Theravāda and Mahāyāna Need Each Other

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The gap in the Buddha-Sāsana (S: Śāsana)[1] between the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions began in India as doctrinal differences, but came to be India itself, for when the Sāsana died out in India, these two great traditions became substantially isolated from one another, Theravāda to the south and Mahāyāna to the north, remembering each other unkindly and mostly in lore. In this way, what began as doctrinal distinctions became a geographical and cultural divide. We now live in a globalized world in which these two great schools cannot fail to intersect; they are found in close proximity, living side by side in almost any major western city and in many Asian cities. Moreover, curiosity, along with the probing of modern scholarship, has broadened the dialog between the two sides. Yet Theravāda and Mahāyāna remain generally aloof from each other.

I have come to the view that there is much more that holds Buddhism together than that splits it apart, that the Sāsana is robust, tolerant of diversity, yet remarkably able to retain its core teachings, which it has – for the most part – on both sides of this divide. Nonetheless, because of the subtle sophistication of the Buddha's teachings, the Sāsana has historically gone through cycles of decline and recovery. Moreover, geographical isolation has not only cut off Theravāda from Mahāyāna, it also disrupted the ability of each to recover from its respective faults. Mahāyāna became early on a tradition cut off from its past, and Theravāda a tradition cut off from its future.

I will begin by dispelling two historical myths that sustain the idea that the separation of these two traditions is irreconcilable, that Theravāda and Mahāyāna can do little to help each other. One has to do with monastic discipline and the other with doctrine. I then illustrate these processes of decline and then recovery and argue that healing the gap between these traditions will create a healthier Sāsana on both counts. Theravāda and Mahāyāna need each other.

Myth 1: schism as the origin of Mahāyāna

Sects or schools distinguish themselves spatially, doctrinally, and also formally at the saṅgha level. A common misconception is that the difference between Theravāda and Mahāyāna began at the saṅgha level with a schism. The saṅgha has been traditionally the heart of the Buddhist community since it is charged with preserving, propagating and living according to the teachings. Schism in the monastic community (P:*saṅghabedha*) was a serious concern of the Buddha, for a dispute in the saṅgha would effectively split the saṅgha in twain and carry the whole community with it. Luckily, formal schisms have been relatively rare in Buddhist history. However, it is a common belief that the Theravāda and Mahāyāna saṅghas can nevermore be in communion. This erroneous belief has had unfortunate consequences.

A little history: Even aside from formal schism, diversity in the Buddhist community began developing in the early centuries of the Sāsana because of geographical dispersal of the saṅgha, for distinctions in monastic behavior and doctrinal views began to develop among communities at significant distances from one another in South Asia, such that separate sects became recognizable, each of which preserved, orally in the early centuries, its own version of the early scriptures, generally in a distinct language, but at the same time the various sects were still largely in communion. At one time eighteen separate sects, almost entirely formed in this way, could be counted in the Buddhist area. The Theravāda sect was probably the most outlying, since it was transmitted to the island of Sri Lanka, apparently during the reign of Aśoka.

Nevertheless, there appears to have been a historical full-fledged formal schism in the early saṅgha, about one century after the Buddha's parinirvana, a schism recorded in the later literature of many of these later sects. One side in this schism became known as the Mahāsāṃghika sect, and the other side, the Sthavira sect, both born of allegedly irreconcilable differences. It was Mahāsāṃghika that would later be identified with Mahāyāna. The Sthavira, for its part, would give rise to Theravāda, Sarvāstivādin, Dharmagelupka, and most other sects. Theravāda is the only one of these many sects that remains today, stranded on an island as Buddhism died out many centuries later in continental India, though it had in the meantime also spread to Southwest Asia.

Among the ancient sectarian reports of schism, there is very little agreement

about its genesis.[2] In some accounts it had to do with monastic discipline in others with doctrine. The Theravāda tradition reports that it had to do with the laxity of Mahāsāṃghika discipline; the Mahāsāṃghika tradition itself held that the schism has to do with the attempt by the the Sthaviriyans to impose stricter discipline. In neither case is a significant difference in the terms of the dispute reflected in its respective monastic code.

On the other hand, the Sarvāstivādin sources – also, like Theravāda, on the Sthaviriya side – attribute the dispute to five doctrinal issues all having to do with the status of the arahant. It was a later Chinese source,[3] based on the Sarvāstivādin account, that seems to have first seen in the Mahāsāṃghika the precursor to the Mahāyāna, even claiming that the Mahāsāṃghika had tried to incorporate some of the Mahāyāna (as we now know, yet to be composed) sutras prior to the schism.[4] In fact, some Mahasanghikas – not all – did espouse views that would, centuries later, come to characterize Mahāyāna, having to do with the supramundane nature of the Buddha and of bodhisattvas,[5] which may have led to this effort by some later Mahāyānists to identify themselves with Mahāsāṃghika.

