

# An Intra-Buddhist Dialogue between Theravāda and Mahāyāna: A Hermeneutical Search for Common Unity\*

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*The purpose of this essay is to seek a dialogue towards a common unity between the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions by raising hermeneutical issues regarding views about scripture and religious practice.*

*Movement towards dialogue and communication among Buddhists should proceed first from dialogue between the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions - both representative of present-day world Buddhism - towards a deeper-level dialogue between other sects. In order to do this, it is necessary first to comprehend the history of Buddhist thought and culture to discover a common unity rather than difference through dialogue between different traditions.*

*This essay points to number of hurdles that need to be overcome in order to acquire mutual understanding and to search for a commonly shared essence from the Mahāyāna perspective. This process will help us to find a way to establish a creative dialogue and identity of common practical goals among the Buddhist communities.*

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## I. Controversial Issues in Theravāda and Mahāyāna Doctrines

In every religion, intra-religious conflict often creates more serious problems than conflict with other religions. It goes without saying, therefore, that intra-religious dialogue should precede inter-religious dialogue, for dialogue within one's home community is the most fundamental, "dialogue begins at home" (Leonard Swidler, 1990:30). As the history of Buddhism shows, there has been conflict and antagonism among the various Buddhist sects. In the era of Abhidharma Buddhism, there were already twenty schools, and Mahāyāna Buddhism is also divided into more than thirteen sects. Today's Buddhism worldwide is divided into three main traditions, Theravāda (上座部), Mahāyāna (大乘), and Vajrayāna (金剛乘).

Since there are so many traditions and types of faith and practice in Buddhism, even devotees themselves often get confused. Some Buddhists argue for the superiority of their own schools without deep understanding about other traditions. As a result, it has been difficult to find either Buddhist identity or unity in the religious community. Let's briefly examine controversial issues between the Theravādins and Mahāyānists with regard to views about Buddha body, Dharma<sup>1</sup> and scriptures, and religious practice.

### 1. Authenticity of the Scriptures

The authenticity of Mahāyāna sūtras is a subtle issue that has been under controversy with the vicissitudes of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The Saṃgīti (合誦, compilation of scripture) was held four times before the Mahāyāna Movement was formed, but new sūtras were compiled with the establishment of Mahāyāna Buddhism. At the beginning of Mahāyāna sūtra texts, specific place names and attendants are mentioned with the phrase, "Thus have I heard (*Evam maya srutam*, 如

1 The Sanskrit term 'dharma' (Pāli, dhamma) combines two aspects, i.e., the ultimate nature of things (external Dharma) and its right experience (internal Dharma): (a) the plural form, 'dharma,' refers to all existent things or phenomena. (b) By using the capital letter and singular, the 'Dharma' refers to the truth enlightened by the Tathāgata.

是我聞)." This introduction is typically used in the sūtrain order to claim some authority. However, if the sūtras were written 600 years after the death of the Buddha, then their orthodoxy and authority seems problematic.

The question as to the authenticity of the Mahāyāna sūtras was first raised by Buddhists who criticized the Mahāyāna movement and condemned the sūtras as teachings of Mārā rather than the words of the Buddha. The Theravadins have held that, at the First Council at Rajagrha (480 B.C.E), the words of the Buddha were recited in full by disciples, and compiled authoritatively in the form of the Pāli Tipitaka, which represents the entire body of the Buddha's teaching.<sup>2</sup>

They believed the authority of the historical Buddha for their scriptural authenticity and consider their Tipitaka as the only authoritative 'Dhamma(Dharma)'<sup>3</sup> taught by the Buddha. Thus, eventually the Theravāda concept of the scriptural word became historical and literal.

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the meaning of the Tripitaka as the word of Buddha differs from that of the Theravāda and other Hīnayāna traditions. About five hundred years after the Buddha's death, new scriptures were composed by enlightened disciples within the Mahāyāna movement. But no Mahayanist claims that the sūtras necessarily contain an exact record of Shakyamuni Buddha's own words. In fact, there have been no sūtras handed down in the same language used by the Buddha, as Mizuno Kogen demonstrates, in that the sūtras were transmitted in other Indic Languages of later periods, and without doubt there were conscious and unconscious changes in Buddha's words made during the several centuries of oral transmission (Mizuno Kogen, 1982:22-40).

In spite of historical facts, Mahāyāna Buddhists accepted the new scriptures as true and authoritative. Thus, the rationale for composing the scriptures is: 'Whatever has been well said has been said by the Buddha.' The

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2 This view is common through out the ages in the Theravāda tradition. However, modern historical studies show that the First Council has no historical evidence. For the Theravāda claim and its modern criticism, see Narada Thera (1964:271) and E. Frauwallner (1956).

3 The two levels of Dhamma in the Theravāda context are also demonstrated by Jone R. Carter as "holy wisdom and salvific truth penetrated by the Buddha, and the teaching about the way that leads to this attainment." (John Ross Carter, 1976:661-679)

Mahayanists began to devalue the Abhidharma tradition and their belief in scriptural authority. Mahāyāna opened a profound and boundless door for the scriptures. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, these scriptural compositions were not closed, but rather opened, and have grown endlessly.

