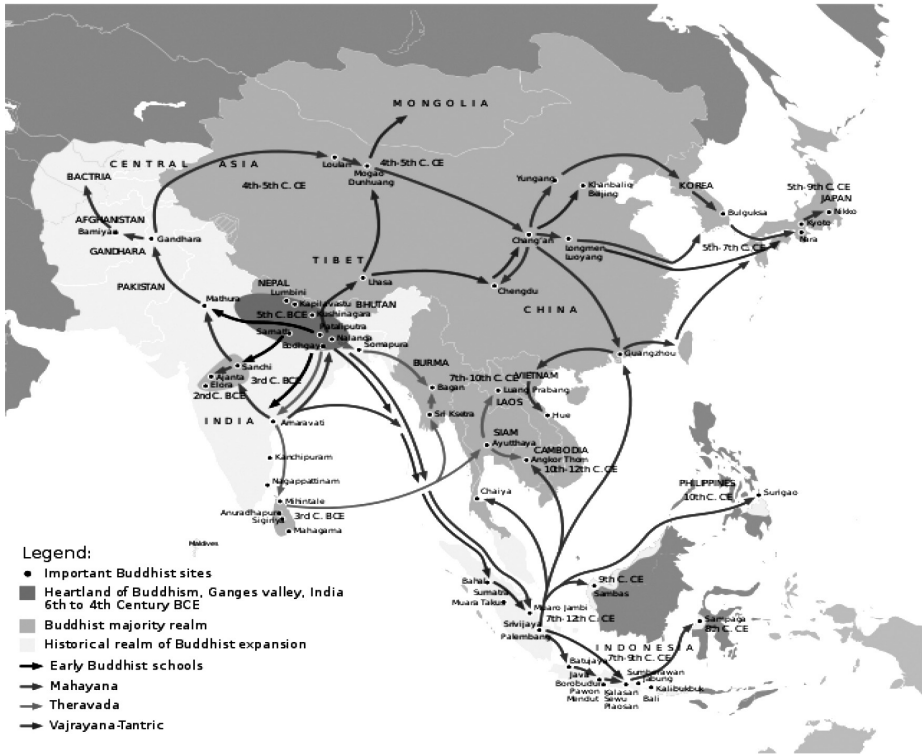


FACES OF BUDDHISM

by Pham Thi Minh Hoa*

Buddhism has existed for more than 2500 years in this world. Today Buddhist ideas have spread and developed to almost five continents and four overseas, beyond Jambudipa (Indian land). In time, and shaping to the countries where Dharma seeds are sowed, nourished and developed, Buddhist ideals are shaped in different form of theory & practices. From Ganga delta, Buddhist ideals were carried by monks and merchants, had migrated up Yamuna River to Indus valley and further to North West, Kashmir & Gandhara region and Kamboja (now Pakistan and Afghanistan). When touching with different people or regions (Janapada) Buddhist ideas, for the purpose of penetrating and rooted in that land, as new comers, they had first merged and reshaped with the existing culture and ways of life. In North – West, Buddhism developed to Mahayana (great Vehicle) forms which were originated from Mahasanghika (great assembly) the open trend. In South and South-east, Buddhist ideas seemed retained its original form or more reserved trend called Theravada (the Elder sect). There are two prevailing schools of Buddhism.

*. Dr., Advisor, Vietnamese Buddhist Association Of Central Valley California, Global Buddhist Education Foundation/ dhammaduta.net. Chùa Tam Bảo 2459 S. Elm Ave, Fresno, CA. 93706. USA.



During the course of dissemination, Buddhist ideas have penetrated, merged, and existing harmoniously with different cultures. Bloomed into colorful Buddhist forms, with three main sects, to say The Elders or Southern Buddhism (*Theravada*), the Developed Buddhism (*Mahayana*) and the Diamond Way (*Tantrayana – Vajrayana*).

In these three main sects, there are many sub-sects as the results of diverts of thoughts, and ways of understanding & of practices in different lands. There were about 20 sects of Buddhism just around 300 years the Great Master passed away. These changes and divided into sects and sectarian were unavoidable due to diverse perceptions in Sangha members, and more considered factors are changes in societies and ways of life in different lands & people and ages. There were competitions among sects and schools of other faiths and interfering of thoughts and ideas among different schools of thoughts and religions co-exist in India.

