AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF
THE ORIGIN OF MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHISM

AN ABSTRACT SUBMITTED TO
SAVITRIBAI PHULE PUNE UNIVERSITY FOR THE AWARD OF THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY
DOAN THI ANH

UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF
Dr. DEONATH TRIPATHI

CENTRE OF ADVANCED STUDY IN SANSKRIT
SAVITRIBAI PHULE PUNE UNIVERSITY, PUNE – 411007
October, 2014
An Abstract of the Thesis entitled
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The Mahāyāna is known as a developed form of Buddhism. The term ‘Mahāyāna’ or “Great Vehicle” is a name of classification of Buddhist philosophy and practice. Mahāyāna Buddhism emerged in the South-India almost between the 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE. However, in the 2nd century CE, it was clearly defined by Nāgārjuna through the philosophy of Śūnyatā (emptiness) expounded in his great work, Mādhyamika śāstra. After that (from the 3rd to the 6th century CE), the renowned philosophers like Āryadeva, Asaṅga, Vasubandhu, Sthiramati, Dharmapāla, Diṁnāga, Dharmakīrti, and so on, contributed immensely to systematize and develop its thought. These efforts made Mahāyāna Buddhism develop fast and spread widely.

In the course of its development, Mahāyāna Buddhism spread from India to various Asian countries, such as, China, Japan, Vietnam, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan and Mongolia. Today, the main traditions of Mahāyāna Buddhism include Chan, Pure-land, Tiantai, Nichiren, and the Esoteric tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.

Taken as an overview, the Mahāyāna thought is very complex and difficult to understand. Even the practitioners of Theravāda (Hīnayāna) think that Mahāyāna deviated from the Buddha’s way and teachings. But in fact, the Mahāyāna movement is only the means (upāya) of communication for the welfare of human beings. Mahāyāna and Theravāda both originated from Early Buddhism with the same goal to achieve enlightenment, but methods and practices of both of them are very different. The Theravādins had a
narrow vision, believing that the teachings recorded in the Pāli canons were the original words of the Buddha. They wanted to maintain the original and were not interested to make any change in those teachings. Consequently, they were concerned mainly with their own enlightenment through the practice of the Arhant-path, not necessarily with full enlightenment or Buddhahood.\(^1\) On the contrary, the Mahāyānists went further; they comprehended the Buddha’s implication in a different way. They tended towards Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient-beings through the practice of the Bodhisattva-path. Their goal was not only to get rid themselves of suffering, but also to help all sentient-beings out of misery. They worked for the benefit of others upholding the view that, “to do something for others is also to do something for oneself.”\(^2\) This does not mean that the Theravādins never think about compassion and altruism. These attitudes may be there, but only to some extent. In other words, they did not pay attention to the benefit of all sentient-beings as the Mahāyānists did.

While Theravāda emphasizes on individual enlightenment, Mahāyāna emphasizes on enlightenment of all sentient-beings. Thus, the ideal of the practitioners of Mahāyāna is to become the Bodhisattvas, who refuse to enter nirvāṇa (even when they have the ability to do so) until all other beings are similarly enlightened and saved. Therefore, Mahāyāna was also called “Bodhisattvayāna” (the vehicle of a Bodhisattva seeking Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings).

The exact origin of Mahāyāna Buddhism is something of a mystery and is still not completely understood. It has caused lots of controversies among scholars. This study is an attempt to show a number of trustful opinions regarding to the origin of Mahāyāna Buddhism as well as the

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\(^1\) Kyabgon, Traleg, \textit{The Essence of Buddhism: An Introduction to Its Philosophy and Practice}, South Asia: Shambhala Dragon, 2004, p. 36.
\(^2\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 37.
appearance of the term ‘Mahāyāna’ in a historical perspective. An attempt has also been made to present the outline of the historical background, philosophical thought, traces, motivations that caused the emergence of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Besides, some other important matters have also been explained with a scientific approach, which help one get a coherent view on the transition of Buddhism and understand Mahāyāna Buddhism clearly.

