

Theravada and Mahayana: Similarities and Differences

**Clear Vision AS/A2 Buddhism
Conference**

Bury Grammar School: 23.11.2007

Dharmachari Nagapriya
Nagapriya.wright@manchester.ac.uk

Aims of Session

- To offer an overview of the leading features of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism
- To map out the geographical spread of Buddhist traditions
- To note common features
- To identify key differences/emphases



The Three Jewels

Theravada and Mahayana

Introductory Remarks

- Buddhism is a rich, complex, and diverse tradition
- Has evolved over a period of 2500 years and has travelled around the globe
- Has changed/adapted and many new forms have emerged
- Usual to divide Buddhism into 2, sometimes 3, main divisions
- **Theravada**: living tradition that claims descent from early Buddhism
- **Mahayana**: *family* of traditions that began to emerge around the common era alongside new scriptures and assumed great importance in central and East Asia
- **Vajrayana**: combines Mahayana philosophy with esoteric ritual and became dominant in Himalayan region
- Using model of Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha as a structure for looking at similarities/differences

Theravada: general features

- ❑ 'doctrine of the elders'
- ❑ 'Classical' Buddhism
- ❑ Conservative: preserves traditions/texts of early Buddhism
- ❑ High degree of uniformity
- ❑ Emphasises renunciation (monasticism)
- ❑ Goal is to escape samsara through realising Nibbana



