Mapping the Mahāyāna: Some Historical and Doctrinal Issues

Mario D’Amato*
Rollins College

Abstract

Buddhism is often characterized as divided into two forms: Mahāyāna and Hinayāna. But how should this distinction be understood? In this article, I offer the reader a sense of how the contours of the Mahāyāna have been drawn from a historical and doctrinal perspective. I discuss three theories regarding the origins of the Mahāyāna, and elucidate an account of the Mahāyāna from a significant Mahāyāna treatise. I also comment on the use of the terms ‘Mahāyāna’ and ‘Hinayāna’, and conclude with some thoughts on a conundrum regarding the Mahāyāna’s own self-understanding.

Introduction

Tracing the contours of religious movements, systems, schools, or sects is not unlike an exercise in historical cartography: boundaries are often contested and continually shifting, internal divisions are sometimes only fuzzily defined, and there are always the problems associated with hinterlands and unexplored territories. The difficulties of the exercise are further exacerbated when the ‘territory’ one is attempting to ‘map’ exists only in an imaginary plane, like the country of Uqbar in the world of Tlön, described in the famous short story by Jorge Luis Borges. The invocation of Borges’ fictional world is not entirely specious in this context, given the present essay’s focus on Mahāyāna Buddhism. In describing Tlön, Borges writes:

Las naciones de ese planeta son – congénitamente – idealistas. Su lenguaje y las derivaciones de su lenguaje – la religión, las letras, la metafísica – presuponen el idealismo. El mundo para ellos no es un concurso de objetos en el espacio; es una serie heterogénea de actos independientes. Es sucesivo, temporal, no espacial. (1956, p. 20)

The nations of that planet are congenitally idealist. Their language and its derivatives – religion, literature, metaphysics – presuppose idealism. The world for them is not a concurrence of objects in space; it is a heterogeneous series of independent events. It is successive and temporal, not spatial.

Borges’ description here is reminiscent of Yogācāra philosophy, one of the main philosophical schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India, wherein
the world is said to be ‘mind-only’ (citta-mātra). Borges goes on to explain that

No es exagerado afirmar que la cultura clásica de Tlön comprende una sola disciplina: la psicología. Las otras están subordinadas a ella. He dicho que los hombres de ese planeta conciben el universo como una serie de procesos mentales, que no se desenvuelven en el espacio sino de modo sucesivo en el tiempo. (1956, p. 22)

It is no exaggeration to say that the classical culture of Tlön comprises only one discipline: psychology. All others are subordinated to it. I have said that the men of that planet conceive of the universe as a series of mental processes which do not develop in space, but only successively in time.

Of course, Buddhism’s focus on psychology has been extensively explored in Western scholarship. It is not without reason that Buddhism has sometimes been described as a form of ‘mind training’ or mental cultivation (bhāvanā).

Returning to the ‘real’ world, our problem is with mapping the Mahāyāna, with attempting to say just what the Mahāyāna is, defining its characteristic features, identifying its shape or form. Some indication of the difficulty of the task may be found in the titles of two recently published essays on the topic: ‘What, If Anything, Is Mahāyāna Buddhism? Problems of Definitions and Classifications’ (Silk 2005) and ‘Searching for the Origins of the Mahāyāna: What Are We Looking For?’ (Harrison 2005c). Allow me to state at the outset that I do not purport to have the precise answers to these questions. What I hope to do in this essay, however, is offer the reader a sense of how the contours of the Mahāyāna have been drawn, both from the perspective of historical research and from the perspective of Buddhist doctrine, that is to say, both from an etic (external) perspective and from an emic (internal) perspective. I take it as a given that whatever the Mahāyāna is, it is a semiotic phenomenon – it is a construction of human thought, human language, and human activity – hence, in developing our own map of the Mahāyāna, we must have some understanding of how the Mahāyāna has been mapped by Mahāyānists themselves. After providing an overview of a few background issues, I move to a discussion of how pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism anticipates the Mahāyāna in a certain way, followed by a presentation of three theories regarding the origins of the Mahāyāna, an elucidation of its characteristic features according to an important Mahāyāna treatise, and some comments on the use of the terms ‘Mahāyāna’ and ‘Hīnayāna’. Finally, I conclude with some thoughts on a conundrum regarding one way in which the Mahāyāna has defined itself.

To begin with a general characterization, according to modern scholarship, Mahāyāna Buddhism has its beginnings sometime between the start of the first century BCE and the end of the first century CE, some four to five centuries after the time of the historical Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama, or Śākyamuni. The Mahāyāna has been broadly characterized vis-à-vis non-Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism as follows: soteriologically, it is oriented...
toward the goal of buddhahood rather than the individualistic goal of nirvāṇa (Williams 1989, p. 25), and is concerned with the practices and path of the bodhisattva (Hirakawa 1990, pp. 298–308); philosophically, it may be viewed as an elaboration of the doctrine of emptiness (Nakamura 1980, pp. 168–70); cultically, it emphasizes devotion to multiple buddhas and bodhisattvas (Williams 1989, pp. 215–56); and literarily, it is manifested through the development of a vast number of sūtras and other texts containing various new doctrines, practices, narratives, etc. (MacQueen 2005, p. 312). Schopen states that there is ‘a kind of general consensus that if there is a single defining characteristic of the Mahāyāna it is that for Mahāyāna the ultimate religious goal is no longer nirvāṇa, but rather the attainment of full awakening or buddhahood by all’ (2004, p. 493). Williams points out that the Mahāyāna should not be viewed as a distinct sect of Buddhism, or even as a social movement, but rather ‘as a vision, a vision of what Buddhism is finally all about . . . of what the final motivation and goal of serious practitioners should be’ (2000, pp. 101–2), namely, the attainment of buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings. And the ultimate goal of the ‘great vehicle’ (mahāyāna) has been viewed by Mahāyānists as far superior to the limited goal of the ‘inferior vehicle’ (hīnayāna) insofar as the Hīnayāna goal is not thought to be oriented toward benefitting all beings – its goal is not motivated by the great compassion (mahākaruṇā) of the Mahāyāna.