The theory that the Mahāyāna and Theravāda monastic orders were rent asunder by this ancient schism is widely believed in both schools and has served to deepen the gap that persists to this day. But the schismatic account is false. This account of the origin of Mahāyāna cannot be correct, for reports of the famous Chinese pilgrims Faxian (early fifth century) and Xuanzang (seventh century) provide us with a clear picture of the process of Mahāyāna propagation. Both tell as that any given monastery in India commonly had monastics of Mahāyāna persuasion living quite happily together with non-Mahāyanists.[6]

Instead, whereas the sects were largely geographically determined, Mahāyanist ideas seem to spread quietly over the entire Buddhist region from sect to sect, much like a dance craze might spread with little regard to national borders. As Gombrich concludes, “Mahāyāna … is not a sect but a current of opinion which cut across sects as properly defined.”[7] The Mahāyāna craze even reached far-flung Theravāda Sri Lanka, at times with some success, but was finally suppressed by King Parakkama Bāhu I in the twelfth century as part of a purification program.[8]

Whereas, before the Mahāyāna movement, doctrine in the various sects was centered on the discourses of the Buddha, the Mahāyāna movement centered a later doctrinal development that added a new scriptural corpus quietly and unevenly throughout the Sāsana, apparently with little drama, opposition or discord. In summary, there was no historical schism that rent Theravāda and its sister sects on the one side, and Mahāyāna on the other asunder. Technically, both saṅghas should still be properly in communion. In fact, I am aware of one ordination of Mahāyāna monks and nuns by a monastic quorum including Theravada monks, at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in California on August 9, 2013.

The story does not end here, for it remains to be shown a significant way in which the myth of schism has harmed the Theravāda saṅgha in particular. Buddhism took root in Central Asia and by the first century CE ventured along the Silk Road into China. This complex migration entailed the mingling of monks ordained in various sects but primarily from the southwestern regions of the Indian subcontinent, which were nearer the trade routes. Likewise, early scriptures were transmitted from various sects and in various languages, along with newer Mahāyāna sutras and scholarly writings. Most early missionaries to China seem to have been associated with Mahāyāna, but there was a dearth of Indian masters of significant influence.[9]

The journey over the Silk Road was made by rough monks traveling with rough caravans led by rough traders through a very rough environment. But eventually an order of Chinese monks was established, around which Mahāyāna began to consolidate itself in China. Ultimately they would settle on the Vinaya from the Dharmaguptaka sect – a Sthirāvada sect historically close to Theravāda – of West India as the standard for monastic procedures throughout East Asia.

Because few women or nuns made the perilous journey over the Silk Road, the first Chinese nuns seem to have been ordained only in the fourth century, and even then they were ordained by monks, contrary to the convention prescribed in the *Vinaya* of ordination of nuns by nuns. Nonetheless, the nuns' saṅgha was fully established with the ordination of three hundred Chinese nuns by foreign nuns in 433 CE. This was possible after a boat captain named Nan-t'i had brought the requisite number of fully ordained nuns from southern regions to Nan-ching to perform the ordination.[10] Significantly for our discussion, these

nuns were brought from Sri Lanka, and so would certainly have belonged to the Theravāda tradition, in fact, probably to the nuns order established in Sri Lanka by Saṅghamitta Theri, the daughter of Emperor Aśoka of India.

Clearly alleged sectarian or schismatic divisions were not an issue in fifth century China; *Vinaya* was *Vinaya*, ordination was ordination, and potential doctrinal differences that might exist between the Sri Lankan and Chinese saṅghas were besides the point. The saṅghas were regarded as in communion, the Chinese women were ordained by the Theravāda nuns and the ordination was approved by Chinese monks, certainly largely of Mahāyāna doctrinal persuasion.

Subsequent Theravāda history has revealed one way in which Theravāda needs Mahāyāna: Theravāda at some point since this historic ordination in ancient China misplaced its own order of fully ordained nuns, in all of the Theravāda countries, in Sri Lanka and in most of the nations of Southeast Asia. It is believed this happened in the tenth or eleventh centuries due to war.[11] The loss of the nuns' sangha has created a situation that is a mirror image of that in China prior to 433 CE, that is, the absence of existing nuns to ordain new nuns. In the meantime, the order of nuns in China – originally transmitted, as we have seen, from Theravāda nuns from Sri Lanka – has flourished uninterrupted to the present day in Mahāyāna lands. If we, like the ancient Chinese, regard sectarian divisions as beside the point, as I have argued here, then a resolution to the Theravāda deficit is simple: Let Chinese Mahāyāna nuns ordain Theravāda nuns and bring back the order the Theravāda saṅgha had itself established to China. If, on the other hand, we adhere to the tradition that an ancient schism separates the two saṅgha irreparably, then Theravāda is cut off from its own future, and from the nun's saṅgha it once spawned. This situation has resulted in controversy, but its outcome is secure.

In recent decades the Theravāda nuns order is, in fact, being restored in exactly this way: with the help of their Chinese, generally Taiwanese, Mahāyāna sisters who have kindly provided the necessary quorum of nuns to ordain new Theravāda nuns. And yet, the status of these ordinations is under challenge for various reasons including this myth of ancient schism. Nonetheless, I am happy to report that the numbers of Theravāda nuns is increasing, particularly with fully viable Theravāda nuns' orders in Sri Lanka and recently also in California, large enough to provide a quorum for ordaining new Theravāda

nuns. In this way Mahāyāna has helped the Theravāda tradition to restore the original intention of the Buddha, effectively recovering the future from which it was long cut off.

