

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras Year Two – Teachers' Notes

Module 6: The Bodhisattva Ideal

This module is large, both in terms of the amount of study and preparation needed and in terms of its spiritual scope. I imagine that most people will have their hands full just getting through the basic reading for each week and so haven't added any supplementary material to the Student Notes. If you are already familiar with the material and wish to explore Bhante's teaching on this area more fully, the best places to look would be the recommended reading contained in the Student Notes.

However, Bhante did lead a Study Group Leader's seminar on this series of lectures in January 1986, which is available here:

<http://tinyurl.com/6gxom3h>

Bhante obviously takes a spiritual perspective on the Mahāyāna and the Bodhisattva Path rather than a historical one but you may be interested in the following article which Saramati (who is otherwise known as Alan Sponberg) passed on to me, which covers much of the latest academic research into the origins of the Mahayana. You may find it helpful background reading, and you may wish to cut and paste it and give it to either some or all of the people in your group, depending on their interests.

I have chosen to put it here rather than in the Student Material partly because there is a lot of material in the book for people to get through anyway (and I don't want to intimidate them or distract them from the core reading) but also it gives you the opportunity to respond with some extra material. If you are interested in this kind of thing, '*A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to "The Inquiry of Ugra (Ugrapariprccha)*', translated by Jan Nattier, gives a very different view of the early days of the Mahayana. But these are probably side issues for most people.

One suggestion for the groups is that you may wish to conclude the module with a Seven-fold Pūjā, encouraging people to bring an offering that represents the altruistic aspect of their own practice. You could also lead a reflection on Vasubandhu's Four Factors. Both these activities would bring out the practical application of the teachings. Otherwise, I think you will have your hands full just exploring the material in a fairly straightforward way.

Mahāyāna Buddhism by Saramati (Alan Sponberg)

From: The Encyclopedia of Buddhism, ed. by Damien Keown & Charles Prebish, Routledge, 2007

The Mahāyāna is the single most historically significant development of the Buddhist tradition subsequent to the death of its founder – if we can, in fact, speak of the Mahāyāna as a single historical phenomenon. More likely, it has its origins in a variety of parallel developments, many of them quite early in the history of Buddhism, and some dating back perhaps even to the time of the historical Buddha. The origins of Mahayana Buddhism – historical, sociological, and doctrinal – are as obscure as they are complex. Indeed, current research tends increasingly to reduce rather than expand what we can say with certainty about this composite development of Buddhism, which was to be so influential in India, Central Asia and especially East Asia.

What we know today as the Mahāyāna coalesced into a relatively identifiable and self-conscious movement only as late as the 4th Century CE, and even then it continued to generate new and diverse devotional cults, beliefs, and doctrines, especially as it evolved into the Central and East Asian forms current today. Rather than seeing the Mahāyāna as particular sect or school of Buddhism, or even as a broader reformation movement arising in reaction to specific developments within the early schools, we might better begin by imagining it as a certain sensibility or attitude among certain early Buddhists, one as much aesthetic and visionary as doctrinal and dogmatic. It is true that much of the best-known Mahāyāna literature expresses a critical and polemical stance towards the earlier tradition, which the Mahāyānists deemed the Hīnayāna or “Lesser Vehicle,” but the emerging scholarly consensus is that this literature presupposes a still earlier phase of development embedded, more directly and less contentiously, well within the mainstream tradition itself.

