BCE onward, the northwest corner of India became a melting pot of different cultures and religions. The Persians were already there with their Zoroastrianism, then came the Greeks with their distinct practices and myths, followed by Central Asian peoples, such as the Scythians and Parthians, both of whom practiced a syncretic mixture of religions. It is also noteworthy that the cult of one of the most important divinities of Mahayana Buddhism, the Maitreya (or Future Buddha), arose after Christian influences reached northwest India, about 200 CE.

History Mahayana thinkers explained these several changes in Buddhist doctrine in a literary form known as the *sutra* (lit. 'thread', cognate with English 'suture'). Resembling a collection of aphorisms, these Mahayana *sutras* expanded into a corpus of innumerable texts, written first primarily in Sanskrit (with some in Prakrit) and then translated into Tibetan and Chinese. The earliest texts of this new literature are consistently dated to the 1st century CE, probably in south India; the translation into Chinese began about a hundred years later. Mahayana texts continued to be written in Sanskrit, and also Chinese and Tibetan, until about 1000 CE. Today, about 100 such texts survive either in Sanskrit or in Chinese and Tibetan translation. Some *sutras* are extremely long, containing more than 100,000 verses, while others are brief, less than 100 verses. Like the earlier Theravada texts, all these Mahayana texts are regarded as the authentic teachings of the historical Buddha, passed down orally from the first disciple, Ananda, through generations of scholars and finally committed to writing and then compiled into a canon.

Cultural Significance Although the philosophical complexities of Mahayana Buddhist texts are often mind-numbing, they have a significance beyond the small world of monks in discourse. For one thing, Mahayana texts formulated the ideal of the *bodhisattva* with an ethical emphasis. Compassion, generosity and patience were placed alongside the earlier emphases of wisdom, insight and courage. Also, by broadening the understanding of the Buddha to include his divinity, Mahayana texts encouraged greater acceptance among the population in classical India. In bringing Buddhism outside the monasteries and beyond the control of monks, Mahayana texts promoted a type of Buddhism that allowed its followers to remain a part of the social world and not have to renounce it. With its wider social reach, Mahayana texts also inspired the arts of painting and sculpture. Finally, the appeal to ethics and to logic found in these texts helped spread Buddhism from the land of its birth to most countries in Asia. It is estimated that today about 500 million people practice Buddhism, and most of them follow the ideas articulated in Mahayana texts. It was not named the 'Great Vehicle' for nothing.

Key concepts

The Bodhisattva The single, most important concept in Mahayana Buddhist texts is that of the *bodhisattva*, or the one who seeks to become a Buddha. In early Buddhism, the Buddha had been a *bodhisattva* at his previous lives, and that was all. After he achieved *nirvana*, there were no more *bodhisattvas*. In Mahayana Buddhism, by contrast, everyone is encouraged to become a 'Buddha-in-the-making.' Anyone who sincerely wishes to be enlightened can produce 'awakening' (*bodhi*) in the

form of *thought* (citta). This 'awakened thought' is the seed that will grow into full enlightenment if the person follows an ethical code and grasps the doctrines of 'compassion', 'emptiness' (the absence of self) and 'co-dependence' (the theory that everything arises from a conglomeration of factors, that nothing exists in and of itself). Of these doctrines, the most important for a *bodhisattva* is compassion. It is because a *bodhisattva* has compassion, to help others reach enlightenment, that he remains in the world and does not enter *nirvana*. While early Buddhism included a 'path,' Mahayana Buddhism emphasised this as a 'path of perfection' with six stages: generosity, morality, patience, vigour, concentration, and wisdom. Once, a person has achieved the final stage, he or she spontaneously acts like a Buddha with infinite wisdom and compassion. In Mahayana Buddhism, even the fully-realised Buddha does not leave the world but acts as a guide and saviour to others. In one text, the *bodhisattva* explains his mission this way:

'I take upon myself... the deeds of all beings, even of those in the hells, in other worlds, in the realms of punishment... I take their suffering upon me,... I bear it, I do not draw back from it, I do not tremble at it ... I have no fear of it,... I do not lose heart... I must bear the burden of all beings, for I have vowed to save all things living, to bring them safe through the forest of birth, age, disease, death and rebirth. I think not of my own salvation, but strive to bestow on all beings the royalty of supreme wisdom... Truly I will not abandon them. For I have resolved to gain supreme wisdom for the sake of all that lives, to save the world.'

