

The Lotus Sutra: Mahāyāna or Beyond Mahāyāna?

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The concept of evolution in Buddhist texts

Buddhism as any other religious, philosophical, sociological, economic, political, etc. system is submitted to the law of Evolution. Evolution is an important concept in Buddhism. Many Buddhist teachings have to do with Evolution. We have mentioned in our paper presented in the XVth Conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Atlanta, 2008, some of these teachings:

- The First Noble Truth, for instance, mentions among the forms of suffering old age, which arrives little by little, destroying the energy and the possibilities of man, transforming the individual in a living being different from what he has been before.

- Also the theory of dharmas presents reality as constituted by a huge accumulation of dharmas (or factors of existence) in a constant universal process of vertiginous replacement of one dharma by another, always different one from another, since they are produced by diverse causes and conditions.

- The cosmological Buddhist conception asserts that the universe is in a beginningless process of alternance of creations and destructions.

The result of the dharmas theory and this cosmological conception is that the universe is not static, but dynamic, that it is not being, but becoming.

- The denial of substance (*nairātmya*), central principle of Buddhism, also contributes to create the awareness of the changing nature of all existing being or thing, since substance -for those who accept it- is the solid and unchanging kernel of everything in the world.

- Let us also mention, as a testimony of this Buddhist awareness of the universal evolution, the fact that many times the *ālayavijñāna*, the basic layer of human mind or personality, is compared to a river that flows perpetually changing.

-Finally, the idea of evolution is forcibly expressed in the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* (Taishō N° 374, p. 449 a lines 6-12; cf. N° 375, p. 690 c line 28-p. 691 a line 5) where it is said:

譬如從牛出乳從乳出酪。從酪出生酥。從生酥出熟酥。

從熟酥出醍醐 . . .

. . . 佛亦如是。從佛出生十二部經。從十二部經出修多羅。

從修多羅出方等經。從方等經出般若波羅蜜。從般若波羅蜜出大涅槃。

“For instance: From a cow comes out (ni=KRAM-) milk, from milk comes out coagulated milk, from coagulated milk comes out butter, from butter comes out clarified butter, from clarified butter comes out cream ...

... The same happens also with the Buddha. From the Buddha comes out the *Twelvefold Sūtras of the Sects*⁷, from the *Twelvefold Sūtras of the Sects* come out the *Sūtras* (of the Mahāyāna in general), from the *Sūtras* (of the Mahāyāna in general) come out the *Vaipulya Sūtras*, from the *Vaipulya Sūtras* come out the *Prajñāparāmitā* (Sūtras), from the *Prajñāparāmitā* (Sūtras) comes out the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* (Sūtra).”

What is important in this comparison is the fact that from one thing, milk, derive many different products, all of them have one thing, milk, as their origin and essence. In the same way, from the Buddha derive all Buddhist Scriptures; all of them have the Word of the Buddha as their origin and essence.

Buddhist evolution as a whole

Something similar happens with Buddhist system as a whole. Buddhism is in a perpetual evolution, in an incessant change. This evolution and change take place in a soft, slow, and imperceptible way. It is why the son thinks and feels that his Buddhism is the same as that of his father, without perceiving the concealed evolution, the hidden changes that have taken place in his own generation, which differentiate his own generation from the generation of his father.

This evolution does not consist in taking from other systems of thought elements, as ideas, beliefs, conceptions, etc. and adding them to Buddhism or replacing by them elements proper of Buddhism. This evolution was a process which took place inside Buddhism, and enriched Buddhism with new elements that potentially lay in the Buddha's personal Teachings, and would be perceived or discovered with the lapse of time, by the naturally produced mechanism of evolution, and the increased receptivity and insight of His adepts, giving to Buddhism new richness, opening in it new spaces, which till then had remained unperceived. This continuous process explains the astonishing and permanent enrichment of Buddhism and the feeling it always provokes of modernization.

Evolution in Śrāvakayāna or “Hīnayāna”

The Buddha preached His Teachings to His followers in many different occasions and places; the memory of all that He has said remained only in the mind of

⁷I.e. of the Hīnayāna

those that had heard Him. In the Period of Buddhism after the Buddha entered into Nirvāṇa, generally called Śrāvakayāna or 'Hīnayāna' (according to Mahāyāna) - name that we keep in this paper but deprived from any pejorative nuance for facility and brevity sake- His Elder Disciples reunited all that was remembered by them of what He had taught. That compilation of the Word of the Buddha (buddhavacana) was constituted by two collections of texts (Piṭakas), the first one containing the doctrinal texts (Suttapiṭaka), and the second one, the texts concerning the monastic discipline (Vinayapiṭaka). These two Piṭakas were a most important step in the History of Buddhism, since they guaranteed the preservation and officialization of the texts that contained the Word of the Buddha. The passage itself of the texts from their isolated form to their compiled form was al-ready a process of evolution.