The earliest sources of Mahāyāna Buddhism, both cultic and scriptural, remain frustratingly obscure even as they have become the focus of much current critical and creative scholarship. What we can say with certainty about the earliest stage of this movement is that it is far less simple, singular, or straightforward than the view that dominated scholarship for much of the 20th Century. Several commonplace assertions, once well-entrenched, have been seriously challenged in the last two decades. For example, it was once assumed that the Mahāyāna was a later development stemming from one or another of the traditional “18 Schools” of Early Conservative Buddhism – the Mahāsaṃghika school typically put forward as the most likely suspect. But recent scholarship is beginning to reveal that ideas and practices later characterized as “Mahayana” were current, if not universally accepted, in many of the early schools. Again, it was frequently assumed in the past that the Mahāyāna innovations could be localized in one particular geographic region—India's Northwest frontier in one view, or South India in another. But now it is clearer that certain aspects of the later Mahayana can be traced to several different regional traditions. Similarly, it was once thought that the Mahāyāna was a laicized or even lay-directed dimension of early Buddhism, one that arose as a sort of populist “protestant” rejection of the more conservative and monastic

Buddhism of the early schools. But again, more recent scholarship is challenging the bias from Western culture embedded in this view, demonstrating that the authors of the Mahāyāna sutras were, in most if not all cases, monks, and perhaps even monks representing the ascetic forest-dwelling wing of the early monastic community.

Scholarly views on the origins of the Mahāyāna are thus very much in a state of flux. Typically, the history of Buddhism in India has been depicted as a rivalry between major factions, each comprising several schools: first a rivalry among the early conservative and monastic Buddhist schools, and then, later, an even more intense rivalry between the Mahāyānist and all the early conservative schools, which were together deemed to be the inferior “Hīnayāna” (“lesser vehicle”). According to this considerably over-simplified account, the Mahāyāna presented itself as superior in every respect – including the authenticity of its expansive literature, which it presented as the final and complete dispensation of Śākyamuni Buddha, taught only at the very end of his life and preserved in a secret transmission until a time when it would be properly understood. Even scholars who rejected these seemingly transparent “origin myth” apologetics still accepted the basic notion of a community of Buddhists divided into two contending camps, with the Mahāyāna camp eventually coming to prevail, except in Southeast Asia where a vestige of the older conservative tradition managed to survive. Recent scholarship leaves very little of this picture intact.

To untangle the confusion and over-simplification here, one must first distinguish carefully between the various ways in which the early Buddhist identified themselves and their communal affiliations. In particular, there is a distinction to be made between ordination lineages (*nikāyas*), schools of philosophical thought and, at the broadest level, different ways of envisioning and conceptualizing the very nature of the Buddhist path. Within these distinctions, the Mahāyāna is especially associated with a new vision of the path. But at least some of its characteristic attitudes and concerns go back to the earliest days of the Buddhist tradition. The institutional organization of Buddhism has always focused more on orthopraxis (“proper practice”) than on orthodoxy (“proper belief”). The different monastic institutions in India were most clearly separated by differences in the ordination lineages, and especially differences having to do with the communal practice of the monastic community – which scriptures and precepts were chanted aloud and how they were to be chanted, and how breaches of the monastic code were to be acknowledged and collectively healed. Differences of belief and individual expression certainly existed in the culture of these early communities, but they were more easily accommodated than differences of collective activity.

When monastic communities took on a particular institutional identity, it was that of prevailing ordination lineage. Well into the early centuries of the Common Era, no one thought of “Mahāyāna” or “Hīnayāna” monasteries. The only relevant question at the level of communal practice would have been, “Which Vinaya – what kind of ritualized monastic organization and activity – does this community adhere to?” At the level of institutional identity, questions of individual belief and practice were neither definitive nor divisive. This allowed a great diversity of opinion and practice within the same monastic setting.

A given monastery would thus house monks following the same Vināya – that of the Sārvastivādin Canon, for instance – but beyond that one common element there would have been room for considerable variation. Some of the monks would have adhered to the Sārvastivāda/Vibhajjavādin school of Abhidharma analysis, while others in the same monastery would no doubt have identified themselves as Sautrantikas (another of the early “schools” of thought). Among the latter there would very likely have been some who would have been drawn to the vision and style of the “newer” Mahāyāna sūtras, while others would have been more engaged with treatises exploring the philosophical consistency of the *śūnyavāda* (“emptiness doctrine”) as an extension of the Buddha's teaching on conditionality (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and the non-substantiality of the self (*anātman*), and not in the least drawn to the imaginative cosmology characteristic of most Mahāyāna scriptures. Early Buddhism thus comprised wide and heterogeneous range of options, some of which, over time, eventually coalesced into a broad movement self-consciously identifying itself as the Mahāyāna.