Whether or not these characteristics capture any purported essence of the Mahāyāna, contemporary and traditional scholarship alike generally define the Mahāyāna in relation to non-Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism – forms that have been labeled ‘Hīnayāna’ by Mahāyānists. Indeed, an important aspect of the process of Mahāyāna self-definition has been the attempt to establish the Mahāyāna as superior (soteriologically, philosophically, etc.) to other, non-Mahāyana, forms of Buddhism. Since the Mahāyāna originated many centuries after the Buddha, it developed in contexts in which it was offering substantial innovations to already established Buddhist doctrines and practices. So as the Mahāyāna continued to take shape, Mahāyānists had to present justifications for their innovations in relation to these already-established visions of ‘what Buddhism is finally all about.’

Because the Mahāyāna came to play an important part in the general development of Buddhism, the distinction between the Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna has assumed a significant role in the study of Buddhism by modern scholars. Whether, or in what way, the terms ‘Mahāyāna’ and ‘Hīnayāna’ should be used in modern scholarship at all is an issue that I will return to below. Here I only wish to point out that the distinction has been a prominent feature of the scholarly interpretation of Buddhism. In mapping some ways in which the Mahāyāna has been constructed, I hope to make clearer the generally constructed nature of the Mahāyāna–Hīnayāna distinction itself. Understanding the constructed nature of these terms may contribute to the realization that the terms are not ‘out there’ somewhere in a fixed and determinate ‘reality’, but rather are always articulated in a
particular context in accordance with a particular interest or intention. Such a realization may in turn lead to a more reflective use of the terms ‘Mahāyāna’ and ‘Hinayāna’. Through understanding the categories found in Buddhist texts in more contextually specific ways, we will be less tempted to simply reproduce those same categories without critically reflecting upon them.

Before we continue, a few notes on terminology are in order. Since the Mahāyāna–Hinayāna distinction was of course created by followers of the Mahāyāna, the term ‘Hinayāna’ was initially intended to be pejorative. Some modern scholars have nevertheless adopted the term ‘Hinayāna’ to refer to forms of Buddhism that are not specifically Mahāyāna, perhaps hoping that the pejorative connotation might be weakened through widespread usage, as does sometimes occur in the history of languages. Others, however, have chosen another term for non-Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism, such as ‘Sectarian Buddhism, Nikāya Buddhism, Conservative Buddhism, Śrāvakayāna, and recently Mainstream Buddhism’ (Silk 2005, p. 369). Each has its problems. For my part, when referring to any form of Buddhism that is not Mahāyāna, I will simply use the term ‘non-Mahāyāna’.

A Logical ‘Place’ for the Mahāyāna

While the Mahāyāna certainly represents an innovation with respect to previous forms of Buddhism, in a certain sense a place had already been staked out for its development, almost as if it were a territory waiting to be inhabited. Early Buddhist traditions recognize three categories of realized persons, ‘worthy ones’ (arhats) who have attained awakening (bodhi) and liberation from the cycle of birth and death (samsāra): (śrāvaka-)arhats, prayerakabuddhas, and buddhas; those on the path to buddhahood are known as bodhisattvas. The three categories of ‘worthy ones’ may be explained as follows. (i) The term śrāvaka is derived from the verbal root śru, which means ‘to hear, be attentive, be obedient’, thus, śrāvaka may be translated as ‘hearer’ or ‘disciple’. Śrāvakas are individuals who pursue and/or attain awakening and nirvāṇa after having heard the teachings of a buddha, and are exemplified by such figures as Sāriputra or Mahākāśyapa, early followers of the Buddha Śākyamuni. The distinction between a buddha and śrāvaka is quite straightforward: while a buddha discovers the dharma on his own and establishes it in the world, a śrāvaka follows that established dharma. (ii) The meaning of the term prayerekabuddha is not certain. While Edgerton translates it as ‘a Buddha for himself alone’ (1970, p. 379), Norman suggests that prayereka may be derived from prayeraya (‘condition’ or ‘cause’), and understands the original term to mean ‘one awakened by an (external) cause’, as opposed to one who is self-awakened (1983, p. 99). Prayerekabuddhas are those who attain awakening at a time when the dharma has not been established in the world, but who do not then go on to establish the dharma themselves: so while buddhas inaugurate a dispensation of Buddhist doctrine and set up
an institution for its transmission, pratyekabuddhas do not. Furthermore, according to the Theravāda tradition, while buddhas are omniscient, pratyekabuddhas are not (Norman 1983, p. 100), which is also the account of Mahāyāna traditions. The pratyekabuddha is perhaps the most curious type of realized person, taking a middle place between the founder of the religion (the Buddha) and his disciples (śrāvakas). Norman offers the suggestion that ‘Early Buddhism and Jainism learned of a category of buddhas (from another sect, preaching in a different dialect of Middle Indo-Aryan), whom they wished to incorporate in their own systems,’ which led to the development of the middle category of pratyekabuddhas (1983, p. 101; cf. Ray 1994, p. 235 and p. 247, n. 65). On this hypothesis, the creation of the category of pratyekabuddhas allowed early Buddhism to identify revered pre-Buddhist sages as Buddhist. (iii) The term buddha simply means ‘awakened one’, while bodhisattva may be literally translated as ‘awakening being’, in the sense of a being who has formed the intention to achieve the unsurpassed, full and complete awakening of a buddha (anuttara-samyak-sambodhi). According to Indian Mahāyāna texts, bodhisattvas must progress through a number of stages of spiritual development (typically ten); upon traversing these stages, a process said to require three incalculable aeons, bodhisattvas become buddhas.

