Mahāyāna Buddhism and the *Madhyamaka* 'Middle Way' (2016)

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In this paper I plan an overview of the scholarly debate around the origins of Mahāyāna, discuss some of its central themes, and in particular, look at the *Madhyamaka* movement, a school of thought within Mahayana; its teaching on emptiness (*śūnyatā*), a central tenet of Mahāyāna will be explored. Mahayana, a new form of Buddhism, emerged in the first century CE, and today it is the primary form of Buddhism practised in China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Tibet and Mongolia. Mahāyāna is often translated as 'The Great Vehicle,' *mahā* meaning great or large, and *yāna* meaning vehicle or raft. Mahāyāna created a new body of literature which moved away from the monastic ideal, and placed a greater emphasis on the laity. The ideals and doctrines found within its body of literature were important in shaping the development of the tradition. One of the most important doctrinal innovations found among Mahāyāna writings was its theory about the nature of the Buddha, and more importantly, its theory about reality; its emphasis on the bodhisattva and the bodhisattva path was also a major development.

The two major schools of Buddhism, Theravāda and Mahāyāna, differ in their approach to the ultimate purpose of life, and the way in which it is to be attained. Theravāda Buddhists, in short, strive to become arhats (a Buddhist saint of the highest order), who have attained enlightenment and nirvana. Such arhats are only considered to be the preserve of monks and nuns, men and women who have devoted their lives to this goal. For the laity, the best they can hope for is rebirth at some future date into the monastic life, thus eventually reaching enlightenment.

Like Theravāda, it is a challenging process for scholars to present a generalised characterisation of Mahāyāna because it cannot be pinned down to being any one thing. Lamotte (1984, p.90) distinguishes Mahāyāna from early forms of Buddhism as 'a more ambitious religious ideal,' and having 'a more complex Buddhology and, especially, more radical philosophical positions.'

Despite its diversity, we find common traits in Mahāyāna. Rather than seeking to become arhats, Mahāyānists seek to become bodhisattvas (enlightened saints) who unselfishly delay reaching nirvana to assist others to attain it too. They see this as a way of imitating the Buddha, who also delayed nirvana in order to help others. Mahāyānists, therefore, gave a radical new meaning to the term bodhisattva, now applied to anyone, not just celestial beings, who set out and aspired to complete, perfect enlightenment. More importantly, Mahāyāna Buddhists teach that it is possible to attain enlightenment in just a single lifetime, and that one doesn't need to be a monk or nun to do it; the attainment of enlightenment is open to all, including laypersons.

In Mahāyāna we also see a number of celestial bodhisattvas gain importance, such as *Avalokiteśvara*, *Mañjuśrī*, *Mahāsthāmaprāpta*, and *Samantabhadra*, serving as 'saintly' models to be followed due to the abundance of their compassion and wisdom. As Prebish and Keowen (2006, p.102) put it, in response to the Theravāda practice: 'The entire Mahāyāna notion of the *bodhisattva* was a clear antithesis to the ideal type in early Buddhism, the *arhant*, whose effort was found by Mahāyānists to be self-centered and ego-based.' We also see among Mahāyāna the emergence of a large body of literature devoted to the bodhisattva and the bodhisattva path, including, among others, such works as the *Bodhisattvabhūmi Sūtra* and the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra.*

In general, Mahāyāna Buddhism tends to be a more esoteric religion than its Theravādan counterpart, including the veneration of celestial beings, Buddhas and bodhisattvas, various ceremonies and religious rituals, magic, and the use of images and sacred objects in its devotional practices. However, the role such religious elements play varies among the various Mahāyāna traditions.

Modern scholarship does not adhere to the traditional account of Mahāyāna's origins. This in part is because Mahāyāna is a diverse mixture of Buddhist visions, sometimes even contradictory in thought. Early Buddhist works used to present Mahāyāna's rise as the result of a simple straightforward chain of events. It was held that the Buddha's oral teachings were organised and developed into what we might call 'Early Buddhism.' This early Buddhism was referred to as Hīnayāna ('The Lesser Vehicle') or Theravāda. Then around the first century CE, Mahāyāna developed, breaking from its original foundations. The problem with this account is that it implied that Mahāyāna become a replacement for earlier forms of Buddhism, but this of course was simply not true. Its emergence is a far more complex affair than this linear model suggests.