Perhaps the safest way to characterize the Mahāyāna and its relationship to the rest of early Buddhism is to say that the Mahāyāna presented a different vision of both the goal and the course of Buddhist practice, a vision which its adherents would have said was more consistent with the teachings of the Buddha. This difference of vision was expressed in virtually every aspect of the tradition, most noticeably in the Mahāyāna's conception of the Buddha, in its mapping of the path by which one becomes a *buddha*, in the methods by which one progresses on that path, and finally in the philosophical and cosmological assumptions underpinning the composite vision. This new vision of the purpose and the method of the Buddhist spiritual life was expressed, moreover, in a distinctive literature, written in a new and more expansive style and serving eventually to pull together the various themes making up the composite whole. Indeed in the earliest days of the tradition, the only clear way of distinguishing “Mahāyāna” Buddhists from their more conservative colleagues would have been to ask the question, “Which of the *sūtras* do you find the most helpful and inspiring?” All would have accepted the early collections of the Buddha's discourses as authorities. All would have followed the Vināya rules of their particular (“Hīnayāna”) ordination lineage. And some would also have found inspiration and even spiritual authority in the Mahāyāna sūtras that began to be circulated in the first century BCE.

Philosophical Innovations

The primary philosophical innovation of the Mahayana is its doctrine of *śūnyatā*, the assertion that all phenomena – the “things” of our experience – are empty or void of intrinsic existence, which is to say, in the technical language of the day, that they lack “own-being” (*svabhāva*). In the Mahāyāna view this asserts nothing not already implied in Buddha's most fundamental teaching, his doctrine of conditionality (*pratītyasamutpāda*), which held that everything exists as part of an on-going process, dependent on a range of prior causes and conditions. The Buddha had already pointed out that *pratītyasamutpāda* entails *anātman* (“no-self”), the non-substantiality of the self, thereby rejecting the possibility of a permanent, immutable *ātman* as the substrate of personal existence and continuity, a notion that was a key tenet in the *Upaniṣads* of the Brahmanic tradition. The

Mahāyāna philosophers, especially Nāgārjuna (2nd century CE), took the teaching of conditionality even further, concluding that non-substantiality must apply to all the phenomena of our experience, to all *dharmas* (*dharmanairātmya*) as well as to the self or *Ātman* (*ātmanairātmya*). All existence is an ever-changing, unbifurcated whole, a never-ceasing flow of experience that we break up into experiential moments (*dharmas*) out of which we construct higher-order composite “things.” But none of these tactics for comprehending the on-going flux of existence yield anything more than conceptual constructions, contingent on other conventionally conceptions and thus having no intrinsic existence or ultimate reality themselves.

This basic notion of emptiness is worked out further by the different Mahāyāna schools. The Yogācārins assert that the perceptions of our experience do have a basis in reality; they called this the *paratantra* or dependent aspect of reality. When we deludedly think that the conceptual constructs by which we reach that *paratantra* experience have some reality themselves, we fail to recognize their ultimately imaginary, constructed nature; this is the *parikalpita* or falsely imagined aspect of reality. For the Yogācārins, the only ultimate truth is reality in its consummate (*pariniṣpanna*) aspect. This is realized only through a long process of moral and meditative practice – a retraining both cognitive and emotional – by which one becomes able to perceive the *paratantra* aspect of reality directly, free from our normal deluded and imaginary (*parikalpita*) projections.