Then a most prodigious task from the intellectual and logical point of view was carried out by the Hīnayāna Disciples: the classification and presentation in a rigorous philosophical system, on the base of the novel theory of the dharmas preached by the Buddha himself, of all the concepts and notions found in the two mentioned collections of texts, a kind of doctrinal encyclopedia. The intellectual effort of the Abhidharmas of the Eighteen sects of Hīnayāna Buddhism was directed to enclose the whole reality in which man exists in an Unitarian and integral system in which is clearly pointed out the exact place that corresponds to each element or factor of existence, and also the relations which connect them in a tight net with the other elements and factors. This was called Abhidhammapiṭaka, and the philosophy it expressed is today known as the Abhidharma, a great creation of the Buddhist mind, and the first philosophical system conceived by Buddhism with elements supplied by the Buddha himself. And let us add that the Abhidharma was also the manifestation of the evolutionary and at the same time creative power of Buddhism, giving to light all the treasures of intelligence contained in the heritage left by the Master to future generations. This passage from the Sūtrapiṭaka to the Abhidharmapiṭaka already meant also an important step of evolution inside the same Hīnayāna Buddhism.

Thus during several centuries of existence Hīnayāna slowly and smoothly had been changing without people taking very much note of the produced transformation. Hīnayāna Buddhism after a so long period of time was necessarily a form of Buddhism different from the previous one it had had at the time of the Buddha's life.

Hīnayāna Buddhism, as a consequence of the powerful evolution that governs reality, acquired different forms, as it is well shown by the diverse Abhidharmas that came to light in the Eighteen Schools under which Hīnayāna splitted.

Evolution in Mahāyāna confronted with Hīnayāna

A similar process happened with Mahāyāna Buddhism. It was the product of the evolution of the previous form of Buddhism – the Hīnayāna. Around the beginning of the Common Era Mahāyāna arose, in the same slow, concealed, and soft way, as a transformation of Hīnayāna. From the time of the coming forth of Mahāyāna it has coexisted with Hīnayāna, with many points of contact and also with many discrepancies, but maintaining their unity in their diversity. We must refer to Mahāyāna's evolution confronting it with Hīnayāna.

1. After being preached by the Buddha Buddhism spread out, the Hīnayāna in Ceylon and South East Asia, while the Mahāyāna did so in Central Asia, Nepal, Tibet, China, Mongolia, Korea, and Japan. It is understandable that the Mahāyānist monks elected the North direction for accomplishing their conversion task, since South had already been converted by the Hīnayānists of the Theravāda Sect. The Mahāyāna looked for new spaces. This geographical different dispersion will have important effects for the following evolutions of both forms of Buddhism, since it put both of them in contact with different people possessing different cultures and languages, which had to exert different influences on them, provoking different changes, although preserving their essential identity.

2. The election of different languages by Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna was not a fortuitous event. The direct Disciples of the Buddha knew very well that their Master's wish and order was that His Message should be preached in the native, popular languages of the persons who received it, and He expressly had prohibited to translate it into Sanskrit, which was the exclusive language of the Brahmins who rejected Buddhism.

After centuries of successful existence Buddhism was known all over India and had gained a great number of adepts, who spoke different languages. It was naturally necessary to have a language proper to Buddhism that would give a linguistic unity to all Buddhists, and would provide Buddhist monks with a common means of expression to interchange ideas and opinions on Buddhism and to comment Buddhist texts. As the language of the Buddha seems to have been the Magadhī Prakrit dialect, which afterwards was named 'Pāli', and the Buddha's Teachings were collected in Pāli by the Theravāda School of Hīnayāna Buddhism, 'Pāli' is now considered the official language of Hīnayāna Buddhism. Let us add that other Schools of Hīnayāna Buddhism used instead of Pāli other Prakrits, and even, as the Sarvāstivādins, Sanskrit.