From positing three distinct classes of realized persons, it is not much of a leap for certain Buddhist traditions to eventually posit three distinct paths or ‘vehicles’ to spiritual realization. The doctrine of three vehicles (trīyāna) occurs in a number of Indian Buddhist sources, including non-Mahāyāna texts. In an overview of the term trīyāna (trīni yānā, yānātāya, etc.) in Indian Buddhist texts, Fujita (1975) states that its earliest use may be found in the Ekottarāgama; he also cites locations of its use in other non-Mahāyāna texts. However, the term never came into use in the Theravāda tradition, and Fujita concludes that the doctrine of the three vehicles took shape in the northern sects of Buddhism. Some texts distinguish between the forms of awakening attained by each of the three vehicles as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>spiritual category</th>
<th>vehicle</th>
<th>form of awakening</th>
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<tr>
<td>(śrāvak-)arhat</td>
<td>śrāvakayāna</td>
<td>inferior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pratyekabuddha</td>
<td>pratyekabuddhayāna</td>
<td>middling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bodhisattva</td>
<td>bodhisattvayāna</td>
<td>superior</td>
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The superior awakening attained by bodhisattvas is the unsurpassed awakening of buddhas, understood as a form of omniscience. In Mahāyānist terms, the śrāvakayāna and pratyekabuddhayāna are generally considered to be the Hīnayāna, while the bodhisattvayāna is the Mahāyāna.

In its most basic sense, then, the term ‘Mahāyāna’ has simply been used by Mahāyānists as a synonym for ‘bodhisattvayāna’, the spiritual vehicle of bodhisattvas pursuing the path to buddhahood (Nattier 2003, p. 138, n. 1; Ruegg 2004, p. 5). Within non-Mahāyāna Buddhism, the concept of the path of the bodhisattva is generally accepted as an option for the exceptional
few who wish to take up the arduous task of striving for buddhahood. However, this path – the bodhisattvayāna – is not referred to as the ‘Mahāyāna’, and is not conceptualized as a general form of Buddhism (with its own sūtras, doctrines, etc.) to be followed by all (Samuels 1997). Referring to Spiro’s ethnographic work on Theravāda Buddhism in Burma, Harrison points out that a small number of Burmese Buddhists have considered themselves to be ‘hpaya laung (“Embryo Buddhas”), i.e. bodhisattvas’ (2005b, p. 122), without however conceiving of any distinction between the Mahāyāna and Hinayāna. Harrison asks, ‘Can this be a distant echo of the state of affairs that once existed in India, before followers of “the Bodhisattva Path” started to cut themselves off from their fellow Buddhists, and before the distinction between the two ‘vehicles’ was anything more than a different perception of the goal of the religious life’ (2005b, p. 122)? So from this brief survey we may see that a ‘territory’ had indeed already been marked for the development of the Mahāyāna. But from the perspective of historical research the important question is when some Buddhists – some followers of the bodhisattva path – actually came to see themselves as Mahāyānists.

Three Theories Regarding the Origins of the Mahāyāna: A Historical Perspective

There are two forms of historical evidence for the Mahāyāna: textual and archaeological (primarily epigraphical). Regarding the textual evidence, the earliest extant Mahāyāna texts are translations of Mahāyāna sūtras from Sanskrit to Chinese. Since these texts were translated in the second century CE (Harrison 2005b, p. 109), scholars have hypothesized that the Sanskrit originals were composed sometime between the first century BCE and the first century CE, thus, marking the beginning of the Mahāyāna as a historical phenomenon. Epigraphical evidence, on the other hand, does not significantly appear until many centuries after the composition of the earliest Mahāyāna texts. In his study of ‘Mahāyāna in Indian Inscriptions’, Schopen states ‘we have for the first time reliable Indian information on the demography of the Mahāyāna in India from at least the fourth century on,’ concluding that the Mahāyāna did not develop as a separate group until that time (2005b, p. 238).

Theories regarding the origins of the Mahāyāna attempt to address the question of what accounts for the Mahāyāna’s development as a historical phenomenon. Earlier research tended to focus on locating pre-Mahāyāna sources for Mahāyāna innovations in doctrine and practice;8 in the past decades, however, scholars have turned to the question ‘What, then, constituted the institutional basis from which Mahāyāna Buddhism arose’ (Hirakawa 2005, p. 200)? These theories focus on the period between the composition of the Mahāyāna sūtras and the emergence of the Mahāyāna as a separate group, movement, or institution. Here I will provide a brief overview of three prominent theories on the origins of the Mahāyāna.
(i) Hirakawa, in a paper originally published in 1963, argues that the Mahāyāna was initially a lay movement, centered on the cult of stūpas (reliquaries), which developed as a reaction against the conservative and excessively monastic focus of pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism. He states that while the Buddha initially left teachings for both laypersons and monastics,

In the extant Āgama [the sūtras of non-Mahāyāna Buddhism] there is very little teaching for the laity, because the transmitters of the Āgama were the renunciants who were concerned with the proper preservation of the teachings at the time when they were passed on by memory and oral repetition. (2005, p. 215)

Hirakawa argues that the teachings for the laity were preserved by another institution, one which was distinct from the monastic community. He posits that the institution that preserved the teachings for the laity was that of the caretakers and administrators of stūpas:

the duty of the caretaker or the administrator increased and soon turned him into a professional who devoted his whole time to his task. . . . As means of increasing the number of worshippers, they must have also stressed the merits of stūpa worship and the greatness of the Buddha as a saviour. There is a deep appeal in preaching the saving powers of the Buddha to people who are unable to undertake the orthodox disciplines. When such a development occurred over a number of centuries, it was only natural that a new doctrine of salvation be developed. (2005, p. 215)

This new doctrine of salvation was, according to Hirakawa’s theory, the basis of the early Mahāyāna.

It is by now clear that Hirakawa’s theory has not successfully withstood the test of time. Others have strongly critiqued the theory, pointing out the ‘comparative rarity of references in this [early Mahāyāna] literature to the stūpa cult,’ and Hirakawa’s ‘serious underestimation of the role of established [non-Mahāyāna] monastic Buddhism’ in that cult (Schopen 2004, p. 497; cf. Sasaki 1997). Hirakawa’s theory has, however, been useful in stimulating further research on the topic.