The Madhyamaka, by contrast, seeks a more rigorously consistent philosophical defense of the emptiness teaching (*śūnyavāda*), one that allows no assertion of any ultimate existence. Recognizing that all of our unenlightened experience is conceptually mediated, and thus at best only conventional truth, (*saṃvṛti-satya*), it argues that any attempt to capture reality in a conceptual system, even one of the sort the Yogācārins are willing to adopt pragmatically, is misleading and will ultimately obstruct rather than facilitate the realization of the ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*), which is simply acceptance that everything in our experience lacks any intrinsic existence.

Later Mahāyāna philosophers took up epistemological questions such as identifying the means of valid knowledge (*pramāṇa*) and specifying what constitutes a valid sequence of syllogistic reasoning. And finally we must consider also the influential if highly paradoxical and philosophically problematic *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine, which taught that all beings possess congenitally a “Buddha Nature” that will eventually be recognized as an already present state of enlightenment. This Buddha nature is in fact our true nature, which has temporarily and adventitiously been obscured by the cognitive and affective defilements known as greed, hatred and delusion. Once one sees through those defilements, realizing their lack of intrinsic existence, one's ultimate true nature is disclosed, the Buddha Nature that has been present all along.

Mahāyana Buddhology and Cosmology

The most distinctive feature of the Mahāyāna vision of the Buddhist path and its goal is its conception of the very notion of buddhahood. The prevailing

cosmological assumptions of the more conservative factions of early Buddhists were framed more in terms of time than space. All Buddhists have tended to see the universe as encompassing many parallel world-systems. And all Buddhists have recognized Śākyamuni Buddha as only one of many *buddhas*, each deemed a buddha by virtue of having rediscovered or “re-launched” the perennial Truth (Dharma) at a time of decline when the teachings of earlier *buddhas* had been lost. A *buddha* was able to do this by virtue of his practice for countless lifetimes as a *bodhisattva*, “a being (directed towards) awakening (*bodhi*).” A further assumption shared by most early Buddhists was that there would never be – never need to be – two *buddhas* active in the same world-system at the same time. From the perspective of conservative or “mainstream” Buddhism this implied that *buddhas* were, in effect “few and far between.” But fortunately there was no need for everyone to become a *buddha*, since the *buddha's* disciples, women and men alike, had access through that *buddha's* teaching to the same awakening he had experienced. As *śrāvakas* (“those who listen to the teaching”) they could become *arhats* (Buddhist saints) who had conquered greed, hatred and delusion to realize the same liberation from *saṃsāra* and suffering achieved by the *buddhas*.

The Mahāyāna vision started from many of the same assumptions, but drew different conclusions about the plurality of *buddhas*. If both time and space were infinite, then so must be the number of *buddhas*. Even though the time required might be immense, there was thus every reason to assume that beings could, and some day would, become *buddhas* themselves, thus realizing not only the great wisdom (*mahāprajñā*) of a *buddha*, but also his great compassion (*mahākaruṇā*), manifested in his intention to teach what he had realized for the benefit of all beings. This shift to the view that everyone could and should pursue the *bodhisattva* path to Buddhahood was, for the Mahāyānists at least, closer in spirit to the character of the historical Buddha, Śākyamuni. While not neglecting the mental and psychological defilements the *śrāvaka* path sought to overcome, the Mahāyāna vision emphasized the more positively framed virtues or “perfections” (*pāramitās*) which all Buddhists agreed were required of *bodhisattvas* seeking to become *buddhas*. Various lists were current, but the standard Mahāyāna enumeration focused on six primary perfections: generosity (*dāna*), morality (*śīla*), forbearance (*kṣanti*), energy (*vīrya*), meditative absorption (*dhyāna*), and wisdom (*prajñā*).

