Development of Buddhist Schools’ Doctrines

During a previous talk on January 20, 2021, the emergence of the various Buddhist schools after the time of the Buddha was reviewed. This discussion reviews the doctrines that emerged within those schools, including some commentary on how the cultures of a particular era and area affected the development of the doctrines and practices. The previous review listed several currently existing schools: Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana, Chan, Seon, and Zen. the reviews are not deeply scholarly, with the intention to convey a sense of how cultures shape spiritual practices, perhaps providing some insights into how our current cultural conditions are shaping Buddhism.

For many centuries after the time of the Buddha, Theravada and Mahayana monks and nuns lived in the same Sanghas—there were some that housed thousands of renunciants—and the debates were often very scholarly. Originally the transmission of teachings was through memorized material, verbally chanted. As these various communities developed over hundreds of years with little or no communication between them, sociological pressures ensured variations the teaching. As a result, by the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, they became more fixed in their doctrines, which became more distinctly different. The result was the emergence of identifiable schools.

There were cultural pressures on Buddhism: The emergence of the Hindu religion from Brahmanism, the esoteric tantric practices of various yogic traditions, along with indigenous animistic ritual concepts and practices. The immersion of any new religion into an existing culture often produces a commingling of indigenous beliefs with the new doctrine; an example would be the way that Christian invaders would find indigenous shrines and goddesses in Europe, destroy the shrine to be replaced by a church, and rename the goddess as a Christian saint. Over the centuries up until the time of the onset of Christian missionaries, the concepts and practices of Buddhism lapsed into stagnation, the monks and nuns were institutionalized and, to a large extent, commingled with indigenous folk mythology and rituals. The introduction of evangelical Christians into Asia prompted a revival of the “roots” of Buddhist principles and practices in Theravadin school in the 19th century.

The following listing will review each in more detail, up to the 18th and 19th centuries when European missionaries began to convert the indigenous people to Christianity—the effect of this process will be the focus of the talk next week.

**Theravada**: This word translates as “Wisdom of the Elders”, and this school considers itself to be the guardian of the oldest and most authentic teachings of the Buddha; contemporary scholarship provides some support for that while still regarding the Mahayana to have begun at a about the same time, with similar historical authenticity. Originally, Theravadins were living in Central and Southern India, and often in the same communities of renunciates, numbering in the thousands. During the time of the Emperor Ashoka around the 2nd century BCE Buddhism was supported by his government. His son Mahinda, a Buddhist monk, reportedly moved to Sri Lanka with his sister, Sanghamitta, a Buddhist nun, as missionaries (Ashoka sent missionaries of Buddhism into China and as far west as the Mediterranean Basin). During the 1st century CE, the teachings began being written down on banana tree leaves in a common dialect of the Brahman Sanskrit, Pali, which eventually became a purely teaching language and is the definitive conceptual and practice language of Theravadins. The Pali Canon is the collection of these teachings, accumulated over the centuries, and the core documentation of this teaching is the Visuddhimagga (vih-soo-dee-mah-gah), compiled by Buddhaghosa in the 5th century CE. This voluminous document placed strong emphasis on direct realization of Anicca (ah-nee-chah), the transitory nature of subjective experience. This focus is one of the factors that differentiates Theravada doctrine and practice from Mahayana teachings.

Along with the scholarly work of Buddhaghosa, a philosophical doctrine was developed, the Abhidhamma (Ah-bee-dah-mah , “Higher Teaching), an elaborate and extensive commentary on consciousness and the nature of reality. The Buddhist “Three Baskets”: Suttas (the teachings), Vinaya (Ethical and community organizational precepts), and Abhidhamma was finalized as a core doctrine.

Beginning in the 8th century, Buddhism was practiced in what is generally termed “Indochina”, that is, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. As it became more institutionalized in India and Sri Lanka, it became more embedded also in the Indochina area.

