

# Today's Lecture

- The rise of Mahayana Buddhism
- The *Prajnaparamita* Tradition

# The rise of the Mahayana Traditions

- Mahayana Buddhism encompasses Northern Buddhism (i.e. the dominant forms of Buddhism found in Tibet and Mongolia) and East Asian Buddhism (i.e. the dominant forms of Buddhism found in China, Korea and Japan) (*Asian Philosophies*, pp.139-40, 145-46).
- The *so-called*, and I **emphasize** so-called, Hinayana Traditions encompass Southern Buddhism (i.e. the dominant forms of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia) (*Asian Philosophies*, p.346). This form of Buddhism is, more often than not, referred to as Theravada Buddhism ('Theravada' literally means the 'teachings of the Elders [*Thera*']')
- Theravada Buddhist teachings would *include* what we have covered thus far (see *Asian Philosophies*, pp.141-42).

# The rise of the Mahayana Traditions

- The term '*Mahayana*' literally means 'the Great(er) Vehicle', while the term '*Hinayana*' literally means 'the Lesser Vehicle'.
- No Southern, or Theravadin, Buddhist would call their form of Buddhism '*Hinayana*'. This term has **intentionally** negative overtones, and was introduced as a negative epithet by Mahayana Buddhists.
- You will sometimes hear reference to the Vajrayana (or 'Diamond Vehicle'), which is a term used to designate Northern Buddhism, but it really is an expression, or subset, of Mahayana Buddhism.

# The rise of the Mahayana Traditions

- The rise of the Mahayana is dated anywhere between 200 B.C.E. and 100 C.E. (*Asian Philosophies*, p.139).
- Importantly, and interestingly, this division within the Buddhist community was not initially divisive.
- ‘Hinayana’ and Mahayana monks and nuns lived together in the same monasteries for the initial centuries of Mahayana Buddhism’s development (*Asian Philosophies*, p.139).
- We can only assume that such a living arrangement facilitated cross-fertilization among the emerging traditions.

# The rise of the Mahayana Traditions

- The Mahayana Traditions do not, *on the whole*, reject the teachings contained in the early scriptural texts of Buddhism.
- This means that, *on the whole*, the Mahayana Traditions accept the teachings we have covered so far, even though some within Mahayana Buddhism would understand the emphasis to be placed on these teachings differently than how Southern Buddhists would understand it (*Asian Philosophies*, p.140).

# The rise of the Mahayana Traditions

- We can distinguish Mahayana from ‘Hinayana’ Buddhism on, *AT LEAST*, five ‘fronts’ (see your *Asian Philosophies*, pp.140-42):
- (1) The **texts** taken to be authoritative,
- (2) their **soteriological ideal** (or **spiritual Path** of the devote Buddhist),
- (3) their **cosmology**,
- (4) their emphasis on **monastic life**,
- and (5) their view of **women**.
- I’ll leave the fifth ‘front’, their view of women, until we cover women and Buddhism.

# The rise of the Mahayana Traditions

- **(1) The texts taken to be authoritative:** In addition to the early texts, what is called the *tipitaka* (or ‘three baskets’) (i.e. the sutras [*Sutta Pitika*], the monastic rules [*Vinaya Pitika*] and the ‘higher’ *Dharma* [*Abhidharma Pitika*]), texts began to appear that were not a part of the early textual tradition. These texts, taken by the Mahayana to be the ‘word of the Buddha’ (thus giving them legitimacy), are believed (by the Mahayana) to be teachings that the Buddha revealed during his earthly ministry to more *advanced* practitioners, or spiritual beings (i.e. various *devas* or Bodhisattvas) (*Asian Philosophies*, p.141).

# The rise of the Mahayana Traditions

- Note: Not all Mahayana texts are recognized as equally authoritative within Mahayana Buddhism. Some Mahayana Traditions will take some to be authoritative, but not others.
- The *Heart* and *Diamond Sutras* are classic, and universally recognized, scriptural texts within Mahayana Buddhism (*Asian Philosophies*, p.193).



# The rise of the Mahayana Traditions

- **(2) Their soteriological ideal (or ideal of spiritual perfection):** (Remember that soteriology is a theory or account of ‘salvation’ or deliverance or liberation.) For the early, and contemporary Theravadin, Buddhist the soteriological ideal is that of the *arhat*, or *arahant*. This is the individual who achieves *nirvana* through following the Eightfold Path (as explained in the early scriptures). This person, and those individuals who pursue this Path (of Purification), are often referred to as *shravakas*, or ‘voice-hearers’ (see your *Buddhist Scriptures*, p.209), (of the Buddha) (*Asian Philosophies*, p.141).