Very likely some early Buddhists found this Mahāyāna emphasis on both the wisdom and compassion, coupled with a path of practice stressing the development of positive virtues, more emotionally satisfying and compelling than the less expansive view of the conservative majority. The early Mahāyānists seemed to feel little reason, in the beginning at least, to perceive the two visions of the goal and path as mutually exclusive alternatives. Indeed, early Mahāyāna scriptures often sought to accommodate the more conservative conception, asserting that the seemingly contrary conceptions ultimately converged. In this view, those who think that they are following the path of the *śrāvakas* will eventually come to realize – as many (but not all) do in the Lotus Sutra, for example – that they have, in fact, been pursuing the *bodhisattva* path all along, without realizing it. Thus there is no fundamental conflict, just a temporary difference of how to proceed. Later Mahāyāna scriptures certainly do become

more aggressively polemical in their rejection of the “lesser” paths, but even this should be understood more as the rejection of what the Mahāyāna saw a spiritually limited mind-set – the “Hīnayāna” – than as institutional sectarianism.

In light of the above it becomes easier to understand the special significance the Mahāyāna placed on another key doctrinal innovation, the idea of *bodhicitta* (lit. “awakening mind”). If the paths of the *śrāvaka* and that of the *bodhisattva* were fundamentally the same, the difference being that the bodhisattvas were able to see this in a way that the aspiring *śrāvakas* were not, then the most crucial and decisive point on the whole path was the point at which that “re-visioning” came about. It is reaching this point on the path that distinguishes the *bodhisattvas* from the *śrāvakas*, and it is this point that the Mahāyānists sought to specify with their notion of “the arising of awakening-mind” or, as it is sometimes translated, “the arising of the will to enlightenment” (*bodhicittopāda*). This is the crucial turning point on the path, the point at which the aspirant realizes that he or she is seeking enlightenment not simply as a personal goal, but for the sake of all sentient beings.

And it is thus the point at which the compassion aspect of the Buddha's enlightenment begins to come to the fore. While the Mahāyāna retained much of the more conservative conception of the stages of the path, this key turning point marked the beginning of *bodhisattva* practice proper, and it led to a richer mapping of the remaining portions of the path, seen now as consisting in the higher cultivation of the bodhisattva virtues or “perfections” mentioned above. The Mahāyāna map of the path retained the basic distinction between the insight stage of the path (*darśana-mārga*) and the cultivation stage (*bhāvana-mārga*). But the former was re-envisioned more specifically as the initial transformative insight into *śūnyatā*, i.e., the ultimate non-substantiality of all the “things” (*dharmas*) of our experience, while the latter was now understood in terms of stages in the cultivation of the perfections. Even though this reconceived notion of the path would require the efforts of multiple life-times over aeons of time, the *bodhisattva* would never despair, as this would simply give all the more opportunity to perfect the compassion that was the natural expression of true wisdom.

The *śūnyatā* doctrine provided the philosophical underpinning for another buddhological innovation central to the Mahāyāna program to re-envision not just the path but also the ultimate goal it reached. The more conservative view focused on Śākyamuni's *parinirvāṇa* (lit: “final extinguishing) as the ultimate fulfilment of his liberation from the suffering of *saṃsāra*. That entailed, in their view, an end not only to future rebirth, but also to the capacity to work actively in any way for the benefit of *saṃsāric* beings. But this understanding of the nature of buddhahood went against the Mahāyāna emphasis on the continuing power of a *buddha's* great compassion. The solution to this dilemma was reached by reconceiving the very nature of the enlightenment, and this was facilitated by the deconstructive conceptual relativism of the *śūnyavāda* doctrine. Rather than framing the Buddha's enlightenment in terms of his “escape” from *saṃsāra* (and thus from the world of beings) into (*pari*)-*nirvāṇa*, the early Mahāyāna scriptures shifted the focus onto his awakening (*bodhi*). Using the deconstructive logic of the *śūnya* doctrine, they then rejected the dualism of *saṃsāra* versus *nirvāṇa*, arguing that the Buddha's realization of the ultimate emptiness of all dichotomies – his *bodhi* – not only

freed him from suffering, but left him in a state of unbounded or “unfixed” (*apraṭiṣṭhita*) liberation that took no stand in either *saṃsāra* or *nirvāṇa*. The fully enlightened *buddha* was thus able to be completely free of the constraints of rebirth and yet remain an active force of good in the realm of suffering sentient beings. The emotional appeal of this reworking of the mainstream notion of both *buddha* and buddhahood would be difficult to over-estimate and must account to a significant degree for the growing popularity the Mahāyāna vision came to enjoy.

