

the foundational bases of the Pure Land School of Buddhism. The text of the sūtra begins with the Buddha on Vulture’s Peak surrounded by a huge retinue of śrāvakas (i.e., hearers, disciples) and bodhisattvas. Using the premise of instructing Ānanda, the Buddha rehearses the story of a monk Dharmākara who made a series of forty-eight vows under a prior Buddha known as Lokēśvararāja. Dharmākara begins pursuit of the bodhisattva path, focusing all his vows on one Buddha-Land. Eventually, Dharmākara is able to actualize his vows, becoming the Buddha Amitābha residing in the Pure Land of Sukhāvātī (the Western Paradise). Rebirth in Sukhāvātī is available to those who (1) make a vow to be reborn there, (2) employ their good merit to do so, and (3) meditate on Amitābha. The sūtra ends with a vision of Amitābha. The Smaller Sukhāvātīyūha Sūtra is a Mahāyāna text that is also important as one of the foundational bases of the Pure Land School of Buddhism. As opposed to the larger version of the text, with the Buddha on Vulture’s Peak, here the Buddha Amitābha presides over the Pure Land of Sukhāvātī. Birth in the Pure Land is not a result of good works, as in the larger version, and is not even mentioned. The key issue in the smaller text focuses on the metaphor of sound. The sounds present in the Pure Land are to remind one of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Additionally, these sounds, and that of Amitābha’s name, are prerequisites to meditation. Consequently, they must be repeated if salvation is to be attained

Mahāyāna Doctrines

Although Mahāyāna is often cited for the importance of the new literature it created in Buddhism, and for its emphasis on the laity, the ideas and doctrines embodied in that literature were equally important in shaping the later development of the

tradition. Most important among the Mahāyāna doctrinal innovations were its new theories about the nature of the Buddha and about reality, as well as its emphasis on the bodhisattva as a new ideal type in Buddhism. Concomitant with this new path, was its stress on a series of perfections known as pāramitās, and two of the most important perfections: compassion and skill-in-means.

Buddha Nature

Buddha nature is a Mahāyāna notion that all sentient beings possess an inherently pure nature identical to that of the Buddhas, worldly or cosmic. This Buddha-ness (tathatā) is one of the issues that clearly differentiates Mahāyāna from Hīnayāna, for in the latter there is no notion suggesting that all beings can become Buddhas.

Emptiness

The doctrine of “emptiness” or śūnyatā is stressed in many Mahāyāna scriptures, beginning with the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras. It goes beyond the early Buddhist position of anātman (not-self), stating that even dharmas, the momentary building blocks of experiential reality, have no ontological existence in their own right. The doctrine of emptiness thus emphasizes the relational aspect of existence, a presumably proper understanding of the early Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination (pratītya-samutpāda). In this way, emptiness becomes an epistemological tool used to “unfreeze” the fixed notions of our minds. It is important to understand that śūnyatā, utilized in this fashion, is not an ontological state, and that even emptiness is empty. However, it would be incorrect to surmise that the negative terminology associated with the concept is indicative of a subtle nihilism in Mahāyāna. To argue that all

dharmas are empty does not mean that they do not exist, but rather identifies them as appearances which should not be perceived as objects of grasping. Because the doctrine of emptiness is critical to all Mahāyāna schools of Buddhism, it becomes of paramount importance, not only to the Mādhyamika and Yogācāra schools of Buddhism in India (including all of their respective subdivisions), but to all the Mahāyāna schools across the geographic landscape, ancient and modern. Sūnyatā also plays a critical role in all the Vājayāna schools as well. Consequently, it is probably not unreasonable to cite this doctrine as the single most important Mahāyāna innovation.

