



BUDDHISM: A STUDY OF THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES OF THERAVADA AND MAHAYANA

Pham Thi Ven

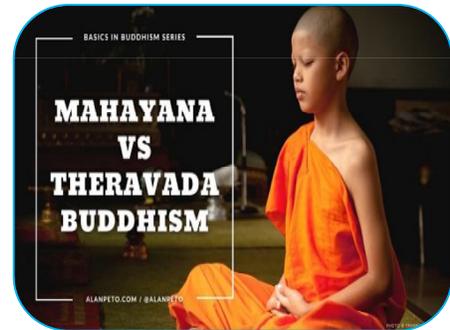
Ph.D Research scholar, Acharya Nagarjuna University,
Department of Buddhist Studies, Nagarjuna Nagar, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, India.

ABSTRACT

Theravāda Buddhism is thought to be the first form of Buddhism. The phrase isn't used until later, but the Theravāda school preserves the monastic path and adheres to the Pāli canon, which contains the Buddha's oldest surviving recorded saying. In the first century C.E., monks in Sri Lanka compiled these original scriptures in the Pāli language. Teachings had been passed down orally before this codification, and there was concern that original texts should be preserved in light of India's growing heterodoxy.

Mahāyāna is a philosophical tradition that preaches universal salvation and offers practitioners help in the form of loving beings known as Bodhisattvas. The purpose was to make Buddhahood (becoming a Buddha) available to all sentient beings. The Buddha was no longer seen as merely a historical character, but as a transcendent figure to which all could aspire.

This is a significant distinction between Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhists. While Theravāda Buddhists aspire to become Arhats and break free from the cycle of samsara, Mahāyāna Buddhists may opt to remain in samsara for the sake of compassion for others. Both are based on Buddha's teachings.



KEYWORDS: *Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Buddhism*

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The goal of this article is to define the two major Buddhist schools, *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna*, and to look at how they interact. I'll try to accomplish this in a logical manner throughout the article, but I'll start by introducing and defining the *Mahāyāna* school before contrasting it with the *Theravāda* school. To do justice to both schools' histories, I'll need to discuss Buddha's teaching in the Sermon on the Turning of the Wheel of *Dhamma*, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, which is considered the first basic teaching of early Buddhism and addressed to five aesthetes from *Uruvela* who had previously dissected the Buddha.

According to legend, the Buddha was an aesthetic who nearly died of starvation in his quest for Enlightenment. He left his fellow hermits and discovered The Middle Way, which lays somewhere between aestheticism and comfort, after being convinced that there was nothing honorable in aestheticism to the point of death. The basic Buddhist teaching of the Four Noble Truths, a summary of the human predicament of suffering and the path for escaping it, is derived from this sermon.

All living beings are caught in *Samsāra*, the unending cycle of life, suffering, and death, according to the Buddha. Pain - *Dukkha*, the source of suffering or Craving - *Samudaya*, the cessation of suffering -

Nirodha, and the end of suffering - *Magga*, which comprise the Noble Eightfold Path, are the Four Noble Truths. It is crucial to note that both schools adhere to this teaching; nevertheless, the *Mahāyāna* school has replaced the Eightfold Path with three trainings, despite the fact that there are no substantial theological differences between the two schools, i.e. they are not the consequence of a schism over doctrine. Rather, consider of the schools as focusing on a distinct aspect of Buddhist doctrine or tradition. I'll compare the two schools and how they interact before concluding that, while they have distinctions, they are both fundamentally Buddhists seeking refuge in the same Three Jewels of the faith: the *Buddha*, the *Dhamma*, and the *Saṅgha*.

1.2 DISCUSSION ABOUT THERAVĀDA AND MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHISM

The *Samdhinimocana Sutta* will be useful in understanding the differences between the two schools. According to this viewpoint, Buddha's talk in Benares was simply the first of three wheel turns, the start of the teaching that would eventually culminate in the knowledge declared in this sutra. In this light, the first instruction, as recorded in the *Pāli* canon, was "small" in comparison to the major teachings of wisdom perfection, and was dubbed the *Hinayāna* "Small Vehicle" as opposed to the *Mahāyāna*, "Great Vehicle," which held the Buddha's complete revelation. According to the *Samdhinimocana Sutra*, two *Mahāyāna* schools known as the *Yogācāra*, who have received the 'third turn of the wheel' of Buddha's teaching, consider themselves superior than *Mahāyāna* devotees who have only received the second turn. As a result, the *Mahāyāna* school is divided into two branches, whereas the *Theravāda* tradition stands alone.

Theravāda tradition arose from one of the most important ancient Buddhist organizations and identifies itself as a direct descendant of the first Buddhist society. It depends on later comments, particularly those of Sri Lanka schools throughout the first millennium CE, and is the older and most conservative of the traditions retaining the sole surviving complete corpus of early scriptures in *Pāli*. *Theravāda* Buddhism, also known as Southern Buddhism, is practiced throughout Burma, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, and Laos, with the *Theravāda* Buddhist writings and practices serving as the common thread. Arhants, flawless people who have achieved complete insight into the nature of existence, are the goal of *Theravāda* Buddhists. They have become Enlightened, which leads to *Nirvāna*, three emancipation from the cycle of reincarnation, as a result of following the Noble Eightfold Path to extinguish the three fires of greed, hatred, and ignorance. As a result, they will no longer be born under the cycle of *Samsāra*.