Though Mahāyāna Buddhism has been studied by many scholars, all of them deal with its different aspects. In general, scholars only mention the emergence and development of Mahāyāna as an overview. In no way, do they analyse and solve the problems mentioned above. I have made an attempt to answer the questions in this study.

Moreover, during the process of its formation, Mahāyāna Buddhism was criticized by the adherents of non-Mahāyāna schools. Actually, most adherents of Theravāda think that Mahāyāna is a school of heresy (vaitulyavāda); the genuineness of Mahāyāna sūtras is questionable; and Mahāyāna thought does not follow the Buddha’s teachings. In order to clarify these misunderstandings, I have tried to verify that the Mahāyāna thought appeared in the Pāli Canons of Early Buddhism, and Mahāyāna originated from Early Buddhism with a certain interconnection as well. Also through the survey of Mahāyāna literature, it is easy to prove that the Mahāyāna teachings are the Buddha’s thought, or the Buddha-vacana.

Nowadays, Mahāyāna Buddhism has become thoroughly integrated with people of different cultures, civilizations, races in Asian countries. It was vigorously propagated to many colonies of Europe, America, Australia, and Africa. In addition, during the process of its propagation and development, Mahāyāna Buddhism did not only bring actual benefit for different communities, but also it had remarkable contribution towards cultures and arts of many countries over the world. In order to prove that
Mahāyāna Buddhism is one of the most dominant forms of religion in this age, the study of the origin of Mahāyāna Buddhism is very important.

The thesis consists of six chapters, including the introduction and conclusion.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This is a brief plan that serves as an opening to the entire thesis containing the introduction of Buddhism, in general, and Mahāyāna Buddhism, in particular. It also contains the problems that need to be interpreted, and the solution of these problems. This chapter also refers to the estimative surveys and short comments on some of the important research works that have been done in this field to justify the relevance of the present research. The sources of basic materials and methods of research are also mentioned. Finally, the outline of the thesis is also sketched here.

Chapter 2: Indian Society at the time of the Emergence of Mahāyāna Buddhism

This chapter gives a brief description about political, economic and religious conditions of Indian society at the time of the emergence of Mahāyāna Buddhism, from Mauryan period (317-180 BCE) to Kuśāna period (Kaniṣ ṭ ka’s dynasty in the 1st century CE). It can be said that this was the period when India enjoyed a social harmony with a stable political system, developed economy, and the renewal of religions, especially, the transition and development of Buddhism in India and abroad.

Chapter 3: Understanding of the Ground of Mahāyāna Buddhism

This chapter opens up with the interpretation the meaning of the term ‘Mahāyāna’ and analysis the origin of the term. Here it has been pointed out that the term ‘Mahāyāna’ means “Great Vehicle”, the vehicle that can bring
all sentient beings to salvation. The term ‘Mahāyāna’ also refers to the scope of aspiration, the methods applied to achieve the goal and the depth of insight of the practitioners as well as the sense of superiority and universality of its doctrine and aim. The followers of Mahāsāṅghika schools coined and used this term about two hundred years after the Buddha’s nirvāṇa as a retaliation against the Theravādin who called them as ‘Pāpa-bhikṣu’ (sinful monk) and heretics, at the same time to exalt their ultimate doctrine. The next part of this chapter mentions the relation between Mahāsāṅghika and Mahāyāna Buddhism about their histories and doctrines. Although, historically, it is very difficult to determine that Mahāyāna emerged from the Northern or the Southern Mahāsāṅghika, but, through a full comparison of the theories of Mahāsāṅghika schools and the doctrines of Mahāyāna, it is certain that the doctrines of Mahāyāna, originally, came from that of Mahāsāṅghika schools. These evidences prove that Mahāsāṅghika and its branches were as precursors of Mahāyāna Buddhism. This chapter also contains some basic doctrines of Mahāyāna Buddhism at the end. It is asserted that the Mahāyāna philosophy is based on the philosophy of Early Buddhist schools, especially Mahāsāṃghika schools. Therefore, its basic doctrines are Trikāya (three bodies of the Buddha), Sūnyatā (emptiness), Buddha-nature (the transcendent nature of a Buddha), Bodhicitta (mind of seeking full enlightenment) and Bodhisattva-ideal.