Theravada: geographical



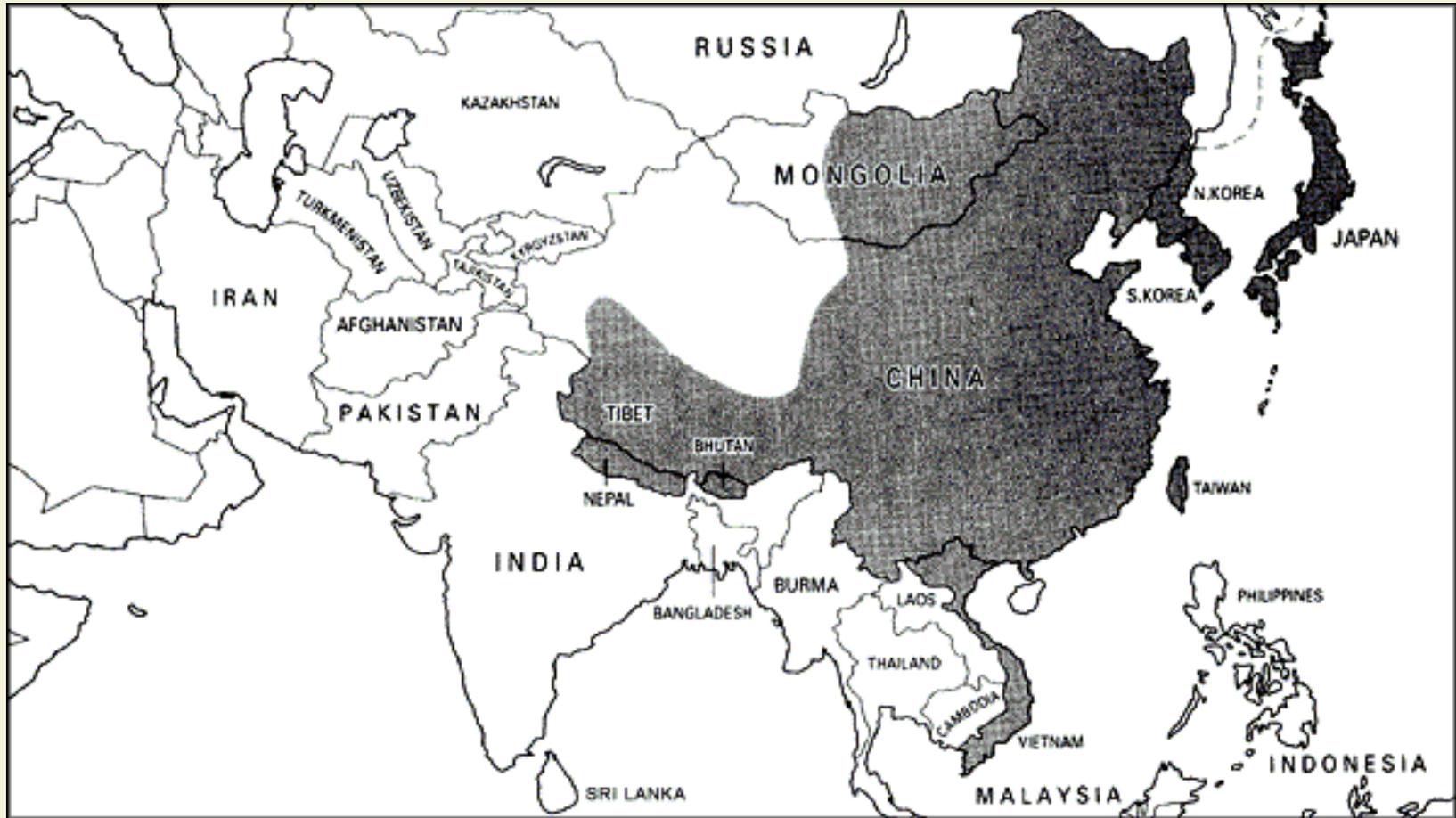
Mahayana: general features

- ❑ Means 'Great way' (as opposed to 'Little Way' – Hinayana)
- ❑ High degree of diversity
- ❑ Difficult to generalise!
- ❑ Main modern forms are Zen, Pure Land, and Nichiren groups
- ❑ Also may include Tantric Buddhism (Tibetan and other)
- ❑ Emphasises bodhisattva ideal – choosing rebirth to help all beings



Guanyin (Chinese, early 8th century)
Theravada and Mahayana

Mahayana: geographical



The Buddha in Theravada



Buddha image from Thailand

- ❑ 'Historical' Buddha is main focus of devotion
- ❑ Seen as guide, teacher, exemplar (not a god!)
- ❑ Buddha is dead and not active in the world
- ❑ Relics especially revered through stupas
- ❑ Images are 'reminder' relics – sometimes contain physical relics
- ❑ Devotion creates 'merit'

The Buddha(s) in Mahayana

- ❑ Expanded concept of Buddha
- ❑ Is a trans-historical, even cosmic presence that can influence the world
- ❑ The Buddha remains active and can be encountered in visions/meditation
- ❑ May manifest in many different forms, places, and times
- ❑ E.g. Amitabha/Amida, Vairochana
- ❑ Cosmic Bodhisattvas (Awakening Beings) also worshipped
- ❑ Buddha is a continuing source of blessing, even salvation (via a Pure Land)



A series of Jizo bodhisattva figures (Japan)

Amida in his Pure Land



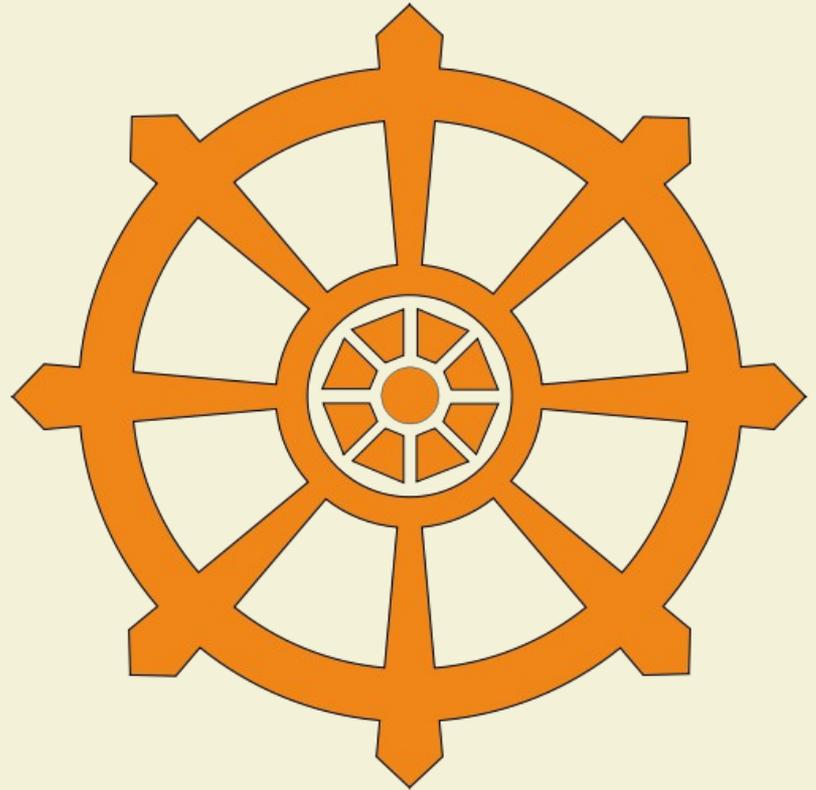
Mahayana Trikaya Doctrine

- ❑ Three bodies of the Buddha
- ❑ Nirmanakaya – ‘Buddha in the World’
- ❑ Sambhogakaya – ‘Buddha in heaven’ (visionary Buddhas)
- ❑ Dharmakaya – ‘Buddha in eternity’; Buddha as abstract principle; also the texts



The Theravada Dharma (Dhamma)

- ❑ Dharma means teaching/truth
- ❑ TV based on Pali Canon
- ❑ PC is a body of scriptures that records the teachings and practice of early Buddhism (if not the Buddha!)
- ❑ Three baskets:
 - ❑ Sutta (discourses)
 - ❑ Vinaya (Discipline)
 - ❑ Abhidhamma (philosophical analysis)
- ❑ Also commentaries on these texts
- ❑ Arahant (worthy one) ideal