Myth 2: Mahāyāna as higher teachings

Theravāda has been remarkably orthodox historically, although it did undergo some further development from the early Buddhist texts (hereafter EBT). This earliest layer of scriptures, as close as we know to what the Buddha himself taught, was supplementing very early on by the canonical *Abhidhamma* and, beginning around 500 CE, by voluminous Pali commentaries (atthakathā) on the EBT and on the *Abhidhamma*. Gombrich[12] notes that Theravāda has developed very little since the commentary days in the first millennium. It has been extremely conservative in its outlook, not participating in the fast pace of Indian Buddhism during that same period, nor the further developments in Mahāyāna lands. The conservationism Theravāda is probably a result of its geographical isolation in Sri Lanka during its early history and subsequently southwest Asia. Gombrich points out that the Tamil culture and language of Sri Lanka are also very conservative compared to the Tamil of southern India. Theravāda has also failed to produce the long line of brilliant and original thinkers that Mahāyāna has.

Characteristic of Mahāyāna is a dramatic shift in the center of its scriptural basis from the EBT to the sometimes wildly original Mahāyāna *sūtras* and *śāstras* (treatises), which were unknown until the first millennium CE. Among the important themes expounded within the new Mahāyāna texts are the bodhisattva ideal, buddha nature, elaborations of cosmology including the attribution of superhuman status to the Buddha, emptiness, subject/object non-dualism and appeal to superhuman beings. Two main philosophical schools are generally held to have developed in Indian Mahāyāna: the Madhyamika and the Yogācāra. the first centered around emptiness and began with *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras,* and followed by the scholarly work of Nagārjuna and others. The second centered around subject/object non-duality, began with the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra and Lankavatara Sutra,* followed by the works of Asanga and Vasubandhu and others in the Yogācāra or Mind-Only School. But the scope of doctrine found within Mahāyāna is much greater than this.

This very gradual (centuries-long), but in retrospect dramatic shift represented

by Mahāyāna has been evaluated from two conflicting perspectives, one by Theravāda and one by Mahāyāna, which Bhikkhu Bodhi calls *Theravāda purism* and *Mahāyāna elitism*.[13] The tendency for Theravadins, and undoubtedly many in the early sects of yesteryear, has been to look at Mahāyāna sutras with some alarm as inauthentic aberrations from the Buddha's teaching, instances illustrative of an unraveling of the Sāsana. The tendency for Mahāyānists, on the other hand, has been to regard their sutras with some enthusiasm as *higher* teachings, a further unfolding of the Sāsana.[14]

A familiar example of the Mahāyāna attitude is the famous *Heart Sutra*, part of the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, which has the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, a mythical figure in Mahāyāna lore, lecturing on the Dharma condescendingly to the great Śāriputra (P: Sāriputta), an historical disciple and arahant at the time of the Buddha, known in the EBT for his great wisdom.

> "Oh, Śāriputra, form does not differ From emptiness, and emptiness does not differ from form. Form is emptiness and emptiness is form. The same is true for feelings, perceptions, fabrications and consciousness."

In the Tibetan rendition of this sutra, we learn that the Buddha has been quietly listening during this discourse and at the end approves of Avalokiteśvara's words.

Mahāyāna sutras typically have the basic form of the EBT discourses, reporting on the composition of an audience and the delivery of a sermon by the Buddha. A myth that often accompanies them – prominent in the *Lotus Sutra*, for instance – is that these texts indeed originate with the Buddha, but that they were preserved secretly for hundreds of years until the world was ready for them.[15] So profound are they, that before these works manifested, the world had first to master an inferior doctrine (the *Hīnayāna*). These texts were quickly embraced by the Mahāyānists as they became available, but neglected by more orthodox Buddhists, as they are by the Theravādins to this day.

Virtually all scholars agree that Mahāyāna sutras are, in fact, of much later provenance, and of uncertain authorship; they certainly did not originate with, nor anywhere near the time of, the Buddha.[16] Although this seems to support the common Theravāda purist view regarding these texts, the value of many of these texts must be acknowledged, for many are quite brilliant and important

for the doctrinal development of Buddhism. Moreover, from the Mahāyāna perspective we could just as well concede that the Buddha was only the first in a series of great Buddhist thinkers, that he turned the wheel of Dharma once but that a second and a third teacher turned it again and again.

Indeed, the first millennium CE, the period during which these texts arose, northern India seems to have experienced a vibrant intellectual and spiritual life, encouraged by the great Buddhist universities suc as Nālanda. It is significant that among the Buddhist sects, the Theravādins played little role in this intellectual fervor,[17] nor does it seem in its history to have produced minds of the stature of Nāgārjuna, nor Vasubandhu, nor of later thinkers beyond India like Tsongkhapa and Dōgen. It was instead creating line-by-line commentaries on the EBT and *Abhidhamma* during this period.