Scholars have pointed out parallels with the Christian ideal of self-sacrifice and compassion, and one cannot rule out the possibility that the Mahayana Buddhist concept of the *bodhisattva* was influenced by that Middle Eastern religion.

Pure Lands In order to accommodate new concepts, Mahayana Buddhism also introduced a new cosmology. Central to his new view of the world was the concept of 'pure lands,' a quasi-mystical place where all the striving *bodhisattvas* and realised Buddhas existed. These lands were purified by the presence of the semi-divine beings, who now resembled Hindu gods in nearly every aspect. The emphasis on meditation and visualisation in Mahayana practice also rendered these 'pure lands' as aspects of the mind: if you can 'see' the pure land then you are purified. That which appears 'out there' is also 'in here.' As explained in some schools of Mahayana Buddhism, the inner and the outer spheres are collapsed and folded into one. A further development, toward worship of divinities in Mahayana, was that these pure lands were presided over by a supreme Buddha. The most popular of these was the pure land of the Amitabha Buddha or 'The Buddha of Infinite Light.' The texts tell a story about a particular monk named Dharmakara who chanted the name of the Amitabha Buddha and himself became a buddha. The cult of the Amitabha Buddha, in which followers chant his name for hours, became extremely popular in China (from the 7th c. CE onward) and later in Korea and Japan, where (in the 13th c. CE) it inspired the Japanese school of Nichiren Buddhism with its now-familiar chant of 'Nam myoho renge kyo.'

Three Bodies The doctrine of the 'Three Bodies' (*trikaya*) developed within Mahayana Buddhism as a way of solving the problem in early Buddhism (and indeed in all world religions) of the relationship between the material world and enlightenment. How exactly can one leave the conditions of the sensual world, which in the Buddhist view, are so powerful and full of suffering? Or, to put it another way, how can the transcendental reality of wisdom (enlightenment) be achieved by creatures such as ourselves who are so mired in the physical world? Mahayana answers evolved into the doctrine of the 'three bodies' of the Buddha. First, there is the physical (*nirmana* or 'emanation') body in which the Buddha appeared in this world in order to teach the Truth. Second, is the enjoyment (*sambhoga* or 'bliss') body, which is the celestial form of the Buddha in the 'Pure Lands' to which people can ascend through meditation. Finally, there is the 'unmanifested' (*dharma*) body of the Buddha, which represents in the intangible, enlightenment and *nirvana*. All reality, everything perceived by the senses and apprehended by wisdom, is contained in this third form of the Buddha. Both the external and the internal, both immanence and transcendence, both the material 'things' of the world and their invisible essence, all this is contained in the unmanifest body. As such, this unmanifest Buddha is both body and mind and thus provides a solution to the otherwise unbridgeable split between the two.

Key texts

Diamond Sutra The *Diamond Sutra* is one of the most influential of all Mahayana texts. It is so-called because it describes 'the perfect wisdom that cuts like a diamond (or thunderbolt).' First composed in Sanskrit in the period between 100-300 CE, it sparked a number of important commentaries, especially by Asanga and Vasubhandu in the 4th or possibly the 5th century CE. The earliest surviving copy of the *Diamond Sutra* is a Chinese translation, authored by a famous scholar named Kumarajiva and dated to about 400 CE. A later copy of this particular translation of the *Diamond Sutra* was found on a Dunhuang scroll of 868 CE. The original Sanskrit also generated further translations in Chinese, several Central Asian languages and then Japanese. By the end of the Tang Dynasty in China, about 900 CE, more than 80 commentaries had been written on the *Diamond Sutra*, although only 32 survive.



