

# An Introduction to the Doctrines of Soul and Enlightenment in Mahayana Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith

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## Abstract

This article examines the development of Mahayana Buddhism, its spread to China and how the Chinese people adopted and adapted it. The Buddhist teachings on “*nonself*” and the “*Enlightenment*” are correlated with the Bahá'í teachings on the soul. In particular, the journey of the soul described in Bahá'u'lláh's *Seven Valleys*, which culminates in a state of “True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness” is likened to the Mahayana *Sunyata* (Emptiness) of *Nirvana*. Parallels are drawn between the Bahá'í “Valley of Unity” and Buddhist monism, both of which seek to go beyond all notions of duality.

The central role played by the founders of the Bahá'í Faith and Mahayana Buddhism on unlocking the spiritual potential of their respective followers is also compared. In both cases their teachings are best understood in terms of a way by which their followers can explore the expanses of their own hearts. Also, both in Mahayana Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith, there is an injunction to attain a balance between Wisdom and Compassion, between individual self-enlightenment and universal salvation.

## 1. Introduction

Buddhism was founded by Sidharta Gotama<sup>1</sup>, an Indian prince who lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, BC. His father was the king of a small state in the foothills of the Himalayas. He was brought up amidst the luxuries and pleasures befitting a prince. Unlike other princes, Sidharta was disenchanted, and left the sheltered life of his home to become a religious mendicant. After years of religious striving He attained enlightenment at the age of thirty-five and was henceforth known as The Buddha, or The Enlightened One. He spent the next forty-five years of His life preaching His message to His fellow men. At the age of eighty He died.

The religion in India during the Buddha's time was Brahminical Hinduism. Its priests the Brahmins claimed to be able to mediate between the people and the gods of Hinduism using special rites and rituals laid down in the Vedas, and which together with the Upanishads constitute the sacred lore of Hinduism. The Hindu quest was for one's rational soul (*atman*) to be united with the Eternal (*Paramatma*) and by so doing pass beyond the ephemeral and enter the permanent, the bliss of *Nirvana*. Recognising that living the moral life and not the rituals can free oneself from worldly entanglements, the Buddha rejected the Vedic concept of salvation and instead taught His famous *Eightfold Noble Path* (see below) as the panacea to overcome suffering and unhappiness.

The Buddha's doctrine of salvation<sup>2</sup> was given in his first sermon, when he enunciated *The Four Noble Truths*<sup>3</sup> and *The Eightfold Noble Path*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sakyamuni is a title given to Sidharta by others. The title He gave Himself is "Buddha".

<sup>2</sup> The Hindus too had their doctrines of salvation.

<sup>3</sup> life is suffering;  
 this suffering has a cause, which is craving for existence and sensual pleasures;  
 this suffering can be suppressed;  
 the way to suppress is the practice of the Eightfold Noble Path.

From Samyutta Nikaya, PTS edition, 5.421 ff.

<sup>4</sup> The Eightfold Noble Path, which is right views, right intentions, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. See Kogen Mizuno, *Essentials of Buddhism*, pp. 158 - 161.

The *Eightfold Noble Path* has three categories comprising the whole range of moral discipline:

- moral conduct (right speech, right action, and right livelihood);
- mental discipline (right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration);
- intuitive insight or wisdom (right views, right intentions).

For the first category, moral conduct, He said that any act that is harmful to oneself or to another is evil. The gist of moral discipline is as follows:

*"Not to commit any evil, to do good, and to purify one's mind. When you wish to perform an action, consider whether it is going to be harmful to others, harmful to yourself, harmful to yourself and others; if it is, do not perform it, for it is an evil action whose fruit will be suffering."*<sup>5</sup>

The second category, mental discipline, requires control of the mind. The root of all evil is delusional ignorance and not craving for sensual pleasures and material possessions. Cravings are generated by the senses and external objects. External objects affect our senses. The Buddha forbids the torturing of the senses. He said we can control the mind and discipline it so we will not mistake the unpleasant for the pleasant, the impure for the pure, and impermanent things as permanent. He said whoever has mental discipline will see things as they really are.