Later in this essay I will describe what I see as a process of doctinal decline and recovery that has characterized the Sāsana historically. For now I point out that Mahāyāna seems to have arisen at a period of doctrinal decline in many sects particularly in northern India. In fact, it is probably partly in response to that decline that Mahāyāna arose, as we will see. Framed in these terms it will be evident that much of the enthusiasm for Mahāyāna ideas came not from some inadequacy of the Buddha's early teachings, but from doctrinal corruption in certain of the early sects in the first few centuries of the Sāsana by the time the Mahāyāna movement was under way. Particularly important to the Mahāyāna response were the teachings of the Sarvāstivāda sect dominant and intellectually active in northern India for many centuries, which had developed a highly speculative and substantialist *Abhidharma*, and the offshoot Sautantrika (sutta-only) sect.[18]

Unfortunately, seeing early Buddhism through the filter of later corruptions, then underscoring this by the myth of higher teachings, resulted in a failure in the Mahāyāna to study and recognize the brilliance and sophistication of the earliest teachings.[19] Hence the dismissive attitude toward poor Śāriputra in the *Heart Sutra*. It is by deprecating what they understood as early Buddhism as “Hīnayāna” that Mahāyāna cut itself off from its own past. This was a grave error, for much of the coherent and remarkably profound system of thought that constitutes the earliest Buddhist texts would significantly have to be re-invented.

Meanwhile, Theravāda has been the bearer of a this same priceless and luminous EBT jewel and the sole custodian of the Buddha's full turning of the wheel. Verily, this early corpus has, almost in its entirety, long existed as a part of the Chinese canon, but it has lied there buried, disregarded and almost completely hidden under heaps of later texts. Not only has the Theravāda tradition kept these texts alive over all of these years, it has preserved these texts in the Pali language, close to the language the Buddha must have spoken, giving Theravāda valuable access to the subtleties of the original language of these texts. These ground the tradition in an authentic foundation.

This brings us to the topic of authenticity. Every tradition is obliged to justify its teachings, to ground its teachings in something in which adherents have unshakable trust, to establish norms for correct understanding. Generally a claim to represent the words of the Buddha (buddhavacana) is the primary criterion of authenticity. Theravada is grounded in the EBT, which is closely linked by tradition to the Buddha and modern scholarship substantially confirms its right to do this this.[20] The Theravāda commentary tradition purports to rest on the same foundation, which is to say, even where it might provide faulty interpretations, those interpretations can be challenged by matching them against the EBT. The canonical Theravada *Abhidhamma* represents a curious case. Scholars place it in the centuries after the Buddha, though it turns out to be quite consistent with the EBT. Nonetheless the canonical *Abhidhamma* is justified by means of a miraculous origin story in the commentary tradition, which involves the Buddha ascending to Tāvatiṃsa Heaven in order to preach to a group of deities, thereby establishing it as buddhavacana.

Authenticity is much more difficult to establish in Mahāyāna because Mahāyāna traditionally ignores or deprecates the EBT. At different times and places the clergy have been compelled to establish their own authority by advancing certain standards.[21] There are a number of ways Mahāyāna sutras and sastras are claimed to be authentic. The most common is to declare them to be words of the Buddha after all, purporting them to be authentic discourses of the Buddha as in the EBT, ones that even begin with Aananda's words, “Thus have I heard.” Other sources indicate inspiration by contemporary buddhas dwelling in other-worldly realms or as revelations by deities, sometimes with books appearing in the hands of forest-dwelling ascetics, or found in caves.[22]

Zen, for its part, describes itself as a teaching transmitted independently of words and letters from teacher to student going back all the way to the Buddha, the transmission of the lamp. Many Mahāyāna texts, such as the influential *Treatise on Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith* were probably not even composed in India, even while they are purported to have been.[23]

Presumably as a result of these discretionary standards, Mahāyāna scriptures are, as one prominent scholar has described it, "a shifting mass of teachings with little or no central core, many of which are incompatible with each other and within which we can sometimes detect mutual criticsm."[24] Mahāyāna is perhaps best regarded as an umbrella for many schools of many shapes and sizes an it is hard to make generalizations about Mahāyāna as a whole. Yet as mentioned, Mahāyāna has produced many brilliant and innovative thinkers and viable schools within its mix, often able to overcome deficits in its pre-Mahāyāna history. How this was possible will be explored in the remainder of this essay.

In sum, Mahāyāna has been cut off from its past and Theravāda from its future. Mahāyāna has been cut off from the EBT in which it is historically rooted. Not understanding its own roots, Mahāyāna has diversified into a wide variety of schools that stretch the bounds of what constitutes Buddhism, each school having to invent its own history in order to justify its own authority. Properly, we cannot say that Mahāyāna teaches the various doctrines listed here, only that they are found within Mahāyāna. As a result Mahāyāna has no widely accepted standards for assessing its historical and existing variations. Theravāda, on the other hand, has been cut off from the later innovations of Mahāyāna. Theravada contains within itself, in principle, all it needs to know, but has little flair for reformation.

The need for reformation remains to be argued. I will now turn to the tendency of Buddhism toward both decline and recovery. Specifically, I will argue that Theravāda froze in early on a number of faulty interpretations of the EBT, while within Mahāyāna correct interpretations have either been preserved or rediscovered.

Tendencies toward decline

What arises must decline. And so it is with the Dharma. *Decline* occurs when

the teachings are improperly understood, improperly transmitted, lost, tainted with pernicious teachings or are no longer put into practice, in essence turning back the wheel of Dharma. Indeed, the turning back of the wheel of Dharma has been a persistent danger in all of the schools of Buddhism because of the extreme subtlety and sophistication, and with that the fragility, of the Buddha's teachings, teachings that “go against the stream” of conventional human existence.