Three scholars in particular have put forward their own theories on the origin of Mahāyāna. Williams (2009) is the most recent overview. His critique of earlier theories, made by Lamotte (1958, 1988) and Hirakawa (1974, 1990), avoids earlier presuppositions. Lamotte believed that Mahāyāna's origins could be traced to the activities of the laity as something of a lay revolt against monastic clericalism of its day. Lamotte (see Williams (2009, p.22), drawing on Bechert and Gomrich (1984, p.90)) hypothesised that: 'During the first five centuries of its history, Buddhism progressed considerably; nevertheless, it has to face both external and internal difficulties because of the divergent tendencies which formed at the heart of the community. Some monks questioned the authenticity of the early scriptures and claimed to add new texts to them; others leaned towards a more lax interposition of the rules governing their life; the scholastic treatises, continuously increasing in number, became more and more discrepant; finally, and above all, the laity, considering the monks' privileges to be excessive, tried to win equal religious rights for themselves.'

The notion of lay origins for the Mahāyāna movement was also widely held among Japanese scholars, and in particular Hirakawa (1974, 1990). He believed that Mahāyāna emerged among an identifiable order of bodhisattvas, consisting of lay members and renunciants of equal standing, centred around stupas, relic mounds and relic shrine worship. According to Hirakawa's theory, these stupas were administered and managed by lay communities; the communities which developed being separate from, and in time, rivals to, monastic orders. This resulted in the growth of Buddha cults, hence Mahayana's emphasis on the superiority of Bodhisattvas and the bodhisattva path, to Buddhas, and a rejection of the inferior status of the laity promoted by monastics. Hirakawa (1974, 1990, p.274) concludes his hypothesis by saying: 'the establishment of *stūpas* and the accumulation of property around them enabled groups of religious specialists to live near the *stūpas*. These people formed orders and began developing doctrines concerning the Buddha's powers to save. The references in many Mahāyāna texts to *stūpa* worship indicate the central role of these orders in the emergence of Mahāyāna Buddhism. However, as Williams (2009, p.23) points out, referring to work done by Schopen (2005): 'Hirakawa's paper relies on too many suppositions to be fully convincing, and Gregory Schopen has argued against Hirakawa that a number of important early Mahāyāna sūtras show a distinctly hostile attitude to the stūpa cult. Schopen's suggestion, a suggestion that has had considerable influence, is that reference to worshipping the texts themselves, an extremely reverential attitude to the Mahāyāna sūtras, indicates that in cultic terms early Mahāyāna may well have been centred on a number of book cults, groups of followers who studied and worshipped particular sūtras. In the sūtras themselves worshipping the text is often specifically contrasted with the stūpa cult, to the detriment of the latter.'

Williams (2009) avoids earlier unstated presuppositions, and in his own theory offers some methodological clarity. His research and hypothesis are based upon a body of newer literature which appeared around the first century BCE claiming to be the Buddha's teaching. These writings appear to have been produced by monks within the existing Buddhist traditions. The new literature centres on such things as the supremacy of the Buddha, his perception of reality, and the importance of the bodhisattva path: a noble path, to be pursued by all, laity and monk alike. Further, the production of this new literature seems to have been associated with forest monks, and those who accepted this new literature, both monastics and lay practitioners, may have formed a series of 'bodhisattva-type' groups, based around different sutras and devotional practices. These groups, Williams believes (2009, p.43) 'may certainly have perceived themselves as a righteous bulwark against moral and spiritual decline.' Those who followed the Mahāyāna remained small in number, he suggests, and continued in the minority for quite some time. Williams further (2009, p.43) remarks: 'It appears to have been some centuries before the followers of the Mahāyāna began to

identify themselves in everyday life as in the fullest sense a distinctive group within Buddhism, and it is not clear how far in general they differed throughout this period in public (as opposed to group cult or individual) behaviour from non-Mahāyāna practitioners.'

As time passed, a sense of confidence within the Mahāyāna movement emerged, becoming the 'Great Vehicle,' a superior way, and the literature begins to reflect a hostility towards those who failed to understand the central message. Hence, those who did not follow the Mahāyāna way were said to be pursuing an 'Inferior Way,' a Hīnayāna.

In India, the Mahāyāna developed two main systems of thought: the *Madhyamaka*, and later the *Yogācāra*. Together, these philosophical schools have been foundational in the development of later Northern and Eastern Buddhism. Of interest to us is the *Madhyamaka* and its central teaching on emptiness (*śūnyatā*).