The third category, intuitive insight or wisdom relates to there being a surface and a depth to things. It is necessary to see beyond external appearances to get at the true reality. Intuitive wisdom requires taking the right view of things and to hold to the truths that all existence is suffering, that all existence is impermanent. The Buddha said that the tears shed by man over the loss of his beloved ones during the course of existence are more than the waters of the ocean. Once a woman came to the Buddha and asked him to restore to life her child who had just died. The Buddha consented, on condition that she first obtain a mustard seed from a family which had not endured the suffering of death. The woman went out feeling

<sup>5</sup> Digha Nikaya, PTS edition, 1.4 ff.

hopeful, but as she went from family to family, she found that they all had experienced such suffering at one time or another. The universality of suffering now dawned on her, whereupon she returned to the Blessed One and asked to be taken into the order of nuns.

Right Views also include an understanding of *The Chain of Causation*.<sup>6</sup> This formula recognises that events are not caused by the arbitrary will of some outside power, but that each event arises out of some previous cause.

The Buddhist who practises *The Eightfold Noble Path* will achieve salvation by escaping the cycle of rebirth and the realisation of *Nirvana*. As the main characteristic of the round of existence is suffering, then *Nirvana* would be the cessation of suffering. By practising the prescribed moral discipline, the individual puts an end to craving. Many Buddhists believe that when craving is extinguished, no more *Karma* is generated and there is no further rebirth. When rebirth is terminated, the individual realises *Nirvana*.

The Buddha's Message, which He termed *Dharma*, advocated a middle course between austerities and gratification of the senses and was known as The Middle Path. The Buddha incorporated in His teachings the Hindu doctrine of *Karma*. "*Karma*" means deed or act. Every act produces a result or fruit; a good deed produces a good fruit; an evil deed, an evil fruit. "*Karma*" means a deed performed and the results that arise from it.

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<sup>6</sup> with ignorance as cause, predisposition arises;  
 with predisposition as cause, consciousness arises;  
 with consciousness as cause, name and form arise;  
 with name and form as cause, the six senses arise;  
 with the six senses as cause, sensation arises;  
 with sensation as cause, contact arises;  
 with contact as cause, craving arises;  
 with craving as cause, grasping arises;  
 with grasping as cause, becoming arises;  
 with becoming as cause, birth arises;  
 with birth as cause, old age and death arise.

From Majjhima Nikaya, PTS edition, 1.256 ff.

To this conception of *Karma* the Buddha further taught that *Karma* involved not just the deed and reward but also the intention behind the deed. For *Karma* to be generated there must be intention, and he considered this intention to be more important than the deed.

In Theravada Buddhism, when a person dies, the *Karma* that one has accumulated in life will determine the nature of one's future life. There are 5 states of existence, namely deity, man, animal, hungry ghost, and denizens of hell. The first two states are considered good states, but the last three are evil and painful.<sup>7</sup>

As long as one is in *Samsara*, one will continually be subject to suffering. The Buddha preached that birth is suffering, old age is suffering, death is suffering, separation from loved ones is suffering, not getting what one wishes is suffering. If we wish to rid ourselves of suffering, we must go outside the cycle of craving associated with physical existence. The aim of Buddhism is to break the cycle of suffering and attain salvation. Many Buddhists believe in reincarnation, where the soul transmigrates into different existences in this physical world, but this is not the only possible interpretation of the Buddha's words on this subject. Others have set out to demonstrate that reincarnation does not imply physical rebirth, and that it has been interpreted in an overly literal and anthropomorphic way.<sup>8</sup>

Many Buddhists believe that the Buddha rejected the Hindu belief in the existence of a permanent self, but this view is questionable. For instance, the author of *The God of Buddha*, states that: "The Sanskrit word "*atman*" which translates the "self" of man has been used and understood in the Buddhist texts in a manner compatible with the Buddha's own concepts of "self". While the Buddha rejected the commonly accepted concept of "self" which was understood by His contemporaries as some kind of a soul monad, an inexplicable ego-being individually residing in the human physique as a separate entity divorced from the mind and thoughts, He did

<sup>7</sup> William Theodore de Bary, *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China and Japan*, Vintage Books, New York, 1969, pp. 9 - 12.

