

## Chapter 19

### Differences of Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism

When propagating the Buddha-dharma, Śākyamuni often mentioned the importance of “initiating enlightenment,” which has always been the unshakable theme in Buddhism.

According to the *Buddha Thesaurus Sutra*<sup>1</sup>, the essential distinction between Hinayana<sup>2</sup> and Mahayana<sup>3</sup> Buddhism is that the two belong to two different stages of the same cultivation. (Also see discussion on Blessing of the Big Carriage in Chapter 6).

Hinayana Buddhism is built upon high moral standards of human beings, including honoring one’s mother and father, respecting one’s teachers and elders, mercifully refraining from killing living things, and practicing the ten virtuous acts. Only after having established this foundation could we begin the Mahayana path of cultivation. The Buddha also stated that “One has to learn the Hinayana path before studying the Mahayana path. Otherwise one is not a true Buddhist disciple.”

However, this is merely one of the viewpoints addressed in the *Buddha Thesaurus Sutra*. In fact, many Southeastern countries—Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, founded

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<sup>1</sup> 佛藏經

<sup>2</sup> 小乘佛法.

<sup>3</sup> 大乘佛法.

their Buddhism on the Hinayana framework. The masters there teach Buddhism by following the Hinayana path, and their approach is supported by the local government.

Why is there a split between Hinayana Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism? Why are there different cultivations within Mahayana Buddhism?

After the death of the Buddha, his disciples continued to propagate Buddhism generation after generations. During this long history, variegated schools of Buddhist teaching have been established. The Buddha often said that there are eighty-four thousand permutations for one to attain enlightenment.

According to the *Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha mentioned that everything one encounters has the potential to provide the causes and conditions for one to obtain Buddhahood. It is not at all surprising that there are numerous sects in Buddhism, as all of them attempt to promulgate their way to Buddha-dharma. However, if someone tries to promote some cultivating methods without the foundation of Buddhism, then such a person is trying to create a new religion.

Hinayana Buddhism considers that the most important goal in life is to attain enlightenment and achieve nirvāṇa. Although its believers are encouraged to selflessly help others, self-realization is their primary goal after all. The *Āgama Sutra*<sup>4</sup> uses a phrase to describe the highest achievement of Hinayana Buddhism: “My life has come to an end. My work in inspiring

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<sup>4</sup> 阿含經.

spiritual values is established. What I set out to do is done. I have no reason to face rebirths.”<sup>5</sup>

The Hinayana teaching is mainly based on the “four noble truths” and “thirty-seven factors of enlightenment” (including “the eight correct paths”), which were proposed by the Buddha in his first sermons (the first turn of the wheel of the Dharma).

Being formulated during the Buddha’s second and three turns of the wheel of the Dharma, Mahayana Buddhism is mainly oriented towards *prajñā* and the pure mind of the *tathāgatagarbha*, considering that practitioners should establish and broaden their enlightened mind to help others. This goal is well articulated through the four great vows of the bodhisattva:

1. to save all living beings without limit;
2. to put an end to all afflictions and delusions however numerous;
3. to study and learn all methods and means;
4. to become perfect in the supreme Buddha-law.

The ultimate goal of Mahayana Buddhism is to pursue perfection until it liberates all sentient beings, which is the core of the enlightened mind.

As Buddhist believers, especially as followers of Mahayana Buddhism, how can we explain the differences between the Mahayana and Hinayana paths? We must bear in mind an

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<sup>5</sup> 我生已盡, 梵行已立, 所作已辦, 不受後有.”

undisputable fact that every path can help us acquire enlightenment, as long as it is the true Dharma. Buddhist teachings never try to argue about who is right and who is wrong.

We would not feel comfortable when we fail to help someone within our capability. This shame of selfness reveals our distance from perfection. In order to elevate ourselves to perfection, we must cultivate the enlightened mind.

How do disciples of Hinayana Buddhism see the difference between the two traditions? To understand this, Professor Huston Smith, a renowned scholar of religious studies,<sup>6</sup> has framed this question: “If people are able to completely surpass themselves, just like the arhats, what could be left besides compassion?” The answer is “nothing.” However, this question brings up another question: “If one is full of compassion after obtaining the true reward and entering nirvāṇa, then how could he stand the fact that numerous sentient beings surrounding him are still suffering from cyclic existence?” After all, the only solution to this conundrum is the four great vows of the bodhisattva and the enlightened mind.

Can we simply adopt the Mahayana path while neglecting the Hinayana cultivation? Of course not. Otherwise we would not be cultivating our mind according to certain stages, which is against the Buddha’s teaching demonstrated in the *Buddha Thesaurus Sutra*<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 127.

<sup>7</sup> 佛藏經.

The development of Hinayana Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism do not obstruct each other. On the contrary, the two traditions of Buddhist theories are mutually beneficial. It is worth noting that people should keep their mind free of discrimination. Just as Section 23 of the *Diamond Sutra* says, “All dharmas are equal”<sup>8</sup>, which illustrates the equality of all dharmas.

Many scholars consider that the concept of the “four noble truths” in Hinayana Buddhism actually contains the core theme of Buddhism. The following passage will explain the reason why I agree with this argument. Even though it is true, I still believe that we should introduce to beginners the concepts of “enlightening one’s mind to one’s (buddha-) nature” and “causes and effects,” which are relatively easy to understand.

The concepts of the “four noble truths”, “enlightening one’s mind to one’s (buddha-) nature” and “causes and effects” are mutually inclusive, because:

The First Truth “suffering” and Second Truth “origination” have already explained that the afflictions in human life are caused by craving, aversion, and ignorance. The idea of “causes and effects” has been integrated in the two truths. The Third Truth, “cessation,” further illustrates that suffering can be terminated, people can escape from the six destinies, achieve nirvāṇa, and restore “intrinsic nature.” It is evident that the “four noble truths” have already made reference to the concept of

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<sup>8</sup> 金剛經第 23 分: “是法平等, 無有高下.”

“enlightening one’s mind to one’s (buddha-) nature.”

As a result, I could say that the “four noble truths” and the theme of Chapter 2 reach the same goal by different means, if not following the exact route. Understanding this is very important, because when we see the commonality between Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism we can come to the conclusion that the two traditions belong to two continuous and compatible stages in Buddhism. They are definitely not two different religions.

Why am I so eager to explain the distinctions between Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism? Hinayana practitioners in Southeast Asia might feel perplexed about the difference between Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism. In this chapter, I discuss this issue in an effort to assist them in furthering their cultivations. In the West, people are already beginning to initiate Navayana. This is a Buddhist movement that may represent a new *yāna*, in addition to the traditionally recognized branches of Hinayana and Mahayana. If the “new *yāna*” is realized, the Buddha’s teachings would face the danger of false promulgation, which could potentially harm local audiences who are unable to hear the true Dharma.

### **Perfection in Mahayana Buddhism**

At the Catholic elementary school I attended in my youth, there was a class called “catechism.” Every student was given a brochure listed with several questions and answers, which teachers required students to memorize. For example, the first Q&A is as follows:

Q: Why do we exist in this world?

A: We are living in this world to worship God and to save our souls.

It seems that the goal of life in Christianity is to save our souls. It is rather similar to the Hinayana tradition, where the main purpose is to achieve enlightenment and nirvāṇa for ourselves. The Mahayana tradition is somewhat different. It emphasizes perfection and the enlightened mind. Besides, Mahayana Buddhism aims to help all sentient beings to attain enlightenment.