The *Pañcavimsatisahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* also provides the doctrinal ground for the authority of Mahāyāna sutras. By establishing the notion of the Dharmakāya Buddha and the non-abiding Dharma, the sūtra gives a new dimension to the scriptures. Edward Conze observes three aspects of the *Prajñāpāramitā* teaching in the sūtra as follows:

(a) The sūtra has been preached by the *Dharmakāya* which manifests its nature as valid independent of temporal or spatial circumstances at all times and throughout the universe;

(b) It proceeds from the highest level of spirituality, i.e., from the Buddha himself, the *Dharmakāya*. The wonderful qualities of the Buddha and his great wonder-working power are taken as a token of his capacity to teach the *saddharma* about the actual facts of existence. Knowledge and power go together. Omniscience implies omnipotence and omnipresence;

(c) The teaching has not only an intellectual and spiritual, but also a cosmic significance. The universe vibrates in consonance with it, and gives its consent to its message.<sup>4</sup> (Edward Conze, 1975:15-16).

As described in the opening section of the sutra, the *Prajñāpāramitā* scriptures are limitless in both time and space. Numerous Buddhas, the manifestation body (*nirmāṇa-kāya*, 化身), the enjoyment body (*saṃbhoga-kāya*, 報身), and the Dharma body (*dharmakāya*, 法身) can preach the Dharma. Shakyamuni Buddha is only one of those Buddhas. The nameless authors of the Mahāyāna sūtras seem to be inspired by the trikāya theory for composing the new scriptures. For the authors of Mahāyāna scriptures, any true disciple of the Buddha can preach the Dharma. Thus, Mahāyāna Buddhists open the door to a concept of scripture as a co-operative work, that is, the work of multiple authors or speakers.

4 This idea seems to be developed in the Zen tradition as a universal scripture. Dōgen Kigen demonstrates that all things are Sutra, in all things is manifested the enlightenment of the Buddhas of all times. These sūtras can be opened in the enlightenment experience (Dōgen's *shobogenzo*, 2 chapter 70: 80-88).

The fact that new schools and sects emerge with new scriptures or claim to be the word of Buddha himself, makes the hermeneutical task all the more complex. Some Buddhists, notably the Pure Land Buddhists, have maintained that the Mahāyāna scriptures are historically the actual words of Shakyamuni Buddha. They claim that the Mahāyāna sutras, including the Pure Land and the Hīnayāna scriptures, can be traced to Shakyamuni Buddha himself. Since Mahāyāna Buddhism has been passed down directly from Buddha's own words, the popular theory that the Mahāyāna scriptures were composed as late as the first century, C.E. can no longer hold. (Giken Ito, 1954).

This idea is closed to the Theravadin's. They seem anxious to establish the historical authenticity of their tradition. For Theravadins, the belief that the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* are the literal word of the historical Buddha is important in order to authenticate their tradition. As seen in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā sūtra*, Hinayanists charge that the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* are the word of *Māra* (evil):

What you have heard just now, that is not the word of the Buddha. It is poetry, the work of poets (*kavikrtam kavayam*). But what I here teach to you, that is the teaching of the Buddha, that is the word of the Buddha. (The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā sūtra*, 328; tr. Edward Conze, 1973)

Thus, for Hinayanists, the *Prajñāpāramitā* scriptures are the works of poets, not the words of the Buddha. And as is well known poets speak words that may be pleasant, false, and useless. The *Ta-chih-tu-lun* (大智度論) defends itself against the accusations in this way:

By reciting the Buddha's preachings, the Buddha's disciples compiled Mahāyāna sūtras. Thus, ignorant people are guilty of slander when they say, "This Mahāyāna sūtra is not the Buddha's preaching. It was made by Mara or Māra's followers, poets, and it was also written by people with false views. (TCTL, 62).

In fact the scriptural texts are a sort of linguistic fiction which exist only in people's imagination. Yet, the works of a poet, that is, metaphorical language, can also be enlightened language. The point here is their efficacy,

not propositional truth-value.

Mahāyānist also argue that if a person who has achieved enlightenment teaches Dharma, it is recognized as the words of Buddha. This attitude is completely different from the Theravāda interpretations of the sūtras. Mahāyānist believe that something is the truth not because it was spoken by Buddha, but because everything that speaks of the truth can be considered the Buddha's teachings. Thus, in the Mahāyāna tradition the notion of Buddhist scripture has expanded.

The question of whether Mahāyāna scriptures are the Buddha's actual words can be considered from two different points of view; historical and doctrinal. As modern Buddhist historians agree, the Mahāyāna sūtras might not be direct a teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha, however, regarding these doctrins Mahayanists assert that they should be accepted as the teaching of the Buddha. These claims are based on the belief that the Mahāyāna scriptures have doctrinal orthodoxy because most Mahāyāna teachings are frequently found in early scriptures.

