

## Development of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism in Historical and Philosophical Perspectives

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper deals with the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism which relied on the understanding of the historical events of the development of Buddhism after Gautam Buddha's Mahaparinirvana around 543 BCE. With respect to the origin of Buddhism in India along with the conditions that led to the schism of Buddhism, the First Buddhist Council, and the Second Buddhist Council must be studied, including the consequences of their results. Each period of Indian Buddhism is divided into layouts to see more clearly about the origin and development of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

The proposed paper has been undertaken with a view to trace the evolution of Mahāyāna School and its various sub-schools in the historical and philosophical perspective. It is aimed not only to trace the historical pathway of the development of Mahāyāna School, but it equally aims at highlighting the important philosophical developments during the course of its evolution.

The paper covers a very wide canvas under its ambit. For this reason, it will examine history as well as philosophy as regards the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The important scholars and savants of the Mahāyāna fold will be covered in detail.

**Keywords:** *Mahayana Buddhism, Development, Historical, Philosophical.*

The fundamental causes giving rise to the development of Buddhist orders in India are necessary to know. In the whole world everyone should be familiar with the name of certain Buddhist orders including their main doctrinal teaching. This understanding will articulate the origin of Mahāyāna Buddhism and its development step by step which will be described in the following chapter. Indian Buddhism may be divided into the five periods as follows. 1) Early Buddhism or pre-sectarian Buddhism 2) Nikāya Buddhism or Sectarian Buddhism 3) Early Mahāyāna Buddhism 4) Later Mahāyāna Buddhism 5) Esoteric Buddhism.

After having originated as '*Shravakayana*', which is known as *Hinayāna* School, Buddhism went on to diversify with the passing of time. Buddhism then bifurcated into two main schools: *Hinayāna* and *Mahāyāna*. Both of them, in turn, branched out to form a number of sub-schools.

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One hundred years after the Buddha's passing away, at the time of the Second Council, Buddhism was still not strong in Mathurā. The second Council was held because the monks of Vaiśālī were said to have adopted ten practices that violated the precepts. When a dispute arose over these practices, seven hundred monks assembled in Vaiśālī and determined that the monks of Vaiśālī were in error. Although deciding the status of the ten practices in question was the main reason for the meeting, the *Dīpavaṃsa*, a Sri Lankan chronicle, refers to the meeting as the "Second Council" because the canon was chanted after the other business had been completed. The schism, often called the basic schism resulted in the formation of two schools: the Mahāsaṅghika, whose monks refused to accept the conservative ruling of the committee of eight monks, and the Sthaviravāda (Pāli Theravāda), whose monks agreed with the conservative ruling. The name Mahāsaṅghika means "great assembly" and suggests that many monks belonged to the liberal faction. The Sthavira lineage underwent seven schisms that resulted in eleven schools, while the Mahāsaṅghika School divided into a total of nine schools. The schisms in the two original schools thus resulted in a total of twenty schools. The phrase "the schisms into the eighteen schools," which is found in a number of Buddhist texts, refers to the eighteen schools produced by these later schisms, but not to the two original schools.

The origin of *Mahāyāna* School is the most important development in the history of Buddhism. It made Buddhism accommodative and flexible - the qualities, which are said to be lacking in *Hinayāna* School. Whereas the followers of *Hinayāna* School stuck to the literal meaning of the words of the Buddha, the *Mahāyānists* allowed room for a liberal interpretation of the Buddha's words so as to follow it in spirit and also to ensure that the *Dhammā* conforms to the changing needs of time.

Apart from this, *Mahāyāna* Buddhism has also made an overall contribution to the history of Buddhism, which is reflected in the fields of meta-physics, philosophy, culture, art and architecture, and so on. The contribution of *Mahāyāna* School to the development of all these areas has been immense and immeasurable. It has made Buddhism quite rich through its various contributions.

*Mahāyāna* School has left a profound imprint on the various aspects of the culture of Buddhism. It has deeply penetrated various aspects of the lives of people. It has influenced their daily chores and has given a meaning to them.

In the field of art and architecture, which is regarded as one of the most important contributions of Buddhism to Indian culture and civilization in particular and to world culture and civilization in general, *Mahāyāna* School's contribution has been unparalleled. Almost all the Schools of Buddhist art, such as Mathura, Gandhara, Nagarjunakonda and Amravati Schools have developed in the fold of *Mahāyāna* School of Buddhism. These schools of art are the prominent representative Schools of the Indian art form. *Mahāyāna* School has influenced the development of Buddhist architecture in varied forms, which are still regarded as masterpieces in the field of art.

Last but not in any way least, is the development of philosophy under *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. There is a huge galaxy of scholars and exponents who have made enormous contributions to the philosophical arm of Buddhism. These scholars have been credited with not only the task of

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elaborating and explaining the philosophical concepts propounded by the Buddha, but they have also been instrumental in giving entirely new interpretations to some of the abstruse metaphysical ideas and in the process have come out with novel connotations. For instance, the concept of *Sunyata* by Acharya Nagarjuna has been a matter of great interest and research to the Buddhist scholars throughout the world. Similarly, there are many other prominent scholars and their equally important works and concepts, which are deemed to be fit for the subject of research.

The development of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism was an epoch-making event in the history and philosophy of Buddhism. The gradual progress of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism will be studied from the stand-point of history. The *Mahāyāna* thought was expanded not in a hurry but in a historical process. In this way, the study area would cover the development of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism in historical terms.

