### Understanding Buddhist Diversity

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Have you ever wondered: Why are there so many Buddhist denominations or sects? In ancient times in China this question arose in response to the diverse and contradictory Buddhist teachings that flowed into China from India and Central Asia. If the Buddha (6th century BCE) had one enlightenment, why did his reported teachings and practice differ? What was the truth of Buddhism?

Theravada Buddhism, the Way of the Elders, became the major religious tradition in South and Southeast Asia. The Elders refers to the teachers who received the teachings directly from the Buddha, transmitting them to later disciples. In the period prior to the famous Buddhist King Asoka (3rd.c. BCE) there were as many as eighteen to twenty groups located in various regions of India, from which the Theravada stream is a major survivor. Another important group was the Mahasanghikas or Great Sangha (Congregation). They are considered the basis for the later development of the Mahayana tradition which is now largely in North and East Asia, and Tibet.

The first stage in the development of the distinctions used to categorize and interpret differences among Buddhists were the terms Hinayana and Mahayana.

Hinayana was used by Mahayanists to criticize and denigrate earlier expressions of Buddhism. It means small, narrow vehicle, referring to the fact that they practiced for their own, personal enlightenment, following the Buddha’s example of pursuing enlightenment and freedom from the stream of births and deaths. Mahayana meant the large, spacious vehicle designed to carry all beings to enlightenment. It had a more inclusive perspective whereby the Bodhisattva, Buddha-to-be, works to save all beings deferring his own enlightenment. The contrast is between the Arhat, the worthy one who has done all to save himself, and the Bodhisattva, one destined for Buddhahood who pledges to saves all others, including himself.

In later times, in the countries where Theravada Buddhism is dominant, the style and meaning of Buddhism has changed little over the centuries. In each region there are differences resulting from history and culture, but the practice and doctrine are the same. With Mahayana Buddhism, differences in style and teachings developed into a great diversity. As Buddhism adapted to various cultures and changing environments from about the second century, BCE new insights and interpretations emerged, influenced by a resurgent Hinduism and Indian philosophy.

Early on it was said that Buddha taught 84,000 teachings, reflecting the emerging wide diversity. The numerous teachings were gradually transmitted and translated into Chinese in various Sutras, purported to be the words of Buddha. Presently the complete, modern collection of texts comprises eighty-five volumes with 5320 writings of various types, sutras, commentaries and indexes from China and Japan. It is a massive body of literature.

Chinese Buddhists attempted to unify the Buddhist teachings found in the Sutras which, as far as they knew at the time, were the true words of the Buddha and compiled by his disciples. Therefore, they all must have a place and meaning within the totality of his teaching. Their understanding was also supported by the Mahayana educational concept of Upaya or tactful device.

Mahayanists maintained that Buddha’s teaching ranged from elementary to complex, and taught according to the level of understanding of the listener. Scholars tried to sort out the superficial or elementary teaching from the more essential and profound. In a sense, they engaged in a search for truth in Buddhist teaching. It was an intellectual as well as spiritual effort. The volume by the late Bruno Petzold: The Classification of Buddhism presents the most detailed survey of the modes of classifying and organizing Buddhist teaching in China and Japan (published in 1995 by Otto Harrassowitz Verlag [Publisher].)

Making category distinctions arose very early as we see with the terms Hinayana and Mahayana. The initial interest was in clarifying the path to enlightenment, and employing the principal of Upaya in order to clarify the progress towards enlightenment, correlated to the disciple’s level of spiritual development. Consequently, say, Bodhisattvas and spiritually developed monks were close to realizing the highest truth through rigorous discipline and visualization practice or meditation, while ordinary lay people were encouraged in their devotion through Upaya, tactful devices which gave hope and drew people to strive for higher levels in future lives.

While the distinction of transcendental truth and conventional truth indicated two aspects of reality, eventually the distinctions were elaborated into True, Provisional, False and Sudden and Gradual. Also the purpose of the classification changed from charting the path to enlightenment to proving the superiority of one’s sect. The True corresponds to the absolute dimension, while also indicating the highest truth of the particular sect and the Buddhist texts representing it. The Provisional dimension is the conventional and temporary stage within Buddhism on the way to truth. This term refers to all other Buddhist teachings and texts, placing them on an inferior level. The false refers to teachings apart or outside Buddhism.

In addition the terms complete, sudden and gradual became important in describing the nature or virtue of the highest teaching and subsidiary teachings. The realm of the absolute was experienced suddenly and totally. Wisdom cannot be divided. Hence gradual teaching, where one proceeds to enlightenment incrementally and by stages, marks a lower, inferior path to enlightenment. Each sect of Mahayana Buddhism had to justify itself by constructing a system of classification of doctrines. Thereby, they established their position in Buddhism, and unified it by accounting for the different modes of teaching which the Buddha taught during his life.