Moreover, some Buddhists believe that the Buddha actually taught the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* during his lifetime. However, no 'Srāvakas (hearers) understood the superior teachings. Hence, the Buddha put the profound teachings into the hand of the Nāgā King. It was Nāgārjuna who obtained the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* from Nāgā in the ocean, and was permitted to bring back the Dharma treasure to the world. (Bu-ston, 1931:122-135).<sup>5</sup>

Do the Mahāyāna scriptures represent the true spirit of the Buddha, and contain more profound doctrines than the Hīnayāna scriptures? Then, what constitutes the true spirit of Buddha-Dharma? Mizuno Kogen proposes two ways in which Mahāyāna doctrines can be seen as the Buddha's teaching:

First, it is necessary to insist that even if the historical Buddha did not actually expound Mahāyāna teachings they should still be

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<sup>5</sup> This story claims three things; (a) the superiority of the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*, (b) depth of the scriptures, (c) Nāgārjuna's role in discovering the scriptures. The story of course is symbolic. As Nāgārjuna's name indicates, Naga and Nagarjuna are identical. The Naga king who lives in the ocean protected the *Prajñāpāramitā* scriptures until Nāgārjuna brought the texts back to this world. The ocean signifies the profound depth of the *Prajñāpāramitā* scriptures. The ocean also means serenity of prajna, the inner peace that comes with enlightenment. Nāgārjuna discovered such truth in the ocean of the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts, and delivered the doctrine to the everyday world. From the silence of the ocean he returns to the speech, the language of the conventional world.

regarded as his word because they embody the Truth of Buddhism. Second, to make clear that the Mahāyāna sūtras merely explain in greater detail the many elements of Mahāyāna belief that are described but briefly in the *Agama sūtras*, which are accepted as reliable records of the Buddha words. (Mizuno Kogen, 1882: 132).

It seems a sound proposal for both Mahayanists and Hinayanists to attain the true spirit of Buddhism. The scriptural texts themselves are more important than authors, for religious texts and truth do not belong to certain individuals. The scriptural text does not exist for the author himself, but is spoken to and for others. These texts exist for all human beings and texts that are written for a specific person are not sutras.

So, what constitutes the authority of the Mahāyāna scriptures? The answer is simple: communicative competence. Whatever effectively conveys the emancipatory message is well spoken, and whatever is well spoken leads to enlightenment, and whatever leads to enlightenment is the word of the Buddha in the extended sense. The words of the Tathāgata are not frozen. They are not eternal or closed. Because they are spoken with the audience in minds, they are flexible and open-ended.

## 2. The View of a Buddha and Religious Practice

The Mahāyāna Buddhist movement started around the 1st Century B.C.E. At that time it was a big wave that marked a historic watershed in Buddhist history. The movement was not that of a single religious sect led by a particular individual, but instead was various faiths and scriptures that gradually became unified and developed into the ideology called Mahāyāna. By the 3rd Century, unified Mahāyāna doctrine and religious order had been established.

The special doctrinal characteristics of Mahāyāna scriptures are the Boddhisattva ideals, the doctrine of multiple Buddhas, a positive interpretation of *Nirvāṇa*, Sanskritization of sūtras, emphasis on worship and rituals, the importance of the role of lay Buddhists, a doctrine of vows, a positive interpretation of the precepts, practice of *mantra* and *darani*, and other-power Faith, etc. In particular, new terms appear such

as 'six *pāramitās*', 'generating *Bodhicitta*', 'the ten *bhumis*', 'attainment of Buddhahood', three-bodies of the Buddha', 'emptiness', '*Tathāgata-garbha*.'

Among these, the two concepts that Mahāyāna Buddhism contributed to the cultural history of humankind are the Bodhisattva ideal and the doctrine of *śūnyatā* (emptiness). The latter became the ideological foundation of Mahāyāna, whereas the former was the driving force that made Mahāyāna Buddhism successful as a religion.

The question of "Who is a Buddha?" was the most significant question for all Buddhist sects. When Gautama Buddha was alive, there was no being that could be called a Buddha other than the historical Buddha. The Buddha was also called Tathāgata, and he showed both human and superhuman aspects, and was seen as the highest teacher of all humans and divine beings.

Dharmakāya-oriented ideology which believes in an eternally imperishable body of a Buddha, was an advancement. Mahāyānists believe that the historical Buddha is a mere incarnation of Dharma-body, but *Prajñā-pāramitā* (perfection of wisdom) is the Tathāgata's Dharma-kāya. The *Saddharmapuṇḍarika-sūtra* uses the term 'eternal Buddha' rather than that of dharma-kāya. The eternal Buddha is a Buddha who was enlightened a long time ago, and the life of Tathāgata is infinite. He exists forever. The eternal Buddha comes into being that surpasses the Buddhas of past or the future (The *Saddharmapuṇḍarika-sūtra* chapter 16).

