

CHAPTER TWO

THERAVADA AND MAHAYANA BUDDHISTS

Westerners who take the trouble to find out about Buddhism can become acquainted with most, if not all, of its varieties. It is therefore possible as an outsider to become more familiar with the spectrum of Buddhist traditions than many 'insiders'. Many lay Buddhists in, let us say, Burma, will be vaguely aware that their tradition of Buddhism is not the only one, but, if they were asked to explain the differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, would be quite unable to do so. This is not to discredit Buddhists: after all, how many members of the Church of Scotland could give an account of Greek Orthodoxy — or vice versa? In this chapter we shall look at the main differences between the two main forms of Buddhism — Theravada and Mahayana — and how this split arose.

Religion is a controversial subject, and every religion has to devise a method for dealing with divisions which arise. Buddhism's attitude to disagreements is interesting. As we saw, the Buddha never insisted that enquirers should agree with his teaching. Only if their experience confirmed what he taught, they should follow him. If it did not, then they should follow what their experience dictated.

Buddhists sometimes actively discourage seekers from converting to Buddhism, if it seems that they would fare better by following some other path. Since one has many lives to live and not just one, it is possible that someone might make more spiritual progress through, say, Christianity than through Buddhism; perhaps in some future existence that person will be drawn towards Buddhism and eventually obtain enlightenment. The Buddhist path is not to be hurried.

There is also no pressure for all Buddhists to agree with one another. Indeed, splits have never been caused in Buddhism because monks have disagreed on points of doctrine: no-one can be expelled from the Sangha for holding unorthodox beliefs. What cannot exist in harmony, however, are different groups of monks who engage in conflicting religious practices. This disrupts monastic life, and disrupting the Sangha is a very serious offence. A monk who cannot accept the rules of his order has only two options: he must either conform or leave.

The 'Greater Sangha Party'

As Buddhism developed, it was perhaps inevitable that disagreements occurred, and so two main traditions emerged. These are the 'Hinayana' which is said to survive in the Theravada tradition today, and the Mahayana traditions. Although there are significant differences between them, the origins of the split between the two are shrouded in mystery, and it is far from clear which Buddhists disagreed with whom, and for what reasons. However, we do know that there were two principal events which heralded the split.

First, a group of monks in the Vajji territory (near the Nepalese border, north-west of Patna) were alleged to be breaking the rules of the *Vinaya* (the scriptures which set the rules for the monastic community). They were accused of eating after mid-day, of storing salt in horns (allegedly contravening a precept forbidding monks to store food), and handling money. It was not so much a problem that rules laid down by the Buddha were being infringed; during his life-time, the Buddha had taught that changes in monastic rules were permissible, but with one proviso: the entire Sangha must agree. In this instance, it could not. These monks were taken to task by the other Buddhist communities and a Second Buddhist Council was called to consider the situation. A working party of four monks was appointed to look into the problem, and

these monks reported to the Council that the behaviour of the monks at Vajji was unlawful.

The Council accepted this decision. The dissenting monks, however, did not. They set themselves up as a community in its own right — a gross misdeed according to Buddhist teaching, in which causing schism in the Sangha is a cardinal offence. However, they had sown the seeds for questioning and developing traditional ideas within Buddhism. According to the Theravadin account, this dissenting group became the *Mahasanghika* — the ‘Greater Sangha Party’ — from which Mahayana Buddhism was born.

Other Buddhists find difficulty with this account. The name ‘Greater Sangha Party’ suggests a majority of Buddhists, yet the monks of Vajji were a minority who were overruled. It has therefore been suggested that the rise of the Mahayana tradition stemmed from another dispute altogether.

This second dispute involved a monk called Mahadeva, some forty or fifty years after the previous incident. Previously, it was believed that an *arhat* (an enlightened one) was perfect: he committed no misdeeds, and was completely all-knowing. Mahadeva questioned this. Some arhats, he said, were ignorant: he had sometimes seen them lose their way on their travels. They were prone to human weaknesses too, he claimed, since many of them have erotic dreams at night! Mahadeva suggested that existing Buddhist teachings were incomplete and he wanted to introduce new material. He also recommended rather unusual means of entering the path towards enlightenment, such as following ‘vocal sounds’. (It is unclear what he meant by this.)