The Buddha's teachings encompass a system of ethics that integrates consequentialist, deontic and virtue ethics. Through the monastic code it defines a system of communal behavior that provides a springboard for the interplay of intensive study and practice and the conditions for sustaining the Sasana. It encompasses a phenomenological or epistemic and highly empirical, non-metaphysical model of human experience and a method of human spiritual development that results in a profound restructuring of cognition. These teachings form an integrated and functional whole, that can be found with detailed study and practice in the EBT.

What started out as a tight, coherent and highly sophisticated system of practice and understanding developed by the Buddha in the forty-five years of the Buddha's teaching career, started unraveling almost immediately. There are many passages even in the EBT in which the Buddha attempts to shore up the Dhamma in response to pernicious interpretations among his own disciples of his own teachings, and others in which he predicts future misinterpretations. The very first sutta of the Pali canon, the *Brahamajāla Sutta* (DN 1), for instance, provides a list of sixty-two mistaken views. Undoubtedly one of the factors contributing to decline in India would have been the encounter with many parallel spiritual traditions with often conflicting doctrines that must have confused the early saṅgha to no end.[25] On a more optimistic note, we will see presently that there is a countervailing processes of recovery at work, which we will come to shortly.

Not all change is decline. The Sāsana has been quite adept in adapting existing teachings or practices to new cultural circumstances resulting in new functionally equivalent teachings or practices. For example, meditation is taught quite differently in the Zen tradition than in early Buddhism, yet produces remarkably similar results.[26] It would be a mistake to see this as decline rather than as cultural adaptation. It is often important to ask not for

authenticity based on what the Buddha literally taught but for integrity based on preserving the functionality of the Buddha's teachings. This is important particularly in the case of Mahāyāna which has developed for hundreds of years in cultures quite distinct from India, cultures that have demanded new means of exposition.

Also, the Sāsana has always been very tolerant of including and *adapting folk cultural elements* in the Buddhist context, such as burning money on behalf of dead ancestors or appealing to famous bodhisattvas in times of need, that do not represent distortions or loss of earlier doctrines, but rather accretions consistent with, but supplementary to, more fundamental Buddhist principles.[27] Folk cultural elements are perhaps most prominent in Mahāyāna as it has evolved in East Asia and Tibet. It is important that these elements not be confused for decline in the more adapt understandings and practices that can be found within Mahayana, any more than popular notions about medicine or science not be misconstrued as evidence for the weakening of these fields.

Let's simply look at some historical examples of decline. This is a topic that is likely to provoke some degree of stepping on toes, since many of these examples are part of the orthodoxy of one current tradition or another. My goal is not to convince, though I provide references for these critiques, but to give on overall sense of the process of decline and the need for some vigilance among practitioners.

Kathāvatthu. One of the earliest calls for a return to earlier Dharma teachings was by Moggaliputta-tissa, a spiritual advisor of Emporor Ashoka, who is reputed to have compiled the Points of Controversy (Kathāvatthu), which appears as a book of the Pali *Abhidhamma*.[28] This text declares the EBT as the final authority in evaluating newer development, then itemizes deviant views that had crept into the Sāsana.[29]

Monastic discipline. Perhaps the most conservative element in all of Buddhism is the Vinaya, the monastic code, a part of the EBT that Theravāda and Mahāyāna share in common. Although the saṅgha, the largely and at its inception decentralized monastic institution thereby defined, is probably the most long-lived publicly known institution on the planet, it is often subject to laxity. For example, the ancient *Vinaya* specifies that monastics are not allowed to handle money nor make financial decisions, yet it is uncommon today to

find a monastery in which these rules are strictly observed, even while the monks are quite aware of the rules as (we assume) the Buddha formulated them. Luckily, monastics know when they are being lax in their discipline and how to recover, because they are trained in the *Vinaya*.

More seriously, the emperors, government officials and wealthy donors have a habit of interfering in monastic affairs. For instance, the traditional monastic saṅgha, living according to the *Vinaya*, has almost entirely been replaced by a married priesthood in Japan due to centuries of government interference in its proper functioning.[30] For instance, the 13th century Zen master Dogen, was never fully ordained according to the Vinaya, even while his life and teachings were clearly monastic in orientation, because the government permitted only limited numbers of ordinations. By the middle of the twentieth century, most Zen “monks” were married and temples were family businesses, because the Meiji government had removed the ability of religious institutions to require celibacy of their clergy.

This illustrates that aspects of decline may arise through factors extrinsic to the Sāsana itself. The loss of the Theravāda nuns' saṅgha, probably due to exigencies of war and famine, provide another example.

Tendencies toward substantialism. The Buddha predicted an aspect of future decline:

> “... [this] will happen with the bhikkhus in the future. When those discourses spoken by the Tathāgata that are deep, deep in meaning, suprmundane, dealing with emptiness are being recited, they will not be eager to listen to them, nor lend an ear to them, nor apply their minds to understand them; and they will not think those teachings should be studied and mastered.” (SN 20.7)

The Buddha's teachings are profoundly phenomenological in orientation, presenting human experience as a “transitory array of phenomena not held together by any underlying substrate.”

