CHAPTER 4

The Varieties of Buddhism

The Buddha said, "The Dharma which I have taught you will be your teacher when I have gone." Soon after the Buddha's death, his followers gathered in a council to agree on his teachings. A century later, a second council was held. By this time, different viewpoints about the Dharma had started to appear among the Buddhists. As Buddhism spread further and the community grew, two viewpoints took shape, which hardened into a basic split within Buddhism.

One was a conservative approach that desired to hew as closely as possible to the doctrines and practices as originally formulated. This approach was called the School of the Elders or Theravada.

The other group chose to interpret liberally the teachings and practices of the Buddha. By the beginning of the common era, its followers had given it the name Mahayana, which means "great vehicle." Buddha had referred to his teaching as a raft, a vehicle that carried pilgrims across the river to the "other shore." The name Mahayana conveyed the idea that it would carry the whole world to salvation. Mahayanans labeled the Theraveda School as the "lesser vehicle," or Hinayana.

■ *Preceding page- Two Zen monks meditate in the peaceful surroundings created by a simple and symmetrical interior. Aichi Ken, Japan.*

Mahayana Buddhism

At the center of Mahayana Buddhism is the figure of the *bodhisattva*—literally, a "Being of Wisdom." A bodhisattva is a being who is very close to Nirvana, but turns back before reaching it to work for the salvation of all beings. A bodhisattva will delay its Nirvana until even the smallest creature has reached the highest goal. Buddha had been a bodhisattva in his lives (or rebirths) before he was born as Siddartha Gautama.

■ *Statue of Bodhisattva, a Buddhist monk who is on the verge of attaining Nirvana but who vows to refrain from his Nirvana in order to help each and every living being achieve it. From Afganistan, Gandhara style.*

The bodhisattva not only radiates compassion, but even bears the pains and sufferings of others. The vow of the bodhisattva is similar to the sacrificial role of Jesus in Christianity:

I take upon myself...the deeds of all beings, even of those in the hells, in other worlds, in the realm of punishment... I take their suffering upon me...I bear it, I do not draw back from it, I do not tremble at it...I have no fear of it... I must bear the burden of all beings, for I have vowed to save all things living, to bring them safe through the forest of birth, age, disease, death and rebirth. I think not of my own salvation, but strive to bestow on all beings the royalty of supreme wisdom...For it is better that I alone suffer than the multitude of living beings. I give myself in exchange. I redeem the universe from the forest of purgatory, from the womb of flesh, from the realm of death...For I have resolved to gain supreme wisdom for the sake of all that lives, to save the world. (Basham-275)

In short, a bodhisattva is a savior. A bodhisattva gains merit for humankind by practicing the Six Virtues, or Paramitas. A virtue is practiced to perfection when it is carried out with a mind free from self-consciousness, ulterior motives, or self praise.

> *Think not the fault of others, of what they have done or not done. Think rather of your own sins, of the things you have done or not done.*
> *From the* ***Dhammapada*** *(4:50)*

The six virtues are:

1. The perfection of giving (dana)
2. The perfection of morality (sila)
3. The perfection of patience (santi)
4. The perfection of courage (virya)
5. The perfection of meditation (dhyana)
6. The perfection of wisdom (prajna)

The bodhisattvas can be reborn as humans or even animals. But the most powerful bodhisattvas are those in heaven. The Mahayana School of Buddhism developed the idea of a heaven, peopled with bodhisattvas who could be adored and petitioned with prayer. The heavens also include past buddhas (enlightened ones) and a Buddha of the Future—Maitreya.

Some bodhisattvas have been more important or beloved than others. Among them are:

Maitreya, the earliest bodhisattva around whom a cult of devotion formed. He answers the prayers of worshipers. A compassionate and benevolent being, he grants help to anyone who calls on him.

Avalokitesvara, who is rich in compassion and love because he has purified his vows for countless eons. He can take any form that will help human beings. He grants rewards and wishes to those who remember him and recite his name. He is the patron of Tibet; and in China, where he was transformed into the female Kwan Yin, he is the most popular of all bodhisattvas.

Manjushri (meaning "sweet" or "gentle"), the symbol of wisdom and eloquence. He is young and never grows old. Manjushri usually appears in dreams, sometimes as an orphan or a poor man. Whoever worships him is protected by the power of Manjushri and is certain to reach enlightenment.

The new development of the bodhisattva as an ideal raised a question about the historical Buddha. Why didn't he remain a bodhisattva instead of selfishly reaching Nirvana and passing from existence? The Mahayana answer to this problem is found in a doctrine called the Three Bodies of the Buddha.

The Buddha's three bodies are the Body of Essence, the Body of Bliss, and the Transformation Body. Living on earth as Siddartha Gautama, the Buddha inhabited the Transformation Body. But his Transformation Body was really an emanation, or manifestation, of his Body of Bliss. In the Body of Bliss, he dwells in the heavens eternally as what might be called a supreme god. The Body of Bliss, in turn, is an emanation of the Body of Essence, which is the Ultimate Buddha. The Ultimate Buddha underlies the entire universe and is identified with Nirvana itself. The Ultimate Buddha or Body of Essence is much like the World Soul or Brahman in Hinduism, presented in a new form.