This caused the Sangha to examine the status of the arhat. Was he so perfect after all? Was there perhaps some further goal beyond the arhat which Buddhists ought to seek? Should not Buddhists strive to become fully complete perfect buddhas instead? These questions demanded serious reflection, and some members of the Sangha developed new teachings in order to solve these problems. Those who believe that Mahadeva heralded Mahayana Buddhism claim that he and his followers represented the majority of Buddhist opinion. Those monks who could not agree with him separated themselves from this majority and in time became known as ‘Hinayana’ Buddhists.

‘Mahayana’ means ‘greater vehicle’, and ‘Hinayana’ means ‘lesser vehicle’. Although Mahayana Buddhists are happy to be described as such, it is understandable that the more conservative Buddhist is unhappy with the description ‘Hinayana’: no-one wants to admit that he or she is journeying in the ‘lesser vehicle’! Buddhists today who do not belong to the Mahayana tradition prefer the term ‘Theravada’, meaning ‘doctrine of the elders’.

In response to the questions which caused controversy, the Mahayana tradition claimed that a buddha was more than a human being, but was a super-human figure; he did not merely have wisdom, which the arhats were supposed to possess, but combined the ideal of wisdom with compassion. This latter ideal enabled Mahayana Buddhism to give greater attention to the religious hopes of the laity. The laity had shown loving-kindness by providing material support for the Sangha, so it therefore seemed right that they too should be able to make progress along the Buddhist path.

Examining the evidence.

The second explanation of the split between the two traditions has its problems too. In theory, differences of belief ought not to divide the Sangha: what holds the Sangha together is its uniformity in practice. Practice is always considered to be more important than doctrine, and Theravadin monks to whom I have spoken certainly do

not think it important to consider whether arhats can be ignorant or have erotic dreams. Yet the dispute between the two main Buddhist traditions seems to have been about doctrines, not practices. So what really happened?

One possibility is that, when Buddhists debated these issues, some groups of monks tended to favour one set of opinions and another group a different set. As time progressed, monks would gravitate towards communities which accepted teachings with which they felt most at home. One might compare this with what happens in Christian churches: ‘fundamentalists’ and ‘liberals’ have not formed separate denominations, yet some churches gain a reputation for attracting the fundamentalists and others the more liberal believers. This may well have happened in the early stages of Buddhism, the only difference being that the two traditions finally did separate from each other. It is possible that, as the two traditions developed, so did distinctive monastic and ritual practices: once this happened, monks from one tradition could no longer live comfortably within a Sangha which followed another.

One further point is worth mentioning about the two forms of Buddhism. It is often said that Theravada Buddhism is more ‘orthodox’ and closer to the teachings of Gautama the Buddha. Many Mahayana Buddhists would question this claim. Indeed, there is a story that at the First Buddhist Council at Rajgir, when all the monks had recited and agreed on the Buddha’s teachings, another monk arrived late. When he heard what had been decided, he replied, ‘Well, I prefer to accept the Buddha’s teachings as I remember them.’ If the story is true, it shows that even at a fairly early stage different accounts of the Buddha’s teachings were circulating, and that the members of the First Buddhist Council did not necessarily reflect what the Buddha himself taught.

The ‘Three Bodies’ of the Buddha.

We must now look at how these two notions — the super-mundane buddha, and the ideal of compassion — have been taught in the Mahayana tradition. (The material about the Buddha’s ‘three bodies’ may not be easy to understand, and readers who are less interested in Buddhist doctrines can comfortably skip this section.)

Traditionally, Buddhism has been a religion of self-effort, a ‘do-it-yourself’ religion, as I have heard some Buddhists say. The *Dhammapada* states:

You yourselves must strive; the Buddhas only point the way.¹

Buddhism is unusual in this respect. Religions generally offer supernatural aid or support to the follower. It was perhaps inevitable, then, that the notion of supernatural help should find its way into Buddhism.