Bodhisattva

The bodhisattva is literally an “enlightenment being,” one who has postponed personal salvation in favor of a compassionate effort to save all sentient beings. In early Buddhism the term bodhisattva (or bodhisatta in Pāli) was used to identify Siddhārtha Gautama, the historical Buddha, and it was assumed that only future historical Buddhas merited this designation prior to their attainment of Buddhahood. In Mahāyāna, this term was given a radical, new interpretation, and used as a designation for anyone aspiring to complete, perfect enlightenment . . . to Buddhahood. Motivated by extreme compassion (karuṇā), and tempered by the perfection of wisdom (prajñā), the bodhisattva first completes three basic prerequisites that include generating the thought of enlightenment (bodhicitta), undertaking a formal vow to gain complete, perfect enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings (prañidhāna), and receiving a prediction with regard to future attainment (vyākaraṇa). Then, a path known as the bodhisattva path, and including ten stages (bhūmis), is traversed. This path requires rejection of the

personal attainment of nirvana, deliberate rebirth in the cycle of saṃsāra, and a sharing of all merit accrued with other sentient beings. In Mahāyāna a number of Celestial Bodhisattvas became extremely important, most notably Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, Mahāsthāmaprāpta, and Samantabhadra. They served as ideal models for their earthly counterparts by exhibiting extreme compassion and wisdom. The entire Mahāyāna notion of the bodhisattva was a clear antithesis to the ideal type in early Buddhism, the arhant, whose effort was found by Mahāyānists to be self-centered and ego-based. An enormous literature developed focusing on the bodhisattva and the bodhisattva path, including such famous texts as the Bodhisattvabhūmi Sūtra, Daśabhūmika Sūtra, and others. Sometimes, the path of the bodhisattva is called the “Vehicle of the bodhisattva” or Bodhisattva-yāna. It is another means of referring to the Mahāyāna or so-called “Greater Vehicle” school of Buddhism. Mahāyāna of course coined a pejorative phrase to describe the entirety of early Buddhism: “Hīnayāna” or “Lesser Vehicle.” Within this Hīnayāna appellation, however, Mahāyāna identified two individual paths: (1) the Vehicle of the Śrāvaka, or Śrāvaka-yāna, literally “hearers,” the immediate disciples of the Buddha (and their spiritual descendants), and (2) the Vehicle of the Pratyeka-buddhas, or Pratyeka-buddha-yāna, those who attained enlightenment on their own and who did not embark on a teaching career. In light of the above, it was only logical to also refer to the Mahāyāna path as the Bodhisattva-yāna, the “Vehicle of the bodhisattvas.”

Pāramitā

This is a Sanskrit technical term usually rendered as “perfection” and applied to a series of practices thought to be essential for spiritual progress. The

term pāramitā is derived from the Sanskrit prefix pāram which generally denotes the other side of something, that is, beyond, and the past participle of a verb meaning “to go.” Thus, pāramitā means “going to the other side” or “having gone beyond,” and by application “perfection.” Although the term appears in the literature of various Hīnayāna sects, and is especially important to the Sarvāstivādins, it is in Mahāyāna that the notion of perfections becomes a critical component of Buddhist philosophy and practice. The concept appears early in the Prajñāpāramitā literature, emphasizing six pāramitās: (1) dāna (giving), (2) śīla (morality), (3) kṣānti (patience), (4) vīrya (vigor), (5) dhyāna (meditation), and (6) prajñā (wisdom). And of course the intended ideal emerges: wisdom can be perfected by all beings if certain religious principles are understood and rigorous religious practices are observed. The practices involve traversing the bodhisattva path as opposed to the way of the arhant in earlier Buddhism. Eventually, four additional perfections were added: (7) upāya (skill-in-means), (8) prañidhāna (vow), (9) bala (power), and (10) jñāna (knowledge). These ten pāramitās are correlated with the ten stages of the bodhisattva path, each perfection corresponding to a particular stage (bhūmi). As a result, a highly ambitious path is outlined which is a guideline for a distinctly Mahāyāna Buddhist practice.

Karuṇā

Karuṇā is a Sanskrit technical term meaning “compassion,” and is important in all Buddhist traditions. Considered to be one of the chief attributes of a Buddha, it is among the prime motivating factors in Siddhārtha Gautama’s pursuit of enlightenment. In the Hīnayāna sects it finds its highest expression as a member of the fourfold brahmavihāras or “divine abodes.” In the brahmavihāras it functions

in consonance with love (maitrī), sympathetic joy (muditā), and equanimity (upekṣā) as an expression of the highest ethical standard of pursuit. In Mahāyāna it achieves its fullest development as one of the driving forces in the bodhisattva’s religious practice. It is generally linked with wisdom (prajñā) in describing the two chief descriptive attributes of the bodhisattva. Karuṇā is said to be embodied in the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, who receives much attention in the Chinese and Japanese traditions (as Guanyin and Kwannon, respectively). Compassion is extremely important as the basis of the Pure Land tradition as well.