■ *Kuanyin. In eleventh-century China, the Buddha was transformed into a female Deity of Compassion called Kuanyin.*

Mahayana theology developed the idea that there were other Bodies of Bliss—all emanations of the single Body of Essence. These Bodies of Bliss were identified as bodhisattvas and "other" buddhas, who had lived at various times in past history. These figures multiplied into a pantheon of beings who dwelled in numerous heavens, hells, and even other universes. Mahayana Buddhist thinkers envisioned wonderful paradises and their counterpart hells, where the wicked suffered horrible punishments. The only limit to new creations was the human imagination.

The concept of the Bodies of Bliss allowed Mahayana Buddhism to absorb the gods and historical figures of other lands. For example, in China, Daoist sages (saintly wise men) were incorporated into Mahayana forms as buddhas (and bodhisattvas), as was the Japanese goddess Amaterasu, the most important spirit in the Shinto pantheon.

The most beloved Bodies of Bliss, however, were those concerned with life and sufferings here on earth. The most important were the Buddha Amitabha ("Immeasurable Radiance"), who resided in the heaven of the West. He was linked with the historical Buddha Gautama and the very powerful and compassionate bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, whose name means "the Lord Who Looks Down."

Mahayana theology was buttressed by two primary philosophical schools. The first school was the Madyamika, or Doctrine of the Middle Position. It was developed by Nagarjuna, who lived in the first and second centuries of the common era. Nagarjuna postulated that all that exists is emptiness, or *the Void* (Sunyata). For this reason his theory is sometimes called the doctrine of emptiness. Nagarjuna admitted that for practical purposes the everyday world existed. But because it was composed of transitory or impermanent phenomena, it had no absolute reality. Since emptiness is the only phenomenon that never changes, the Void is absolute reality. The Void, in fact, is the same as Nirvana and the Body of Essence of the Buddha.

The Madyamika doctrine included a very optimistic corollary. Although the existence of emptiness could not be proved by ordinary logic, it could be directly experienced in meditation. The emptiness or Void was everywhere: indeed, there was no difference between the ultimate Void and the world of phenomena. Humans and all beings were already part of the emptiness or Void. Potentially, they were all buddhas if they could only, through meditation, recognize the Void and realize the true nature of things.

The Madyamika doctrine was popular in China and Japan. Because it emphasized salvation in the real world, it appealed to the practical spirit of the Chinese and Japanese. Since the real world and Nirvana were the same, Madyamika appealed to the love of nature that was an important value in both countries. Indeed, portrayal of the Void became important in Chinese and Japanese art. Moreover, the Madyamika doctrine offered a quicker path to enlightenment. The need for rebirths was less important, for Nirvana or Buddhahood were omnipresent and only needed to be realized.

The second philosophical school, called Yogacara, was founded in the fourth century. Its central belief is that the phenomenal world exists only in the mind of the beholder. It uses as an example the monk who in meditation can conjure up visions that are as real as his ordinary perception of the mundane world. Yet the monk knows that they are a product of his own thoughts. The only independent reality outside the mind, according to the Yogacara School, is an entity called Suchness. Suchness (Tathagata) is without characteristics, pure and whole. It is the counterpart of the Void of the Madyamikas.

Salvation in the Yogacara School came from purifying oneself until one reached the state of absolute purity, or Suchness. The purifying process was a rigorous one and only those at a high state of spiritual development could achieve it. Basically, the meditating person conjured up visions that were as vivid as possible, absorbing their reality. Through constant practice, the subjectivity of the perceptions of the everyday world and his visions would be apparent. The adept would realize that all phenomena were subjective. Only when the visions and ordinary phenomena were perceived in the same manner was Suchness reached.

The ideas of Mahayana Buddhism created a religion of two levels. For the intellectual, the intricate underpinnings provided a challenging and creative philosophy. However, at the popular level, Mahayana Buddhism offered something more concrete—devotion to the buddhas and bodhisattvas. The knowledge that they were working for the salvation of all beings was comforting. Moreover, these heavenly beings heard prayers and appeals directly from those in need, and acted as personal saviors.

Differences Between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism

Although both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism recognized Siddartha Gautama as the founder of the religion, their differences were profound. These differences can be summarized in nine points.

1. The ideal of the *arhat* and the ideal of the bodhisattva. In Theravada Buddhism the ideal was the arhat. The arhat was a person, usually a monk, who through the Eightfold

beginners there is a method in which they count their breaths and so remove dull and distracted thoughts. So entering the Samadhi or undisturbed purity, remain in the meditation. *(Conze 134-135)*

Both Zen sects shared many beliefs and practices. Each revered the historic Buddha. In both, the training went from a master to his disciples. Each sect believed that within each person it was possible to awaken the Buddha mind. Both argued that religious devotion was expressed in daily work.