Many have argued that this began happening very early on with substantialist interpretations of much of the Buddha's non-metaphysical, epistemical or phenomenological framework.

A common critique of Theravāda[31] is that a substantial shift from the doctrine

of the EBT had occurred by the time of the commentaries. Although the cononical *Abhidhamma* seems to stay close to the Buddha's thinking,[32] a different metaphysical perspective is found in the Theravāda commentaries, including the assimilation of ontological “universals” like momentariness and substantiality.[33]

Recall, from chapter eight, that a sense sphere is where consciousness, contact, feeling and craving play out, as distinct from the sense *faculties*, such as the eye per se, which would be *saḷ-indriya*. In the chain of dependent co-arising it seems to stand for the capacity for contacting, viewing and responding to the external world.

Meditation. In recent years scholars have argued that meditative concentration (samādhi or jhāna, Skt: dhyāna) as presented in the commentaries is far removed from what is found in the EBT.[34] In fact, there is much reason to believe that meditation was largely neglected in Theravāda from at least that time until the late nineteenth century.[35]

Age of decline. Mahāyāna is quite diverse with many independent subschools and certainly almost every sub-school potentially exhibits some degree of decline. One of the most pernicious doctrines to effect all of Buddhism, but particularly many Mahāyāna sects, has been the idea that we are in an age of irreversible decline generally assumed to have been predicted by the Buddha and therefore no longer able to match the attainments of our forefathers and -mothers.[36] Although this doctrine is sometimes sometimes also expressed in Theravāda, it was given a special boost in East Asia under the name *mo-fa* (Chinese) or *mappō* (Japanese). The prediction of decline is nearly self-fulfilling in that it has often served to justify a fallback from serious Buddhist practice and aspirations of awakening to innovative but more modest practices, such as appealing to Amitabha Buddha, as in the Pure Land school, or chanting the name of the Lotus Sutra as the central practice, as in the Nicherin school. On the other hand, *mo-fa* also inspired others, such as meditation master Hsin Hsing (540-594 CE) to redouble their efforts as a more appropriate response to *mo-fa*.[37]

Practice reaches beyond doctrine. It is important to point out that the Sāsana, although highly suseptable to misunderstanding of subtle doctrines, is

remarkably robust. In particular, I would like to propose that decline in Buddhist doctrine is not necessarily fatal to practice, because practice reaches beyond doctrine. This will help us understand how the Sāsana is able to recover from decline in the following section. We can practice successfully in spite of a degree of doctrinal decline, as long as the decline has not progressed too far. In fact, I dare speculate that at virtually no time and in no place since the Buddha has the doctrine propounded by the Buddha been fully understood or entirely properly conveyed; yet people have presumably managed to progress in their practice and reach higher attainments, even full awakening in spite of limitations in understanding.

By way of illustration, we might visualize the Dharma as a trail guide, and our practice is a process of navigating the terrain represented by that trail guide, perhaps with the goal of reaching the top of a particular mountain, say, Mt. Vimutti. If the Dharma is pure, our trail guide will provide the optimal support for navigating the terrain. However, if the trail guide has corruptions, such as mistakes or omissions or coffee spillage, we are likely to have much more difficulty finding our way. Nonetheless, even then, given enough fortitude, patience and willingness to hack our way through the underbrush or get our feet wet for not finding a bridge, we are likely to prevail and in the end to prevail over Mt. Vimutti. So it is with our practice: experience and experimentation give us considerable support in correcting or filling in a faulty trail guide. Furthermore, as such trail-blazers we will be critical in the recovery of Dharma in periods of decline, as we will see.

Tradition and authority often acts as a counterweight to decline, but tradition can already carry the symptoms of decline and authority can be misplaced. Because Theravāda has preserved the EBT so well, it is in an ideal position to avoid or correct later aberrations. However, the interpretations of the later commentaries of the EBT is often instead accepted as authoritative, which seems to have at least introduced some mistaken understandings into Theravada orthodoxy. Mahāyāna, on the other hand, cut off from its past, is driven to find authority in some aspect of a later tradition, either in particular texts or in particular teachers.

Revival movements

At the same time the Sāsana has been continually vulnerable to decline, it is

also able to reform itself, either to recover from past decline or to enhance or adapt itself through new innovation.

Monastic practice. Movements to restore the intent of the Vinaya are common in Buddhist history to offset the natural human predilection toward laxity. An interesting example of monastic recovery in the Japanese tradition, where we have seen married priests have replaced the monks of yesteryear, is found in Shasta Abbey Buddhist Monastery in California. Shasta Abbey supports a strict celibate monastic order of over twenty monks and nuns that follow monastic practice as it was understood by Zen Master Dōgen in the thirteenth century whose teachings are taken as authoritative in this school. This does not go all of the way back to a time when the full Vinaya was in use in Japan, but rather to a more recent but important normative point in the evolution of Japanese Zen.