(ii) In a paper originally published in 1975, Schopen argues that the ‘early Mahāyāna (from a sociological point of view), rather than being an identifiable single group, was in the beginning a loose federation of a number of distinct though related cults, all of the same pattern, but each associated with its specific text’ (2005a, p. 52). While Hirakawa argues that the Mahāyāna had its beginnings in the cult of the stūpa, Schopen emphasizes that the cult of the stūpa was already a significant, established form of Buddhist worship, and argues that the Mahāyāna originated around a competing form of worship: the cult of the book. He states that ‘it is evident that in spite of this competition, or, more probably, because of it, the form of the cult of the book was closely patterned on the form in which its rival cult [the cult of the stūpa] was organized’ (2005a, p. 44). The early Mahāyāna arose around specific sites in which Mahāyāna sūtras
were kept, sites that served as focal points for followers of the Mahāyāna, since ‘it is reasonable to assume that the early Mahāyāna texts, being critical of established Buddhist orthodoxy (= the Srāvakas), could not be taught or explained or kept in the usual monastic centers and would require the development of separate centers that would be free of orthodox interference’ (2005a, p. 52). These sites, then, provided the institutional basis of the Mahāyāna.

In an interesting (and humorous) commentary on his own theory, some three decades after first publishing his essay on the cult of the book, Schopen writes,

Here too it is important to note that Gregory Schopen was almost certainly wrong – and his theory too must go the way of Hirakawa’s – in seeing in these passages [from early Mahāyāna sūtras] only an attempt by the ‘new’ movement to substitute one similar cult (the cult of the book) for another similar cult (the cult of relics). That such a substitution occurred – and perhaps rather quickly – is likely, but it now appears that it is very unlikely that this was the original or fundamental intention. (2004, p. 497)

He goes on to state that the original intention of those who composed the Mahāyāna sūtras was ‘to shift the religious focus from cult and giving to doctrine,’ to convince fellow religionists of the importance of ‘seriously taking up or engaging with doctrine’ (2004, p. 497). Despite Schopen’s later ‘disavowal’ of his own theory (a disavowal which is, of course, only partial, since the quote cited above does indeed affirm the importance of the cult of the book for Mahāyāna Buddhism), his theory regarding the sociological origins of the Mahāyāna has received widespread support.

(iii) In his book Buddhist Saints in India, Ray offers the hypothesis that ‘the Mahāyāna originated as a tradition of forest renunciation’ (1994, p. 407). Ray states that the standard sociological model of Buddhism is two-tiered – lay and monastic – but argues that this two-tiered model should be replaced by a three-tiered system, including forest renunciants, settled monastic renunciants, and laypersons. Ray points out that according to a number of Indian Buddhist sources, those engaged in the life of a settled monastic were often unable to engage in ‘intensive meditation or, through that, to actualize the highest goal of the tradition, enlightenment’ (1994, p. 435). Hence, many turned to the life of forest renunciation in order to pursue the most rigorous practices recommended by Buddhist traditions. According to Ray’s theory, early Mahāyāna began among groups of non-monastic forest renunciants, but eventually became an ‘institutionalized, monastic movement’ (1994, p. 410). He argues, on the basis of evidence collected by Schopen and others, that the monasticization of the Mahāyāna occurred in the fourth century CE (1994, p. 412), some three or four centuries after the composition of the earliest Mahāyāna sūtras.

Other scholars have offered theories similar to Ray’s, but have emphasized that the Mahāyāna was a monastic movement from the start. Harrison states:
Far from being the products of an urban, lay, devotional movement, many Mahāyāna sūtras give evidence of a hard-core ascetic attempt to return to the original inspiration of Buddhism, the search for Buddhahood or awakened cognition. (2005c, p. 175)

Similarly, in her study of the Ugraparipṛcchā (an early Mahāyāna sūtra), Nattier argues that ‘the bodhisattva path was developed, as an optional religious vocation, within the confines of the traditional monastic community’ (2003, p. 93); in this early text, ‘To be a “Mahāyānist” – that is, to be a bodhisattva – [means] . . . simply to practice Buddhism in its most rigorous and demanding form’ (2003, p. 195; cf. p. 147). So on this account, the beginnings of the Mahāyāna are to be found in renunciant traditions emphasizing intensive practice directed toward the ultimate goal of buddhahood, rather than in devotional movements or new forms of cultus. As Harrison states, ‘the initial message of the Mahāyāna is clear: people should not worship bodhisattvas, they should become bodhisattvas themselves’ (2005b, p. 118).

Considering these various theories regarding the origins of the Mahāyāna, we are reminded of the title of Harrison’s paper referred to earlier: in searching for the origins of the Mahāyāna, we have to have some sense of what the Mahāyāna is, of ‘what it is that we’re looking for.’ So defining the Mahāyāna is not just a concern within Buddhist traditions; it is also a concern of historical research. Part of the difficulty here, however, is that there are various forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and from the earliest evidence we have for the Mahāyāna, it appears that this has always been the case. Nattier states that in studying Mahāyāna sūtras we find a ‘kaleidoscopic assortment of combinations of the presence and absence of elements that until now have been widely – but wrongly – grouped together as essential components of the “Mahāyāna”’ (2003, p. 191): some texts emphasize the supramundane nature of buddhahood, others the doctrine of emptiness, still others devotion to celestial buddhas and bodhisattvas, etc. She indicates that in the Ugraparipṛcchā, for example, devotional elements seem to be entirely absent (2003, p. 169): the focus is not upon the worship of buddhas and bodhisattvas as saviors, but upon becoming a buddha oneself. Hirakawa, however, looks to passages from Mahāyāna sūtras that extol the stūpa cult and emphasize the role of the Buddha as a savior. Similarly, Schopen sees the origins of the Mahāyāna in a form of cultus – the cult of the book rather than the cult of the stūpa – but argues that the intention of those who composed the Mahāyāna sūtras was not to establish a new form of worship; rather, their intention was reformist, to return to a more rigorous form of Buddhist practice. In these theories, then, we see a tension between what may be referred to as a ‘devotional’ stream of the Mahāyāna and an ‘emulatory’ stream. Silk hypothesizes that different monastic communities formulated different forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and that ‘later on there was a kind of leveling . . . leading to a more generalized “Mahāyāna,” in which originally distinct sources were treated and utilized equally’ (2005, p. 118).
p. 377). So, perhaps the emulatory and devotional streams of early Mahāyāna thought originally developed somewhat independently (as did other tendencies within what we now refer to as ‘the Mahāyāna’). But again both tendencies are evidenced rather early on, and both are represented by contemporary forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is difficult to locate precise origins when there are a variety of types and tendencies, which again is part of the problem with defining the Mahāyāna in the first place. But as Hirakawa points out, ‘Mahāyāna Buddhism is a religion centered around the Buddha’ (2005, p. 214): both tendencies emphasize the centrality of buddhahood (whether in terms of emulation or devotion), and for both tendencies the ultimate goal is the attainment of buddhahood. And as noted earlier this, if anything, is what distinguishes the Mahāyāna from non-Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism.