**Mahayana**: As mentioned above, the Mahayana tradition has deep roots in the early development of Buddhism and apparently Theravada and Mahayana practitioners often lived in the same large monastic communities. They engaged each other regarding differing understandings of what were three goals of Buddhist practice: To become an Arhant (ahr-hant--the disciple of a Buddha who becomes a fully Awakened being), a Paccekabuddha (pah-cheh-kah-boo-dah--a being who experiences total Awakening without the teachings of a Buddha) and a Sammasambuddha (sahm-mah-sahm-boo-dah—a fully Awakened Buddha who leads others to full Awakening). Siddhattha Gotama is an example of the latter. The Mahayana adherents aligned with the latter goal, regarding the first two categories as lacking or lesser because they did not lead others to Awakening, hence the derogatory name they had for the Theravadins—Hinayana—translated as “smaller” or “lesser” vehicle. The emphasis on dedicating one’s spiritual attainments to the liberation of all beings led to the Bodhisattva Vow, the aspiration to defer full Awakening until all beings are free from Dukkha.

Supporting the Bodhisattva Vow is a Mahayana emphasis on Anatta (ahn-ah-tah, the absence of an enduring/autonomous self), one of the Three Characteristics, a foundational Buddhist view; the Theravadin school emphasized Anicca, as mentioned above. Closely associated with the Anatta doctrine is sunnata (soon-yah-tah), usually translated as “emptiness” or “voidness”. This view integrates with the core Buddhist concept *paticca samuppada* (pah-tee-chah sahm-oo-pah-dah) usually translated as *dependent origination*; I have determined a different translation: *contingent provisional emergence*—google the term and you’ll find an article I wrote on the topic. This Mahayana view was most clearly developed by Nagarjuna (nah-gahr-joo-nah), a Buddhist scholar/monk who lived during the 1st or 2nd century CE in Central India. His insights into sunnata and paticca samuppada are considered to have had a transformative effect on the development of Mahayana Buddhism and its offshoots: Chan, Seon, Zen and the various Vajrayana schools.

During this time and over the next several centuries there was also a dynamic tension between the emergence of Mahayana Buddhism and the various Hindu sects. Of particular interest is Advaita Vedanta (ad-vay-tah-veh-dahn-tah), translated as “non-duality”, which was similar regarding the Buddhist concepts of Anatta and sunnata, with a significant difference: Buddhism does not propose an ultimate entity, while Advaita Vedanta proposes that there is no difference between Atman (aht-mahn), the “true self” and Brahman (brah-mahn), which is a Vedic term which represents the “ultimate creative and substantive principle of the universe”. To me it seems that the primary difference between the Mahayana and Advaita Vedanta views is that Buddhism denies the reality of a “true self”.

The Mahayana schools produced an extensive series of Sutras that are not related to the Theravadin Suttas, although both words have the same meaning. The Sutras, in Sanskrit rather than Pali, are supposed to have been taught by the Buddha to a select group of senior disciples, to be saved for those individuals in the future who would have enough accumulated wisdom to make use of them. The Lotus Sutra and the Prajna-Paramita Sutras (prah-nyah pah-rah-meh-tah soo-trahs—the term translates as Wisdom-Purifications Teachings) are prominent among the various schools that spun off from Mahayana. They were produced in the 2nd through the 5th centuries CE and were mostly written down.

An important conceptual development of this school is Yogacara (yo-gah-chah-rah: “practitioner of yoga [meditation]) or Vijnanavada (vihn-yahn-nah-vah-dah: “mind-only”). This concept is associated with the “Buddha-nature” teaching, that the totally purified mind conforms with natural order, is void of a separate/autonomous self and Awakened. These teachings are not essentially different from the Theravadin but place a different emphasis for understanding. This philosophical view was promulgated by two brothers, Asanga (ah-shahn-gah) and Vasubandhu (vah-shoo-bahn-doo), who are believed to have lived in the 4th century CE. The focus of this concept is on how the mind fabricates subjective experience and regards this as the true path of Buddhism, rather than on any concepts that attempt to describe the world, ultimate reality, etc. A core teaching is the Lankavatara Sutra (lahn-kah-vah-tah-rah soo-trah), supposedly a teaching from the Buddha to a monk in Sri Lanka describing Buddha-nature; this teaching became a core concept when Buddhism integrated into Chinese culture as Chan. Some scholars regard this as an idealistic view, that is, perceiving spiritual practice as seeking some idealized outcome, while others focus primarily on how the mind creates a rendering of reality, leaving theories of ultimate reality as distractions; I am of the second view.