The *Mādhyamikas*, followers of *Madhyamaka*, emphasised the 'middle way' (*madya* means middle). This amounted to a non-acceptance of the two extreme views, essentialism and nihilism, concerning existence and nonexistence, self and non-self, advocating neither the theory of reality or unreality, but merely of relativity. This Buddhist school of philosophical thought was founded by Nagarjuna (c.150-250 CE), a south Indian monk, philosopher and mystic, and one of the most important figures in Buddhist philosophy. He is attributed with writing the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, around 150 CE which is the foundational text of the *Madhyamaka* school of Indian Buddhist philosophy. Constituting 27 chapters, Nagarjuna's work sets out to establish the principal tenet of the *Mādhyamikas*, that all phenomena (*dharmas*) are empty or devoid of essential nature (*svabhāva-śūnya*), and of characteristics (*laksana-śūnya*), which give them a solid or independent existence.

The early Mahāyāna sutras, known collectively as *Prajñāpāramitā*, appeared around the first century CE, claiming that all phenomena are empty *(śūnyatā*). This was around the more specific claim that no person is a separate, permanent, existing or enduring self; the idea of a person, therefore, is a mental construct. Later Mahāyāna texts further developed these ideas, asserting that not just a person, but all phenomena (*dharmas*) are devoid of intrinsic nature. In the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Nagarjuna offers this doctrine its philosophical defence.

The *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* is presented in verse form, addressing an audience of fellow Buddhists; its task is to refute the metaphysics and the heterodox theories circulating at the time around the intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) of all things. In *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* chapter 24, we find the philosophical heart of Nagarjuna's arguments. Opening the chapter are six verses setting out an opponent's objections to Nagarjuna's doctrine of emptiness, charging him with the doctrine of nihilism. The next eight verses are a reply, rebuking the opponent with a counter charge of misunderstanding. From chapter 15 we have a presentation of Nagarjuna's theory, which establishes the correlation between emptiness, dependent co-arising, and convention. Verses 18 and 19 offer the climax of the entire text, and as Garfield (1996, p. 304) has put it, 'can truly be said to contain the entire *Madhyamaka* system in embryo,' being 'perhaps the most often quoted and extensively commented on verse in all of Mahāyāna philosophy:

18. Whatever is dependently co-arisen
That is explained to be emptiness.
That, being a dependent designation,
Is itself the middle way.

19. Something that is not dependently arisen,
Such a thing does not exist.
Therefore a nonempty thing
Does not exist. (tr., Garfield, 1996, p.304)

In these two verses, Nagarjuna's philosophical defence rests on his argument that all phenomena are devoid of an intrinsic nature because all phenomena are said to be dependently co-arisen. This is the basis for Nagarjuna's understanding of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). As Garfield (1995, p.305) notes: 'Nāgārjuna is asserting that the dependently arisen is emptiness. Emptiness and the phenomenal world are not two distinct things. They are, rather, two characterizations of the same thing. To say of something that it is dependently co-arisen is to say that it is empty. To say of something that it is empty is another way of saying that it arises dependently.'

To understand these concepts better, and in defence of their position, as Harvey (2013) points out, we note that the Madhyamika school holds that confusion arises over the nature of all phenomena because some people do not understand 'how' the Buddha taught. This was (Harvey 2013, p. 119) 'according to two levels of truth or reality: 'coventional truth/reality' (*samvrti-satya*) and profound 'ultimate truth/realtiy' (*paramārtha-satya*).' We see Nagarjuna's explanation of the two levels of reality, conventional and profound, in the following verses of the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā Chapter 24:

8. The Buddha's teaching of the Dharma
Is based on two truths:
A truth of worldly convention
And an ultimate truth.

9. Those who do not understand
The distinction drawn between these two truths
Do not understand
The Buddha's profound truth.

10. Without a foundation in the conventional truth,
The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.
Without understanding the significance of the ultimate,
Liberation is not achieved. (tr., Garfield, 1996, pp.296,298)

Mādhyamikas held, therefore, in the words of Lamotte (1984, p.93): 'Without having lived everyday life according to conventional standards, profound reality cannot be perceived in order to reach Nirvāna. It is therefore necessary, at the starting point, to bow to convention, because it is the means of reaching Nirvāna, just as whoever wants to draw water makes use of a receptacle.'

In these verses, Nagarjuna is arguing that the concept of two levels of truth is part of early Buddhist philosophical thought. Harvey (2013, p. 119) further explains that: ''conventional truths' were those expressed using terms such as 'person' and 'thing'; 'ultimate truth' is more exact expressed by talking of *dharmas*, ultimate realities… Seeing them thus is wisdom, leading to *non-attachment* to conventional realties, but a greatly enhanced ability to *skilfully work with* them.'