Furthermore, the development of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism would be analyzed on the bed-rock of philosophical doctrine. How does the developmental process of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism start drifting away from the earlier principles of *Theravada* Buddhism? Infact, Buddhism got metamorphosed in the *Mahāyāna* fold beyond recognition. Thus, the study area encompasses the origin and development of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism within the historical as well as philosophical paradigm.

Many modern scholars have maintained the view that *Mahāyāna* Buddhism developed out of the Mahāsaṅghika School. But since the Mahāsaṅghika School continued to exist long after *Mahāyāna* Buddhism arose, the rise of *Mahāyāna* cannot be explained simply as the transformation of the Mahāsaṅghikas into Mahayanists. While it is true that the many similarities between Mahāsaṅghika and *Mahāyāna* doctrines prove that the Mahāsaṅghika School did influence *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, teachings from the Sarvāstivādin, Mahīśāśka, Dharmagupta, and Theravāda schools were also incorporated into *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. The doctrines of Sarāstivāda School in particular were often mentioned in *Mahāyāna* texts, and Sammatīya teachings also were influential. The relation between Nikāya Buddhism and *Mahāyāna* Buddhism clearly is not a simple one.

### LITERATURE

There is a huge corpus of literature in regard to the development of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism in the form of primary, secondary and tertiary literary source materials. There are several important and peerless monographs. A large number of *Mahāyānic* treatises with their translations are now easily available. The most important work on the subject under discussion is listed below:

***Mulamadhyamikakarika* of Acharya Nagarjuna translated in English titled as “The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way” by J. L. Garfield.**

This book provides a clear and eminently readable translation of Nagarjuna’s seminal work, offering those with little or no prior knowledge of Buddhist philosophy a view into the profound logic of the *Mulamadhyamikakarika* in its entirety, and a commentary reflecting the Tibetan tradition through which Nagarjuna’s philosophical influence has largely been transmitted.

***An Introduction to Mahāyāna Buddhism* by William Montgomery McGovern.**

The present work puts forth the essentials of *Mahāyāna* philosophy in a simple form and presents a historical outline of the origin and development of *Mahāyānic* ideas and practices.

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### ***Outlines of Mahāyāna Buddhism* by Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki.**

This is one of the finest introductory manuals to date on *Mahayana* School of Buddhism. The book has been written in a lucid, transparent and easy to read style so that an average reader can easily grasp the most intricate and complex *Mahayana* philosophical doctrines.

### ***Madhyamaka Schools in India* by Peter Della Santina.**

This book deals with the history and philosophy of the most famous school of Buddhist thinkers, i.e. the *Madhyamika*. Its exposition of the Buddhist metaphysics is without parallel in the modern period.

### ***The Lankavatara Sutra: A Mahāyāna Text* by D. T. Suzuki**

The present translation is based upon the Sanskrit edition of Bunyo Nanjo. This edition reflects those fundamental themes of Buddhism, which the *Mahāyāna* Buddhism in general cherishes and upholds. It looks at absolute from absolute and relative realms.

### ***Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Doctrinal Foundations* by Paul Williams.**

This volume provides an up-to-date and accurate account of the principles of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism as they are found in both the Indo-Tibetan and East Asian forms of *Mahāyāna*. The book places Buddhist doctrine within a historical and cultural context, and provides a basis for students to engage in their own further research into Buddhist theory and practice.

### ***Mahāyānasutralankara* by Asanga translated by Surekha Vijay Limaye.**

The *Mahāyānasutralankara* by Asanga is a landmark in the development of *Vijnanavada* absolutism. It is an embellishment of *Mahāyāna sutras*. There is no Buddhist topic, which is not touched by Asanga.

## CONCLUSION

The present paper concluded with the main points which are given as under:

- *Mahāyāna* Buddhism evolved out of *Hinayāna* Buddhism
- The adoption of Sanskrit as a medium of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism paved the way for profound and abstruse *Mahāyānic* concepts and philosophies, and
- The development of *Mahāyāna* philosophy is in line with the historical progression.

Approximately one century after the Buddha's death, the early order split to Mahāsaṅghika and Sthaviravāda schools. Later, further schism occurred, resulting in a number of additional schools. Sectarian (Nikāya) Buddhist doctrine at that time was typified by the development of scholastic abhidharma philosophy. Because the tradition differed from Early Buddhism in many ways, most scholars distinguish between Early and Sectarian Buddhism. Sectarian Buddhism was a major force in India for over thousand years, but most of its important doctrinal development occurred during its first three centuries, between 150 B.C.E. and 150 C.E. Of the more than twenty sects, the doctrines of only the Sarvāstivāda and Theravāda schools are understood in any detail today. Only a little is known about the doctrines of other schools because of the paucity of information concerning them. The Sautrāntika and Sammatīya schools flourished after the beginning of the common era. Although both probably had highly developed systems of doctrine, detailed information about them has not survived. When Iching departed from Canton for India in 671, the Theravāda, Sarvāstivāda, Sammatīya, and Mahāsaṅghika schools were still thriving.

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Later, they gradually blended with Mahāyāna Buddhism. In addition, both Sectarian and Mahāyāna Buddhism were influenced by Esoteric Buddhism. Unfortunately little is known about the later phases of Sectarian Buddhism. Mahāyāna scriptures were already in existence by the first century B.C.E., indicating that Mahāyāna Buddhism must have arisen around the beginning of the common era while Sectarian Buddhism was still developing. Early Mahāyāna practitioners were especially interested in teachings on 24 non substantiality or emptiness. Although mentions of non substantiality can be found in Early Buddhist scriptures, Mahayanists stressed and developed this theme far beyond anything found in either Early or Nikāya Buddhism.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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