Devotional and Meditation Practice

In the area of practice – both individual meditation and collective worship – we can see further developments arising from the Mahāyāna effort to re-envision the path and the goal of the tradition in terms of the *bodhisattva* ideal. While the Mahāyāna maintained much that was current in more conservative circles – recitation of the Three Refuges, for example – distinctly Mahāyāna forms of practice evolved as well, especially forms that reinforced the centrality of the *bodhisattva* path with its emphasis upon seeking enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. This is most obvious perhaps in the liturgical structure of a form of worship popular in Mahāyāna circles, the threefold worship (*triskandhaka*). The focus of the *Triskandhaka* portion of the Mahāyāna *Upālipariṣcchā* scripture, which was elaborated further by the Mahāyāna poet-philosopher Śāntideva (7th century CE), this liturgy began with a ritualized confession of sins, a practice paralleling the collective *Prātimokṣa* recitations common in mainstream Buddhism from its earliest days. That acknowledgment of one's own limitations led next to a rejoicing in the merits of others, a practice again with precedent in the *muditā* portion of the meditation of the four *Brahmavihāras*. Finally the practitioner added a petition to all the Buddhas that they remain active in the world, working for the benefit of all sentient beings. It is in this third component that we can most clearly see a distinctly Mahāyāna element, a conception of what *buddhas* could and might do that would make little sense in a non-Mahāyāna context. Conservative mainstream buddhology was based on the assumption that a *buddha's* death or *parinirvāṇa* represented a complete and irrevocable separation from the world of *saṃsāric* suffering. But the whole of the *triskandhaka*, including the first two components, is framed in terms of the pursuit of enlightenment for the sake of all beings.

Innovation in Mahāyāna meditation practice is also significant, and can be best summarized as proceeding in apparently different directions. On the one hand, one can identify a tendency towards “formless” techniques of meditative absorption or concentration; while on the other hand, there was a simultaneous development of increasingly elaborate visualization practices. The first of these trajectories stems from the practical exploration of the *śūnyavāda* insight into the ultimate non-substantiality of phenomenal experience beyond all conceptual construction. Meditation practice within more conservative circles would typically involve training to maintain an object of meditation (*ālambana*) firmly in mind. But in the Mahāyāna context we find more emphasis on cultivating methods of meditation that are object-less (*nirālambana*) and intended to lead to modes of concentration free of signs all signs (*animitta*) and beyond all conceptualization (*nirvikalpa-samādhi*). The second trajectory begins with modes of devotional cult-practice

deriving most likely from earlier “mindfulness of the Buddha” (*buddhānussmṛti*) meditation practices. In their Mahāyāna forms these practices began with a devotional experience of the positive qualities of the chosen cult figure (*iṣṭadevatā*) and then expanded to incorporate not just elaborate eidetic visualizations of a particular archetypal *buddha* or *bodhisattva* but often their respective buddha-field (*buddha-kṣetra*) or “pure land” as well. With the later assimilation of Tantric modes of practice into the Mahāyāna, these visualization meditations were taken a step further, with the practitioner not only venerating the enlightened qualities of the object of his meditation but personally identifying with the figure as well.

Mahāyāna Literature

In surveying the nature and the role of Mahāyāna literature in shaping the tradition, we should first note that whereas the most conservative, mainstream tradition favoured maintaining its teachings in an oral tradition, the Mahāyāna appears to have depended much more on the creation of a written canon of scriptures for its eventual success. Indeed, the fact that the Mahāyāna does not begin to emerge in the historical record until the 1st century BCE is perhaps because it was impossible for this fledgling and minority “re-visioning” movement to gain sufficient momentum before the written word was more widely available and accepted in Indian culture. These new scriptures in their written form were so highly valued and venerated that the early Mahāyāna has been characterized, if somewhat misleadingly, as a “cult of the book.” And the books generated by this tradition were as expansive in bulk as they were in both imaginative scope and vision.