(A traditional pocket-sized, folding edition of the *Diamond Sutra* in Chinese)

The *Diamond Sutra*, like so many other early Indian texts (including the Theravada *Dhammapada* and *The Questions of Milinda* [*Milindapanha*]), is composed in the form of a conversation. In this instance, we listen to a discourse given by the Buddha to a senior monk. The central teaching of the text is the liberation by understanding the truth of 'emptiness' (*sunyata*) and 'no-self' (*anatman*). The Buddha urges his disciple to realise that nothing, not even oneself, has any permanent reality, that everything is co-dependent on other things and therefore transient. Throughout the text, the point is made that things are not what they seem, they are illusory, and one must try to unlearn what one has taken for granted. This involves a deconstruction of language in order to demonstrate that have we convinced ourselves that things exist 'in and of themselves'. In fact, however, nothing has this permanent essence. For instance, it is misleading to say 'I have gained enlightenment' or 'I will show compassion to other beings' because they falsely assume the reality of a separate 'I' and 'them.' In this respect, the complicated ontological doctrine of the text has an ethical dimension of teaching people to be humble and to avoid attachment to 'things.' And although the text tends to preach negatively, using what commenters call the 'not-logic' ('this does not exist, that does not exist'), it also speaks of the bliss experienced when these difficult concepts are fully understood. As the text explains, 'all conditioned phenomena are like a dream, an illusion, a shadow, like dew or a flash of lighting. This is how we should see them.'

Below is an extract from the *Diamond Sutra*, translated by Charles Muller, in which the Buddha, the Tathagata, or 'One who has Attained', speaks to his disciple, Subhuti.

'Subhuti, what do you think? Is the Tathagata [Buddha] to be recognised after a body-form?'

'No, World-honoured One, he is not to be recognised after a body-form. Why? According to the Tathagata, a body-form is not a body-form.'

The Buddha said to Subhuti, 'All that has a form is an illusory existence. When it is perceived that all form is no-form, the Tathagata is recognised.'

Subhuti said to the Buddha: 'World-honoured One, if beings hear such words and statements, would they have a true faith in them?'

The Buddha said to Subhuti: 'Do not talk that way. In the last five hundred years after the passing of the Tathagata, there may be beings who, having practised rules of morality and, being thus possessed of merit, happen to hear of these statements and rouse a true faith in them. Such beings, you must know, are those who have planted their root of merit not only under one, two, three, four, or five Buddhas, but already under thousands of myriads of Buddhas have they planted their root of merit of all kinds. Those who hearing these statements rouse even one thought of pure faith, Subhuti, are all known to the Tathagata, and

recognised by him as having acquired such an immeasurable amount of merit. Why? Because all these beings are free from the idea of an ego, a person, a being, or a soul; they are free from the idea of a dharma as well as from that of a no-dharma. Why? Because if they cherish in their minds the idea of a form, they are attached to an ego, a person, a being, or a soul. If they cherish the idea of a dharma, they are attached to an ego, a person, a being, or a soul. Why? If they cherish the idea of a no-dharma, they are attached to an ego, a person, a being, or a soul. Therefore, do not cherish the idea of a dharma, nor that of a no-dharma. For this reason, the Tathagata always preaches thus: 'O you Bhikshus, know that my teaching is to be likened unto a raft. Even a dharma is cast aside, much more a no-dharma.'

Therefore, Subhuti, you should, detaching yourself from all ideas, rouse the desire for the supreme enlightenment. You should cherish thoughts without dwelling on form, you should cherish thoughts without dwelling on sound, odour, taste, touch, or quality. Whatever thoughts you may have, they are not to dwell on anything. If a thought dwells on anything, this is said to be no-dwelling. Therefore, the Buddha teaches that a Bodhisattva is not to practice charity by dwelling on form. Subhuti, the reason he practices charity is to benefit all beings.