In time the issue of the correct path to enlightenment transformed to the question which school or sect represented the highest truth and was most appropriate for the people. The terms and principles used in sectarian rivalry became more intensified in Japan due to cultural, social and political conditions.

Among the major forms of critical classification of teaching, the Kegon (Avatamsaka) school, the Tendai sect, and Honen’s (1133-1212) Pure Land sect, as well as a version set forth by Shinran (1173-1263) are most exemplary. The Kegon taught there were five divisions in Buddhism. Their interpretation begins with the fact that the Avatamsaka Sutra (Kegon) was first proclaimed by the Buddha, but it was so profound, no one understood it. Consequently, Buddha arranged his teachings to accommodate their understanding. Initially, there was Hinayana teaching aimed at dispelling the misunderstanding on the nature of the self. Early Buddhism taught there was no permanent, underlying self or the doctrine of non-soul with Nirvana being total extinction. The second, early Mahayana, taught relative emptiness of the self/phenomena and the elements making up the world. This level distinguishes emptiness and things as though one might strip away the phenomena and leave emptiness. The third level is True Mahayana which represents the identity of phenomena-things and the principle of emptiness. Things as they are, are empty, having no self-existence. The fourth level is Sudden teaching which is experience of truth directly, beyond language. **The fifth level is the Complete teaching or the total mutual interrelationship of all phenomena where every individual rock or grass contains and represents the whole. It gave rise to the phrase: The one is All and the All is One. It is a vast vision of the ultimate spirituality of the cosmos and self, expressing One Reality. When contemporary Buddhists talk of Oneness, this is the underlying ideal.**

The Tendai tradition initiated by Chih-I (538-597) in China classified teachings in a system of five periods and eight teachings. Though this teaching was known in the Nara period (710-794), it was later also transmitted to Japan by Saicho (767-822) and established on Mount Hiei where it became a powerful and influential institution in medieval Japan.

According to Tendai, Gautama Buddha’s life is divided into five periods. Like the Kegon school, Tendai also taught that the Avatamsaka Sutra was given first, but the disciples were uncomprehending. Hence, the Buddha taught the Hinayana teaching. As students progressed, in understanding, he then gave early Mahayana teaching and later the teaching of emptiness in the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras. In the fifth and final stage, Buddha taught the Lotus Sutra and the Nirvana Sutra. The various Sutras and teachings in Mahayana Buddhism are ranked by putting them in chronological order, leading to the superiority of the Lotus Sutra. In addition, teachings were arranged by method and nature of teaching with the Sudden and Complete teachings as superior.

With the development of the popular Pure Land teaching, a variety of distinctions emerged which justified the method of salvation through recitation of the name of Amida Buddha, or Nembutsu, which meant originally thinking on the Buddha. Initially the teacher Nagarjuna described the easy and difficult paths in Buddhism. With T’an-luan in China there appeared the concept of self- and Other-power. Tao-ch’o made the fundamental distinction Pure Land gate and Saintly or Holy path. Shan-tao proposed True practice (practices focused on Amida Buddha) and Diverse practices. Amida Buddha was the chief object of practice, excluding other Buddhas. He also distinguished the Correct practice from Subsidiary or Supporting practices. Recitation of Nembutsu (Amida Buddha’s Name) was elevated over other practices such as worship, offerings, chanting scriptures.

The Pure Land gate was justified by the theory of history called Mappo (Age of Disappearance of the Teaching). According to this theory, the first 500 years after the Buddha was the period of True Teaching where devotees followed the teaching, practiced and attained realization. The second period of 500-1000 years is Semblance Teaching where there was teaching and practice, but no realization. In the final period, purportedly beginning in 1052 in Japan and lasting ten thousand years, there is only teaching and no practice or realization. This is the age of Honen, Shinran and Ippen who established major Pure Land movements.

Honen established his justification for an independent sect of Pure Land by connecting the terms from the tradition and focusing on the three Pure Land Sutras as central. In this way he showed that in the last age, only the Pure Land path assured enlightenment.

Finally, Shinran followed Mahayana and Honen in employing terms True and Provisional, Sudden and Complete. However, he stressed absolute Other-Power, creating his own distinctive classification of teachings, known as Two Pairs and Four Levels. The terms are Sudden, Crosswise (Other-Power), Vertical (self-power) and Gradual. Combined in pairs, they represent various styles of Buddhist teaching. The absolute Other-power teaching combines Sudden-Transcendence which is Shin Buddhism; Sudden-Gradual is The Pure Land Sects; Vertical-Transcendence is Zen, Shingon and Tendai, all self-power in Shinran’s view; and Vertical-Gradual represents the Theravada path.

These examples of efforts to organize and evaluate the diverse body of Buddhist teachings testify to the intellectual, as well as spiritual, abilities of the ancient teachers. Their keenness of mind should inspire modern followers to clarify their faith, not only in a diverse Buddhist world, but our complex interfaith world.