The linguistic situation of Mahāyāna is different and more complex. The Buddhist new doctrines and teachings presented by the Mahāyāna as the last Message of the Buddha are contained in the Sūtras that begin with the same words as those used by the Pāli Suttas: "Thus have I heard", showing in this way that the Suttas and the Sūtras

are the authentic Word of the Buddha, two links of the same chain of Teachings. These Sūtras are written in the Language that since Edgerton is called 'Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit'. This language is, as the Pāli language, a Prakrit language, one of the popular dialects spoken in India that was permanently subjected to a process of "Sanskritization".

But Mahāyāna had developed in the meantime original systems of philosophy. The non Buddhist thinkers criticized the novel Buddhist philosophical theories, and of course they used Sanskrit language. In order to make themselves understood in their defense of their own ideas Buddhist thinkers had to have recourse also to Sanskrit language. Sanskrit had always enjoyed a great prestige in India. It was traditionally the language of speculation and study. Moreover, the introduction of Buddhism in China had obliged to translate Buddhist texts containing the Word of the Buddha into another language, Chinese. This was also a good reason to justify the use of Sanskrit by Buddhist philosophers in their treatises, śāstras. Besides that these treatises were not translations of the Buddha's Words transmitted in Pāli and other Prakrit languages. Since Sanskrit began to be used by Buddhist philosophers it became also an official language of Buddhism. In Sanskrit are written the great chef-d'oeuvres of Mahāyāna philosophy.

3. Along with the different evolution of Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna in relation to territory and language, there was also an evolution in relation to the systems of thought of both movements, although their deep Buddhist essence remained beyond alteration.

Let us give some examples of the results of the evolution of thought in both Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna.

- Hīnayānist first thinkers were inclined to take things as they are, they had a pragmatic approach to reality, or –we could also say- they had a rather anti-speculative tendency concerning it: they were eager to escape suffering, and thus they did not want to loose time asking questions about the essence and nature of things that could delay Liberation from suffering.

But India was the land of philosophical speculation and metaphysics long before the arising of Buddhism. And Buddhism is inserted in Indian tradition, thus not long time after the Parinirvāṇa of the Buddha the doctrinal system of thought known as the Abhidharma, which we have already referred to, began to be constituted in Hīnayāna period. From a metaphysical perspective Hīnayāna adhered to philosophical Realism, i.e. the view that all things have external existence, independent of the mind.

- Mahāyāna Buddhism, contrasting with the Hīnayānist pragmatic, anti-speculative realistic attitude, developed in an extraordinary way Buddhist philosophical and metaphysical thought, giving rise, for instance, to the great systems of philosophy centered, one –the Mādhyamika School- on the notion of Voidness (Śūnyatā) or

Universal Contingency, which brought to its extreme limit the theory of Causality discovered and taught by the Buddha himself, the other –the Yogācāra School- on the theory of Only Mind (Cittamātra), which conceives reality not as a Void, but as an Illusion of the mind, being Mind the only existent thing. In Mahāyāna prevails boldness of thought, a powerful speculative creativity, a subtle and profound intuitive capacity and the most severe logical rigor.

- But together with evolution in relation to territory, to language, and to systems of thought there were many other instances of evolution inside Buddhism related to wise man (Arhant/Bodhisattva), the chronological position of Nirvāṇa, the conception of the Buddha nature, the concept of pure mind, and so on.

Ekayāna: “One Vehicle”

In the preceding pages we have preferred to speak about evolution instead of history, because we think that “evolution” expresses, better than “history”, the process to which Buddhism was submitted. The first period of Buddhism, the so-called “Early Buddhism”, the following period “Hīnayāna”, and then “Mahāyāna”, were tightly connected among themselves, because these three periods are not independent one from another, but diverse forms adopted by one and the same thing, Buddhism, changing and transforming itself in the course of centuries, while “history” may refer to things that have nothing to do one another, not related among them.

In the Lotus Sutra, Chapter II, it is clearly said that the Buddhas in the past, in the present, and in the future have taught, teach, and will teach a Single Doctrine, a Single Vehicle, Yāna. There are Three Vehicles: the Śrāvakayāna, the Vehicle of the direct Disciples of the Buddha, the Pratyekabuddhayāna, the Vehicle of persons that look for Liberation by themselves and for themselves (both can be considered Hīnayāna), and the Bodhisattvayāna (or Buddhayāna or Mahāyāna), the Vehicle of those who have received the last, complete, and definitive Teaching that ensures them that they will attain Enlightenment and Liberation.