For Theravāda the EBT provides a natural reversion point for rebooting, the very earliest normative tradition, the authenticity of which is probably much more certain than is commonly assumed.[38] A reboot to the EBT is like performing a full reboot of the entire operating system. For Mahāyāna reversion is generally possible only to an intermediate tradition, since the EBT has been so long dismissed and neglected. Mahāyāna has many models of normative Buddhism constructed in different eras and places in its history, in each case to establish the authority of one tradition or another and in any case parts often go back to Taoist, Bon or Shinto roots.[39] In the end, it has no doctrinal or historical grounds for determining what is "authentic," other than allegiance to a particular teacher or text in which one places faith.

– Within the Theravāda tradition we seem to embarking on a critical and systematic reexamination of the later commentary and *Abhidhamma* traditions in the light of the earlier Pali discourses. A primary example is the discussion about the meaning and role of jhāna (stages of meditative concentration); often we now here the term sutta-jhāna contrasted with Visuddhimagga-jhāna in recognition of the differing perspectives of the discourses and the commentaries.[40] This reevaluation of later Theravāda teachings seems to be largely driven by growing western or western-style scholarship focused on the Theravāda tradition.

Rebooting is possible if the nature of the previous decline is clearly recognized. However, an earlier normative tradition may be misunderstood or authority may have been granted to later teachings that are themselves faulty. Re-invention is possible in Buddhism because of the robustness provided by practice. If the Dharma no longer matches adherents' practice experience, there will be pressure to correct the Dharma. If decline has produced a faulty trail guide, practitioners may recognize errors and deficits, correct these in their own practice and understanding and in some cases may contribute to correct the tradition, often through new scriptures and commentaries.

Madhyamaka

– The scholar David Kalupahana argues that Nāgārjuna, commonly revered as the first great innovator in the Mahāyāna tradition, in fact attempted to recover the empiricist and pragmatic roots of the early teachings of the Buddha,[41] which had become obscured by substantialist or essentialist thought in the highly speculative philosophies primarily of the Sarvāstivādin and Sautantrika sects in northern India.[42] The Abhidharmic enterprises of the region were insisting on the self-nature of phenomena, involving atomic objects and discrete moments of time.[43] The Personalists, a pan-sectarian school, even proposed the “person” as a primary universal, and idea that seems to fly in the face of the teaching of non-self. Nāgārjuna's masterwork, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, in fact, is a analysis based on the early Buddhist *Kaccāyanagotta Sutta*, and he makes no reference to any Mahāyāna works existent at his time, overlooking even the *Prajñāpāramitā Sutras*, which seem to have predated him.[44]

Yogacāra

– Perhaps the most significant example of re-invention in India lead to the development of the Yogācāra school, a Mahāyāna school identified with the so-called “third turning of the wheel.”

A modern writer tells us, “The idea that there is an aspect of consciousness that creates this sense of self is distinctly Yogacarin.”[45]

This is why Theravāda needs Mahāyāna: Recovery has been Mahyana's good fortune because it remained a much more dyanamic tradition for much longer in its history.

– The Yogācāra (yoga or meditation practice) school, like the lost interpretation of the six links, developed an account of the world of human experience as a psychological construct. It did this, as the name Yogācāra suggests, on the basis of meditative introspection, rather than, say, the study of ancient texts or philosophical speculation.[46] The account it provided is also know variously as Vijñānavāda (consciousness teaching), Vijñapti-mātra (consciousness only), and Cittamātra (mind only). Its earliest precedents of the mind-only school are the *Sandhinirmocana Sutta* (1st or 2nd century CE) and the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (3rd century CE), and developed in the shastra literature by half-brothers Asaṅga and Vasubandhu (4th century CE). It has had enormous influence in East Asian and Tibetan Buddhism. The great Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang studied Yogācāra at Nalanda and established the Faxiang Yogācāra school in China.[47]

A primary thesis of the Yogācāra is that the inability of free ourselves from the duality of subject and object is the cause of samsaara, that freedom from subject and object is the key to awakening. This is close to the thesis of the six links. Yogācāra, like the six links, goes on to model the arising of this duality, along with other forms of conceptualization. The model posits that there are eight forms of consciousness: the six forms referred to in the six links and throughout the EBT – consciousness of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind – defiled consciousness and storehouse consciousness.

In the EBT, a parallel account of subject/object duality can be found that has rarely been recognized for what it is. It is found in the first few links of dependent co-arising (P: *paṭiccasamuppāda*).[48] Consciousness fabricates an *external world* "out there" as a primary sphere of experience that contrasts with experience of our own mental states and physical sensations, which appear to be "in here." The illusion is completed through the next two factors of the chain of dependent co-arising: the sixfold-sphere and contact, which constitute the experience of looking out from the vantage point of the world "in here" through the sense doors into the world "out there," which sure *seems* to exist independently but which we can directly apprehend. This illusion is also fabricated by consciousness and obscures what can be directly experienced in concentration, that we fabricate the world "out there," that it is itself simply part of our world of experience.

This bifurcation into inner and outer is taken very seriously because the fabricated external world is taken as very real. This is basis of subject and object and also the root of the conceptual self, for if there is an “out there,” there must be an “in here,” and some kind of wall or fence between the two. We look, in our conceptual experience, out through the wall between inner and outer by means of a *sense door* (*dvāra*) at an external object.

