



The descent of Amida Buddha and Attendants, Japan, 14th c

Mahāyāna Buddhism

Around the first century of the common era a new form of Buddhism arose in northern India. This form of Buddhism was called *Mahayana* (the Great Vehicle) in contrast to the earlier form of Buddhism sometimes called *Hinayana* (the Smaller Vehicle). Today it is recognized that this term, *Hinayana*, was a pejorative term used by the Mahayana Buddhist to condescendingly refer to the earlier form, and thus the term *Theravada* (School of the Elders) is the preferred term for the earlier form of Buddhism. While Theravada Buddhism developed in Southeast Asia, Mahayana Buddhism spread north from India into Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet, China, Mongolia, Korea and Japan. Mahayana Buddhism is also the dominant form of Buddhism today in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan and Singapore. There are several features of Mahayana Buddhism that distinguish it from the earlier Theravada tradition.

The Trikāya Doctrine

The first is that the notion of the Buddha changes. In Theravada Buddhism the Buddha is just the historical Buddha, the sage named *Shakyamuni* who became enlightened and known as the “awakened one” (the Buddha). The Buddha is considered to be just a very exceptional human being. In Mahayana there is the *trikaya* (three bodies) doctrine in which three forms of Buddha are recognized. The first, the *nirmanakaya* (manifestation body) refers to the Buddha manifested as a

particular human being like Shakyamuni Buddha. In Mahayana, however, there was not just one Buddha, but many human beings who are awakened and thus buddhas. The Tibetans, for example, revere the Dalai Lama as a living buddha.

Then there are also the *sambhogakaya* (enjoyment body) buddhas. These “celestial Buddhas” are divine like beings that inhabit different realms and become the object of worship in Mahayana Buddhism. Earlier Buddhism might be regarded as more psychological than religious, since the problem of suffering could only be solved by oneself following the Buddha’s prescription of the eightfold path. The later form of Buddhism became known as the “Greater Vehicle” because it allowed for different ways to reach enlightenment and thus accommodate more people. There are many different schools of Mahayana Buddhism, emphasizing different paths to enlightenment, and as this form of Buddhism spread widely across Asia, picking up distinctive flavors from the different cultures where it developed, Mahayana Buddhism is quite a huge vehicle indeed. There are many of these celestial Buddhas that became the object of worship in the different schools of Mahayana and these Buddhas are often depicted in great works of art across Asia. The cover image here depicts one of these celestial Buddhas, known in Japan as Amida Buddha, in China as Amita Buddha, and originally in India as Amitabha Buddha. In this image, Amida Buddha is depicted descending from his heavenly realm, accompanied by many attendants playing heavenly music. In some schools of Mahayana Buddhism, just repeatedly chanting the name of Amida Buddha can lead to release from suffering. Thus, while in early Buddhism, each individual must solve the psychological problem of suffering for himself or herself, in Mahayana Buddhism the celestial Buddhas offer assistance in overcoming suffering and finding *nirvana*.

The third of the *trikaya* Buddhas is perhaps the most interesting philosophically. This is the notion of the *dharmakaya* (dharma body), and this refers to what is known as the Buddha-nature in all things. This is the view that everyone really has the capacity to become enlightened as the Buddha-nature is within. Sometimes this notion is thought to be similar with the view in the *Upanishads* that the Atman, or soul within, is identical with the eternal Brahman, but the notion of the Buddha-nature is really quite different from the Atman-Brahman hypothesis. To better understand what the Buddha-nature in all things is, it is important to better understand some of the other teachings of Mahayana Buddhism.

The Bodhisattva

Another very distinctive feature of Mahayana Buddhism is the notion of the *Bodhisattva*. The term means “awakened being” and thus it means virtually the same thing as “Buddha.” The bodhisattva might be thought of as the enlightenment hero of Mahayana Buddhism. In early Buddhism, it was thought that the Buddha became enlightened and thus after his death he did not need to come back and be reborn again. The bodhisattva, however, takes a vow to come back to this world again and again in order to help all beings end suffering and reach enlightenment. The notion of the bodhisattva may signal an even more radical revolution in Indian philosophy in perhaps suggesting that the whole goal of escaping from *samsara* and not having to be reborn is given up. Perhaps nirvana is not another place one goes to after death, but is rather a different way of being