There is another factor which made the introduction of supernatural aid a logical development within Buddhism. Particularly in the West, Buddhism has been accused of being a selfish religion. On the surface, it looks as if I must follow the Buddhist path by my own efforts to gain personal enlightenment, not the enlightenment of others. So it is easily assumed that the Buddhist must make spiritual progress alone, being unable to help or receive help from anyone else.

This view of Buddhism is unfair. All traditions insist that the Buddha taught about the importance of compassion as well as gaining the clear insight which removes ignorance. If compassion is so important, then could it be true that a buddha, once deceased, was ‘beyond recall’, having no further contact with men and women who were struggling within the constant cycle of birth and rebirth?

Accordingly, a Mahayana teaching developed that the Buddha was not ‘beyond recall’, but continued to live in a celestial realm, after (and also before) his

appearance as a historical figure on the earth. This celestial Buddha is a spiritual body known as a 'bliss-body' or 'enjoyment-body' (*samboghakaya*). With this body, he continued to give teachings in the celestial realm, to celestial monks, enlightened ones (arhats) and bodhisattvas (see the next section) which could be passed on to humans when they were ready for them. His followers were urged not just to become enlightened beings who had discovered their own path to liberation, but complete buddhas who existed beyond the human realm, and who could continue to offer spiritual aid to other living beings. Gautama, the historical Buddha, had a physical body which was conjured up (*nirmanakaya*), by the spiritual celestial Buddha as a skilful means of teaching humankind the Dharma.

There is a further dimension to this line of thought. Mahayana Buddhism teaches that there can be many buddhas in each age, and not merely one at a time, as the Theravadins hold. We have already seen that for the Buddhist there are no souls, and that there is no permanent being inside each one of us, enabling me to say that this body is 'mine' or another person's body is 'yours'. Strictly speaking, then, there is no real distinction between me, the author, and you, the reader. Likewise there is no real distinction between Gautama the historical Buddha, Dipankara (an earlier buddha), Maitreya (the Buddha of the next age), Amitabha (the Buddha of infinite light), and so on. Ultimately, these beings are one and the same, sharing the same 'absolute body' or 'truth-body' (the *dharmakaya*)

Compassion and the Bodhisattva.

Since it is important not to slip away into nirvana, but to help other living beings, Mahayana Buddhism developed a further ideal beyond seeking personal enlightenment. One should not strive for one's own nirvana, but for the liberation of all living beings from the cycle of birth and rebirth. So with Mahayana Buddhism came the concept of the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva is one who has attained all the perfections, and gained enlightenment, but, in order to help living beings, does not enter a nirvana which is 'beyond recall'. The help which the bodhisattva offers has sometimes been compared with 'divine grace', but of course that is a Christian term and not a Buddhist one. The term the Buddhist would prefer to use is 'transference of merit': the bodhisattva has acquired more merit than he (or she) needs, and can pass on this additional merit to those who call upon him. When a bodhisattva comes to earth to take on a physical body, such an action is not 'rebirth' in the same way as humans and animals are reborn. The bodhisattva chooses to take on a body: he is not caused to do so as a consequence of deeds, for he has acquired infinitely more merit than he needs to escape the cycle of birth and rebirth.

The bodhisattva can offer physical or spiritual help to humankind. There are stories of bodhisattvas assuming a physical body, and then sacrificing it to feed hungry animals. At other times, a bodhisattva can offer spiritual guidance to the follower by showing the appropriate path to nirvana. The best known of the bodhisattvas is one with the rather formidable name of Avalokiteshvara. Avalokiteshvara, the story goes, was about to enter into nirvana when he heard a cry for help. The cry, which came from the human realm, grew louder, and was joined by other human cries. Avalokiteshvara found himself unable to slip into nirvana while there remained so much suffering to be alleviated. The name 'Avalokiteshvara' means 'the lord who looked down'; Avalokiteshvara looks down on the unsatisfactoriness of the world and offers his help to those who call upon him.

The Spread of Buddhism.