Once the hearer has grasped two levels of truth, Nagarjuna believes the concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is better understood. Harvey (2013, p.121), quoting from (Wallace, 2003) sees in modern physics a parallel to this doctrine: 'When the 'solid' objects of common-sense reality were first analysed, they were seen to consist of empty space and protons, neutrons and electrons. Classical physics saw these as hard, indivisible particles, the ultimate building blocks of matter; but further analysis showed them to consist of a whole range odd particles such as 'quarks', whose nature is bound up with the forces through which they interact. Matter turns out to be a mysterious field of interaction, with 'particles' not being real separate entities, but provisional conceptual designations.'

For the Mādhyamikas, emptiness, therefore, (Harvey, 2013, pp. 121,122) 'is neither a thing nor it is nothingness; rather it refers to the essencelessness of reality, which cannot be captured by concepts, with their tendency to breed reification.' To put it simply, all phenomena are empty of inherent, independent

existence. In this way, as Prebish and Keowen (2006, p.102) explain 'emptiness becomes an epistemological tool used to 'unfreeze' the fixed notions of our minds.'

Lamotte (1984, p.93) reminds us that some western interpreters see within Mahāyāna a 'negative absolute' in their theory of emptiness. However, Lamotte suggests that: 'when the Mahāyānists say that beings and things are empty, they are not attributing any characteristic to them. They refuse to hypostatize an Emptiness which is nothing at all (*akimcid*), 'mere non-existence' (*abhāva-mātra*). It is not that by virtue of Emptiness beings and things are empty: they are empty because they do not exist. The very notion of Emptiness is only of provisional value: it is a raft which is abandoned after crossing the river, a medicine which is thrown away after the cure.

This is why is is possible to say that *Mādhyamikas* are not nihilists because (Lamotte, (1984, p.93) 'nihilists deny what they see but the Mahayanists do not see anything and, consequently, neither affirm nor deny anything.' Lamotte (1984, p.93) offers this summary of the *Madhyamaka* position: 'By admitting from the point of view of conventional truth what it denies from the point of view of absolute truth, and vice versa, the Mahāyāna stands at an equal distance between affirmation and negation, between the view of existence and the view of non-existence. This is the Middle Way (*madhyamā pratipad*) in which it avoids every objection.' Prebish and Keowen (2006, p.102) too remind us that: 'it would be incorrect to surmise that the negative terminology associated with the concept is indicative of a subtle nihilism in Mahāyāna. To argue that all *dharmas* are empty does not mean that they do not exist, but rather identifies them as appearances which should not be perceived as objects of grasping.'

In summary, the *Mādhyamikas* held that the things we perceive as real have a conceptual and conventional existence only. This is not to say that they do not exist at all, but rather, that they do not exist as independent reality; the true status of phenomenon, therefore, is somewhere in the 'middle,' between existence and non-existence.

Over the course of this paper, we have explored some of the common traits found among Mahāyāna. We have learnt that rather than seeking to become arhats, unlike the Theravādans, they seek to become bodhisattvas, in order to assist others to obtain enlightenment. The origins of Mahāyāna was also discussed, looking into the scholarly research of Lamotte, Hirakawa, and Williams. The latter offers a methodological clarity to his findings, and avoids the presuppositions put forward by the other two. His hypothesis is based upon the emergence of a new body of literature first appearing around the first century BCE. Produced by monks, it centres on the supremacy of the Buddha, his perception of reality, and the importance of the bodhisattva path, which is open to both monastic and lay alike. Finally, a central school of thought among Mahāyāna was explored, known as *Madhyamaka*, and in particular their teaching on emptiness (*śūnyatā*). For the *Mādhyamikas*, there is no ultimate reality. No matter how hard one may look, an essential nature cannot be found in any phenomena which we perceive to be real. This, however, does not mean that those things we perceive as real have no existence whatsoever; to say so would be nihilistic. To speak of emptiness is neither to speak of a 'thing,' nor is it to speak of 'nothingness,' but it speaks to the essencelessness of reality. The *Mādhyamikas* believed that the true status of phenomena was something midway between existence and non-existence; it was from this midway position that *Madhyamaka* derived its name. Their influence among Mahāyānist philosophical and metaphysical thought continues to this day.

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