Some Characteristic Features of the Mahāyāna: A Doctrinal Perspective

Having considered characterizations of the Mahāyāna from an etic, historical perspective, we now turn to an account of what defines the Mahāyāna from an emic, doctrinal point of view. I will focus on the account offered by a text known as the Mahāyānasūtrālāṃkāra (Ornament to the Mahāyāna Sūtras; hereafter, the Ornament). This text offers a presentation of various Mahāyāna themes relevant to the path of a bodhisattva, and is explicitly concerned with defining the Mahāyāna and establishing its superiority to the Hīnayāna. The Ornament is extant in Sanskrit, and occurs in the Chinese and Tibetan canons, where it is classified as belonging to the Yogācāra school of Mahāyāna philosophy; the Yogācāra (literally, ‘practice of spiritual discipline’) was probably the ‘most popular and influential of philosophical schools in India associated with Mahāyāna’ (Williams 2000, p. 154). The Ornament was composed ca. the fourth century ce, which as noted above is the period from which we have evidence for the emergence of the Mahāyāna as an independent movement.

The Ornament addresses the distinction between the Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna in a number of passages, but there are two verses (1.10 and 19.46) wherein the text offers a list of criteria that differentiate the two vehicles; since 19.46 substantially recapitulates 1.10, I will focus on the earlier passage. Here, the Ornament specifies the differences between the Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna as follows:

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\begin{align*}
\text{āśayasyopadeśasya pravogasya virodhatah/} \\
\text{upastambhasya kālasya yat hīnām hīnam eva tat// (Ornament 1.10)}
\end{align*}
\]

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\begin{align*}
\text{kathāṃ viruddham/ pañcabhīr virodhaih/ āśayopadesa-prayoga-upastambha-kāla-virodhaiḥ/ śrāvakayāne hy ātma-parinirvāṇayāvāśyas tad-artham eva-} \\
\text{padeśas tad-artham eva prayogaḥ pariṣṭaḥ ca puṣya-jñāna-sāṃbhāra-saṃghita} \\
\text{upastambhaḥ kālena cālpena tad-artha-prāptir yāvat tribhir api jānmbhiḥ/ mahāyāne tu sarvaṃ viparyayeṇa/ (Ornament Commentary ad 1.10)\textsuperscript{11}}
\end{align*}
\]

Because of the incompatibility of intent, teaching, application, support, and time, the lesser [vehicle] is truly inferior.
How are the [śrāvakayāna/Hīnayāna] and the Mahāyāna incompatible? Due to five incompatibilities: of intent, teaching, application, support, and time. In the śrāvakayāna the intent is only the parinirvāṇa of oneself. Its teaching has just the same purpose. Its application also has just the same purpose. Its support is the acquisition of limited provisions of merit and knowledge. And with a small amount of time, its goal may be obtained: even with only three births. But in the Mahāyāna, everything is the reverse.

Five criteria are used to differentiate the Mahāyāna from the Hīnayāna: intent (aśaya), teaching (upadeśa), application (prayoga), support (upastambha), and time (kāla). The first characteristic that separates the two vehicles is their intent (aśaya) or ultimate goal: in the Hīnayāna, the intent is only the parinirvāṇa of oneself, which means the attainment of nirvāṇa without residual conditioning. Buddhist doctrine traditionally distinguishes between two forms of nirvāṇa: nirvāṇa with residual conditioning (sopadhīṣeṇa-nirvāṇa) and nirvāṇa without residual conditioning (nirupadhīṣeṇa-nirvāṇa). The former refers to the form of nirvāṇa attained by (śrāvaka-) arhats and pratyekabuddhas before the termination of their last rebirth: all the mental afflictions binding one to saṃsāra have been completely cut off, so there will be no more rebirths, and in this sense nirvāṇa has been obtained. However, there is still residual conditioning from previously accumulated karma, which accounts for the continuation of conditioned existence in one’s last rebirth. When this final rebirth comes to an end, nirvāṇa without residual conditioning – or parinirvāṇa – is attained. And the Ornament interprets this Hīnayāna parinirvāṇa as a form of extinction. In the Mahāyāna, on the other hand, the ultimate goal or intent is the attainment of buddhahood. Furthermore, the Mahāyāna does not lead to the extinction of nirvāṇa without residual conditioning, but rather to a third form of nirvāṇa: non-abiding nirvāṇa (apratiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa), nirvāṇa that abides in neither saṃsāra nor nirvāṇa. Through attaining non-abiding nirvāṇa, buddhas are neither limited by the constraints of saṃsāra, nor are they immersed (or dispersed) in some eternally quiescent state of nirvāṇa; rather, they acquire the ability to manifest in the conditioned world in whatever form is appropriate in order to aid sentient beings (Ornament 17.32 and 19.61–62). So while the Hīnayāna parinirvāṇa leads only to the end of one’s own suffering, the Mahāyāna non-abiding nirvāṇa allows a buddha to benefit other sentient beings.