**The decline of Buddhism in India**: Buddhism was supported by the emperors of India ruled by the Mauryan dynasty, which united most of the subcontinent between 322 and 185 BCE and experienced varying degrees of imperial support through the following centuries in a dynamic competition with Hindu schools. However, by the beginning of the 15th century, the Hindu Brahmins, who were more inclined towards political and administrative roles, had eroded the influence of Mahayana Buddhists, who were more involved in spiritual and scholarly studies. The unification of the Indian subcontinent was also fragmenting. The Islamic and Turkic sultanates began to invade and integrated into that area over several centuries from 1300-1600 CE. During this time Buddhism practically ceased to exist in the subcontinent but remained viable in Sri Lanka and the foothills of the Himalayas.

**Buddhism in Far Eastern Asia**: The Mahayana was less prevalent on the Indian subcontinent for much of the time Buddhism was present there, but it was apparently more accessible to the Chinese who were travelling to India from the 2nd-6th centuries CE over the extensive trade routes called the Silk Road. Various explorers brought their translations of the Sutras and their own meditative training to China, where they integrated over time with the already existing Taoist and Confucian traditions. The Confucian establishment saw the Mahayana emphasis on sunnata as a threat to the worship of ancestors and the primacy of social order that were core beliefs of that tradition. The Taoists were mostly philosophers whose views were compatible with the sunnata doctrine; the arrival of dhyana (jah-nah) meditation practices were adopted because they fostered an appreciation of how the philosophical concepts of Taoism could be subjectively realized. The tensions between Confucianism and Taoism interacted with dhyana practices to become Chan Buddhism—Chan (chahn) is how the Chinese translated dhyana. Chan was then introduced into Korea, Japan and Tibet over the following centuries.

**Chan**: Mahayana teachings travelled from Northeastern India to China repeatedly over several centuries. Taoism developed in Chinese culture from prehistoric shaman (shah-mun) magical and nature worship beliefs and was deeply embedded in village culture; a primary teaching of Taoism is the Tao Te Ching, supposedly composed by Lao Tsu (laoh-zoo). Confucianism emerged from the urbanization of China as a ritualistic worship of elders and social order around the 6th century BCE, associated with various imperial governments. Confucius is best known as the compiler of the I Ching (ee-jing).

A somewhat legendary person named Bodhidharma (boh-dee-dahr-mah) travelled from India to China early during the Common Era, bringing Mahayana teachings. He is acknowledged as the First Patriarch of Chan. Another well-regarded teacher of Chan was Huineng (hwee-nen), the 6th Patriarch, b. 638, d. 713 CE, who heard the renowned Diamond Sutra, became a monk and then the 6th Patriarch.

Chan integrated the “mind-only” doctrine with Taoist concepts of the “natural man who has no preferences”, a view that easily is compatible with that doctrine. Over several centuries, the organizational and inter-generational aspects of Confucianism were also integrated. Chan, over the centuries, was either favored or condemned by the different dynasties who ruled and the region of China where it was practiced.

Chan entered the Korean culture during the 4th century CE. The Korean pronunciation of Chan is Seon or Son (shawn). It seems to have adopted the teachings of Chan with little alteration of the concepts and practices and had the same variable support by various ruling factions over the centuries.

Chan entered Japan as Zen, the Japanese pronunciation of Chan, sometime around the 8th century CE, but did not become distinctively Japanese until the 12th century CE. There was a pre-existing tradition, Shinto, which was centuries old and supported by the ruling classes. Shinto is a shamanic system with worship of specific holy places and the attendant spirits that inhabit them. Shinto and Zen became integrated over the centuries, so that some ancestor worship aspects can be found in some Zen sects.

There are two memorable teachers of Japanese Zen, Eisai and Dogen. Eisai lived from 1141-1215 CE and is considered the founder of the Rinzai school of Zen. Their training focuses on [zazen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zazen) (zah-zen, seated meditation), [koan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K%C5%8Dan) (koh-ahn), and [samu](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samu_(Zen)) (sah-moo, physical work done with [mindfulness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mindfulness)). Koan is the Japanese pronunciation of gong-on (gohn-ohn) from Chan, which had integrated formal Confucian interview formats into teacher-student relations. Characteristic koan practice involves the deep contemplation of a topic such as “the sound of one hand clapping”, which cannot be resolved rationally, which is the theme of interpersonal exchange between the administrator of the koan, typically an authorized teacher of Zen, and the person contemplating the koan. The intention is to disrupt normal ways of understanding self-experience with the hope of producing a “sudden Awakening”, that is, a realization of Buddha-nature.