Upāya

Upāya is a Sanskrit technical term literally meaning “skillful means” or “skill-in-means.” Although the term is not unheard of in early Buddhism, it is almost always applied to the Mahāyāna tradition, where it is counted as one of the pāramitās or “perfections.” Identified as the seventh perfection, it follows attainment of the perfection of wisdom (prajñā). Since one of the critical aspects of Mahāyāna teaching is that bodhisattvas must have compassion (karuṇā) for all sentient beings, it is logical for Mahāyāna adepts, at a certain stage of development, to know precisely how to apply the wisdom they have experienced. Upāya provides that aspect of the teaching. Upāya enables the individual who is teaching to find precisely the method of instruction that is appropriate for the person being instructed. Whether a Dharma discourse or shout, meditation instruction or a slap,

upāya is the skillful means by which a genuine teacher demonstrates the truth of enlightenment.

Celestial Buddhas And Bodhisattvas

Many celestial Buddhas permeate the pantheon of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Foremost among them is **Amitābha**, the Buddha of “Unlimited Light,” said to rule over the Western Paradise of Sukhāvātī. Known in China as Amituo and in Japan as Amida (from the short Sanskrit form Amita), this Celestial Buddha is the focus of three major texts of Pure Land Buddhism: the (1) Larger Sukhāvātyūha Sūtra, (2) Smaller Sukhāvātyūha Sūtra, and (3) Amitāyurdhyāna Sūtra. The legend surrounding Amitābha develops from the story of a monk named Dharmākara who, eons previously, aspired to Buddhahood and made forty-eight vows, each concerning the nature of existence whence he becomes a Buddha. Dharmākara, after countless lifetimes of practice, becomes the Buddha Amitābha. Amitābha is generally conceived of in two ways: (1) as an object of meditation and (2) as the embodiment of compassion. As ruler of the Pure Land of Sukhāvātī, he welcomes all who earnestly wish to be reborn there, requiring only a strong commitment of faith in Amitābha’s vows. This faith is expressed by the formula (in Sanskrit): *Namo Amitābhāya Buddhāya*, “Homage to Amitābha Buddha.” Known in China as the Nianfo (Nanmo Amitufo) and in Japan as the Nembutsu (Namu Amida Butsu), its repetition was a necessary ingredient for rebirth in the Pure Land. In fact, Dharmākara’s eighteenth vow, often referred to as the most important of all vows, states quite directly that anyone who desires rebirth in the Pure Land need only recite his name or think of this desire ten times, in order to actualize their ambition. Because this tradition relies on faith rather than meditation, it is sometimes referred to as the

“easy way” (tariki in Japanese). Amitābha sometimes appears with the bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta on his left and right, respectively. He also appears with Bhaiṣajyaguru Buddha, another of the Celestial Buddhas. An alternate name for Amitābha is sometimes employed: *Amitāyus*, literally “Unlimited Life.”

Another famous celestial Buddha is Akṣobhya, earliest of the non-historical celestial Buddhas. His name literally means “immovable,” and he is said (in the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūtra*) to reign over the Eastern Paradise known as Abhirati. His name seems to be first mentioned in the *Perfection of Wisdom (Prajñāpāramitā)* literature, but eventually finds citations in a wide variety of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna texts. His most usual color is dark blue, but occasionally golden colored. He usually holds a vajra or diamond scepter in his right hand, while making the earth-touching gesture (*bhūmisparśa-mudrā*) with his left. He is often seated on a blue elephant. Legend reports that Akṣobhya, while still a bodhisattva, vowed never to manifest anger toward any being, and as a result of his vow, came to rule over the paradise of Abhirati. It is suggested that other practitioners who follow his example will obtain rebirth in Abhirati. While he is prominent in Nepal and Tibet, Akṣobhya is less popular in China and Japan.