The second characteristic that differentiates the Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna is their teaching (upadeśa). While our passage is brief on this topic, we may turn to other passages from the Ornament for further elucidation. In the Hīnayāna, a distinction is made between secondary and primary existents: while secondary existents, namely, the conventional objects that make up the world, including persons, are considered to be mere conceptualizations and not ultimately real, primary existents, namely, the momentary events that comprise secondary existents, are considered to be actually existent. Through analyzing (reducing) one’s ‘self’ into interrelated processes of...
momentary events, one eliminates all forms of craving, and attains liberation from samsāra. So according to the Ornament, the Hinayāna teaching eliminates the conceptualization of personhood, but maintains the conceptualization of momentary events, viewing these momentary events as the ultimately existent underlying basis of the illusion of personhood (Ornament 19.50 and 13.15). In the Mahāyāna teaching, however, all forms of conceptualization are eliminated (Ornament 9.81). According to the Mahāyāna doctrine of emptiness (śūnyatā), all phenomena – whether primary or secondary existents – are empty, all phenomena are mere conceptualizations (kalpanā-mātra, also referred to as vijñapti-mātra in other contexts), with no ultimate basis in reality.\(^{15}\) The Mahāyāna teaching is understood to be superior, then, because it entails the elimination of the entire matrix of conceptualization that obstructs the mind from an unmediated apprehension of reality or ‘thusness’ (tathatā).

The third and fourth characteristics that differentiate the two vehicles are their application (prayoga) and support (upastambha). Here ‘application’ refers to the extent to which one must apply oneself to, or practice in, the given vehicle. The level of application in the Hinayāna is considered to be inferior, and it only allows for the development of an inferior level of ‘support’ – an inferior accumulation of provisions of merit and knowledge (punyā-jñāna-sambhāra), which are necessary prerequisites for the attainment of awakening. According to the Ornament, since the Hinayāna involves an inferior degree of application, and only allows for an inferior accumulation of merit and knowledge, in the end it leads to an inferior form of awakening. The Mahāyāna, on the other hand, requires a superior degree of application and leads to unlimited merit and knowledge for the benefit of all sentient beings (Ornament 18.40), and ultimately to the unsurpassed awakening of a buddha.

The fifth characteristic that differentiates the Mahāyāna from the Hinayāna is their time (kāla), or according to Ornament 19.46, their attainment (samudāgama). The Hinayāna is said to bring about the termination of the afflictive obstructions (kleśāvarana) that bind sentient beings to samsāra; these afflictive obstructions are composed of various mental factors, such as passionate attachment and passionate aversion, which fuel the process of rebirth; when these mental factors are eliminated, the cycle of rebirth is brought to an end in the attainment of nirvāṇa without residual conditioning. While the Mahāyāna is also said to bring about the termination of the afflictive obstructions (such as passionate attachment and aversion), it is considered to bring about the elimination of cognitive obstructions (jñeyāvarana) as well (Ornament Comm. ad 17.4–5 and Ornament 20–21.44). The cognitive obstructions are understood to be composed of various forms of ignorance that obstruct the proper vision of reality, or the way things really are. Because the Hinayāna does not achieve the eradication of these cognitive obstructions, it leads to an inferior form of awakening. But since the Mahāyāna does bring about the eradication of cognitive
obstructions, it leads to an unlimited, entirely unobstructed form of awakening: the unsurpassed awakening of a buddha, understood as an awareness of all objects of knowledge and all modes of appearance (sarva-jñeya-sarvākāra-jñāna), namely, omniscience (Ornament Comm. ad 20–21.58; cf. Griffiths 1990). Furthermore, since the Hīnayāna goal is limited in scope, it may be attained in a limited amount of time – even within three births. The Mahāyāna goal, however, takes three incalculable aeons to attain.

Considering the Ornament’s account of the distinction between the Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna in relation to interpretations of the Mahāyāna offered through historical research, we can observe that the text’s account is much more clear and specific. From the Ornament’s perspective, we have a cut-and-dried answer to Silk’s question, ‘What, if anything, is Mahāyāna Buddhism?’ However, before we congratulate ourselves on having definitively answered this question, we should remind ourselves of the following two points. (i) The Ornament’s account is only one account among a vast number of Mahāyāna texts. This is not to say that the text is entirely original (it is not), nor that it has been without influence (it has been commented upon and studied in various Mahāyāna traditions, up to the present); it is simply to emphasize the multiplicity of perspectives that is found in Mahāyāna sources. (ii) The Ornament was composed many centuries after the composition of the earliest Mahāyāna sūtras (it is after all an ‘Ornament’ to the Mahāyāna Sūtras), and thus has the benefit of being able to systematize a number of developments that occurred over an extended period of time. Nevertheless, in arriving at any answer to the question, ‘What, if anything, is the Mahāyāna?’ it is necessary to understand just what the Mahāyāna has been understood to be by Mahāyānists themselves. And, studying the Ornament’s account is one small step in that direction.

On the Rectification of Names

Now that we have considered accounts of the Mahāyāna from a historical and doctrinal point of view, we may turn to some reflections on the terms ‘Mahāyāna’ and ‘Hīnayāna.’ A useful entry point here would be Cohen’s article ‘Discontented Categories: Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna in Indian Buddhist History’ (1995). Cohen points out that while, ‘Of all the categories through which to reconstruct Indian Buddhism’s history, Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna are the most productive,’ there are certain taxonomical difficulties with these categories (1995, p. 20). He begins, for example, with Bechert’s distinction between the Mahāyāna and the Hīnayāna: while the former is, according to Bechert, ‘not to be conceived as a “sect”’, the latter is considered to comprise a variety of sects.16 Cohen indicates, however, a problem with taxonomies like the one offered by Bechert. Turning to epigraphical evidence, Cohen identifies an inscription in Cave 22 of the Ajanṭā complex, which seems to fall on both sides of the Mahāyāna-Hīnayāna divide. He translates the inscription as follows (1995, p. 11):
Success! This is the religious donation of the Śākyabhikṣu Aparaśaila... for the attainment of Unexcelled Knowledge by [my] parents [and] all sentient beings.

