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Clearing Up Some Misconceptions about Buddhism

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Hinduism and Buddhism Compared

The historical Buddha Shakyamuni denied the divine authority of the Brahmins, the Hindu priestly class. He set up a system of taking refuge with the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha) in which a member of the Buddhist monastic community becomes the representative of the Three Jewels and the teacher of individual lay Buddhists. He also set up lineages of enlightened masters, who were entrusted with the task of carrying on the authentic teachings.

The Buddha also criticized mere ceremony in Hinduism, especially ritual bathing and mortification ceremonies. He did, however, establish some rituals of his own. The Buddha set up rituals that could act as aids or vehicles in the inner journey towards the discovery of one's own true nature.

The Buddha was not interested in setting up a religion filled with religious dogma and metaphysical stances. He wished merely to give practical directions for people so that they could themselves permanently end their suffering. This principle is illustrated in the celebrated analogy of the poison arrow.

The Buddha was not anti-tradition, but he did not believe in Tradition for tradition's sake. He taught that one should take the Truth for one's own, wherever it is found, and disregard that which is not the Truth. The system of lineage mentioned above is a way of ensuring that the Truth which the Buddha had discovered would not be lost.

The Buddha encouraged people of all classes and of both sexes to seek for enlightenment in this very life.

The Buddha did not deny the supernatural and stated clearly that there were gods, spirits, ghosts, and demons, etc. He taught that spiritual powers could be developed and that all

enlightened beings have them. Nevertheless, he did not recommend the worship of the gods, etc., and condemned fortunetelling and the display of spiritual powers without good reason.

Mahayana, Hinayana, and Theravada Compared

'Mahayana' means 'great vehicle.' 'Hinayana' means 'small vehicle' or 'lesser vehicle.'

'Theravada' means 'teaching of the elders.'

Mahayana and Hinayana began not as separate schools but as alternative intentions and goals, which were a matter of personal choice. The adherents of each lived and practiced together. It took many centuries for those differences to coalesce into different schools, which eventually spread into different geographic areas.

The Theravada School of Buddhism, which is found in Sri Lanka and most of Southeast Asia, should not be called 'Hinayana,' because Hinayana originally referred to the commitment of individuals, not to a school of Buddhism. Later it became incorrectly used as an inappropriate and pejorative term for the Theravada. Theravada is sometimes referred to as Southern Buddhism, while Mahayana is sometimes called Northern Buddhism, because it came to be found in China, Korea, Japan, and Tibet.

What then are the different goals? The goal of the Hinayana practitioner is that of ending attachment to self and, thereby, becoming an Arhat, who undergoes no further rebirth.

Although those on the path of the Arhat help others, often extensively, that help ends with the entering of nirvana because the Arhat is not reborn. The Mahayana practitioner does not treat Arhatship as an ultimate goal, and is on the Path of the Bodhisattva, which leads to becoming a Buddha. A Buddha is replete with perfect wisdom (whereas the wisdom of the Arhat is seen as limited and imperfect) and universal compassion. The Bodhisattva is reborn voluntarily in order to aid all living beings to become enlightened. The realization of Buddhahood includes not only realization of the emptiness of self but also of the emptiness of dharmas, that is, of the entire psychophysical world. Emptiness is a Buddhist technical term that refers to the lack of real, permanent, inherent nature in any one, any thing, or any concept. Roughly speaking, it means that there are no real essences of people (i.e. selves) or of 'things' (dharmas).

The various Mahayana schools accept all of the teachings that are found in the Theravada canon; however, the Theravada school rejects the Mahayana Sutras and does not recognize

the "expansive" teachings of the Mahayana about Bodhisattvas and about the Buddhas of the other directions. The Theravada primarily discusses the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, while the Mahayana pays comparatively more attention than the Theravada to other Buddhas, who stretch infinitely into the past and who are also found in other worldsystems. The scriptures of the Theravada do mention Buddhas prior to the Buddha Shakyamuni and Buddhas in other world-systems, and also the path of the Bodhisattva.

Mahayana emphasizes compassion more than the Theravada and recommends that we universalize it. Mahayana also advocates the goal of a higher level of wisdom, that of the Buddha.

Further Comments on Mahayana and Theravada

Western scholars often analyze Mahayana, Theravada, and their antecedent schools in Western historical and social evolutionary perspective, an approach that makes little sense from a Buddhist point of view. (It is true that the two schools did develop historically and evolve socially, but that is not central to the Buddhist way of looking at things.) A Buddhist analysis emphasizes alternate choices for pathway to enlightenment and different levels of enlightenment.

Some Western scholars have erroneously tried to claim that Mahayana is primarily a religion for laymen and Theravada is a primarily monastic religion. Both Mahayana and Theravada have as their foundation strong monastic communities, which are almost identical in their regulations. Schools of Mahayana Buddhism without monastic communities of fully ordained monks and nuns are relatively recent and atypical developments, usually based on cultural and historical considerations rather than differences in fundamental doctrine. Both Mahayana and Theravada also provided a clear and important place for lay followers.

Both Mahayana and Theravada have little use for intellectual speculation. Though rational thought is valued and has its place on the Buddhist Path, in itself it will not take one to enlightenment. Nonetheless, Buddhist logicians were the most advanced in the world until relatively recently.

The cosmologies of Mahayana and Theravada are quite similar. In Mahayana scriptures, the realms of Bodhisattvas and Buddhas are described in greater detail.

In Mahayana Buddhism the Buddha is not considered to be a savior. Buddhists of some schools do talk about self effort and other power. Yet, according to Buddhist teaching, that distinction ultimately does not hold up, because the distinction between self and other is unreal. Like-wise, for the same reason, no clear dividing line exists between prayer and meditation. Although no equivalent to grace is found in Mahayana, the aid of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas is an important reality. Yet Buddhists do not consider Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to be separate, ultimately, from themselves, from their own true minds. In both Mahayana and Theravada, enlightenment is not contingent upon others. If the Buddha had been able to grant enlightenment, he certainly would have enlightened all living beings.