Vairocana, yet another celestial Buddha literally means “Shining Out.” Although he did not become popular until around the seventh century C.E., in Tantric Buddhism he is located at the center of the cosmic maṇḍala, surrounded by the other four Celestial Buddhas. His symbol is often represented as the Dharmacakra or “Wheel of Teaching,” and is sometimes shown making the “supreme wisdom” mudrā in which the right index finger is held by the fingers of the left hand. His is regularly associated with the Celestial bo-

dhisattva Samantabhadra. Some traditions identify him with the earthly Buddha Krakucchanda, but he is also noted, in the Chinese scholastic tradition, to be the dharmakāya of Śākyamuni Buddha. Vairocana is regarded in some traditions to be the Ādi-Buddha or primordial Buddha. In the iconography, he is depicted as white in color

Perhaps the foremost Celestial Bodhisattva is Mañjuśrī. A prominent bodhisattva whose name means “Sweet Glory,” and who is especially important in a number of Mahāyāna sūtras. Although present in the Lotus Sūtra, he is a primary interlocutor in the Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūtra where he, of all the bodhisattvas mentioned, comes closest to the brilliance and understanding manifested by Vimalakīrti. A tenth stage bodhisattva, he is often shown iconographically holding a lotus which supports a Prajñāpāramitā text and a sword, symbolizing the wisdom he manifests in aiding sentient beings. Mañjuśrī is said to appear to people in dreams, and those worshipping him are protected by his power. He is also sometimes referred to as Mañjuḥṣa, (“Sweet Voiced”). In Tibetan Buddhism a number of the most prominent figures are considered incarnations of Mañjuśrī.

Maitreya is the name of the future Buddha, literally translated as “Benevolent One.” Although the notion is present in virtually all the Hīnayāna schools, where they view Maitreya as a bodhisattva progressing toward Buddhahood, the notion reaches its apex in Mahāyāna, where Maitreya is depicted as a virtual cult image. He is mentioned in a wide variety of Mahāyāna sūtras, and also comes to play a major role in Vajrayāna Buddhism where his heaven is said to represent a Pure Land. He is represented by a detailed and explicit iconography, and is identified as one of the five earthly Buddhas.

Finally, Avalokiteśvara is “The Lord Who Looks Down,” one of the most famous and important of

the Celestial Bodhisattvas in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Initially, Avalokiteśvara is a minor figure in such texts as the Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūtra and Lotus Sūtra. His first significant role is in the Pure Land Sūtras where he and Mahāsthāmaprāpta serve as the chief attendants to Amitābha Buddha. Presumably, Avalokiteśvara has purified himself for countless ages, and accordingly, is the embodiment of compassion (karuṇā) which, along with wisdom (prajñā), are the chief attributes expressive of Buddhahood. He aids all people who call upon him in need, helping them with numerous arms of compassion. In art, Avalokiteśvara is represented in a variety of ways, often as a layman with eleven heads, as many as a thousand arms, and a crown with an image of Amitābha in it. He sometimes holds a blue lotus flower in his hand. In China and Japan, Avalokiteśvara was transformed into a female image, known as Guanyin and Kwannon, respectively. In Tibet, he was revered as a patron of the land, known as Chenrezi (sPyan-ras-gzigs).

Mahāyāna Schools: [Mādhyamika](#)

Mādhyamika is an Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist school founded by Nāgārjuna, and emphasizing the emptiness (śūnyatā) of all components of experiential reality (dharms) as its major doctrine. One of the most important schools of Buddhism across the face of the globe, it had its beginnings in the writings of Nāgārjuna, a second or third century C.E. philosopher, famous for his Prajñāpāramitā-inspired logical discourses. The title of the school essentially means “Middle Way,” and it uses as its primary text the Mūlamādhyamika-kārikās of Nāgārjuna, a treatise that expounds in great detail about the genuine meaning of dependent origination (pratītya samutpāda) and emptiness (śūnyatā). Although subscribing to the merits of the bodhisattva path, and the efficacy of Mahāyāna