



# Mahayana and Zen Buddhism

Dr Amartya Kumar Bhattacharya

**Z**EN IS THE ABBREVIATION of the Japanese word *zena* or *zenno*. It refers to a meditative absorption in which all dualism such as I and you, subject and object, true and false are eliminated. Zen Buddhism first flourished in China and is now popular all over the world. It is an offshoot of Mahayana, great vehicle, Buddhism, which was propagated in China by Buddhist monks from India. Kumarajiva (344–413 CE) went to China in 401, and Buddhahadra (359–429) in 408. Chinese Buddhists also came to India to study this doctrine and then spread it back home. Fa-hsien, or Fa-xian, came to India between 399 and 414 CE, and Hsuan-tsang, or Xuan-zang, between 633 and 643 CE. The Indian monk Gunabhadra was the first to translate the *Lankavatara Sutra* into Chinese. Another noted translator was Paramartha.

The philosophical basis of Mahayana Buddhism developed in India a few centuries after Buddha's *parinirvana*. The Buddhist Emperor Kanishka convened in 100 CE the Fourth Buddhist Council of the Sarvastivada tradition at Jalandhar, or Kashmir, in which the great scholar

Vasumitra presided along with Ashvaghosha, another eminent scholar and the author of the *Buddhacharita*. A schism took place at this Council that divided the Buddhists into the two branches of Mahayana and Theravada. The Pali word *thera* is derived from the Sanskrit *sthavira*, which means elder. Theravada Buddhism is the orthodox form of Buddhism and has preserved the historical teachings of Buddha. The Theravada sutras in Pali are the earliest available historical teachings of Buddha. The Pali canon, known as the *Tripitaka* in Sanskrit and the *Tipitaka* in Pali, consists of three parts: *Sutra-Pitaka*, *Vinaya-Pitaka*, and *Abhidharma-Pitaka*.

## Mahayana

In Mahayana Buddhism enlightened individuals, called Bodhisattvas, strive to take all other beings along with them to the ultimate goal: nirvana. Mahayana Buddhism emerged as the development of different readings of concepts related to sangha, dharma, and Buddha.

The first stirring of the dispute was regarding ideas of the sangha. The primary concern of

Buddhist monks was to keep the dharma and the *vinaya*, discipline, pure. They felt that this was the only way to sustain Buddhism in the long run. But some other monks wanted the *vinaya* to be flexible. The case of *mahasanghika* monks is the best example of the conflict between the two viewpoints. These monks had added ten minor precepts for their group; for example, monks could obtain, keep, and use money. In the Second Buddhist Council, held at Vaishali, these monks were called *papishtha bhikshus*, sinful monks. Their behaviour was unacceptable by the orthodox school. Later these monks established their own tradition and called themselves *mahasanghikas*, the monks of the great sangha.

Controversies also appeared regarding dharma. Three months before Buddha's *parinirvana* at Kushinagara, he declared that the monks and the laity would have the dharma and the *vinaya* as their leaders in the future—this is in the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*. However, after the dispute about the sangha, some Buddhists, mostly the *mahasanghikas*, found themselves having no shelter except the dharma. Therefore, they searched for the true meaning of dharma. The statement of Buddha, 'He who sees the Dharma, sees me; He who sees me, sees the Dharma,'<sup>1</sup> also supported their quest. If one uses logical arguments to judge this sentence, an interesting question emerges: How must one see the dharma so that one also sees Buddha? For some Buddhist scholars, even today, dharma is not merely the sermons of Buddha. His life contains more latent implications, like his silence in certain contexts—for example, his silence in response to questions by Vacchagotra. Thus for these Buddhist monks, dharma was something more than what Buddha spoke. The sermons are merely a part of him, not the totality. These Buddhist monks shifted the ethical facet of Buddhism to the metaphysical level. And what they did was to seek out the

truest dharma, one that also revealed the status of Buddha after his *parinirvana*.