Bodhisattva with Lotus, Ajanta Caves

here. It may be confusing since the Tibetans revere the Dalai Lama as a living buddha, but they also revere him as a bodhisattva, as one who keeps being reborn in order to help all beings attain nirvana. Various bodhisattvas are depicted in some of the great works of art in Mahayana Buddhism. The image on the left is of a painting on the wall of a cave wall in northern India where Mahayana Buddhism first arose. This image depicts the famous bodhisattva named Avalokiteśvara of the *Heart Sutra*. The first texts of Mahayana Buddhism were called the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* (The Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras) and the most famous of these texts is called the *Heart Sutra*. In this image the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara holds out a lotus flower which is a symbol of enlightenment. If one looks carefully at the image, one might notice that the central creature that is looking up at the lotus flower is actually a rat. This makes the point that the Bodhisattva holds out the lotus flower of enlightenment for all beings. In Mahayana Buddhism, even the rats have Buddha-nature and are thus deserving and capable of experiencing liberation from suffering.

The Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras

The Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras are a vast collection of texts, and the two most famous are the ones known as the *Diamond Sutra* and the *Heart Sutra*. The central teaching of these texts is the teaching known as *śūnyatā*, usually simply translated as “emptiness.” There is much confusion as to what exactly this means, and this confusion is at least partly the result of a difference between the Sanskrit and Chinese versions of the texts. Most of *The Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* were originally composed in India and written in Sanskrit and then translated into Chinese after Buddhism spread to China. Recent scholarship has determined that the *Heart Sutra* may actually have been originally composed in Chinese, as a kind of summary of the whole of the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* and then this summary text was translated back into Sanskrit. To understand the text, one has to remember that an important part of the Buddha’s teachings was that the self is composed of parts, the five *skandhas* (aggregates) or branches of the self: form (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedana*), perception (*saṃjñā*), mental formations (*samskāra*), and consciousness (*viñjāna*). In the *Heart Sutra*, one of the Buddha’s favorite disciples Shariputra asks the Bodhisattva about this secret special wisdom called the perfection of wisdom. The Bodhisattva then instructs Shariputra that the secret is the knowledge that all the five parts of the self are empty. In the Chinese text it just says that the skandhas are empty, but in the Sanskrit text it says what they are empty of, and what they are empty of is “inherent existence.” The most famous lines of the Heart Sutra is when the Bodhisattva explains “Form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form; form is not other than

emptiness.” The Bodhisattva then goes on to say the same is true of all the other branches of the self. He goes on further in the text to say that everything is empty. So what is this strange teaching of emptiness?

It is often thought that the line “form is emptiness, emptiness is form” expresses some kind of paradox, as it would seem that form and emptiness are usually understood as opposites. The famous Indian Mahayana philosopher Nagarjuna, a teacher who lived about one hundred years after the appearance of these strange teachings, explained that the teaching of emptiness was not really different from the central teaching of Buddhism. One must remember that the central teaching of Buddhism is the notion of interdependent arising (*pratitya samutapada*). This says that nothing exists separately. Everything is interwoven in interdependence. Though it may seem paradoxical at first glance, especially if one does not understand what the branches of the self are empty of, the line “form is emptiness, emptiness is form” actually is perhaps the easiest to understand. For what is meant by “form” (*rupa*) is the body. It should be obvious that our bodies are not independent but would not exist without interdependence. As a thought experiment, think of all the food you have eaten in your whole life that has produced the body that you have today. Think of all the plants, all the animals, all the bugs in the soil, the soil itself, all the people that grew the food, transported the food, sold the food, cooked the food. When one thinks of all the food that one has eaten in one’s life, one begins to realize that one’s body is empty of independent or inherent existence. Our bodies are the products of a vast web of interdependence. The *Heart Sutra* goes on to say that this is true not only of the body, but also of all the other parts of the self, and it is also true of everything else in the world. This is the central teaching of Buddhism that everything exists in interdependence.

Perhaps the most important point of Mahayana philosophy is that wisdom leads to compassion. The wisdom is this notion of emptiness, which is really the teaching that nothing is ever really completely independent and separate. We are all in this together and if we really understand this then compassion follows. According to the *Heart Sutra*, this realization is what leads to complete enlightenment or nirvana. What follows here is the complete text of the *Heart Sutra*, a translation from the Sanskrit text, and also a selection from the *Diamond Sutra*.