In the *Avatṃsaka-sūtra*, Vairocana Buddha, the dharma kāya Buddha, is manifest as an infinite Buddha that has omnipresent nature, therefore the Buddha in Mahāyāna Buddhism is elevated into vast and transcendental light. This idea of the Buddha-body was later developed into that of sambhoga-kāya meaning the body that resulted from the achievement of bodhisattva vows.

Mahāyāna Buddhism criticized conservative precepts and emphasized opened autonomous ethics. Although it inherits the morality of early Buddhism, Mahāyāna Buddhism reinterprets the meaning of Sila, depending on whether the precepts are kept in a self-centered way or in a Mahāyāna way. The Bohisattva precepts are positive and active,



in that these are always related to mind karma based on motivational ethics and a hope for redeeming mankind. The spirit of Sila in Mahāyāna Buddhism carries meaning only when the precepts are observed in order to attain enlightenment and for the benefit of all mankind. They are not passive commandments that avoid committing evil, but are active ones that expand the good.

The idea of *karma* in early Buddhism emphasized self-responsibility. However, Mahāyāna introduced the idea of *parināmanā* (廻向, *hui-xing*) in which one's good deeds not only benefit oneself, but contribute to the wellbeing of others. There are two types of *parināmanā*. One is to channel the merit obtained from one's good deeds to one's own enlightenment, another is to offer this merit for the wellbeing and enlightenment of others. The latter is different from the doctrine of causality which emphasizes that one's karma is bound to come back to oneself.

Theravāda emphasizes faith based on self-power, whereas Mahāyāna adopted elements of other-power faith. The Pure-Land faith believes that Buddha's original vows will establish an idealistic Buddha-land and redeem those mankind who aspire to be reborn there. Faith in Amitabha Buddha teaches that one's sins can be easily lifted and enlightenment achieved all by Buddha's Grace and the power of his original vows. The Pure-land teaching is said to have arisen from the Buddha's warm compassion towards an agonized humankind. Faith in Rebirth to the Pure land earned empathy from the general public and opened the door for popularization of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

It cannot be denied that Mahāyāna beliefs such as Avalokiteśvara Boddhisattva, Amitabha-Buddha, Maitreya Buddha, and Ksitigarbha Boddhisattva are influenced from other religious cultures. However, the value cannot be underestimated from the viewpoint of orthodoxy based on historicism. The advantage of Buddhism is that when it is introduced to new cultures, it generally harmonizes with the local beliefs. At the same time, it has never lost its essential religious characteristics based on self-power, and other power also aims for the ideal of ultimate awakening.

Buddhism has an inclusive character. Inclusivism, in this sense, may be defined as a religious system which accepts other religious teaching, but recognizes only its preliminary values of other teachings while maintaining the superiority of Buddhism. This principle of inclusivism can be applied not only to intra-religious dialogue among the various sects or religious bodies, but also to Buddhism's understanding of other religions.

## II. The Search for Common Unity and Creative Dialogue

### 1. Common Ground

From a religious or historical perspective, the Mahāyāna concept came mainly from the doctrine of the Mahāsamghika school. In fact, the root of Mahāyāna was already contained in the original Buddhist teachings. The major principles of Mahāyāna can be found in the Five Nikāyas. Walpola Rahula sees no big differences between Theravāda and Mahāyāna in terms of fundamental lessons due to the following reasons:

- (a) Both accept Sakyamuni Buddha as the Teacher.
- (b) The Four Noble Truths are exactly the same in both schools.
- (c) The Eight-fold Path is exactly the same in both schools.
- (d) The *Paticca-samuppāda* or Dependent Origination is the same in both schools.
- (e) Both reject the idea of a supreme being who created and governs this world.
- (f) Both accept *Anicca*, *Dukkha*, *Anatta* and *Sīla*, *Samādhi*, *Paññā* without any differences. (Walpola Rahula: 1996)

The World Buddhist Sangha Council also approved the following points as written by Ven. Walpola Rahula in Sri Lanka in 1966 as follows.

- (a) The Buddha is our only Master.
- (b) We take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha.
- (c) We do not believe that this world is created and ruled by a God.

- (d) Following the example of the Buddha, who is the embodiment of Great Compassion (*mahākaruṇā*) and Great Wisdom (*mahāprajñā*), we consider that the purpose of life is to develop compassion for all living beings without discrimination and to work for their good, happiness, and peace; and to develop wisdom leading to the realization of Ultimate Truth.
- (e) We accept the Four Noble Truths, namely *Dukkha*, the Arising of *Dukkha*, the Cessation of *Dukkha*, and the Path leading to the Cessation of *Dukkha*; and the universal law of cause and effect as taught in the *pratītya-samutpāda* (Conditioned Genesis or Dependent Origination).
- (f) We understand, according to the teaching of the Buddha, that all conditioned things (*saṃskāra*) are impermanent (*anitya*) and *dukkha*, and that all conditioned and unconditioned things (*dharma*) are without self (*anatma*).
- (g) We accept the Thirty-seven Qualities conducive to Enlightenment (*bodhipakṣa-dharma*) as different aspects of the Path taught by the Buddha leading to Enlightenment.
- (h) There are three ways of attaining bodhi or Enlightenment, according to the ability and capacity of each individual: namely as a disciple (*śrāvaka*), as a Pratyeka-Buddha and as a *Samyak-sam-Buddha* (perfectly and Fully Enlightened Buddha). We accept it as the highest, noblest, and most heroic to follow the career of a Bodhisattva and to become a *Samyak-sam-Buddha* in order to save others.
- (i) We admit that in different countries there are differences with regard to the life of Buddhist monks, popular Buddhist beliefs and practices, rites and ceremonies, customs and habits. These external forms and expressions should not be confused with the essential teachings of the Buddha (Walpola Rahula: 1974).