<sup>8</sup> Jamshed Fozdar for instance, challenges this common interpretation, see Ch. 5, "Karma and the Fallacy of Reincarnation," of his book *Buddha Maitreya-Amitabha Has Appeared*, pp. 74 - 117.

not deny man's mentality, his spiritual constitution, his thoughts, his mind or manas, in brief, his soul. However, we must understand that there is no dualism involved here since, to the Buddha, man's soul does not consist of two things, an atman (self) and a manas (mind or thoughts), but of only one reality. Our thoughts are our self, our soul or atman, and hence it would be completely erroneous to assert that the Buddha denied the soul or self. This premise is also corroborated by Buddhist scholars of different schools and countries, including the Theravadin Buddhists, who claim for themselves greater precision and faithfulness concerning the Buddha's doctrine. We should also recognise here that the Buddha, above all, was cognizant of the impossibility of attributing definitions and form to such inherently "indefinables" as self, soul, mind etc. and, hence, once again took the middle course, between the two extremes. This middle way placed no demands on the Buddha to prove or disprove either of the contending concepts, both being by their very nature outside the realm of empirical verification. The way He chose provided Him with the flexibility of being able to contain both views, and also enabled Him to endow His own concept of the "self" with just that correct measure of reality necessary to incorporate it into His message as the "motive" for self-improvement and righteous living."<sup>9</sup>

These are the main tenets of Theravada Buddhism, which is essentially a discipline for personal salvation by the individual for himself. Salvation, however, is possible only for those who join the monastic order, the *Sangha*. The monk is intent on the accumulation of meritorious *Karma* for his own salvation and these merits cannot be transferred to others. After entry into the *Sangha*, he strives to become an *Arahat* or perfect saint. This *Arahat* is traditionally indifferent to social and family concerns. Historically, Theravada doctrine was viewed by some to be spiritually restrictive, because it dealt mainly with the individual's salvation. It was criticised as conservative, following the letter rather than the spirit of the Buddha's teachings.

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<sup>9</sup> See Jamshed Fozdar, *The God of Buddha*, pp. 63 - 64.



## 2. Mahayana Buddhism

From the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD (approximately 700 years after the death of the Buddha) onwards a new and different Buddhist doctrine arose in India. This doctrine is called Mahayana (or the Greater Vehicle to salvation). In Theravada, suffering is something to be escaped from, but the Mahayana teaches that in suffering there is meaning and that is the very principle of religion and is the way to salvation. The Mahayana offers salvation not only to those in the *Sangha*<sup>10</sup> but also to all sentient beings. It teaches that all sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature in them and hence all have the potential to achieve enlightenment. Instead of adherence to the strict discipline advocated in Theravada, Mahayana teaches that enlightenment can be achieved by faith, love and devotion to the Buddha. These are manifested by compassion, charity and altruism.<sup>11</sup>

*Dharma*<sup>12</sup> is a central concept in both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. *Dharma* means "Religion" or "rta" (righteousness). *Dharma* is interpreted as signifying the teachings of also the Buddha. Both meanings are implied in the word "*Dharma*". For example, a passage in the Theravada scriptures describes *Dharma* as being "eternal, verifiable, and onward leading - to be known individually by the wise."<sup>13</sup> Another passage states that "whether or not Tathagatas<sup>14</sup> arise, this world remains the same, with constancy of *Dharma*, normativeness of *Dharma*."<sup>15</sup> According to Theravada teachings, the realisation of *Nirvana* and *Dharma* - both as "righteousness" and as "teachings" - occur together. In contrast, Mahayana stresses *Dharma* and de-emphasises *Nirvana*. Mahayana regards the Buddha not as a human being, but as the omnipresent Universal Truth (*Dharma*), which is manifest in all things. This is

<sup>10</sup> The Order of Monks.