The question raised here is: What made Buddhist thoughts and practices when applied in East and Sought –East of India could retain

their original forms, but when they were to be applied in the North and North - West had to undergo reformation and adaptation? This presentation offers an brief analytical approach to those factors which make Buddhism become more diverse in our age, what we can keep and what should we develop, and what we need to drop for Buddhist ideas to continue a beneficial way of life, are ideals and aspirations that guide mankind to develop in this millennium. In other words, it's Buddhism: Innovations and integration.

According to my way of understanding, there are as least three conditions contributed to the differentiation & diversity of the two main Buddhist Schools which made them developed as they were and still are. And from these points, we can ascertain what need to be changed and what need to keep the original form when carrying on Buddhist ideas into different lands in our age.

First, we have to come back to the Buddha's time, read stories about how the Buddha made changes in practices Vinaya responding to the needs & perceptions of people and cultures where His teachings had come in touch with. When Venerable Maha Kaccayana and his ordained disciple went back to Avanti, his home land – where the climate and geography different from Ganga delta, and here, people also had different perceptions on how are clean, beauty, polite and civilized, etc. from middle land. With the due request of Maha Kaccayana, the Buddha allowed changes in Vinaya (the code of disciplines for monks), made them suitable and adaptable to the natural and social conditions in Avanti. (Ref. Vin. iii, Mahavagga, *Cammakkhandhaka*)

Issues we see here are (1) climate, (2) geographic (natural conditions), and (3) perceptions and culture which people followed (social conditions) where the Dharma seeds will be planted & rooted, making impacts and influences on people minds and lives as a new religion or belief. One more important factor is, the missionary: status and power of influence that person and his/ her supporters have on the new founded society. Perhaps, of the four factors mentioned above, the social conditions such as established believes & philosophical milieu – perceptions already have in the land play a crucial importance in which the Dharma will be accepted & have the chance to be a part of life in new land or not.

Countries and tribes who lived in South of India share a similar climate and customs as people in Ganga delta, and before common Era, they had not established any strong belief system which influenced people minds as orthodox yet. When Buddhist thoughts and ideas of living come to these lands, majority were from missionary monks/nuns who were well trained in Buddhist practices, have their mind developed to certain advance in spiritual world, on returning to their original countries. They also had the aspiration to spread the good teachings for benefits and happiness of people who if well received in the teachings, may lead a more enlightened life for their own welfare. In these lands, it's not too difficult for the new teachings have a footing in the hearts and lives of people. The reputation & prestige of lineage, the power of influence of the missionaries in the beginning are also very important. Many of the missionary monks had come from royal or highly respected families who had important roles & influence in the society. These factors is an advantage for true Dharma to pass on and become the main stream of thought and philosophy guiding people lives even at the first generation of missionary workers.

This is the reason why Buddhism spread to South India and Sri Lanka, and later to the East, like Myanmar, Thailand, Thaton Kingdom & Suvannabhumi, the essence of Buddha's teachings and practices were not changed much in compare to the peak time of the Buddha when the Dharma had have a great influence in the middle land of India & Ganga river.

When Buddhist ideas and practices spread to the north and North-West of India, Buddhism met with other cultures and traditions which had currently established in the society. Even at the time the Buddha started founding his Sangha and sharing his enlightened messages, there were other traditions and religious practices in India which made Buddhism just one of them. When reading the Long Discourses of the Buddha, and occasionally in other collections, we can see the conversations between the Buddha and other religious and educated leaders of different traditions. Interaction and interfering between different thoughts, cultures, and practices made Buddhist ideas become more distinguished as a middle way, Buddha's followers were not just wanderers of self-

mortification, they were also educators, and to some extent, were social reformers, and left their positive influences on the people lives and society. These influences including changing perceptions on cast and social range as not determined by birth, understanding about how to lead an ethical in family and social life, and in the way of harmonious government. One point we need to see here is in the course of interacting and mutual exchanging of ideas and believes, what are the crucial points of teachings and practices had been modified and changed to become developed Buddhism (*Mahayana*)?