'The Tathagata teaches that all ideas are no-ideas, and again that all beings are no-beings. Subhuti, the Tathagata is the one who speaks what is true, the one who speaks what is real, the one whose words are as they are, the one who does not speak falsehood, the one who does not speak equivocally.

'Subhuti, in the Dharma attained by the Tathagata there is neither truth nor falsehood. Subhuti, if a Bodhisattva should practice charity, cherishing a thought which dwells on the Dharma, he is like unto a person who enters the darkness, he sees nothing. If he should practice charity without cherishing a thought that dwells on the Dharma, he is like unto a person with eyes, he sees all kinds of forms illumined by the sunlight.'

Pure Land Sutras The Pure Land *sutras*, approximately 300 in number, developed first in India, especially in Kashmir and later, through translation, became extremely popular in China. They are best known for their celebration of Amitabha, the Buddha of infinite light,' and his glorious realm where purified beings live. Many of the texts are taken up with descriptions of the longevity of these beings and their resplendent forms that glow on the 'western horizon'. Other lengthy sections are devoted to listing and explaining the merits of 48 vows taken by Amitabha. The main benefit of reciting and listening to these *sutras* is the promise of being reborn in one of these 'pure lands.'



(Amitabha in his Pure Land, painting on silk, Tibet, 18th century)

Below is an extract from the *Sutra on the Contemplation of Amitabha*, translated by Hisao Inagakhi, 2003.

'The majestic light of Buddha Amitabha is the most exalted. No other buddha's light can match his. The light of some buddhas illuminates a hundred buddha lands, and that of others a thousand buddha lands. Briefly, that of Amitabha illuminates the eastern buddha lands as numerous as the sands of the Ganges River. In the same way, it illuminates the buddha lands in the south, west, and north, in each of the four intermediate directions, and above and below. Further, the light of some buddhas extends seven feet; that of others, one yojana, or two, three, four, or five yojana s; and the distance covered increases in this way until the light of some buddhas illuminates one buddha land.

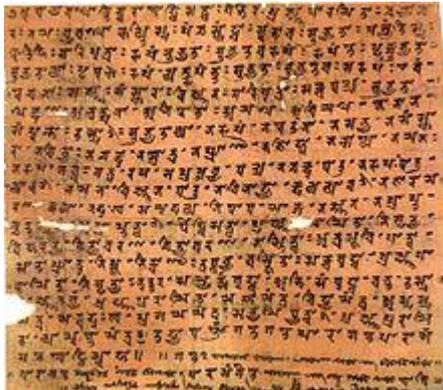
'For this reason, Amitabha is called by the following names: the Buddha of Infinite Light, the Buddha of Boundless Light, the Buddha of Unhindered Light, the Buddha of Incomparable Light, the Buddha of the Light of the King of Flame, the Buddha of Pure Light, the Buddha of the Light of Joy, the Buddha of the Light of Wisdom, the Buddha of Unceasing Light, the Buddha of Inconceivable Light, the Buddha of Ineffable Light, and the Buddha of the Light Outshining the Sun and Moon.

'If sentient beings encounter his light, their three defilements are removed; they feel tenderness, joy, and pleasure; and good thoughts arise. If sentient beings in the three realms

of suffering see his light they will all be relieved and freed from affliction. At the end of their lives they all reach liberation.

'The light of Amitabha shines brilliantly, illuminating all the buddha lands of the ten directions. There is no place where it is not perceived. I am not the only one who now praises his light. All the buddhas, sravakas [ascetics], pratyekabuddhas [a lone-buddha] and bodhisattvas praise and glorify it in the same way. If sentient beings, having heard of the majestic virtue of his light, glorify it continually, day and night, with sincerity of heart, they will be able to attain birth in his land as they wish. Then the multitudes of bodhisattvas and sravakas [ascetics] will praise their excellent virtue. Later, when they attain buddhahood, all the buddhas and bodhisattvas in the ten directions will praise their light, just as I now praise the light of Amitabha.'