**Chapter 4: Analysis of the Origin of Mahāyāna Buddhism**

The fourth chapter is the main subject of the thesis. The first part of this chapter puts forth an analysis of the traces of Mahāyāna in the Pāli Canon and in the development of Early Buddhism. Through the survey of Pāli Canon, it has been pointed out that the Buddha had the philosophical outlook of Mahāyāna Buddhism in his mind. Moreover, in the process of the

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3 Mahāsāṃghika philosophy developed the idea of the transcendent nature of a Buddha, the ideal of the Bodhisattva, and the doctrine of sūnyatā, or "emptiness."
development of Early Buddhism, especially in the period of Nikāya Buddhism, we also find evidences of the stūpa worship that was popular among the laity. This shows that, in order to satisfy the spiritual needs of its community, Nikāya Saṅgha adopted the stūpa worship. And thus, the stūpa worship played a significant role in the emergence of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

The next part of the chapter contains a survey of motivations for the Mahāyāna movement, i.e., the deviation in the monastic disciplines, variations in doctrine, skillful means (upāya-kauśalya), and social factors, such as, polity, economy and religion.

Thereafter, this chapter has an analytical study of the sources and the emergence of Mahāyāna Buddhism. In this section I have tried to collect trustful viewpoints in order to bring out reasonable and logical conclusions. The emergence of Mahāyāna Buddhism was not sudden, but it was due to many causes. It was not originally associated with just one school, but it was a gradual renovation of thoughts and concepts of many schools in Nikāya Buddhism. And Mahāyāna Buddhism has multiplicity of sources. We cannot say that Mahāyāna originated from the Mahāsaṅghika schools, or from the doctrines of Nikāya Buddhism, or from the stūpa worship, or among certain laity, or certain Abhidharmists, or certain rebel monks, or foreign influences, actually, all of these had their own contributions. The contribution of each group interacted dynamically and as a result they gave the emergence of the Mahāyāna Buddhism. In other words, Mahāyāna is possibly the consequence of adaptation and gradual development of Buddhism for a long period of time. Gombrich also opines that, “Mahāyāna is not a sect, but a current of opinion which cut across sects as properly defined.”4 The timing of the emergence of Mahāyāna is between the 1st century BCE and the 1st century

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CE, however, it, most likely, had been developing gradually for a long time before that. Moreover, we also find some evidences that in the 2nd century CE Mahāyāna Buddhism started developing and became an influential school through the philosophy of emptiness by Nāgārjuna. There are also a lot of extant evidences for the date and circumstance of the emergence of Mahāyāna which come from early translations of China. The Mahāyāna texts, for the first time, were translated into Chinese language by Lokakṣema during the 2nd century CE. In the last section of this chapter, some new concepts in the Mahāyāna movement have been mentioned. They are the Concept of Bhakti, Bodhicitta, Dharma-dhātu, and Two-truths.

Chapter 5: The Formation of Mahāyāna Literature

A large number of scholars hold the view that Mahāyāna Buddhism employs all “skilful means” to communicate its thought to the benefit of human beings. Therefore, though Mahāyāna accepts all the canons of the Theravāda tradition, it also establishes its own literature to suit different human capacity and social circumstances.

The first section of this chapter mentions the significance of the formation of Mahāyāna literature. It shows that the Theravādins believed on the teachings recorded in the Pāli canons as original words of the Buddha. Consequently, they were not interested to make any changes in the Pāli canons. However, the Mahāyānists considered the teachings recorded in the Pāli canons as the thought of the Śrāvakayāna. They argued that the preservation of the Pāli canons is a deviation from the spirit of the original teachings of the Buddha, because they were written down after three centuries of oral

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6 Mahāyāna literature including sūtras and philosophical schools that will be mentioned detail in chapter 5.
transmission.\textsuperscript{7} And thus they wrote fresh ones with intent to conserve more for the spirit than for the letter of the scriptures. They believe that the movement of this new literature would develop more fruitful ideas of the Buddha’s teachings. However, it is reliable that the Mahāyānists wrote fresh ones, but all are based on the Buddha’s teachings in the Pāli canon of Early Buddhism, without employing their minds. In other words, they composed their canons with intent to develop and propagate the Buddha’s teachings suitable to human capability and social situations. Therefore, Mahāyānists assert that all their canons have been taught directly by the Buddha himself or have at least been inspired by him.