At the Buddha's time and when noble disciples were still alive and had great influences, due to their wisdom and authentic living shined in every corners of life, Buddhist ideals and practices spread wide, fast, and steady. Ascetics and scholars who met the Buddha (or His great disciples); most of them were influenced & overwhelmed by His great vision and inner power. This is the period that the Buddha's teachings were so wonderfully attractive, capable of transforming almost every social ranges. However, in a later time, those great personalities in the Sangha had gradually decreased with time, while Buddha Sasana still co-exists with other schools of religions and philosophies, the influence become mutually balanced.

Within the Buddhist groups, first changes perhaps were due to geographic distant which make going and coming foe regular meeting become difficult. There were not much meeting and exchanging ideas, learning from each other, mutually holding religious functions (*Sangha karma*) make Buddhist groups divided further more in practice and transmitting the teachings. Especially the first five hundred years the oral tradition transmission is very important. Less meeting among the Sangha groups made this tradition even more different in memorizing and passing on the script ions from teacher to his students of different groups.

Commonly, each group only learn by heart a portion of scriptures, when transmit them to their students, they only can pass on the portion that they had learned from their teachers. If different groups did not learn and exchange from each other, they miss the portion that were not transmitted in their group, and they could

not access to the whole Tipitaka. This problem causing them not have a complete knowledge of what the Buddha had taught; the inheritance they have is only limited to their tradition.

According to Prof. Harimuna Arika in his book, the History of Indian Buddhism, quote:

*“The rise of Mahayana Buddhism approximately five hundred years after the Buddha’s death is an example of how Buddhism responded to the demands of a new time. Mahayana Buddhism included many elements not found in early Buddhism. Despite these innovations, the original spirit of the Buddha’s teaching was not lost in early Mahayana. In fact, early Mahayanists revived the spirit of the Buddha’s teaching by adapting it for a new age. However, these innovative elements brought hidden dangers with them. As time passed, many Buddhists became more interested in the new additions than in the original message of the Buddha’.*¹

Indeed, one of the famous treatises on the Middle Way (*Madhyamaka*), and other concept of Emptiness (*Sunyata*) of Nagarunja and Varabandhu – the early Mahayana authors had their root in the very early discourses of the Buddha. With time, these thoughts were developed, proliferated in new languages to satisfy the need of knowledge for scholars of the later generations. As said by Prof. Arika, common people were more interested in the adding elements than the pure spirit of teachings that encouraged one to treat the path to enlightenment by following the Noble Eightfold Path. And again, with the adding of magical spells, exotic Buddhism attracted people who love magic, myths, and supernatural phenomena.²

These adding elements with the purpose of attracting people to Buddhism, like coats which were cut to fit the perceptions of common folks, adding colors to make them stunning, with rite and rituals more and more elaborating – made Buddhism drift far & further from the original messages of the Buddha.

Again, when the missionaries do not have self-discipline and not master the true Dharma, and one’s inner power have not

1. P. 19 – Introduction – *Indian Buddhism From Sakyamuni to early Mahayana* by Harikawa Arika, translated into English By Paul Groner, © 1990 University of Hawaii Press.

2. P. 23 – Introduction – *Indian Buddhism From Sakyamuni to early Mahayana* by Harikawa Arika, translated into English By Paul Groner, © 1990 University of Hawaii Press.

developed, when interact with other faiths and existing cultures in new land, the assimilation of Buddhist faith with local customs is unavoidable. Around 6th century AD, Buddhism in India had developed into a religion that wear many characteristics of esoteric & mystic practices, importing different Hindu gods – assimilated them with Bodhisattva figures, and adding more rituals that were local customs and believes. These things happened because of competition and mutual influence between different faiths that co-exist, especially with polytheist culture like Hindus.

The fact that importing Hindu gods & goddess as well as indigenous rituals and customs into Buddhism indeed attracted some common folks, especially people who need no clear cut doctrinal and ethical points, come to Buddhist temples. However, these innovations also manifest dangerous draw backs: it makes Buddhism very similar to Hinduism, to the extent that Buddhism had lost its distinctive characteristics, and so lost its right foothold in the land it was born. This is one of the factors that contributed to the disappearance of the Buddhism in India – where it emerged and developed for 1500 years.