<sup>11</sup> William Theodore de Bary, *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China and Japan*, Vintage Books, New York, 1969, p. 76.

<sup>12</sup> It is also used by the Hindus with the same meaning. To the Hindus, *Dharma* also means the same as regards Krishna.

<sup>13</sup> Majjhima Nikaya, PTS (Pali Text Society) edition, vol. 1, p. 265.

<sup>14</sup> Another name for The Buddha.

<sup>15</sup> Samyutta Nikaya, PTS edition, vol. 2, pp. 25 - 26.

illustrated in the story of the monk, Vakkali who was on his death-bed. He said he desired to glimpse the Buddha before he passed away. The Buddha consented but regretted His disciple's behaviour saying, "Enough, Vakkali. What is the use of seeing this vile body? Whoever, Vakkali, sees *Dharma*, he sees me. Whoever sees me, he sees *Dharma*."<sup>16</sup> This implies that it is more important to practise the Buddha's teachings (*Dharma*) and thereby see the Universal Truth than it is to see the Buddha in person.

### Nirvana and Samsara

In Mahayana, *Nirvana* and *Samsara* are considered two different aspects of the same Reality, the same *Dharma*. If one looks at the universe and sees the truth, that is *Nirvana*. If one fails to see the truth, then it is *Samsara*. The final passing of the historical Buddha is similar. If one is capable only of seeing the physical body of the Buddha, one may believe the Buddha has abandoned *Samsara*. From the *Lotus Sutra* it is stated that:<sup>17</sup>

*"The life of the Tathagata so long ago enlightened is unlimited;  
he is everlasting.  
Without becoming extinct, the Tathagata makes a show of  
Nirvana,  
on behalf of those needing guidance."*<sup>18</sup>

### **The Triple Bodies of the Buddha**

Mahayana doctrine has a number of distinct concepts from Theravada. These relate to *The Three Bodies of the Buddha*, the *Bodhisattva*, and the concepts of *Prajna* (Wisdom) and *Karuna* (Compassion).

The Buddha in Mahayana is considered not an ordinary human teacher who lived on earth, carried out his spiritual mission and then passed into *Nirvana*. The Buddha is regarded as an eternal being who embodies the

<sup>16</sup> Samyutta Nikaya, PTS edition, vol. 3, p. 120.

<sup>17</sup> *The Lotus of the Wonderful Law (Saddharmapundarika Sutra)*. This is a translated work from North India or Central Asia. It is the basic scripture of the T'ian-T'ai School of China.

<sup>18</sup> *Saddharma Pundarika Sutra*, Section 15.



universal Truth, who is neither born nor dies, but lives from eternity to eternity. The eternal Buddha has made appearances on earth countless times in the past and will continue to do so in the future. He is believed to be the manifestation of a great spiritual being. *The Triple Bodies of the Buddha*<sup>19</sup> interprets the Buddha as follows:

*The Dharmakaya* (The Body of Essence)

*The Sambhogakaya* (The Body of Bliss)

*The Nirmanakaya* (The Body of Transformation)

#### *The Dharmakaya - The Body of Essence*

The *Dharmakaya* is the "Truth-body" of the Buddha. It is not limited in time and space. The *Dharmakaya* Buddha is omnipresent, eternal and the ultimate Buddha. The Body of Essence is the only real body of the Buddha; this body connects and unites all the Buddhas of the past with those of the future. Although there are many Buddhas, there is only one Body of Essence.

#### *The Sambhogakaya - The Body of Bliss*

When the Body of Essence is called upon to fulfil the spiritual needs of the bodhisattvas, it then appears in the second form, the Body of Bliss, which is akin to the Holy Spirit. It is the privilege of the bodhisattvas to perceive this body which is the emanation of the Body of Essence. The Body of Bliss dwells forever in the heavens like a supreme god. From the Body of Bliss emanates the Body of Transformation.