The Heart Sutra
Mahāprajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya Sūtra
The Great Perfection of Wisdom Heart Sūtra

Thus did I hear at one time. The Transcendent Victor (*Tathāgata*) was sitting on Vulture Mountain on Rājagṛha together with a great assembly of monks and a great assembly of Bodhisattvas. At that time the Transcendent Victor was absorbed in a samādhi on the enumerations of phenomena called “perception of the profound.” Also at that time, the Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara was contemplating the meaning of the profound perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) and he saw that those five aggregates (*skandhas*) also are empty of inherent existence. Then by the power of the Buddha, the venerable Śāriputra said this to the Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara, “How should a son of good lineage train who wishes to practice the profound perfection of wisdom?”

The Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara said this to the venerable Śāriputra: “Śāriputra, a son of good lineage or a daughter of good lineage who wished to practice the perfection of wisdom should view [things] in this way: They should correctly view those five aggregates also as empty of inherent existence. Form (*rūpa*) is emptiness (*śūnyatā*); emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form; form is not other than emptiness. In the same way, feeling (*vedanā*), discrimination (*saṃjñā*), compositional factors (*saṃskāra*), and consciousness (*viññāna*) are empty. Śāriputra, in that way, all phenomena are empty, that is, without characteristic, unproduced, unceased, stainless, not stainless, undiminished, unfilled. Therefore, Śāriputra, in emptiness, there is not form, no feeling, no discrimination, no compositional factors, no consciousness, no eye, no ear, no nose, no object of touch, no phenomenon. There is no eye constituent, no mental constituent, up to and including no mental consciousness constituent. There is no ignorance, no extinction of ignorance, up to an including no aging and death and no extinction of aging and death. Similarly there are no sufferings, no origins, no cessations, no paths, no exalted wisdom, no attainment, and also no non-attainment.

Therefore, Śāriputra, because Bodhisattvas have no attainment, they depend on and abide in the perfection of wisdom; because their minds are without obstructions, they are without fear. Having completely passed beyond all error they go to the completion of nirvāṇa. All the Buddhas who abide in the three times have been fully awakened into unsurpassed, perfect, complete enlightenment (*anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*) through relying on the perfection of wisdom.

Therefore, the mantra of the perfection of wisdom is the mantra of great knowledge, the unsurpassed mantra, the mantra equal to the unequalled, the mantra that thoroughly pacifies all suffering. Because it is not false, it should be known as the true. The mantra of the perfection of wisdom is stated:

ॐ गते गते पारगते पारसंगते बोधि स्वाहा

oṃ gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā

gone, gone, gone beyond, gone all the way beyond— awakening, aha!

Śāriputra, Bodhisattva, Mahāsattvas should train in the profound perfection of wisdom in that way.

Then the Transcendent Victor rose from that samādhi and said to the Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara, “Well done. Well done, well done, child of good lineage, it is just so. Child of good lineage, it is like that; that profound perfection of wisdom should be practiced just as you have taught it. Even

the Tathāgatas admire this." The Transcendent Victor having so spoken, the venerable Śāriputra, the Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara, and all those surrounding and those of the world, the gods, humans, demigods, and *gandharvas* were filled with admiration and praised the words of the Transcendent Victor.

Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *The Heart Sūtra Explained: Indian and Tibetan Commentaries* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

The Diamond Sutra

Vajraccedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra

The Perfection of Wisdom that Cuts like a Thunderbolt Sūtra

... He said: 'How, Blessed One, should one who has set out on the way of a *bodhisattva* stand? How should he actually practise? How should he direct his thought?'

The Blessed One said: 'Here, Subhūti, one who has set out on the way of a *bodhisattva* should produce a thought in this manner: "All living beings should be led by me to final *nirvāṇa* in the realm of *nirvāṇa* which leaves nothing behind. But after having led living beings thus to final *nirvāṇa*, there is no living being whatsoever who has been led to final *nirvāṇa*." And why is that? If, [8a] Subhūti, a conception of a living being were to occur to a *bodhisattva*, a conception of a personal soul, or a conception of a person, he is not to be called "a *bodhisattva*". And why is that? Subhūti, that which is called "one who has set out on the way of a *bodhisattva*", that is not a thing.