In contrast, the *Mahāyāna* school believes that Enlightenment can be attained through the Buddha's teachings, with the goal of becoming a *Bodhisattva*, which is attained through the six perfections. Because *Mahāyāna* emphasizes compassion, *Bodhisattvas* opt to remain in the cycle of *Samsara* in order to help others as well as themselves reach enlightenment. The main distinction between the two schools is that the *Theravādas* strive to become Arhantas, while the *Mahāyānas* remain trapped in the *Samsara* cycle.

When *Mahāyāna* Buddhism emerged in Northern India, Central Asia, and East Asia in the early centuries CE, *Theravāda* Buddhism was already established in Sri Lanka and did not play a significant part in the development of Buddhism in these countries. The *Mahāyāna* had no ties to the *Theravādas* and instead debated with the *Sarvastivāda* tradition, which eventually died out as a separate order but left its influence on the Tibetan monastic code and philosophy studied by *Mahāyāna* Buddhists. Northern Buddhism, also known as *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, is practiced in Tibet and the surrounding *Himalayan* regions, as well as parts of Central Asia such as Mongolia. This branch stems from later Indian Buddhism of the Pala dynasty, and it contains huge collections of Tibetan scriptural and commentarial materials, as well as Sanskrit translations. East Asian Buddhism, which is practiced in China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and other Asian countries, is based on *Mahāyāna* traditions that originated in China in the early centuries CE.

The *khandhas* are five elements of the human personality, according to the *Theravāda* school. The *Khandha Sutta* introduces this concept: form – *rūpa*, feelings – *vedanā*, perception – *saññā*, ideas – *samkhāra*, and consciousness – *viññā*. The Buddha teaches that these five diverse parts should be fluid

and in constant motion. This implies that the self is constantly evolving. The concept that everything is in flux and that there is no permanent self is referred to as anachronism. *Theravāda* thinks that these five *khandhas* determine a person's personality ties.

1.3 TANTRIC BUDDHISM: A FURTHER EVOLUTION OF MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHISM

Tantric or esoteric Buddhism, also known as *Vajrayāna* (the Thunderbolt Vehicle), emerged in India during 500–600 C.E. Tantric Buddhism is a *Mahāyāna* Buddhist offshoot with roots in ancient Hindu and Vedic rituals, including esoteric ritual literature aimed at achieving physical, mental, and spiritual breakthroughs. Tantric Buddhism is sometimes referred to be a "quick path to enlightenment." Practitioners of some traditions were secretive because they defied mainstream Buddhism and Hinduism by engaging in behaviors that were ordinarily considered prohibited. A spiritual mentor or guru worked closely with initiates.

Although *Vajrayāna* Buddhism is most strongly associated with Tibetan Buddhism, it also affected Southeast Asia and East Asia. For more than a millennium, Buddhism flourished in India, reaching a pinnacle in the Pala period in eastern India. Buddhism had diminished by the 1100s C.E., primarily due to Muslim conquests.

However, Buddhist ideology had already been transferred to Sri Lanka, which became a new point of reference for the growth of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. By the first century C.E., travelers and missionaries had brought the message of Buddhism to China by sea and land routes across Central Asia. Buddhism flourished in China between 300 and 900 C.E., and offered a point of reference for Buddhism as it developed in Korea and Japan. The evolution of printing was aided by Chinese translations of Indian scriptures. Bhutan, Cambodia, Japan, Korea, Laos, Burma, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Tibet, and Vietnam are all Buddhist countries. Buddhism has been remarkably adaptable to local beliefs and practices throughout its history and transmission, and Buddhist art throughout Asia is characterized by the mixing of these native forms with foreign beliefs and symbols.

1.4 WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THERAVĀDA AND MAHĀYĀNA?

I have studied *Mahāyāna* for many years and the more I study it, the more I find there is hardly any difference between *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* with regard to the fundamental teachings. We can see that any things as follows:

- Both accept *Gotama Buddha* as the Teacher.
- The Four Noble Truths are exactly the same in both schools.
- The Noble Eight-fold Path is exactly the same in both schools.
- In the both schools, the *Paticcasamuppāda* and the Dependent Origination is the same.
- Both rejected the idea of a supreme being who created and governed this world.
- They accept *Anicca* - Impermanence, *Dukkha* – Satisfactoriness or Suffering, *Antta* – Non-self, and *Sīla* – Moral conduct, *Samādhi* - Concentration, and *Paññā* - Wisdom without any difference.