#### *The Nirmanakaya - The Body of Transformation*

The Body of Transformation is the physical body of the historical Buddha who lived on earth. It is limited in time and space. It helps to explain the appearance of a Buddha among mankind. The eternal Body of Essence creates a fictitious phantom of himself and causes this to appear among ignorant and wicked mankind in order to convert it. The historical Buddha was such a phantom. He took on the characteristics of man. He lived and followed the ways of the world. He lived, preached, and then

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<sup>19</sup> Mahayanasutralankara, verses 9.60 - 66, Asanga's Ornament of Mahayana Sutras, quoted in William Theodore de Bary, *The Buddhist Traditions of India, China and Japan*, pp. 94 - 95.

entered into *Nirvana*. The eternal Buddha has done this not once but countless times, but these creations are believed to be illusions and appearances.

### **The Mahayana Bodhisattva**

The bodhisattva is a human being destined for enlightenment. He is the epitome of Mahayana virtues. Though qualified to enter *Nirvana* as a result of merits accumulated in the past, the bodhisattva delays his final entry and chooses to remain in the world until he has brought every sentient being to enlightenment. He does this by transferring some of his inexhaustible stock of merits to less fortunate creatures so that they too may share in the rewards of those merits. He will sacrifice himself, if this is of assistance to others. Universal compassion, through perfect self-sacrifice, is the main characteristic of the bodhisattva.<sup>20</sup>

The bodhisattva is the personification of a trait of the Buddha's personality. As there are many such traits, so there are different bodhisattvas. Manjusri represents wisdom, while Avalokitesvara represents the compassion of the Buddha. The master is often described as being excellent in all ways, and this is symbolised by the bodhisattva Samantabhadra. Of these, Avalokitesvara occupies pre-eminent position. He is able to abrogate *The Law of Karma* and he visits the numerous hells to lighten the miseries of unfortunate creatures. He is especially on the lookout for people facing the dangers of water, fire, demons, sword and enemies. He is depicted pictorially as a person with a thousand eyes and arms to enable him better to see and help the suffering.

### **The Two Mahayana Philosophies - Madhyamika and Vijñānavāda**

The two chief Mahayana philosophies (both founded in India) are Madhyāmika and Vijñānavāda. Madhyāmika was founded by Nagarjuna in 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, and Vijñānavāda by Asanga and Vasubandhu in 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.

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<sup>20</sup> Tathagathguhya Sutra, Siksasamuccaya, p. 274, From William Theodore de Bary, *The Buddhist Tradition*, p. 91.

### The Madhyamika Philosophy (The Doctrine of Middle Position)

Nagarjuna described the Supreme Reality as *Sunyata* (Emptiness). His School is called Madhyamika because it teaches a Middle Doctrine where existence and non-existence have only relative truth. True wisdom is the knowledge of the real meaning of Emptiness. Upon the true meaning of Emptiness depends the understanding of Madhyamika. Emptiness is empty only in the sense that it is free from the limitations of relative knowledge. Enlightenment alone will reveal what it really is. To seek and find nothing is to find the true Buddha.

*“Those who describe in detail the Buddha --- who is unchanging and beyond all description --- are defeated by description, and do not perceive the Tathagata.*

*The self-existence of the Tathagata is the self existence of the world.*

*The Tathagata is without self-existence, and the world is without self-existence.”<sup>21</sup>*

The Madhyamika doctrine of metaphysical emptiness is explained by the example of the chair. We say and think that a chair has a back, a seat and legs. Actually there is no such thing as a chair apart from an assemblage of these components. There is no “chair” that could possess a back, seat or legs. Take away the back, and the “chair” becomes a stool. Take away the legs, and the “stool” becomes a slab of wood. The assembled components are the condition for the “existence” of the chair.

### The Vijñānavāda Philosophy (The Doctrine of Consciousness)

The two philosophers of Vijñānavāda are Asanga and Vasubandhu. The Vijñānavāda agrees in many areas with the Madhyamika. According to this philosophy, all phenomena originate in the Mind (the Absolute Reality, which is like an impersonal God) and nothing exists but the Mind. It proceeds with the analytical division of the 5 *Skandhas* and the *Dharmas*. It insists that not only are objects transitory, but that the substances also are impermanent. According to this system of thought, spirit and matter are one, and all external objects are the outcome of the one Mind.