Even though the Mahāyāna movement introduced new forms of Buddhism, it is certain that the doctrine of *śūnyatā*, which is a central teaching in Mahāyāna, is just a reinterpretation of *Anatta* and dependent origination of early Buddhism. The origin of Yogācāra Thought is also easily found in early scriptures.

## 2. Proper Use of Terminology

Devotees of Mahāyāna Buddhism used the term Mahāyāna to emphasize the greatness of their own teachings. However, it can be problematic whether or not it is appropriate to call anything other than the tradition of Mahāyāna as Hīnayāna. In this regard, it would help to refer to Walpola Rahula's views:

Theravāda Buddhism went to Sri Lanka during the 3rd Century B.C. when there was no Mahāyāna at all. Hīnayāna sects developed in India and had an existence independent from the form of Buddhism existing in Sri Lanka. Today there is no Hīnayāna sect in existence anywhere in the world (Walpola Rahula: 1996).

In fact, the so called Hīnayāna sect, that was critical at the time when Mahāyāna Buddhism was on the rise, might be the Sarvāstivāda or Sautrāntika sect. For that reason, The World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB) decided not to use the term "Hīnayāna" to refer to Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Khmer, and Laos.

It is equally inappropriate to identify today's Theravāda Buddhism with early Buddhism. Theravādins only believe in Pāli scriptures which are considered to be closer to the live speech of the Buddha than any other scriptures. There is a concern that if early Buddhism is identified as Hīnayāna, the Buddha's fundamental teachings might be reduced to an inferior teaching which is quite a troubling dilemma. By the same token, it is wrong to refer to the five Nikāyas, i.e., early Buddhist scriptures, as Hīnayāna scriptures. Mahāyāna should be understood not as a particular sect, but as a concept that came into being through dialectical negation of non-Buddhistic teachings.

In fact, Hīnayāna exists in every Buddhist tradition, not as a specific sect, but as a non-religious phenomenon. For example, selfish prayer, a Bhikṣu-centered samgha system, distorted preaching, selfish or pedantic Buddhists, noumenal Buddhism interpreters, false sūtras, lack of will to practice, sectarianism, exclusivism, and Buddhists who neglect

their duty of practicing mercy, or are obsessed with formality of Buddhist precepts: these are Hīnayāna Buddhists. In this context, Hīnayāna means the non-Buddhistic ways that should be overcome, and Mahāyāna means the will to rise above and reform Hīnayāna.

Therefore, the true meaning of Mahāyāna lies in a return to the original teaching of the Buddha and a correction of the distortions which have occurred in the course of Buddhism's 2,600 years history. In this regard, the terms Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna will not be used to indicate certain sects, but as concepts of extensive value determination.

### 3. What is Orthodox?

One of the barriers between Theravāda and Mahāyāna is a so-called orthodox belief system. The Theravādins argue that they have historical orthodoxy from the Buddha, and they arrogantly ignore Mahāyāna based on the belief that the only the five Nikāyas are the genuine and pure teaching coming directly from the Buddha. This view should be corrected.

Likewise, Mahāyānists should abandon their attitude of superiority which is generated from the three-yānas, i.e., *śrāvaka-yāna* (聲聞乘), *pratyeka-buddha-yāna* (緣覺乘), and *bodhisattva-yāna* (菩薩乘). Also sectarian attitudes should be abolished such as claiming that Mahāyāna teaching is *Nītārtha* (了義, ultimate teaching), and Hīnayāna is *Neyārtha* (不了義, provisional teaching). Finally, the view that the schools and doctrines of early Buddhism, including the Abhidharma and Hīnayāna are the same, is an error of over-simplification and should be corrected.

Theravādins argue that they are the successor to the orthodox Buddhism, based on the belief that the Theravāda sūtras were regarded as those which the historic Buddha himself preached. This view implies that the orthodoxy of Mahāyāna should be denied, and furthermore, Theravāda should be absolutized.

Mahāyāna originated and developed from early Buddhism. It is not a new religion departing from Sakyamuni Buddha's original teaching. Even so, Theravādins criticize Mahāyāna as not originating

from Buddhism, and regard faith in multi-Buddhas as heretical. Besides, the Theravāda advocates are concerned that ignoring historic Buddha may result in an evil course. They also argue that excessive tolerance and generosity will dilute the innocence of Buddhism and thus regard Mahāyāna and Esoteric Buddhism as Hindu-Buddhist which deviates from the essence of Buddhism.