When the Lotus Sutra affirms that the Buddhas teach a “Single Vehicle”, Ekayāna, this expression does not mean that they elect for their Teachings, among the Three Vehicles, only One: the Bodhisattvayāna (or Buddhayāna or Mahāyāna), excluding the others, the Śrāvakayāna and the Pratyek-abuddhayāna. It would be unacceptable to think that the first Teachings of the Buddha, those of the Early Period, i.e. the proper Word of the Buddha, systematized in the Hīnayāna by His first wise Great Śrāvakas, would be left aside. This expression “Single Vehicle” means that the Three Vehicles are One single Vehicle, which is constituted by the Three Vehicles as a single

and indivisible Unity, whose division or separation would destroy its essence and innate effectiveness.

All forms of Buddhism are derived from the First Buddha's Teachings, as it is clearly affirmed in the Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra (Taishō 374, p. 449 a, 6-12). There it is already the idea that the Sūtras of the Mahāyāna came forth from the First Teaching of the Buddha through a process of evolution in several stages as happens with cream from the milk.

The Buddha's Teachings were the causes that gave rise to their effects: the diverse forms of Buddhism that came into existence during more than twenty-five centuries. These new forms are of an intellectual and ethical nature similar to the essence of the Teachings that produced them.

Buddhism, which extols Compassion and Knowledge did not become during its evolution an incitement to violence and ignorance; necessarily it has to continue being a Message of Compassion and Knowledge. Many thinkers in India and also in the West have affirmed that the effect wholly exists in the cause (satkāryavāda), and also that there is a necessary correspondence between both elements of any production, cause and effect – as the seed of an oak-tree can give rise only to an oak-tree.

Besides that there is a tight logical link between the original principles and the further theories, conceptions, norms that derived from them: the conception of Voidness (Śūnyatā), for instance, could never have arisen without the primordial teachings of “universal causality” or “universal interdependence” (pratītyasamutpāda) and “insubstantiality” (nairātmya).

Thanks to this process that we have tried to describe, the Early Buddhism as taught personally by the Buddha, with its simple style and extraordinary wisdom, the Abhidharma and the Abhidharmic treatises of the Hīnayāna with their logical and severe scholasticism, and the Mahāyāna with its audacious and amazing philosophical theories, and novel and profound ethical and religious conceptions are one single Doctrine, one single system of thought, one and the same Path to Enlightenment, One and the same Vehicle that brings human beings to Liberation. It could be named in full truth 'Ekayāna'.

The theory of Ekayāna is one of the most important notions of the Lotus Sūtra. This theory is essentially connected with the notion of upāyakaśālya.

Buddha wanted His Message to reach all human beings for their “benefit” and “happiness”. He possessed upāyakaśālya or the “skill in (the use of) means”, especially in devising means to impress and convert people. Thanks to this skill He knew how to transmit His Teachings to the diverse Assemblies that heard Him, respecting their nature,

dispositions, tendencies, aspirations, intellectual receptivity, psychological conditions, in a word: according to the personality of each one.

And this is the method that is followed by all His Śrāvakas, Arhants, Bodhisattvas, when they, inspired by the desire to imitate the Buddhas, dedicate their efforts to transmit the Dharma to the persons that come to them to hear It. They begin with that part of any of the Three Vehicles most attainable and convenient in that moment for them. Then, gradually, lead the persons, step by step until they, developing in themselves the intellectual and moral necessary aptitudes, are able to receive and make their own in its integrity the Doc-trine.

Now, after more than two thousand years that the Mahāyāna came forth and the Lotus Sūtra taught the doctrine of Ekayāna, we must enlarge the limits of the use of the word 'Ekayāna'. It does not cover only the three forms of Buddhism that we have examined in this paper thinking only in India: Early Buddhism, Hīnayāna Buddhism, Mahāyāna Buddhism – going beyond Mahāyāna, Ekayāna applies also to all the forms of Buddhism that have appeared all over the world, not only in Asia, from Tibet to Japan in old days, but also at present, in Europe, United States of America, Canada, and Latin-America, each one them with their peculiar Buddhist identity. All these new Western forms of Buddhism together with the older Eastern mentioned forms actually are an Ekayāna, a “Single Vehicle”, which gives to mankind a noble model of individual and social way of life and a firm support in the difficult and painful moments of modern times, based on a Teaching always One and always the Same, and nevertheless permanently New.