<sup>21</sup> *Madhyamaka Karika* 24.15-6

The seeds of all phenomena and objects are comprehended in the *alayavijnana*.<sup>22</sup> When not in action it lies latent. It is like a fine perfume, whose scent penetrates into the innermost part and then extends to the outer deeds, both good and bad. It is like the projections of the Mind.

In the Vijnanavada philosophy the world is produced from the Mind, and the condition needed for the manifestation of seeds is *The Law of Cause and Effect*. The *Alaya*<sup>23</sup> is the substance and causation the means. They combine to create the world and show forth all phenomenal objects. The origin of *The Law of Causation* cannot be known, nor can the beginning of the storing of seeds, and their manifestation. Theravada's basis is *The Law of Cause and Effect*, and so did not define a personal Creator. But in Mahayana there is an Absolute Reality (the Mind), which is birthless, deathless and permanently existing. It is the substance of all phenomenal objects and the basis of the relative *Alaya*. The Middle Path doctrine asserts the oneness of this world with this Absolute Reality, and urges us to exert ourselves in this world, even though it is full of sorrow. Bliss is not just to achieve deliverance from this world, but in working for salvation one realises our Oneness with it. Vasubandhu wrote:

*"As long as one places something before oneself, taking it as an object and saying:*

*"This is only a mental image," so long does one dwell in that (mental image) alone.*

*But when cognition no longer apprehends an object, then it stands firmly*

*in consciousness only, because where there is nothing to grasp, there is no more grasping.*

*It is without thought, without bias, and is the supra-mundane cognition....*

*This is the element without defilements, inconceivable, wholesome and stable, the blissful body of liberation,*

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<sup>22</sup> An underlying store of perceptions and which was formed from an accumulation of traces of earlier sense-impressions. From William Theodore de Bary, *The Buddhist Tradition*, p. 79.

<sup>23</sup> Storehouse Consciousness.

*the Dharmakaya of the Great Sage.*"<sup>24</sup>

### 3. Mahayana Buddhism in China

During its first two centuries of development, Buddhism was confined to India. When Emperor Asoka (274 to 236 BC) converted to Buddhism, he used it to unify India and the faith spread rapidly throughout the region. Asoka sent missionaries to many countries, including Central Asia, Greece, Iran, China and Japan. By the first century BC, Buddhism had spread to China via the Silk Road. During that time, the Han empire (206 BC to 220 AD) was ruling China.

By 410 AD, Buddhism had spread to most of China. Buddhism brought to the Chinese many deities in the form of ever-compassionate and merciful bodhisattvas, who are always ready to help those who sought their assistance. It appealed to them with its hierarchy of heavens. Rebirth was considered a reward for meritorious living on earth. At the same time it depicted hells where the tortures became progressively more tormenting and terrifying. These serve as a deterrent to perpetrators of evil deeds. The doctrine of *Karma* appealed to those sunk in hardship and misery during the era and it offered them a rational explanation of the adverse social conditions. Their sufferings were looked upon as the retribution for past misdeeds. If they did meritorious work they would be reborn into happier lives in the future. Meanwhile, the arrogant tyrannical officials who were living in luxury now, would in their next rebirth be tormented by misery. Such a "rational" explanation of divine justice won many converts for Buddhism during the early period.

The Mahayana teaching that all human beings have the Buddha-nature in them and so are capable of attaining Buddhahood and salvation, is an inspiring spiritual ideal. This concept had never been put forth to the Chinese people before. The path leading to this salvation was also made easy: just the repetition of the formula *Namo Amitabha*<sup>25</sup> or the creation

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<sup>24</sup> *Trimsika*, verses 27-30, A poem by Vasubandhu. From Noble Ross Reat, *Buddhism: A History*, California, 1951, p. 60.