The Heart Sutra Like the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Heart Sutra* belongs to a collection of Mahayana Buddhist texts known as the 'perfection of wisdom.' The *Heart Sutra* exists in two versions, one long and one very short. The short version contains, in fact, only 14 lines, as if it has been abbreviated for teaching laymen and women. It, too, was originally written in Sanskrit (c. 350-500 CE) and quickly translated into Chinese, Tibetan and Mongolian. The earliest extant version of the text is that carved on a stone pillar in China in 661 CE; two other stone pillars, also carved in China in the same century, carry the text. A Sanskrit manuscript of the text found in a temple in Japan is traditionally thought to also date from the early 7th century. Although this last date has not been verified, most scholars accept that the manuscript is no older than about 800 CE.



(Sanskrit manuscript of the *Heart Sutra*, Bibliothèque nationale de France, unknown date)

Again, like other texts, the *Heart Sutra* is delivered in the form of a discourse, in this case given by Avalokitesvara (the bodhisattva of compassion) to monks gathered at a mountain setting. In brief, one of the monks asks Avalokitesvara for advice on how to achieve 'perfection'. Avalokitesvara then explains how he gained wisdom through deep and prolonged meditation on the 'emptiness' of all things, which are broken down into their five constituent parts, known as the aggregates (*skandas*): form (*rupa*), feeling (*vedana*), volitions (sakhara), perceptions (*samjna*), and consciousness (*vijnana*). The background to this doctrine is that an earlier text had similarly dissected reality into these five parts but had made the mistake of giving them permanence. The burden of the *Heart Sutra* is thus to show that they are 'empty', like all things, because they are conditioned, that is, dependent on each other. Then Avalokitesvara applies the same 'deconstruction' to other sacred cows of Buddhism, including the Four Noble Truths. This wisdom is finally encapsulated in the mantra: 'Gone gone, gone beyond, gone utterly beyond, Enlightenment hail!' This summary has become so influential that many Buddhists utter it at the end of the recitation of any Mahayana text or the conclusion of a period of meditation.

The short version of the *Heart Sutra* is provided below in its translation by E. Conze in 1974.

When Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva was practicing the profound Prajnaparamita ('Perfection of Wisdom'), he illuminated the Five Skandhas and saw that they were all empty, and crossed over all suffering and affliction.

'Sariputra, form is not different from emptiness, and emptiness is not different from form. Form itself is emptiness, and emptiness itself is form. Sensation, conception, synthesis, and discrimination are also such as this. Sariputra, all dharmas are empty: they are neither created nor destroyed, neither defiled nor pure, and they neither increase nor diminish. This is because in emptiness there is no form, sensation, conception, synthesis, or discrimination. There are no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or thoughts. There are no forms, sounds, scents, tastes, sensations, or dharmas. There is no field of vision and there is no realm of thoughts. There is no ignorance nor elimination of ignorance, even up to and including no old age and death, nor elimination of old age and death. There is no suffering, its accumulation, its elimination, or a path. There is no understanding and no attaining.

'Because there is no attainment, bodhisattvas rely on Perfection of Wisdom, and their minds have no obstructions. Since there are no obstructions, they have no fears. Because they are detached from backwards dream-thinking, their final result is Nirvaṇa. Because all buddhas of the past, present, and future rely on Perfection of Wisdom'

Therefore, know that the Perfection of Wisdom is a great spiritual mantra, a great brilliant mantra, an unsurpassed mantra, and an unequalled mantra. The Perfection of Wisdom Mantra is spoken because it can truly remove all afflictions. The mantra is spoken thus:

Gone, Gone, gone beyond, Gone Completely Beyond. Praise to Awakening!

Reading

Peter Pfand, *Māhāyana Texts Translated into Western Languages – A Bibliographical Guide*, 1986

Edward Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom Books*, 1975

Donald S. Lopez, *The Heart Sutra Explained*, 1985



(Amitabha and two attendant Buddhas, China, date unknown)