Simultaneously, the assumption that Buddha still existed pervaded and caught the faithful minds of Buddhists. Dharma turned out to be a means to reach the state of Buddha. When one realizes the ultimate truth of all things, one is sure to free oneself from all types of bondage. To see dharma is to see the truth of phenomena. When the truth of phenomena is seen, the wisdom of Buddha rises within oneself. That is the reason why when one sees the dharma, one also sees Buddha. Further, that state of the mind is linked to liberation. The state of liberation is conceived to be the same as the pure mind. A human mind that is pure and detached from all types of impurities is synonymous with the state of liberation. There were also groups that defined dharma as the ultimate truth of Buddha.

The more these Buddhists investigated Buddha's life, the less they believed that he had gone away. Hence, to see dharma is to see Buddha's power penetrating through all things. These groups also tended to relate dharma to Buddha's *mahakaruna*, great compassion, and felt that to see dharma is to see the Buddha-*dhatu*, substance, within oneself. *Mahakaruna* is *karuna*, compassion, combined with *prajna*, wisdom. Clearly, the most important duty of an individual is to live and spend life in accordance with Buddha's intention, which was to liberate all sentient beings from suffering. In order to realize the Buddha-*dhatu* within oneself, it is crucial that one has also to assist other sentient beings and take them along to nirvana. *Prajna* is vital, because different *upayas*, expedient means, should be employed to bring sentient beings on the path to *bodhi*, enlightenment. Thus the concept of the Bodhisattva sprang up from this attitude.

Differences also occurred regarding the understanding of Buddha. When the *vinaya*

and the dharma showed fault lines, the only way out for some Buddhists was to go back to Buddha as refuge. At that time many Buddhists conceived the existence of Buddha in the transcendental state. The *Saddharma Pundarika Sutra*, Lotus Sutra, a Mahayana scripture, conceives of a transcendental Buddha. Buddha had returned to his universal form after his *parinirvana*, and he still exists. Buddha has three bodies, *trikaya*. The first and most fundamental body is called *dharmakaya*, cosmic body. The conceptualization of Buddha's all-pervading, eternal, omniscient, omnipresent, and radiant *dharmakaya* provided for an intense and immersive spiritual experience. The nature of the *dharmakaya* is called *dharmakaya-dhatu*. During deep meditation the state of Buddha is his blissful body, *sambhogakaya*. The third body is the *nirmanakaya*, constructed body, which signifies the historical Buddha. The *nirmanakaya* of Buddha had come and gone under the will of the *dharmakaya*. He was born to fulfil his human functions in leading human beings to liberation. It is believed that as long as humankind does not realize the true dharma, the anguish of separation from Buddha takes place. And when the human mind is able to make the distinction between the pure mind and the *kleshas*, painful impurities, the Buddha-dhatu becomes clear. The concept of *rupakaya* existed among the *mahasanghikas*, and this *rupakaya* was later split into *nirmanakaya* and *sambhogakaya* in Mahayana Buddhism.

Mahayana Buddhism combines *shraddha*, faith and devotion, with the wisdom of logical reasoning. This is the appeal of Mahayana Buddhism.

## Zen

Zen Buddhist masters are found even among the laity, but Zen's greatest geniuses were found in the highly regulated life of the monasteries.

From the vast Chinese land mass Zen Buddhism slowly spread to Korea and onwards to Japan.

According to Buddhist legends, Buddha taught, apart from his orthodox teachings, special techniques to a few. The famous discourse of Buddha on the vulture mountain to a host of assembled monks is important in Zen. It is said that Buddha just held up a flower in his hand without speaking and only his close disciple Kashyapa understood and smiled. As a result of Buddha's gesture and silence, Kashyapa experienced a flash of enlightenment and grasped the essence of Buddha's teachings. This was the first instance of a heart-mind to heart-mind transmission. Kashyapa was thence known as Mahakashyapa and became the first Indian patriarch in the long guru-disciple line unbroken until now. In the sixth century Bodhidharma brought this lineage to China, where it was mixed with Taoism. Over the centuries many schools developed, but two of them, the Rinzai and the Sota, reached Japan in the twelfth century. In China the authentic transmission of the secret knowledge declined during the Sung dynasty (960–1279) and then got mixed up with Pure Land Buddhism during the Ming dynasty (1368–644). In Japan, however, the Zen traditions flourished.