As with the more conservative versions of the Buddhist canon, the Mahāyāna scriptures fall into the three broad divisions of the *tripiṭaka* (lit: “three baskets”): *Sūtras* or discourses of the Buddha; *Vināya* or works dealing with the monastic code; and *Śāstras* or philosophical treatises. There is nonetheless a striking difference, in that the Mahāyāna canon was never officially “closed”. The texts continued to proliferate, not only with the addition of new works but also with the expansion of the earlier works, including the *sūtras*. The Vināya section of this loosely defined Mahāyāna “canon” was relatively more stable in that most Mahāyāna monastics eventually sought ordination in one of the existing *nikāya* ordination lineages they shared with their more conservative colleagues. But even so, a substantial body of Mahāyāna literature arose, with the addition of works dealing with the vows of the *bodhisattva*, which constituted the contribution of Mahāyāna ethics to the basic monastic code. The Mahāyāna *śāstra* literature shows a much greater degree of proliferation, and this was not just due to the need to work out the implications of the new Mahāyāna doctrinal innovations. As the Mahāyāna became established in Central and East Asia, new, more localized schools of thought emerged, each developing its own distinctive exegetical traditions and *śāstra* literature.

The *sūtras* of the Mahāyāna movement, vast in both imaginative conception and literary execution, remain its most distinctive literature. Viewed historically, the earliest strata of these scriptures, which probably date from the 1st century BCE,

include the most influential of the tradition, in particular the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Verses (Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā)*, the core portions of the *Lotus Sūtra (Saddharmapuṇḍarīka)*, and the earliest of the “Pure Land” *sūtras*, including the *Akṣobhyayvuhā* and other early works in the *Ratnakūṭa* collection of *sūtras*, along with the earlier of the two *Sukhāvātī Sūtras*. The later Mahāyāna *sūtras* include a number of works presenting expansions of the Prajñāpāramitā Literature, most notably the *25,000 Verse Prajñāpāramitā* and later still the *Heart Sūtra (Prajñāpāramitāhṛdāya Sūtra)* and the *Diamond Sūtra (Vajracchedikāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra)*. In this period we also find the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* (including the *Gaṇḍvuyuhā Sūtra*) which was very influential in East Asia, as was the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa*. More directly associated with Yogācāra Buddhism were the *Sandhinirmocana Sūtra* and the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*. Another group of *sūtras* introduced the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine, including most notably the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*, the *Śrīmālādevī Sūtra* and the later recensions of the Mahāyāna version of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*.

This list includes the most important and historically influential Mahāyāna *sūtras*, all of which are available in modern translations. But there are many, many more. Indeed it is safe to say that the majority of the Mahāyāna *sūtras* still remain untranslated into any European language. And our understanding of the origins of Mahāyāna Buddhism will certainly continue to evolve as these works receive the scholarly attention they deserve.

Alan Sponberg, Ph.D. (Dh. Sāramati)
Professor of Asian Philosophy & Religion
University of Montana

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Feedback on the Dharma Training Course

Once you’ve finished the module, please consider leaving feedback on the DTC on-line forum – a dedicated place for Mitra group leaders to make comments, suggestions, and corrections to the new course. This will have two big benefits:

1. It collects ideas and information needed to improve the course over time
2. It will also be a place where group leaders can find out how others have led or approached a particular module, share good ideas, and so on.

Each group leader needs to get their own username and password to access the forum. If you are a Mitra group leader and would like to participate, please e-mail Vajrashura (who has kindly set up the forum) and he’ll set up an account for you, usually within a day or two. His e-mail is: vajrashura@gmail.com, and the URL of the forum is: www.dublinbuddhistcentre.org/DTCforum.