Theravada and Mahayana: Similarities and Differences

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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
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)
Mahayana: geographical
The Buddha in Theravada

- ‘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
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


• 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