The essential nature of Zen is summarized in four statements: (i) special teachings outside the orthodox teachings, (ii) non-dependence on sacred writings, (iii) direct pointing to the heart, and (iv) realization of one's nature and becoming a Buddha.

The Sanskrit word *dhyana* is a synonym of the Pali *jhana*, the Chinese *ch'an*, Vietnamese *thien*, Korean *son*, and the Japanese *zen*. In Zen Buddhist practice one can take the help of koans—*kung-an* in Chinese, *kongan* in Korean—spiritual puzzles, as an aid to propel the mind to a transcendental state in which one can meditate.



*Zazen*—*tso-ch'an* in Chinese—is the practice of Zen Buddhist meditation that leads to enlightenment. A koan is a phrase from a sutra or a teaching on realization. A koan is like a paradox, which transcends logical or conceptual thinking. Since it is not a riddle, a koan cannot be solved by reasoning. Solving a koan requires a leap to a higher level of consciousness. The role of the Zen Buddhist master is important here. The master can deliver a shock—an emotional one usually suffices, but a physical blow or other corporeal shock may be needed so that the spiritual aspirant is propelled into a higher level of consciousness. To give an example of a koan: 'Before enlightenment, chopping wood, carrying water. After enlightenment, chopping wood, carrying water.'<sup>2</sup>


The fundamental viewpoint of Zen Buddhism is that one has to concentrate directly on one's mind, seeing it as it is, *yatha bhutam*, and become a Buddha. A very important difference between Theravada Buddhism and Zen Buddhism is that the former believes that enlightenment is obtained gradually by means of practice, while the latter believes in sudden enlightenment, called *satori*.

The practices of Zen are directed towards self-realization and lead finally to complete awakening. It stresses the uselessness of rituals and intellectual discussions of the doctrines. It instead stresses on the practice of *zazen*, sitting in meditative absorption as the shortest but steepest way to awakening. They also cautiously state that *zazen* is not any particular method, as that will pin it down to something else. *Zazen* is a technique to free the mind from any thought-form, vision, thing, or representation. Zen masters even say that Zen is not a religion in the conventional sense, but an indefinable state free from concepts, names, and descriptions, which can be experienced only by each individual for himself or herself. Zen is the perfection

of everything existing, designated by various names, and experienced by all sages and saints in all cultures. Zen perfection is present in every individual; one just has to express it.

One of the central teachings of Mahayana Buddhism is to possess a *bodhi-chitta*, awakened mind. *Bodhi* does not change the samsara one is immersed in, but it does change and completely restructure one's attitude towards that samsara. In Hinayana, lesser vehicle, Buddhism,

*bodhi* is equated with perfection of insight into, and realization of, the four noble truths, which perfection means the cessation of suffering. ... By contrast, in Mahayana *bodhi* is mainly understood as wisdom based on insight into the unity of nirvana and samsara as well as of subject and object. It is described as the realization of *prajna*, awakening to one's own Buddha-nature (*bussbo*), insight into the essential emptiness (*shunyata*) of the world, or omniscience and perception of suchness (*tathata*).<sup>3</sup>

A radical indeterminacy underpins and permeates human existence. Things happen that we do not want; things that we do not want happen. But instead of sitting and becoming fatalists Buddhism teaches one to bravely work out one's way to emancipation. One requires immense enlightened courage to bring order in place of chaos and to face life with fortitude. Zen enables us to bravely undertake this enlightened journey and to reach nirvana, which is free from all dualism and is the goal of Buddhism. 

## References

1. *Buddhism: A Modern Perspective*, ed. Charles S Prebish (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University, 1994), 37.
2. Wayne D Dyer, *Wisdom of the Ages* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 34.
3. *The Rider Encyclopedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion*, eds Stephen Schumacher and Gert Woerner (London: Rider, 1986), 37.