Almost all doctrinal conflicts in Buddhist schools are due to misunderstanding of the nature of the scriptural word. The doctrinal classification of the sūtras into Hīnayāna and Mahayana, and the belief of superiority of one over the other, is one example. Buddhists have claimed that some scriptures are superior to others, thus projecting their ego identity into doctrinal rigidity. Buddhists should refute such doctrinal classifications (*p'an-chiao*, 判教).<sup>6</sup> Chi-tsang points to the *ekāyana* nature of Buddhist scriptures:

These classifications of scriptures are like illustrations. What image do they resemble? It is like empty space which is immovable, unobstructed. There will be many terms. However, in fact, they are the character of non-difference. For this reason, although the terms and letters are different, in truth, their nature are non-difference. (The *Ta-ch'eng-hsuan-lun* (TCHL, 大乘玄論), T. 45, 44a).

The varying understanding of scriptural texts is often due to the different doctrinal understandings that are brought to the reading of the text. There appears to be a contradiction in the teaching of the Tathāgata, due in particular to his presentation of a theme in a certain way at a given place and time, and his different treatment of the same theme in another place and time. This seeming contradiction can be explained in light of the upayic stance, i.e., he teaches in accordance with the spiritual maturity and ability of listeners.

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<sup>6</sup> The classification of sūtras and doctrines is seen in the *Samdhinirmocana sūtra* and (*Wu-liang-i-ching*) [T. 16. pp.673c-674a], and the *Akshayamati-sūtra* (*Shen-mi-chieh-t'o-ching*) [T. 9. p. 386ab]. In China since the Northern and Southern dynasties period the 'p'an-chiao' system for classifying the scriptures has become a popular intellectual exercise among the Buddhist schools. They try to determine the proper historical place of each sūtra and doctrine in the whole teachings of the Buddha. The p'an-chiao system primarily aims at establishing a hierarchy of its own school. They failed to find the historical order of the scriptures, because their approach was not historical and textual.

All scriptures just point to the path. The point is not whether the scriptures are intrinsically true or false, but what is crucial is the scriptures' liberating efficacy; whether or not they lead to enlightenment. In this regard, the question as to whether the scriptural texts are based on intrinsic truth or falsity, can be suspended. In a sense there are many yānas (vehicles); in another sense they are one vehicle (*ekayāna*, 一乘). It is necessary to point out that the sūtras are not about the truth itself, but are to teach us how to reach the truth. The doctrines in the Five Nikāya are also contextual truth according to the audience and the necessities of that time. Therefore, if it is not clearly understood that all sūtras are an instrument, it may lead to severe misinterpretation of the profound meaning of Mahāyāna.

#### 4. Buddhism is a Mere Mārga

Buddhists should understand that the Buddha's discourses are mere method (*mārga*). The Mādhyamika school holds that there is an inseparability of truth and method in the scriptures. The Buddha speaks, but the truth of what he speaks depends on how he has come to speak the words that he does. The Buddha's discourses are characterized as a functional means from beginning to end (Yadav, 1977). Never does the Buddha speak of truth for himself; he invariably speaks of how he has arrived at the truth and how others can do the same. The method dominates the content. The *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* (金剛般若波羅密經) advises:

You should not be attached to things as being possessed of, or devoid of, intrinsic qualities. This is the reason why the Tathāgata always teaches this saying: My teaching of the Dharma is to be likened unto a raft. Even the teaching of the Buddha must be relinquished; how much more so non-Dharma. ( The *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā sūtra*, Chapter 67) <sup>7</sup>

7 For the Sanskrit text of the *Vajra-cchedikā-Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* and its various translations, see M. Muller, AOAS 1:1(1881): 19-46; repr. (1972). Dutt, N. *Gilgit Manuscripts* 4 (1959): 141-170. E. Conze, SOR13. (Rome: Is.m.e.o., 1957); 2nd., with corrections and additions (1974). Tibetan translation: To. 16, P. 739. Chinese translations: T. 220, K. 1. T. 235, K. 13. T. 236, K. 14. T. 237, K. 15. and T. 238, K. 17. English translation: A. F. Price, *The Jewel of Transcendental Wisdom* (1947); repr. as *The Diamond sūtra* (1955). E. Conze, *Vajracchedika- Prajñāpāramitā* (Rome: 1957), pp. 65-92. M.Muller, *Buddhist*

Therefore, The *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* warns that we should not attach to even the sermon that Buddha himself preached as the Absolute Truth. In Buddhism, it is said that obsession with Dharma is one of the sufferings that should be discarded along with obsession with oneself. If it is believed that truth has substance, this idea can cause obsession with one's own creed, resulting in conflicts of hatred and contradiction. The *Majjhima nikāya* also emphasizes that the scriptural words are functional tools:

Does a man who has safely crossed a flood upon a raft continue his journey carrying that raft upon his head? So long as the mind is attached even to Buddha's teaching, as a basis, it will cherish the idea of 'I' and 'other'. (The *Majjhima nikāya* I-134, SBE 5: PTS, 1894).