Dharma Wheel

Theravada and Mahayana

The Dharma in Mahayana

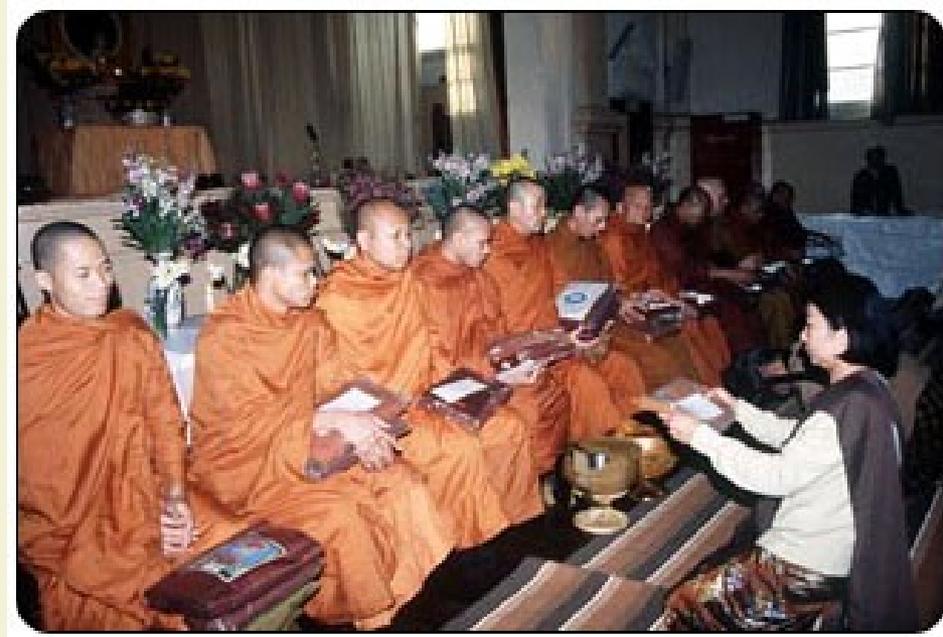
- ❑ In principle, accepts teachings of early Buddhism; e.g. renunciation still important
- ❑ New scriptures
- ❑ E.g. Lotus Sutra, Heart Sutra, Pure Land Sutras
- ❑ Rhetoric of compassion
- ❑ Expanded concept of awakening: Emphasis on bodhisattva ideal
- ❑ Diverse teachings depending upon sect/ tradition
- ❑ Tantric Buddhism emphasises ritual
- ❑ Idea of Buddha Nature



Gohonzon: representation of Lotus Sutra

The Theravada Sangha

- ❑ Often means monastic sangha
- ❑ Distinction between monk and lay
- ❑ Monks are the 'full-timers'
- ❑ Celibate
- ❑ Role is to follow the vinaya (discipline) and instruct laity
- ❑ Lay people practise dana (giving) to monks (generates merit)
- ❑ Clear hierarchy



The Mahayana Sangha

- Generally also follows monk/lay hierarchy
- Sangha is more diverse: embraces Zen, Pure Land, Nichiren Buddhism
- Sects may have radically different emphases
- In Japan many 'monks' marry and have families
- Includes nuns (although generally subordinate), unlike TV
- Some sects de-emphasise monk/lay divide: e.g. Jōdō Shinshū (True Pure Land)
- In modern period important 'lay' groups have emerged: e.g. Sōka Gakkai



Taiwanese nuns and lay people

Summary Points

- ❑ Theravada and Mahayana traditions share many basic principles, practices, and institutional structures
- ❑ Theravada more unified, coherent tradition based on conservation of early teachings (Pali Canon)
- ❑ Mahayana more diverse; inspired by new body of scriptures and new Buddha/bodhisattva cults
- ❑ Mahayana Buddhism evolved in East Asia giving rise to many new traditions
- ❑ Theravada preserved in Southern Asia
- ❑ Mahayana represents itself as a 'higher' path
- ❑ Mahayana has an expanded conception of the Buddha, distinctive teachings and texts (especially bodhisattva ideal), and a more diverse sangha

Questions and Further Reading

- Questions
- Side, Dominique. 2005. *Buddhism*, Philip Allan Updates, pp.48-60.
- To learn more about Theravada:
<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/>
<http://www.buddhanet.net/>
- To learn more about Mahayana:
<http://www12.canvas.ne.jp/horai/index.html>

Optional Extension Work

- Read one discourse from the Pali Canon, then summarise its contents
- Research the imagery, stories, and meaning associated with one cosmic Buddha/bodhisattva and write it up in a 300-500 word article