The Mahāyāna Tradition and the Bodhisattva Ideal

Introduction to Buddhism (Spring 09)
Lecture 5
Prof. Mario Poceski
Origins of the Mahayana Tradition

- Uncertainties about the historical origins of the Mahayana (Great Vehicle) movement and the provenance of its scriptures
- Gradual emergence of Mahayana perspectives and ideas few centuries after the Buddha’s passing away
- Diverse scholarly theories about the origins of Mahayana
Theory of Mahasanghika Origins

- Traditional account about a schism between Sthavira-vada (School of the Elders) and Mahasanghika (Great Assembly) after the second Buddhist council

- Mahasanghika perspectives
  - Doctrine of the “Supramundane Buddha”
  - Exaltation of the Buddha and lowering the status of the Arhats

- Lack of clear historical links between the Mahasanghika and Mahayana traditions
Theory of Lay Origins

- Depiction of early Mahayana as a lay reaction against monastic Buddhism
- Argument about the importance of stupa worship
- Glossing over ample evidence of the leading roles played by monks in the growth of Mahayana
- Influence of the concerns and agendas of modern Japanese Buddhism on the hypothesis of lay origins
Evolution of Buddhist Doctrine and Practice

- Organic development of the Mahayana tradition from beliefs, ideas, and attitudes that were present in early Buddhism
- Leading roles played by diverse groups of monks that developed new conceptions of Buddhist spirituality
- Reinterpreting of existing doctrinal frameworks and their enriching by adding new elements and perspectives
Characteristics of Early Mahayana

- Promotion of the Bodhisattva ideal
- Buddhahood as universal religious goal
- Construction of new cosmology and buddhology
- Development of a new doctrinal outlook, centered on the doctrine of emptiness
- Creation of a new canon
- Assertion of Mahayana’s superiority over the “Hinayana” (Small Vehicle) traditions
Mahayana Scriptures

- Later historical origin
- Uncertain provenance and authorship
- Use of Sanskrit as canonical language
- Subsequent translations into other languages, such as Chinese and Tibetan
- Continued production of new scriptures over an extended period
Origin of the Mahayana Scriptures

- Traditional understanding of the Mahayana scriptures as records of the Buddha’s advanced teachings
- The sutras as inspired utterances of the Buddha communicated by means of supernatural powers and meditative trances
- Stories about the recovery of teachings hidden in the world of nagas by great bodhisattvas (such as Nagarjuna)
Narrative Changes in Mahayana Literature

- New literary styles
- Different main protagonists
  - Prominent roles played by celestial bodhisattvas
- Expanded (or contracted) length
- Innovative dramatic settings & audiences
  - Depiction of otherworldly realms
  - Copious insertion of mythopoeic elements
  - Infusion of symbolism
- Novel doctrinal perspectives
Attitudes Towards the Early Canon

- Claims about the superiority of Mahayana scriptures over those of Hinayana
- Acceptance of the early scriptures as authentic, albeit provisional, teachings of the Buddha
Common Institutional Frameworks

- Adherence to the same Vinayas by both Mahayana and Hinayana monks, who sometimes shared same monasteries
- Continued flourishing of some of the older Buddhist schools long after the emergence of Mahayana
- Peaceful co-existence between the two groups
Mahayana Criticisms of the Arhat

- Critiques of the Arhats as being selfish
  - They seek individual Nirvana
  - They do not help others
- The Nirvana of an Arhat is said to be inferior to that of a Buddha
- *Lotus Sutra*’s idea that Arhatship is an intermediate stage, rather than a final goal
The Bodhisattva Path

- **Bodhi-citta**: aspiration to realize Buddhahood and save all beings, which marks the beginning of the bodhisattva path

- Cultivation of **wisdom and compassion** by means of the “perfections” that constitute the bodhisattva path
Bodhisattva Perfections

Six Perfections
- Generosity
- Morality
- Patience
- Vigor
- Meditation
- Wisdom

Ten Perfections (the previous six plus the following)
- Skillful means
- Transfer of merit
- Power
- Knowledge
Stages of the Bodhisattva Path

- Ten faiths
- Ten abodes
- Ten practices
- Ten dedications
- Ten stages
- Equal enlightenment
- Sublime enlightenment
The Buddha’s Awakening

At that time, the World-Honored One, seated on his seat, realized the most perfect knowledge of all dharmas. His wisdom entered the three times, equal in every respect. His body filled all worlds. His voice harmonized with all lands in the ten directions. Like space which contains the multitude of forms, he did not discriminate among all objects. Also, like space which pervades everywhere, he equally entered all lands. His body eternally sat at all sites of enlightenment. Amidst the congregations of Bodhisattvas his sublime light was effulgent like the arising of the sun disk, illuminating the world. The great ocean of his myriad blessings cultivated over the three times was already completely pure; yet he constantly appeared to be born in all Buddha-lands.
The Buddha’s Awakening (cont)

His limitless body and his perfect light pervaded the whole dharmadhātu, equally, without distinction. He expounded all dharmas, like spreading out big clouds. The tip of each of his hairs could contain all worlds without obstruction, each displaying boundless preternatural powers, edifying and civilizing all sentient beings. His body pervaded the ten directions, and yet it had no coming or going. His wisdom comprehended all forms and realized the emptiness and quiescence of all dharmas. Among the miraculous acts of all Buddhas of the three times, there was none that was not completely seen in [his] light. The adornments of all Buddha-lands over inconceivable kalpas he caused all to be manifest.

Huayan (Avatamsaka) Scripture
Young Sudhana’s Journey to Buddhahood
Borobudur (Java):
The Bodhisattva Path to Perfection Set in Stone
Images and Conceptions of the Bodhisattvas

- Paradigmatic exemplars of religious perfection (whose acts should be emulated by Mahayana practitioners)
- Celestial beings (that are objects of religious devotion and focus of cultic practices)
- Embodiments of key spiritual qualities
  - Guanyin/Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion
  - Mañjuśri, the bodhisattva of wisdom
Guanyin (Avalokiteśvara, Kannon), Bodhisattva of Compassion
Mañjuśri, Bodhisattva of Wisdom
Maitreya, the Future Buddha