# The rise of the Mahayana Traditions

- The ‘Hinayana Path’, or ‘Hinayana’ soteriological ideal, is taken by the Mahayana to be a lesser one when compared with the Path that they pursue, or the ideal they proffer. The Mahayana soteriological ideal is that of the Bodhisattva. Indeed, Mahayana Buddhism is sometimes referred to as the Way/Path of the Bodhisattva. A Bodhisattva is an enlightened (*bodhi*) being (*sattva*) who chooses to remain, or reappear, in samsaric existence in order to help others escape *duhkha* (i.e. achieve *moksha*) and, if they should so choose, achieve *Supreme Enlightenment* (*Asian Philosophies*, pp.141-42).

## The rise of the Mahayana Traditions

- As we will see, instead of rejecting the Eightfold Path followed by the ‘Hinayana’, Mahayana Buddhists reformulate this Path as six ‘perfections’ (or *paramitas*). Though the *paramitas* encompass what is included under the Eightfold Path, the Mahayana Path is explicitly for the benefit of all beings trapped in *samsara*, rather than primarily for the individual practitioner (*Asian Philosophies*, pp.141-42).
- The Supreme Enlightenment of Mahayana Buddhism is the enlightenment associated with Buddhahood. Unlike ‘Hinayana’ Buddhists, Mahayana Buddhists see the eventual soteriological goal to be becoming a Buddha in their own right (if you like to see this discussed in a little more detail from a Mahayana perspective, go to your *Buddhist Scriptures*, pp.197-211).

## The rise of the Mahayana Traditions

- (3) As you already know by this point, within early Buddhist cosmology you find references to beings that belong to the six realms of samsaric existence (*Asian Philosophies*, p.169). Within Mahayana cosmology you will also find references to beings who have an existence *outside* of samsaric existence (though they can manifest themselves within the realms of samsaric existence). You will find references to cosmic Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who live in various Buddha lands, or *Pure Lands* (*Asian Philosophies*, p.142 [see also your *Buddhist Scriptures*, p.222]).
- A **significant departure** from early Buddhism, and even Theravada Buddhism, is the view that Buddhas continue to exist after achieving *parinirvana*.

# The rise of the Mahayana Traditions

- The celestial beings of Mahayana Buddhism are believed to hold powers that can benefit beings trapped in samsaric existence (*Asian Philosophies*, p.142).
- Indeed, under Mahayana Buddhism, the characteristics of a Buddha are magnified beyond what was attributed to Gautama Buddha in the early texts (i.e. the *tipitika*). So a Buddha, for Mahayana Buddhists, is perfectly omniscient, has three levels of existence or being, and can manifest anywhere and in multiple places at once.
- Many Mahayana Buddhists would, however, still believe that you, and only you, can, in the end, liberate yourself from *samsara*. (Indeed, this is the ‘official’ teaching in Mahayana Buddhism.)

# The rise of the Mahayana Traditions

- **(4) Their emphasis on monastic life:** Within early Buddhism and Southern Buddhism you have a not insignificant emphasis on entering the monastic life if you are to succeed in achieving enlightenment or *moskha*. This is largely predicated on the view that the life most conducive to enlightenment (i.e. with the least distractions, temptations and hindrances) is the monastic life (*Asian Philosophies*, p.141).

# The rise of the Mahayana Traditions

- *Though you find talk of householders achieving enlightenment in the Theravada Tradition, the Mahayana Traditions are much more willing to think that you can achieve enlightenment if you live in the ‘mundane world’ (Asian Philosophies, p.141).*
- Now I know that Koller claims (on page 141) that, according to the early Buddhist Tradition, you can’t achieve enlightenment as a householder, but he is wrong on this point.
- Indeed, *according to the early Buddhist Tradition, IF you achieve enlightenment as a householder AND do not enter the monastic order, THEN you die that very same day.*
- Again, I’ll leave (5) for later.

# The *Prajnaparamita* Tradition: The *Diamond and Heart Sutras*

- The *Prajnaparamita* Tradition gets its name from its emphasis on the ‘Perfection of Wisdom’, a term used to designate Supreme Enlightenment within the Way of the Bodhisattva (*Asian Philosophies*, p.195).
- The cultivation of this wisdom is one of the six perfections that marks the Way of the Bodhisattva (see page 142 of your *Asian Philosophies*). More on this shortly.



# The *Prajnaparamita* Tradition: The *Diamond* and *Heart Sutras*

- **Note Koller's instructions on how to read these *sutras*:** the authors move from declaration through negation to a re-declaration so as to emphasize the departure of enlightened wisdom from conventional understanding (or the, now familiar, distinction between ultimate and conventional truth).
- Both *sutras emphatically* deny that our conceptual, or linguistic, frameworks correspond (in any significant sense) to Reality.
- Though our conceptual, or linguistic, frameworks *can be useful* in our day to day affairs, they are ultimately empty of any Reality (and not knowing this causes *duhkha*) (*Asian Philosophies*, pp.195-96).