These then are some of the main differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. The two traditions spread in different directions, Theravada Buddhism spreading south and Mahayana north. Because Mahayana Buddhists interpreted monastic rules more liberally than the Theravadin orders, they were able to adapt better to the colder climates of the Himalayas. They were more flexible, too, in accommodating the beliefs and practices of other religions which they met, such as shamanism in Tibet and Taoism in China. Mahayana Buddhism was brought to Nepal, and through the Himalayas to Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea and Japan. The Theravada tradition spread to Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand. The two traditions are sometimes known, therefore, as the 'northern' and the 'southern' traditions.

Although Buddhism travelled north and south of India, and indeed right through it, as it spread, there is little that remains of Buddhism in India today. It is now only found to any significant degree in Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh, in the north-west. The caste system and the strength of the prevailing Hindu faiths proved too strong for Buddhism. Although Buddhism was opposed to caste, it never succeeded in abolishing it, and the Indian people found difficulty in conforming to social conventions and accepting a religion which rejected them. The Indian people were also unwilling to abandon their gods: in theory, this was no problem for Buddhism, in which it is perfectly permissible to pay homage to the gods and also follow the Buddhist path; however, financially the people could not afford to look after their Hindu temples and maintain a Sangha too. A Hindu tradition arose that the great god Vishnu took on the physical form of the Buddha, and this legend in effect led to the Buddha becoming part of Hinduism.

Although the traditional Buddhist sites at Bodh Gaya and Sarnath (near Varanasi) are well supported and are endowed with many Buddhist temples, these are often places of pilgrimage for Hindus also, who revere the Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu. Pilgrims go to the shrines (and even to the nearby archaeological museum at Bodh Gaya!) and place small coins in the hands of the Buddha-images. Attaching gold leaf to a statue is believed to bring merit, and the less affluent who cannot themselves afford gold leaf will touch the gold embellishments and then their foreheads as a token of devotion.

The Muslim invasions of India from the eleventh century onwards struck a fatal blow to Buddhism: Buddhism had support from previous Indian rulers, but now lost its royal patronage. Yet, despite its decline in the country where the Buddha first preached, Buddhism continues elsewhere to thrive in both its southern and northern forms.

The cult of Ambedkar.

Although Buddhism now only has a following in India of around three million amidst a 700 million population, the Buddhist path offered one important advantage at least to Hindus of lower caste: Buddhism rejected the caste system, and consequently some recent attempt at reintroducing Buddhism has been possible. This has been spearheaded by a Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956), who was born an untouchable. His family belonged to a Hindu Reform Movement, and as a result he had the good fortune to receive a high school and college education at Columbia University, New York, where he studied law and gained a PhD. Returning to India, he took up the causes of the untouchables.

Mahatma Gandhi, the Prime Minister and Hindu leader, had already taken up the cause of the untouchables, but Ambedkar went further than Gandhi. Gandhi had opposed the continued existence of the outcastes, who were beyond the pale of the caste system. However, Gandhi still believed that the caste system itself served a

useful function in maintaining social order. Ambedkar did not agree: 'Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of the caste system,' he insisted. In 1936 Ambedkar founded the Independent Labour Party, and became Minister of Law in 1937. He secured some privileges for the outcastes in education and in government service.

Converting to another religion did not secure unmitigated blessings for the Hindu. Members of recognised castes had certain legal privileges which were denied to those who converted to another faith. Ambedkar, however, believed that as long as he remained a Hindu there would always be an obstacle to equality and emancipation. In 1935 he expressed an intention to convert to another religion, but it was not until 1950 that he finally decided to convert to Buddhism, and called up the rest of the untouchable community to accept it. On the fourteenth day of October 1956 he was initiated as a Buddhist: this was the last year of his life — he died on December 6 1956.

Notwithstanding Ambedkar's short official recognition as a Buddhist, Ambedkar is regarded as a bodhisattva today, and is even taken as a Fourth Refuge. Followers of Ambedkar, when taking refuge, will say:

I take the Buddha as my refuge.
I take the Dharma as my refuge.
I take the Sangha as my refuge.
I take Ambedkar as my refuge.

© 1988, 2009 George Chryssides