Zen became the religion of the warrior class in Japan. The warriors, or samurai, were attracted by a religion where it was not necessary to study philosophical texts or to observe ritual. It was simple and emphasized discipline, a trait honored by the warrior. Zen was also the inspiration for many of the distinctive arts of Japan.

Tantric Buddhism

Around the fifth century C.E., a new variety of Buddhism arose in India. It is called *Vajrayana,* or Tantric Buddhism. The two names reveal the unusual nature of its relationship to Mahayana Buddhism. The word Vajrayana ("The Thunderbolt" or "Diamond Vehicle") implies that it is a whole new branch of Buddhism. The thunderbolt is a symbol of Ultimate Reality, or the Void. But Mahayana philosophy underlies Vajrayana, although the latter used a new technique to attain salvation—the *tantra.*

Tantra is the name of manuals or guidebooks that contain the techniques for gaining enlightenment. *Tantrism* developed a system of beliefs and practices understood only by adepts, called gurus, who were skilled in the use of the manuals. The tantras included magic spells (mantras), occult diagrams (mandalas), and symbolic hand gestures (mudras).

Tantric methods were practiced by Hindus and Buddhists alike. Their goal was to reach a mystical union with reality beyond everyday reality. This was symbolized in Hinduism as the union between a god and his consort. In Buddhism the union was between bodhisattvas or buddhas and a feminine partner. Through meditation the devotee reached an inner unity with the buddha or bodhisattva and experienced bliss and Ultimate Reality.

Vajrayana became part of the Buddhism of Nepal, China, and Japan. But its greatest development and elaboration took place in Tibet. By tradition, the Indian monk Padmasambhava introduced Tantrism to Tibet. In Tibet, a guru was called a lama. A lama need not be a monk—his skills in the tantra were all that mattered. The lama assumed such importance in Tibet that the religion is often called Lamaism.

The highest duty of the lama was to guide a dying person as the spirit left his body. For forty-nine days, the spirit would exist in *bardo*, the state between after death and rebirth. During this time, the instructions given by the lama would help the spirit reach either enlightenment or rebirth.

In the eleventh century, a Tibetan guru, Mar-pa (1012–1096), renewed the Tantric tradition after studying in India. Marpa was a married householder who led the ordinary life of a farmer. Yet he translated the Sanskrit writings of Buddhism and gathered disciples, to whom he revealed the secrets and practices of tantrism he had learned in India. Spritually, he claimed descent from a buddha called Vajradhara ("Holder of the Vajra").

Mar-pa's most famous disciple was Mi-la-ras-pa (1012–1135). For many years, Mi-la-ras-pa meditated in caves in the high Himalaya Mountains, practicing and developing the techniques he had learned from Mar-pa. His powers included the ability to develop internal heat, so that even in the bitterly cold winters of the world's highest mountains, he wore only a thin robe of white cotton.

Neither Mar-pa nor Mi-la-ras-pa was ever ordained as a monk. They were important in Tibetan Buddhism for creating poetry to express their personal religious experiences. This began a tradition that has continued in Tibet to modern times.

Toward the end of the twelfth century, waves of Indians entered Tibet, fleeing the Muslim invaders who devastated northern India. Before this time, Tibetan pilgrims had gone to India for spiritual learning. Now, Tibetans began to see their own country as the spiritual center of Buddhism. They believed that the Buddha himself had prophesied this destiny. The bodhisattva Avaloki-tesvara began to be revered as the patron of the Tibetan state.

In the fifteenth century, a religious leader named Tsong-kha-pa established the Ge-luk-pa School. It was important for two reasons. First, the Ge-luk-pa became the dominant school in Tibetan Buddhism. Tsong-kha-pa founded monasteries near Lhasa, the capital, and made that city the center of his religious group.

The second reason was that the third successor of Tsong-kha-pa was the first *Dalai Lama* ("Ocean of Wisdom"). He and his successors are believed to be reincarnations of Avalokitesvara. For centuries afterward, on the death of the Dalai Lama, a search began for the child who was his latest incarnation. Once found, the child was educated by the elder lamas in preparation for his role. In 1642, a converted Mongol chief placed the Dalai Lama on the throne of Tibet, making him both the temporal and religious leader of the country, a position that endured until 1959, when the Chinese Communist government took control of Tibet.

Tibetan doctrine recognizes three vehicles to reach the final goal of Buddhism. The methods take into account the different levels of spiritual development of the practitioners. The first of these methods is the Theravada, which through self-discipline brings the devotee to the goal of self-emancipation. Many monks practice this discipline. The second is the Mahayana, which is the path to philosophical insight for the sake of saving others. The third is the Vajrayana, which is the way of tantric rites and mystical meditations. At a higher level these three disciplines are seen as successive steps in the One Vehicle (Ekayana). The lamas spend fourteen to twenty years studying the first two vehicles before they are ready for the tantras. These books set forth the rituals, mystical meditation, and spells that can lead to Supreme Wisdom. Only specially qualified masters can lead the adept through this phase. Tibet's three ways have made the country a virtual museum of Buddhism.

■ ***A Vajrayana** prayer bell with a spear handle*