The next section of this chapter beas an introduction of some main sūtras of Mahāyāna literature, such as, the Prajñapāramitā Sūtra, Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūtra, Saddharmapundarīka Sūtra, Avatamsaka Sūtra, Lankāvatāra Sūtra, and Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra. And, finally, there is mention of two main śāstras of Mahāyāna literature, namely, Mādhyamika Śāstra and Vijñānavāda Śāstra.

**Chapter 6: Conclusion**

The last chapter is a chapter of conclusion that bears a summary of the important points of the thesis. It has been concluded that, Mahāyāna Buddhism is not a breakaway religion, neither is it a new religion, but it is only a developed form of Buddhism. Its roots are to be traced to the very life and teachings of the Buddha. Its thought is to be found in Pāli Canons and in the development of Early Buddhism. In other words, Mahāyāna originated from Early Buddhism and has a certain interconnection with Early Buddhism. The Mahāyāna movement is only the means (upāya) of communication for the welfare of human beings. The emergence of Mahāyāna is possibly the

\textsuperscript{7} K.R. Norman considers that the Buddhist canon was oral “for perhaps the first three centuries”; Gombrich, T.W. Rhys Davids and Oldenberg suggest “about three to four centuries” (Mark Allon 1997, p. 3)
consequence of adaptation and development of Buddhism to suit the capacity of people and social situations in different periods of time. We can say that Mahāyāna is a more ‘engaged’ form of Buddhism that is based on compassion and altruism. Some scholars go further and say Mahāyāna is not a single vehicle but rather a train comprising many carriages of different classes. And the date for the emergence of the Mahāyāna is almost between the 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE, but it had been developed gradually for a long time before that, event in the Buddha’s time. However, until the 2nd century CE, Mahāyāna became clearly defined in the South-India by Nāgārjuna through his Mādhyamika school.

Next, I have tried to give an account of the adaptation of Mahāyāna Buddhism in the modern world. As society changes from time to time, Buddhism also needed to change to contribute to the development of mankind. With the skillful-means, Mahāyāna Buddhism has received a suitable response at the global level. The greatest success of Mahāyāna Buddhism is that it was accepted with great fervour even outside India. The great thing about Mahāyāna Buddhism today is the adaptation of Pure Land, Zen (Meditation) and Esoteric of Tibetan Buddhism. Moreover, today, we find many educational and charitable centres of Mahāyāna Buddhism in many countries all over the world. Thus, it shows that Mahāyāna Buddhism is adapted by a large number of people and therefore it is successful in the modern world today. Suzuki rightly says: “Mahāyāna Buddhism is not an object of historical curiosity. Its vitality and activity concern us in our daily life. It is a great spiritual organism; its moral and religious forces are still exercising an enormous power over millions of souls; and its further development is sure to be a very valuable contribution to the world-progress of the religious consciousness.”

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The last section describes a model-life according to Mahāyāna ideal, namely, the ideal of the Bodhisattva through the practice of six-perfections (six-pāramitās).

In short, though Mahāyāna has a lot of changes and developments form Early Buddhism, it is totally based on the Buddha’s teachings. Many Buddhists, especially Western scholars, say that Mahāyāna is often seen as an expansion or commentary on Theravādin teachings. While Theravāda has succeeded in preserving well the Buddha’s words, Mahāyāna on the other hand has strived successfully in demonstrating the Buddha’s innermost intention. These changes of Buddhism were felt a matter of necessity as it had to suit to the needs of people and social circumstance at times. The Buddha himself often used to say: “His teachings could be further cleared, interpreted, and if necessary could undergo minor changes, especially, the minor rules and terminologies, but they should not violate the fundamental teachings.” Therefore, over the course of its 2500-year old history, Buddhism has undergone many modifications to become suitable to local practices and beliefs of different regions where it has spread.