The other teacher is Dogen, who lived from 1200-1253 CE. He imported the Soto (soh-toh) school of Zen from China and emphasized *shikantaza* (she-kan-tah-zah) translated as *just sitting,*  a practice quite similar to basic mindfulness of breathing meditation. In his *Fukan Zazengi*, Dōgen wrote:

For zazen, a quiet room is suitable. Eat and drink moderately. Cast aside all involvements and cease all affairs. Do not think good or bad. Do not administer pros and cons. Cease all the movements of the conscious mind, the gauging of all thoughts and views. Have no designs on becoming a Buddha. Zazen has nothing whatever to do with sitting or lying down.

Over the following centuries Zen became integrated into the Shogun system of government and was involved in Samurai training, which included training in martial arts as well as Zazen. Zen and Shinto coexisted as well, although Zen seems to have been the dominant form of spiritual training.

**Tibetan Vajrayana**: Sometimes called “The third turning of the wheel (of Dharma)”, *Vajrayana* (vaj-rah-yah-nah), is translated as the *Diamond Vehicle*; a ritual staff called a vajra is part of Tibetan Buddhist ritualistic meditative and contemplative practices and is said to be able to cut through all obstacles to Awakening.

Before Buddhism was introduced into Tibet through China around the 7th century Bon (bohn) practices were part of the indigenous culture, as they still are today. Bon is a shamanic ritual practice that worships various gods and goddesses associated with geographical sites. There is some controversy regarding the extent Bon practices influenced the integration of Chan Buddhism into Tibet. Tibetan Buddhism has an elaborate organization of idealized Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that are contemplated as part of Vajrayana training.

Tantric practices were also integrated into Mahayana Buddhism as it was introduced into Tibet over the course of several centuries. Tantra originated as part of Indian yoga and involves a variety of approaches to contemplation and mental discipline: Ritual objects and routines, deity worship, mantras, postures called mudras, and controversial sensory stimulation through psychoactive substances and ceremonial sexual practices. All of the following schools involve Vajrayana concepts and practices, with elaborate ritual and contemplation of deities practices, along with strongly developed meditation training.

There are various schools within Tibetan Buddhism. The earliest, from the 8th century CE, is the Nyingma (nihn-mah, the old school). The Mahayana teachers Padmasambhava and Sankharasita were invited to Tibet around 760 CE to indoctrinate the population into Buddhism.

Another key Tibetan school is the Kadam (kah-dahm), formed through the teaching of Atisa (ah-tee-shah), an Indian meditation master, who introduced Lojong (low-jong) training contemplations around 1000 CE. The core of Lojong training is Tonglen (tohn-glen), a contemplation of compassion.

Perhaps the most well-known is the Gelug, originating with the 1st Dalai Lama in 1409 CE.; the leader now is the 14th Dalai Lama, Lhamo Dhondup, better known by his initiate name, Tenzin Gyatso. Atisha’s Lojong training had a significant influence in the formation of this school. Another school which is currently operating in the U.S. is called the “New Kadampa” and is somewhat in conflict with the Gelug.

Tibetan Buddhism places great emphasis on the Mahayana practices for the cultivation of Bodhicitta (bow-dih-chee-tah), translated as Awakened Mind, and the practice of compassion, as a characteristic of the Bodhisattva Vow and realized through the Lojong training. If Theravadin Buddhism seems to focus practices on realizing liberation through Anicca (ah-nee-chah), the transitory nature of subjective experience, then we could say that Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism focus practices for realizing sunnata, emptiness and Anatta, the absence of an enduring/autonomous self.

The history of Tibetan Buddhism is similar to the other traditions in that there have been cycles of stagnation and renewal of the liberational practices of the Buddha. Over the centuries, Tibet was invaded by Chinese and Mongolian conquerors, with support from or condemnation by the various rulers.

This has been a brief and superficial review of the complex history of Buddhist traditions over the centuries. The focus of the talk for next week will be the effect of the intrusion of Western traders, missionaries and Imperial conquest during the 18th-20th centuries and how these stimulate reform movements in the areas where Buddhism was predominant.