When Buddhism come to Central Asian, Tibets and China – those countries have climates and believes – cultures quite different with North East India, whose changes in the way to share Dharma and how to practices Buddhist ideals so that they will be accepted in the new lands is unavoidable. Buddhist doctrine reaches Chine in the first century AD, Taoism and Confucius already well-established in the land and influenced on social orders and folk's customs for centuries. When Buddhist Ideals were spread here, they were interpreted & understood in the languages & concepts that were familiar with these existing religions and customs. Its take few centuries for Buddhism become rooted and developed into Chinese Buddhists which are a well blend of Confucius, Taoism and Buddhism. From China, Buddhism was spread to Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam. This is the second wave of Buddhist thoughts & practices to Vietnam.³

3. The first time Buddhism came to Vietnam was from South India, following sea-rout traders, and it appeared like Savastivada and Sautantika sects of Buddhism which flourished few centuries before common ara.

As the water run from Himalaya Mountains down hills, valleys, passing many country sides, through many streamlets to rivers, overcoming different obstacles, carrying alluvial & minerals to different lands that marked its journey; in a similar way, Buddhist doctrine were interpreted & understood, practiced in so many ways marked by interactions of Buddhist ideals with different cultures, believes, civilization and customs of the people who they come in touch with – making multi-faces Buddhist characteristics here and there. These elements enriched Buddhism, but at the same time, the farther it reaches the more impure with added elements not in origin it had. Forms of Buddhist practices which were many times invented to adapt to indigenous cultures and folk's lore's, are deeming & losing its original massages on enlightenment and liberation from Samsara. That is why the term Decline Dharma was formed.

We can also symbolize Buddhism as a giant tree with two big branches developed near the root and many medium and small branches had formed, changed and evolved & transformed to be the tops, leaves and flowers of the tree.

Tipitaka of few traditions are still existed in different languages. We are fortunate to live in the age that travel and learning from country to country for discovering 'other tradition' become easy now, unlike our ancestors. Approaching to Suttras, Vinaya, and many thesis of Buddhist studies in different languages are also make convenient through internet. Since two centuries recently, Buddhism has crossed beyond Asia and Far East, entering Western world, and flourishing in Euros, Australia and US, Canada. Evolving from the original massages of the Buddha through many centuries, changing and reshaping according to circumstances make modern Buddhism abundant and diversity when they come in touch with analytical westerner's minds in England, France, Germany, United States of American and Australia.

We inherit a very rich dharma inheritance of knowledge and cultures which are Buddhist or related to Buddhist in abundant & diverse forms. However, how to apply Buddhist philosophy and ethic into our lives, in our conditions and culture, our specific time and life circumstance is depend on the wits & wisdom of now

Buddha's sons and daughters – who are considered as Dharma messengers with the responsible carry on the Dharma to every corners & cultures. Let the true Dharma merge into the global trend. We also have the opportunity to compare different versions of Tipitaka to see what are in common and are essential of Buddhist ideals & practices that most resemble the early teachings of the Buddha in these richness of Dharma inheritance have passed to us. This is the journey back to the origin; purify Dharma from elements that were added from old time and from indigenous cultures & customs where Buddhism went through before come to us during these two thousand years long.

The doctrine of the Four Noble Truths, Four Divine Abiding, the Dependent Origination, and education on the Law of Cause and Effect, the Three Characteristics of Existence (Anicca, Dukkha, Anatta) make people more enlightened about the reality of life and how to respond to unsatisfactory, make people realize about their stubborn, uplifting them to new horizon, higher perception and live a nobler life utilizing Buddhist timeless values. These ethical and wise teachings of Buddhism are always applicable in every age. The real values of Dharma are timeless, while the elements added to it journey are like baggage, or like coats according to weather or mode, we have the choice to take or leave them. When the covering or added elements become obstacles, or of no use, just drop, so they will not hindrance the flow of true Dharma.