'What do you think, Subhūti? Is that some thing which was awakened to by the *Tathāgata*, in the presence of the *tathāgata* Dīpaṃkara, as the utmost, full and perfect awakening?'

He said: 'Blessed One, that which was awakened to by the *Tathāgata*, in the presence of the *tathāgata* Dīpaṃkara, as the utmost, full and perfect awakening is not some thing.'

He said: 'Because of that was I assured by the *tathāgata* Dīpaṃkara: "You, young man, will be at a future time a *tathāgata*, *arhat*, fully and perfectly awakened one named Śākyamuni." And why is that? "*Tathāgata*", Subhūti, that is a designation for thusness (*tathatā*). Subhūti, someone might speak thus, "The utmost, full and perfect awakening is fully and perfectly awakened to by the *Tathāgata*." But that which is the utmost, full and perfect awakening fully and perfectly awakened to by the *Tathāgata* is not some thing. Subhūti, the thing which is fully and perfectly awakened to by the *Tathāgata* — in that there is neither truth nor falsehood. On that account the *Tathāgata* says "all characteristics are the characteristics of a buddha". "All characteristics", Subhūti, all those are not characteristics. In that sense "all characteristics" is used. Suppose, for example, Subhūti, there would be a man endowed with a body, a great body.'

Subhūti said: 'That which [8b] the *Tathāgata* has called a man endowed with a body, a great body — he, Blessed One, is said to be without a body by the *Tathāgata*. In that sense "endowed with a body, a great body" is used.'

The Blessed One said: 'Just so, Subhūti, the *bodhisattva* who would speak thus: "I will lead beings to final *nirvāṇa*" — he is not to be called a *bodhisattva*. And why is that? Is there, Subhūti, some thing which is named "*bodhisattva*"?'

He said: 'No indeed, Blessed One.'

The Blessed One said: 'On that account the *Tathāgata* says "all things are without living being, without personal soul, without person". Subhūti, a *bodhisattva* who would speak thus: "I will bring about wonderful arrangements in [my] sphere of activity" — he too is not to be called a *bodhisattva*. And why is that?'

"Wonderful arrangements in [one's] sphere of activity, wonderful arrangements in [one's] sphere of activity", Subhūti, those have been said by the *Tathāgata* not to be wonderful arrangements. In that sense "wonderful arrangements in [one's] sphere of activity" is used. Subhūti, that *bodhisattva* who is intent on saying "without a self are things, without a self are things" — he is declared "a *bodhisattva*, a *bodhisattva*" by the *Tathāgata*, *arhat*, fully and perfectly Awakened One. . . .

. . . 'If, again, Subhūti, it should occur thus: "by someone set out on the way of a *bodhisattva* the destruction of some thing is taught, or its annihilation", again, Subhūti, it is not to be seen thus. The destruction of some thing, or its annihilation, is not taught by someone who has set out on the way of a *bodhisattva*.

'If, again, Subhūti, a son or daughter of good family, after filling world-systems similar in number to the sands of the Ganges with the seven precious things, were to give them as a gift to the *Tathāgata*, *arhat*, fully and perfectly Awakened One; and if a *bodhisattva* were to achieve composure in the midst of things that have no self — the latter would indeed produce much greater merit than the former. However, Subhūti, a quantity of merit is not to be acquired by a *bodhisattva*.'

He said: 'A quantity of merit, Blessed One, is to be acquired, surely?'

The Blessed One said: "'Is to be acquired", Subhūti, not "is to be held on to". In that sense "is to be acquired" is used. [11b]

'But once again, Subhūti, if someone were to speak thus: "The *Tathāgata* goes, or he comes, or he stands, or he sits, or he lies down" — he does not understand the meaning of what I said. 'Why is that? A "*tathāgata*", Subhūti, has not come from anywhere, has not gone anywhere. In that sense "*tathāgata*, *arhat*, "fully and perfect awakened one" is used.

'And if again, Subhūti, a son or daughter of good family were to grind into powder as many world-systems as there are particles of dust in this three thousand great-thousand world-system so that there would be just a pile of the finest atoms — what do you think, Subhūti? Would that pile of atoms be huge?'