The scriptures are so by virtue of their therapeutic efficacy; they are a means to an end, and the end is the spiritual awakening of sentient beings. In this sense, the scriptures have no particular value in themselves, but their truth value lies in whether they are an effective means to enlightenment. They are like a raft. It must be abandoned at a certain point on the reader's journey toward the other shore, *pāramitā*. That is why the Mādhyamika masters propose to deconstruction of scriptural texts as a thing-in-itself.

As a teacher, the Buddha has to know actual conditions of every individual in past, present, and future. By comprehending all modes (*prakara*) of existence and the rule of demonstration, the Buddha can discourse with his audience with confidence. Thus, for the Buddha, wisdom (*prajñā*) and strategic use of language (*upāya*) work together in communicating the emancipatory experience. The *Saddharmapundarīka sūtra* (妙法蓮華經) elucidates this point:

The wisdom of Buddhas is very profound and infinite. It is difficult to understand and difficult to enter. Ever since I became Buddha, with various reasoning and various parable I have discoursed and taught, and, by countless tactful method have led living beings, causing them to leave all attachments. Wherefore? Because the Tathāgata is altogether perfect in His upaya and

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*Mahāyāna Sūtras*. SBE 49 (Oxford: PTS, 1894). The references to the VCPS are taken from Conze's translation with modification.



prajnaparamita.---The Tathāgata is able to discriminate everything, preach the Dharma skillfully, use gentle words, and cheer up the hearts of all. (The *Saddharmapūṇḍarīka sūtra*, 1971: 32-33)

The scriptural texts represent the Buddha's method of teaching, but they do not represent truth itself. Truth seeks to free itself from the limits of scriptural language, as a raft has to be abandoned at the end of its journey. Candrakīrti also observes the nature of the teaching of the Tathāgata:

All the teachings of the illustrious Buddhas, who are possessed of universal compassion, ultimate insight and practical wisdom, are intended to be a means of penetrating to the way of things as they are. The perfectly realized ones have not uttered one word which was not in fact a means of penetrating to the way of things as they are. They administer medicine suited to the illness. They have the urge help to those who need guidance and they teach the truth accordingly. To quote from the Four Hundred Verses: "Things are real, things are not real, things are both real and not real: all this is said variously. Indeed all cures as such are cures for a specific desire." (Chandrakīrti, 1978:182)

We argue that all scriptural texts are strategic communications and therefore provisional (*neyārtha*). The contexts defines the texts. To understand the discourse of the Buddha, it is important to keep in mind the relationship between the truth of the enlightenment of the Buddha and his method of communicating truth. The scriptural texts have to be understood in the context in which they are taught. Contextual understanding is required to be aware of both the Buddha's intention and a listener's situation. And the teachings of the Buddha cannot be differentiated between the shallow and the profound as they are designed to meet the needs of people's varying capacities.

### III. Conclusion

Buddhism does not die with Buddha. As Mahāyāna accomplished a drastic development in Buddhism by reinterpreting the wisdom and mercy which are the central concepts of Buddha's awakening, Buddhists

today should reinterpret Buddha Dharma and open to a new vision of Buddhist hermeneutics.<sup>8</sup> Hence, the following points for creative dialogue and collaboration between Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions are proposed:

First, a new formulation of Samghiti is required to develop it into a universal Buddhist scripture. Through official meetings of the three traditions, new Buddhist doctrines should be reviewed and officially recognized. The process of canonization for all Buddhist scriptures should be agreed by Buddhist scholars and leaders from all three traditions. In particular, it is crucial to attain official agreement on the authenticity of Mahāyāna sūtras from all Buddhism traditions.

Second, establishment of a common teaching and standardized ceremony is necessary. For example; standardization of Three Refuges, reinterpretation of the panca-sila (Five Precepts) or the Ten Sila, establishment of the buddha-body theory, and the determination of central doctrine in Buddhism including early Buddhism, Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions.

Third, for mutual learning and growth through dialogue among Buddhist communities, Buddhists around the world should participate actively in INEB (The International Network for Engaged Buddhists), WFB (The World Fellowship of Buddhists), or IPM (International Pancasila-samadana Movement). In 1993, the Korean headquarters of WFB established IPM which is designed to set common ethical rules among the Buddhist traditions of Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna. The Five Precepts can be extended globally as a common ethical movement, because it may be accepted by any communities which may have a prejudice against religion, country, people, race or religious sect (Yong-pyo Kim, 2002b: 8-9).

Fourth, facing the new century of globalization, it is time for Buddhist communities to open to an age of dialogue. This dialogue should begin with an understanding of each tradition's history, and

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<sup>8</sup> Robert A. F. Thurman proposes, "hermeneutics as the science of interpretation of sacred doctrine (*saddharma*) should be central in methodology of enlightenment of all the Buddhist traditions." See Thurman(1978: 19-39).

should be developed to include notional, ethical and practical dimensions. It is necessary to start a new chapter of mutual understanding among the three Buddhist traditions with regard to the education of doctrine, ceremony, history and culture in each tradition.