One of the obstacles that stand on the way for young people to learn & understand Dharma is the classic languages. Until now, many temples and monasteries still use old Chinese as standard for recitation in the temples. Until now, the twenty first century many translations of Vietnamese Buddhists, whether they live in Vietnam or over sea, are still retained a lot of old style Han- Viet, which make young people have no comprehension of what is going on. Beside, stories and symbols which convey educated massages are mostly out of date, can't verify and even illogical. In old days, Buddhist Masters used stories, languages and classic examples belong to their time. We also can use our modern languages, classic examples and stories & symbols of our time – the internet-of-things & quantum physic age.

At the Buddha time, when a group of monks had Brahmin background come to the Buddha, and requested the Blessed One to convert all of his teachings into a standard language, that's Sanskrit, the Buddha refused their request. He advised people to learn Dharma and share it in their language, or the language that is more familiar with the listeners. (Ref. Vin. iii.)

Today Buddhism comes to Western world, not only one school, but three main schools of Buddhists are found in US, and many other forms of Buddhists practices. What attracted educated Westerners learns and practices Buddhist ideals? After the Tipitaka were translated into English by Pali Text Society around 1881 by Thomas (London), they found a very rich store of ancient knowledge: philosophy, psychology, ethics, etc., extremely deep, diversity and more important, very pragmatic of this Eastern religion which appeared very attractive to educated Westerners.

In the last century, Buddhist meditation, especially calm (*samatha*) and insight (*Vipassana*) meditation aroused more interest in learning and practicing these techniques. At the present, there are about 50 Vipassana meditation centers in US & Australia follow Guenkaji method. At each center, every month have two 10 days retreat for new and average, and 20 days retreat for advanced meditators, each accepted 120 yogis. These retreats attached mostly young and middle aged educated and professional people to attend. All retreats are booked in full long before it opens, not only because of expert teachers who guided yogis, but the way they are organized and served are real selfless & altruistic services.

Besides, Westerners are also finding out that studying & practicing Buddha's teachings really enhance them in cognitive ability, slow and calm their minds effectively. Again, combining Buddhist meditation techniques with analysis psychology is now a popular trend for educated and open-minded people in the West. Buddhist philosophy in simple and natural living are learned and practiced now, especially in combined with neuroscience, are applied in medical schools and in psychotherapy to reduce stresses & worry, restless that past face living in modern world caused on human minds and health. A program named Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) has been applied in many fields of secular

lives in US and other countries of the West. This is the program that used Buddhist mindfulness meditation & Yoga and consciously changing attitude, at the beginning aim at helping patients to cop up with pains and frustration in hospital environment. The program are created and taught by University of Massachusetts Medical Center in early 1970, led by Prof. Jon Kabat-Zinn. Up to now, mindfulness meditation have been developed and practiced in many other fields, in schools, in leadership and in business and in management as well.

On studying and scholarship, the Tipitaka are translated into English many times to update with modern English. There are few websites introduces different versions of Tipitaka for comparison between Pali canon and Agama from Chinese, Tibet and Japanese. (Ref. www.buddhanet.net & <https://suttacentral.net/>). These websites are very rich & reliable sources for Buddhist studies, presented in different languages which are easy to read and accessible to different levels of readers.

Thus, after 2560 years, Buddhism has developed and spread all over the world, are studying, researching and practiced for better living in this world, not only for ordained Sangha, but are useful for lay people. We can use the Dharma to cross over stresses, overcoming pains, and liberated from worry and depressions, calm the restless monkey minds of modern people. When Buddhist ideals are accepted and practiced in the West, most of rites and ritual as well as Eastern dogmatic are removed. Only the essences of the enlightened teachings such as understanding about three marks of existences, practical tools to reduce stresses such as living selfless life, skillful services are retained and interpreted in a clear & easy way, using psycho & neurons languages, even IT and AI concepts to convey Dharma messages to new learners.

Reference sources

2500 years of Buddhism – the Publications Division Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi May 1956.

Digha Nikaya, Silakkhandha.

Geography of Early Buddhism by Bimala Churn Law, University of Oxford Press 1932. Scan version on Internet of Ven. Ānandajoti Bhikkhu May, 2014. Ref: <http://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net/Maps/MP-index.htm>

Indian Buddhism From Sakyamuni to early Mahayana by Harikawa Arika, translated into English by Paul Groner, © 1990 University of Hawaii Press.

Vinaya, Maha vagga pali.