He said: 'That is so, Blessed One, that would be a huge pile of atoms. And why is that? If, Blessed One, there would have been a pile, the Blessed One would not have said "a pile of atoms"'. Why is that? That which is said to be a pile of atoms, that is said by the Blessed One not to be a pile. In that sense "a pile of atoms" is used. That which the *Tathāgata* calls "three thousand great-thousand world-system", that is said by the *Tathāgata* not to be a system. In that sense "three thousand great-thousand world-system" is used. Why is that? If, Blessed One, there would have been a system, just that, Blessed One, 'would have been the holding on to a solid mass. And that which is said by the *Tathāgata* [12a] to be the holding on to a solid mass is said to be not holding on. In that sense "holding on to a solid mass" is used.'

The Blessed One said: 'And holding on to a solid mass is itself, Subhūti, a thing not open to verbal expression; it cannot be put into words. It, however, has been held on to by simply ordinary people. Why is that? If, Subhūti, someone were to speak thus, "A view of a self was taught by the *Tathāgata*, a view of a living being, a view of a personal soul, a view of a, person" — would he indeed, Subhūti, speak correctly?'

He said: 'No, Blessed One. And why is that? Blessed One, that which is said by the *Tathāgata* to be a view of a self, that is said by the *Tathāgata* to be not a view. In that sense "a view of a self" is used.'

The Blessed One said: 'In this way, Subhūti, one who has set out on the way of a *bodhisattva* should know all things, should be intent on them. And he should be intent on them in such a way that even the conception of a thing would not be present. Why is that? "Conception of a thing, conception of a thing", Subhūti, that is said by the *Tathāgata* not to be a conception. In that sense "conception of a thing" is used.

'And again, Subhūti, if a *bodhisattva*, *mahāsattva*, having filled immeasurable, incalculable world-systems with the seven precious things, were to give them as a gift; and if a son or daughter of good family, having taken up from this perfection of wisdom a verse of even four lines, were to preserve it, were to teach it, were

to master it [12b] — the latter certainly would produce immeasurable, incalculable merit, much greater than the first.

'And how would he fully cause it to appear? In such a way that he would not cause it to appear. In that sense "fully cause it to appear" is used.'

*A shooting star, a fault of vision, a lamp;
An illusion and dew and a bubble;
A dream, a flash of lightning, a thundercloud —
In this way is the conditioned to be seen.*

The Blessed One said this.

Delighted, the elder Subhūti, and the monks and nuns, the laymen and women, and the world with its *devas*, men, *asuras* and *gandharvas* rejoiced in that spoken by the Blessed One.

The *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā* is concluded.

Selection from *The Diamond Sutra* taken from Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ed. *Buddhist Scriptures* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2004), pp. 450-463. Translated by Gregory Schopen from the manuscript of the *Vajracchedikā* found at Gilgit. The translation was first published in Luis O. Gomez and Jonathan A. Silk (eds.), *The Great Vehicle: Three Mahāyāna Texts* (Ann Arbor: Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies, 1989), pp. 123-31.

* * *

KEY TERMS

बोधिसत्त्व

bodhisattva

Bodhisattva

literally: "awakened being"

the ideal of Mahayana Buddhism: the one who vows to save all sentient beings

प्रज्ञापारमिता

prajñāpāramitā

Prajnaparamita

the perfection of wisdom

शून्यता

śūnyatā

Shunyata

"emptiness," the central teaching of the *Prajnaparamita Sutras*

तथता

tathatā

Tathata

"suchness," "thusness"

seeing things as they are in their "emptiness"

त्रिकाय

trikāya

Trikaya

literally "Three bodies"

the Mahayana doctrine of the three bodies of the Buddha

निर्माणकाय

nirmāṇakāya

Nirmanakaya

"Manifestation Body"

the Buddha manifested in a particular body
the historical Buddha

सँभोगकाय

saṃbhogakāya

Sambhogakaya

"Enjoyment Body"

the celestial Buddhas that are the object of devotion in Mahayana Buddhism

धर्मकाय

dharmakāya

Dharmakaya

"Dharma Body"

the Buddha nature in all things