The first point to note regarding this inscription is that according to the criteria offered by Schopen (2005b), we may quite confidently identify this inscription as Mahāyānist: the donor is identified as a śākyabhikṣu, a term often used in reference to Mahāyānists; and the donation is dedicated for the attainment of unexcelled knowledge (anuttara-jñāna). A second point regarding the inscription is that it identifies the donor as an Aparaśaila, that is to say, as a member of one of the sects, or nikāyas, which Bechert’s taxonomy would describe as part of the Hīnayāna. How is this apparent taxonomical difficulty to be resolved?

Cohen, in the conclusion of his article, recommends that the distinction ‘Mahāyāna–Hīnayāna’ should be retained by contemporary scholarship, with the proviso that it should be understood that there is not one Mahāyāna–Hīnayāna distinction, but rather there are many, and that different Mahāyāna–Hīnayāna taxonomies may be usefully employed in different contexts. Thus, ‘Cave 22’s donor can be both a “Mahāyānist” and a “Hīnayānist”, albeit not within the same taxonomic moment’ (Cohen 1995, p. 21). I, however, would recommend another approach.

As Bechert points out, ‘That Mahāyāna itself is not to be conceived as a “sect” is settled by unambiguous textual evidence’ (1973, p. 11). Early Indian evidence for the use of the term ‘Mahāyāna’ (both textual and epigraphical) does not seem to indicate that the term specifically refers to particular monastic communities, lineages of ordination, hierarchical organizational structures, or the like. Rather, ‘Mahāyāna’ seems to refer to certain forms of Buddhist discourse and practice – forms directed toward the attainment of buddhahood. Hence, ‘Mahāyāna’ does not initially refer to new monastic communities, etc., but rather to new forms of discourse and practice developing within already existing ones. To reiterate a quote from Williams: the Mahāyāna is ‘a vision of what Buddhism is finally all about’ (2000, pp. 101–2) – to which we might add, an alternative vision developed in response to its imagined ‘other’, the ‘Hīnayāna’.

What can be said about the category ‘Hīnayāna’? It must be emphasized that mapping the Hīnayāna is not formally similar to mapping the Mahāyāna. It is decidedly not the same thing as mapping non-Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism. Mapping the Hīnayāna is, rather, tracing the contours of a discursive construction deployed by individuals endeavoring to develop a novel Buddhist identity: a Mahāyāna identity. And given the historical context in which this new identity was formed, a context in which there were already established forms of Buddhism, the development of a Mahāyāna identity was considered to require a foil, an ‘other’, in terms of which this particularly ‘Mahāyāna’ Buddhist identity could be formulated. The ‘Hīnayāna’ of course was that foil. As Silk elegantly expresses it, the ‘Hīnayāna’ is a ‘rhetorical fiction’ (2005, p. 376).
It should come as no surprise if certain features of the construct ‘Hinayāna’ resemble certain features of non-Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism: again, the Mahāyāna identity developed in a milieu in which other forms of Buddhism were present. But as nuanced interpretations of the specific discourses and practices of non-Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism indicate, the Mahāyāna construction of the ‘Hinayāna’ does not conform to non-Mahāyāna discourses and practices on many points. And why should we expect it to? The Indian Buddhists who initially used the term ‘Hinayāna’ were not developing historical–critical interpretations of various forms of Buddhism: they were not interested in articulating any sort of ‘objective’ account of how non-Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism differ from Mahāyāna forms. Rather, their interest was in deploying a discourse to establish a new Buddhist identity, based on a new vision of what Buddhism is ‘finally all about’: namely, attaining buddhahood.

Thus, I think it is a category mistake for contemporary Western interpreters of Buddhism to consider ‘Mahāyāna’ and ‘Hinayāna’ to refer to the same sort of thing. ‘Mahāyāna’ refers to certain forms of Buddhist discourse and practice directed toward the goal of buddhahood, forms that began to emerge in India sometime between the first century BCE and the first century CE. ‘Hinayāna’ on the other hand refers to the Mahāyānist-constructed image of all non-Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism – and I emphasize, this is not a historical–critical category, but rather a polemical one. So, despite its currency in some contemporary Western interpretations of Buddhism, I suggest that the term ‘Hinayāna’ only be used to refer to Mahāyānist constructions of non-Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism, and not to non-Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism simpliciter. That is to say, while the term ‘Mahāyāna’ may be used to refer to specific forms of Buddhism that developed in India, the term ‘Hinayāna’ should only be used to refer to the Mahāyāna’s imagined ‘other’, rather than to any actual, historical forms of Buddhism.

Using the terms in this way will allow us to avoid certain unnecessary confusions and potentially difficult cases. For example, the inscription in Cave 22 referred to above may simply be understood as the inscription of a monk of the Aparaśaila sect who considered himself to be a follower of the Mahāyāna, a vision of Buddhism directed towards the attainment of buddhahood. Furthermore, in examining the travelogues of Chinese Buddhist pilgrims to India, it is not surprising that Fa-hsien (ca. fourth to fifth century CE) refers to monasteries in which both the Hinayāna (read ‘non-Mahāyāna’) and Mahāyāna were studied, that Hsüan-tsang (602–664 CE) refers to the ‘Mahāyāna-Theravāda’ (read ‘members of the Theravāda sect that practiced the Mahāyāna’) or that I-ching (635–713 CE) describes the distinction between Mahāyāna and Hinayāna monks as somewhat unclear (Hirakawa 1990, pp. 120–2). All of this is quite readily compatible with the view that the Mahāyāna refers to a particular form of discourse and practice – a particular ‘vision’ of Buddhism directed toward buddhahood.
which developed within particular sects, becoming dominant in some, playing a minor or temporary role in others, and remaining more or less anathematized in many.