Fifth, Buddhist should seek universalism in traditional diversity. By understanding the history of Buddhist doctrine, the development and extension process of doctrine and its continuity should be recognized from the cultural and religious perspective. Also the diversity of Buddha's teachings and the uniqueness of Buddhist culture in many countries should be accepted.

Lastly, the Korean Buddhist tradition of inter-penetration can be a good model for further studies as current example for collaboration among Buddhism traditions. Korean Buddhism is a tradition based on successful interpenetration of number of different schools and religious traditions. The characteristics of a Korean Buddhism are based on hamonization Buddhism, and they range from sectarian Buddhism to hamonizational Buddhism.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Buddhism transcends all doctrinal beliefs and thought, and denies any dogmatic fixation of the truth or reality.<sup>10</sup> An open mind free of all barriers and boundaries, should be the basis for dialogue among the Buddhist communities.

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9 Wonhyo (617-686) in Shilla dynasty, stated in the *Thematic Essential of Nirovāna-sūtra* (*Yeolbanjongyo*, 涅槃宗要: HPC1, T.38) that it united all sūtras from diverse traditions, returned countless branches of the truth to the one, proved the utmost fairness of Buddha thought, and finally reconciliated many disputes.

10 Mahāyāna Buddhists' attitudes to the world religions might not be basically different from their attitudes toward other Buddhist schools. It stands for inclusivity. But this inclusivity is not metaphysical or theological; it does not elevate the uniqueness of a truth or its contexts to universal proportions. There are those who say that "the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real or the Ultimate" (John Hick, 1980:18). This view presupposes that there is one ultimate reality behind the world religions. It asserts that one ultimate reality, whether it is divine reality or not, manifests itself in various forms. There is a fundamental difference between such inclusivism and the Buddhist view on religious pluralism. Buddhism, especially the Mādhyamika, will not accept a fundamental unity of the world religions with Buddhist religion. In fact, as we have explored throughout the present study, such an absolute reality is metaphysical and must be deconstructed.

## Glossary

\* Notes: S = Sanskrit. P=Pāli K = Korean. J = Japanese.

- Amitabha Buddha (S) 阿彌陀佛  
 Anatta(P) 無我  
 Avalokiteśvara Boddhisattva (S) 觀世音菩薩  
 Avamṭasaka sūtra (S) 華嚴經  
 bhūmis (S) 地  
 Bodhicitta (S) 菩提心  
 bodhisattva-yāna (S) 菩薩乘  
 Saṃdhinirmocana sūtra (S) chieh-shên-mi-ching 解深密經  
 Chi-tsang, Kil-jang (K), Kichizo (J) 吉藏  
 dharma-kāya (S) 法身  
 Dōgen (J) 道元  
 ekayāna (S) 一乘  
 Hinayāna (S) 小乘  
 hui-xing 廻向 parināmanā (S)  
 Kim Yong-pyo (K) 金容彪  
 Kogen Mizuno (J) 水野弘元  
 Kṣitigarbha Boddhisattva (S) 地藏菩薩  
 Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra (S) 大般若經  
 Mahāsaṃghika (S) 大眾部  
 Mahāyāna (S) 大乘  
 Maitreya Buddha(S) 彌勒佛  
 majjhima nikāya (P) 中部經典  
 Nāgārjuna (S) 龍樹  
 Neyārtha (S) 不了義  
 nirmāṇa-kāya 化神  
 Nirvāna (S) 涅槃  
 Nītārtha (S) 了義  
 p'an-chiao 判教  
 paticca-samppāda (P), Pratītya-samutpāda(S) 緣起法  
 prajñāpāramitā (S) 般若波羅蜜  
 pratyeka-buddha-yāna (S) 緣覺乘  
 Saddharmapuṇḍarīka sūtra (S) 妙法蓮華經  
 saṃbhoga-kāya (S) 報身  
 saṃgiti (S) 合誦  
 Sarvāstivāda (S) 說一切有部  
 Shobogenzo (J) 正法眼藏  
 śrāvaka-yāna (S) 聲聞乘

sūnyatā (S) 空  
 Ta-ch'eng-hsuan-lun 大乘玄論  
 Ta-chih-tu-lun 大智度論  
 Tathāgata-garbha (S) 如來藏  
 Theravāda(p) 上座部  
 Tipitaka(p) Tripitaka(s) 三藏  
 upāya (S) 方便  
 Vajracchedikā prajñāpāramitā sūtra 金剛般若波羅蜜經  
 Vajrayāna(S) 金剛乘  
 Wōnhyo(K), yuan-hsiao 元曉  
 Yeolbanjongyo (K) 涅槃宗要

## Abbreviations

T *Taishyo-shinsyu-tajokyo* (Japanese Edition of the Chinese Tripitaka)  
 HPC *Han'gukpulgyochoṅsō* (Complete Works of Korean Buddhism)  
 K *Korea Tripitaka* (Korean Edition of the Chinese Tripitaka)

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