These are the Buddha's most essential teachings, and both schools embrace them without reservation. There are a few areas where they diverge. The *Bodhisattva* ideal is an apparent example. Many people believe that the *Mahāyāna* is for *Bodhisattvahood*, which leads to *Buddhahood*, and the *Theravāda* is for Arhantship. It's worth noting that the Buddha was an Arhant as well. *Pacceka-Buddha* is an Arahant as well. An Arhant might also be a disciple. The word Arahant-yana, or Arahant Vehicle, is never used in *Mahāyāna* scriptures. *Bodhisattvayana*, *Prateka-Buddhayana*, and *Sravakayana* were the terms they employed. These three are known as *Bodhis* in the *Theravāda* tradition.

Because *Theravāda* emphasizes that everyone should seek their own salvation, some people believe it is selfish. But how can a self-centered individual achieve Enlightenment? The three *Yanas* or *Bodhis* are accepted by both schools, but the *Bodhisattva* ideal is regarded as the ultimate. Many mystical *Bodhisattvas* have been formed in the *Mahāyāna*, whereas a *Bodhisattva* in the *Theravāda* is a man among us who devotes his entire life to the attainment of perfection, eventually becoming a fully Enlightened Buddha for the welfare and happiness of the world.

1.5 NIRAVĀNA OF THERAVĀDA AND MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHISM

Theravāda Buddhists believe that by dedicating oneself to the renunciation of life's distractions, one can obtain *Niravāna*, or emancipation from the torturous effects of desire. The Buddha advises that one should control their mind and body in order to accomplish so. As the Buddha instructs, those who are temperate and do not relish excess are closer to *Niravāna* because they get genuine insight into the world's basic nature by not being unduly connected to it. *Niravāna* is the result of one's commitment to putting an end to desire in Theravada Buddhism. As a result, *Niravāna* is a condition of emancipation not only from needs, but also from the suffering that comes with them.

Mahāyāna school of Buddhist thinking, on the other hand, thinks that people who honestly desire liberation and spiritual awakening can travel the route to *Niravāna*. *Mahāyāna* Buddhists believe that in order to obtain *Niravāna*, one must mimic the Buddha's life and then seek to become a Bodhisattva, or someone who is in the process of reaching enlightenment like the Buddha did during his lifetime. *Niravāna*, according to *Mahāyāna* Buddhists, is found in copying the Buddha's life. The journey to *Niravāna* in the here and now grows steadily easier as one more fully embraces the ideals of selflessness, self-sufficiency, and detachment.

1.6 CONCLUSION

The two schools of *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* share certain similarities: they both seek shelter in the Three Jewels, they both believe in the cycle of Samsara, and they both believe in the Ultimate Goal of Enlightenment, but they are two separate schools. The *Theravādas* are older, more traditional Buddhists, most likely monks, who claim to be a direct descendant of the Buddha and follow the *Pāli* canon in its entirety. The *Mahāyāna* schools is made up of the *Hinayāna* 'Small Vehicle' and the *Mahāyāna* 'Large Vehicle,' as well as the *Sarvativāda* school, which subsequently died out as another. It believes in the continuing revelation of scripture and is viewed as a younger version of Buddhism.

The fundamental distinction between the *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* traditions is their views on the path to Enlightenment, with the *Theravāda* believing that you must follow Buddha's teachings in order to become an Arhanta, or Enlightened One. The *Mahāyāna* tradition holds that anybody can attain *Buddhahood* by becoming a *Bodhisattva*, but the *Theravāda* tradition holds that Buddhists should strive to become Arhantas. Another difference is the vocabulary they use.

The *Theravādas* adhere to the *Pāli* canon, following in the footsteps of their forefathers, whilst the *Mahāyāna* employs Sanskrit. Although there are subtle distinctions between the two traditions, they should not be considered as diametrically opposed to one another or as though they have split apart due to a doctrine disagreement or a big schism. Perhaps we might think of them as complimenting one another in the same way that *Samatha* and *Vipassanā* meditation do. *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* are different, but the end of goal is the same. They want to find peace in their life and break free from the cycle of *Samsāra*.

REFERENCES:

1. Bapat, P.V. "India and Buddhism" in 2500 year of Buddhism, P.V. Bapat (ed), Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi, 1976.
2. Burt, E.A. ed., *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha* (New York: Mentor Book., 1955). 11-241.
3. Conze Edward. *A Short History of Buddhism*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1980.
4. Dutta, Nalinaksha, *Aspect of Mahayana Buddhism and its Relation of Hinayana*, Firma KLN Private Ltd. Kolkata, 1930.
5. Edward J. Thomas. *The History of Buddhist Thought*, Munshiram Manoharlal, 2007.
6. Kate Crosby. *Theravada Buddhism: Continuity, Diversity, and Identity*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.
7. Narada, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, Buddhist Missionary Society, Malaysia, 1988.
8. Thomas William Rhys Davids. *Essential Theravada and Mahayana Texts*, Jazzybee Berlag, 2012.



Pham Thi Ven

**Ph.D Research scholar, Acharya Nagarjuna University,
Department of Buddhist Studies, Nagarjuna Nagar, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, India.**