Conclusion: The Teaching of No-Teaching

In discussing the distinctions among the three categories of realized persons, I indicated that according to the standard account of Buddhist traditions, a buddha is one who discovers the dharma on his own and then goes on to establish the dharma in the world. This rather straightforward (and widely accepted) definition, however, presents something of a conundrum for Mahāyāna Buddhism. As Nattier states, ‘a Buddha is, by definition, a person who discovers the way to enlightenment by himself. . . . Ironically, this means that it is impossible to become a Buddha in a world in which Buddhism is already known, for to do so would be a contradiction in terms’ (2003, p. 142). The goal of the Mahāyāna, of course, is to lead beings to buddhahood. But a buddha is one who must discover the way for himself. Is there not a conundrum here? Is not the Mahāyāna undermining – or worse, contradicting – its stated aim from the moment that the first Mahāyāna teaching is uttered? Is the only possible way to buddhahood to avoid following the teachings of the Mahāyāna?

In order to develop a possible ‘dissolution’ of this conundrum, I will again turn to the Ornament. The Ornament makes a number of interesting claims to the effect that all statements, even those made by the Mahāyāna, are illusory and ultimately unable to describe or characterize reality. Reality itself is said to be inexpressible. Ornament 11.13 states that reality (tattva) is unable to be expressed and is without the nature of discursivity (aprayācitmaka). And in Ornament Comm. ad 11.41, the perfected characteristic (another term for reality) is said to be without conceptual discrimination (avikalpa), since it is not discursive (nisparapacetā). Words and language do not refer to actual objects; rather, they are to be viewed as mental constructions, and all mental constructions are ultimately unreal. And this includes Buddhist teachings themselves: Ornament 11.28 states that the doctrines offered as an antidote to the afflictions are like an illusion (māyopama); the commentary explains this to mean that they are non-existent (avīdyaṁaṇa). The next verse (11.29) continues with this theme, stating that all doctrines are like one illusory king defeating another. Furthermore, Ornament 13.2 offers the well-known Buddhist trope of the dharma as a raft. Thus, on the Ornament’s account, the Mahāyāna does not describe reality, and Mahāyāna teachings themselves are ultimately illusory. Indeed, we might characterize the Mahāyāna as a ‘no-teaching teaching’.

But what then is the purpose of this ‘no-teaching teaching’? What is its ultimate aim? In a word: non-conceptualization. According to the Ornament, the fundamental awareness of a buddha is a non-conceptual awareness (nirvikalpa-jñāna). Buddhahood – the unsurpassed, full and complete
awakening of a buddha – is understood to be a non-conceptual awareness, a direct, unmediated realization of thusness. Such an awareness cannot be ‘taught’ or contained within any system of doctrine. It must be directly realized, and thus buddhas are those who directly realize the way on their own. The Mahāyāna, however, may be understood as an aid in pointing sentient beings in the right direction. In the end, however, they must go and see for themselves.

Ultimately, the Ornament is in accordance with the Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra’s claim that when there is a transformation of the mind – when reality is realized – there is neither a vehicle nor one who goes by it. From the perspective of historical scholarship, the Hīnayāna is indeed a ‘rhetorical fiction’, but from the perspective of this Mahāyāna doctrine, the Mahāyāna is as well. And so in the end we return to where we began: attempting to map an imaginary realm, like Borges’ Tlön.

Short Biography

Mario D’Amato (BA, Loyola University Chicago; MA and PhD, University of Chicago) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Rollins College in Winter Park, FL, USA. Before arriving at Rollins, he taught at Hampshire College (Amherst, MA, USA). D’Amato specializes in the study of Mahāyāna philosophy, with a particular focus on the Yogācāra school, and has published papers on Yogācāra thought in Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Journal of Indian Philosophy, Indian International Journal of Buddhist Studies, and Semiotica. He is currently completing a book-length study and translation of a Yogācāra doctrinal treatise known as the Madhyāntavibhāga (Distinguishing the Middle from the Extremes).

Notes

*Correspondence address: Mario D’Amato, Rollins College, 1000 Holt Ave., 2659, Winter Park, FL 32789, USA. Email: mdamato@rollins.edu.

1 I am referring here, of course, to ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’ in Borges’ Ficciones (1956).
2 In fact, Borges had a deep and long-term interest in Buddhism, and even wrote a book on the topic, wherein he describes the Mahāyāna as a form of ‘absolute idealism’ (idealismo absoluto) (Borges 1979, p. 756).
3 All translations in this article are my own.
4 As Ruegg states, ‘the clarification of “emic” usage is a prerequisite for our being able usefully and effectively to pursue “etic” analyses and comparisons’ (2004, pp. 32–3).
5 This assumes that the Buddha’s dates are ca. 566–486 BCE. If Bechert’s dates for the Buddha are used (448–368 BCE), the Mahāyāna would have its beginnings some three to four centuries after the time of the historical Buddha; see Bechert 1982.
6 I admit, however, that such usage only makes sense in the context of a discussion of the Mahāyāna; a scholar of contemporary Theravāda Buddhism – the only currently practiced form of Buddhism that is not Mahāyāna – might find it rather tedious to constantly refer to the Theravāda as ‘non-Mahāyāna’.
advocated for all Buddhist practitioners. Thus, attaining Buddhahood, and therefore becoming a Buddha, is emptiness. Note, however, that this is not the case.

Harrison (2005b, p. 113: ‘The rarity of the terms mahāyāna and bodhisattva in the earliest extant Mahāyāna Sūtras’ already invites the conclusion that at this stage there was no rigid division of the Buddhist Sangha into two hostile camps. . . . there is little evidence of any urge on their part to enshrine their different point of view in hard and fast sectarian categories.’

According to I-ching’s description, ‘Those who worship the Bodhisattvas and read the Mahāyāna Sūtras are called Mahāyānists, while those who do not perform these are called the Hinayānists’ (Silk 2005, pp. 371–2) – we can guess, however, that the latter were called ‘Hinayānists’ only by Mahāyānists.

Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra 2.16.204cd (Nanjio 1923, p. 135): citte tu vai parāvṛtte na yānāṁ na ca yāninaḥ//.


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