Contact is then the apparent particular encounter with something in the world “out there.” After peeking through one of the six sense doors we apprehend what we find there. Normally we think that the self, which we often identify vaguely with a kind of enduring consciousness, contacts the object. Contact, conceptualized in this way is a critical step in the development of the human dilemma in that it establishes a relationship between self and other, on the basis of which feeling, greed, aversion, attachment, obsession, scheming, speculation, views, self-identity, and the perpetuation of *saṃsāric* existence unfold in response. To give an example, the *Brahmjāla Sutta* (DN 1) rejects sixty-two erroneous speculative views of non-Buddhist schools, each one with the conclusion, “that too is dependent on contact.”

Mahāyāna seems to have begun as a reform movement. What is surprising is how broad it was in scope, encompassing the need to recover from various doctrinal misunderstandings, but also to promote some supplementary doctrines and to provide more color and appeal to the Sāsana.

Theravāda and Mahāyāna need each other

Theravada has been cut off from its future, frozen in time. Being frozen in time with the Buddha and the jewel of the EBT might not seem so bad, but Theravada has also crystalized many of the early misunderstandings of the Buddha's teachings, and does not seem to have brought up the wherewithall to recover. Mahāyāna has been cut off from its past, split into many competing authoritative traditions with no overarching means to evaluate what is valuable or invaluable in each of these traditions.

We are entering a new era, one in which these two great traditions are closer in a shrinking world than at any time in centuries in which Modern scholarship is looking at Buddhism with a critical eye as never before, clarifying what are early or late or apocryphal texts, carefully analyzing and comparing cognate

texts preserved in different traditions.

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1 This term for Buddhism as it plays out historically and socially is here given in two languages. The scriptural language of Theravāda is Pali, that of Indian Mahāyāna is Sanskrit. The two languages are closely related and often words are identical in both. Where I provide both terms I will use P for Pali and S for Sanskrit.
2 Nattier and Prebish (1977).
3 ibid.
4 As we will see shortly, none of these Mahāyāna scriptures could have existed at this early time.
5 Nattier and Prebish (1977).
6 Anālayo (2014).
7 Gombrich (1988, 112).
8 Skilton (1994, 150).
9 Sharf (2001, 4-5). Sharf (2001, 7) also points out that it is uncertain whether this meant Mahāyāna was really popular in India and Central Asia at this early time or whether Mahāyāna monks felt themselves to be outcasts in their own lands.
10 Heirman (2001).
11 Skilton (1994, 152).
12 Gombrich (2006, 21-22).
13 Bodhi (2013).
14 Anālayo (2014) traces this view to Tarkajvāla (6th century) and points out that it was promoted by the Japanese delegation to the 1893 Chicago Parliament of Religions.
15 Kalupahana (2015, 4).
16 Williams (2008, 39): “However, source-critical and historical awareness has made it impossible for the modern scholar to accept this traditional account.”
17 Mahāyāna does seem to have made at least an appearance in Sri Lanka during the first millennium. See Williams (2008, 10).
18 Kalupahana (2015, 20-21). Interestingly the Sautantrika (sutta-only) sect, which also became prominent, split from the Sarvāstivādins in an attempt to distance itself from the *Abhidharma*, but failed to excise many concepts that in fact deviate from the Nikayas.
19 Kalupahana (2015, 5).
20 Sujato and Brahmali (2014) argue for the authenticity (as well aknowledge the limits) of the EBT according to a wide variety of criteria.
21 Sharf (2001, 14).
22 Williams (2008, 39-40).
23 Muller (1998).
24 Williams (2008, 3).
25 REF influence of Hinduism on decline (also Taoism, etc.)
26 My personal training in both traditions confirms this.
27 See Cintita (2014) for extensive discussion of folk Buddhism and its contrast with adept Buddhism.
28 Kalupahana (2015), 5, 25.

29 Sujato and Brahmali (2014, 136).
30 Jaffe (2010).
31 For instance, Kalupahana (1992, 106-108).
32 REF, Gombrich?
33 The Theravāda *Abhidhamma* of at least quasi-canonical status really came to a close with the Compendium of the Abhidhamma (Abhidhammatthasangaha) as late as the eleventh century.
34 See, for instance, Polak (2011, 11-16) and most of the rest of this book, Gombrich (1996, 96-134). Polak traces the deviance to yogic influences on Buddhist meditation.
35 Polak (2011, 187).
36 Nattier (1992) discusses the history of this doctrine.
37 Nattier (1992, 137-138).
38 See Sujato and Brahmali (2014) for a detailed argument for the reliability of the EBT corpus.
39 Sharf (2001, 14-16).
40 On S-jhana/V-jhana, terms, Shankman?
41 Sujato and Brahmali (2014, 7-12), also Kalupahana (1992, 3-5); Gombrich (1996, 36-7).
42 Sujato and Brahmali (2014, p 81).
43 Sujato and Brahmali (2014, 20-21).
44 Sujato and Brahmali (2014, 9-11).
45 Connelly (2016, 57).
46 As argued by Schmithausen, see Williams (2008, p. 89).
47 Williams (2008, p. 88).
48 To avoid confusion, dependent co-arising (S: *pratītyasamutpāda*) generally refers in Mahāyāna to a more general principle than in Theravāda or EBT. In the latter it most often refers to a particular phenomenological model captured in a causal chain of twelve links.