<sup>25</sup> Invocation of the Buddha's name.

of an image of Buddha, even in the mud or sand, was sufficient to merit deliverance. The religion was adapted to make it more acceptable to the people. An example was the use of the Confucian virtue of filial piety. When a person joined the *Sangha*, he severed all relations with his family and society and he no longer needed to honour his parents and ancestors. Yet statues of the Buddha were often erected in China to perpetuate the memory of dead parents.

To the Chinese, Mahayana was spiritually and intellectually more stimulating than Confucianism and Taoism. The life of the Buddha was taught and it rejuvenated China. Mahayana did not take off in India, but it had a wholesome effect on the cultural life of the Chinese people. It stimulated their mind and made it work out many things original to it. A school of Mahayana Buddhism from India known as Dhyani Buddhism became Chan (Zen in Japan) Buddhism. Other well known Mahayana schools were the T'ian T'ai and the Pure Land. The Chan philosophy appealed to the practical and intellectual sides of the Chinese, whereas The Pure Land met its spiritual cravings.

The desire to be born in a land of purity and happiness is the desire for immortality. Whatever form it may take with different individuals, they all have a longing for an after-life. Before Mahayana came to China, the people did not have a very definite idea about their future; their religious horizon was very much limited to the earthly life. The Chinese people have been pursuers from the beginning of their history of The Three Desires: Bliss, Prosperity, and Longevity. Bliss means perpetuation of the family life, while Prosperity and Longevity are matters concerning the individual. Buddhism did not oppose this outright, but taught the moral law of causation to attain this end. There is no doubt that this is an important contribution that Buddhism made among the Chinese people.

### **Mahayana Schools in China**

From the Han to the Tang Dynasties (200 BC - 900 AD) eight Mahayana schools emerged. They developed out of the intense intellectual ferment caused by Buddhism. The eight schools were:



1. The San Lun School
2. The Wei Shi (Vijnanavada) School
3. The Zhen Yan (or Tantric) School
4. The San Jie Jiao (or Three Ages) School
5. The T'ian T'ai School
6. The Hua Yen School
7. The Pure Land School
8. The Chan School (from Dhyani or "Mental" Buddhism)

1. The San Lun School - This School was also known as The Three Treatises School. It was founded by the Han translator Lokashema (170 AD). The three works translated by Kumarajiva (344 - 413 AD) were Nagarjuna's *Madhyamika* and two other works by unknown authors. Kumarajiva never went to China but spent his life in Nalanda translating Buddhist texts into Chinese. He met the Chinese monk-to-be Fa Hsien in 400 AD. Mahayana Buddhism came to China in AD 410. It was brought by Gunavarman (a Kashmiri prince monk) who reached China from Ceylon. Before that he taught Buddhism in Southeast Asia (now Indonesia). The San Lun School attained its greatest influence during the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. During this time there was a close relationship between Buddhism and Taoism on the basis of the similarities between the concept of *Sunyata* (emptiness) and *wu-wei* (non-being).

2. The Wei Shi School - This School (or Vijnanavada School) was established in 563 AD with the translation of Asanga's *Mahayana Samgraha*.<sup>26</sup> It was boosted by the pilgrim Hsuan Tsang's (596 - 664 AD) return from India. He studied directly under Vasubandhu and Asanga, the founders of Vijnanavada Buddhism. It did not remain a separate school as it became absorbed into the School of Hsuan Tsang (called The *Dharma* Character School). It declined in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century AD and disappeared a few hundred years after that.

3. The Zhen Yan School - This School (or The Tantric School) is opposed to The San Lun and Wei Shi Schools. This school impressed greatly the foreign rulers of northern China. Buddhist monks reportedly impressed the new and unsophisticated northern rulers with magic feats.

<sup>26</sup> Noble Ross Reat, *Buddhism: A History*, Berkeley, California, 1951, p. 150.

Similar feats were used when Buddhism was established with the peoples of Tibet and Mongolia. This school was most developed in the Tang Dynasty (618 - 906 AD) with the Three Indian Masters, Subhakarasiṃha, Vajrabodhi and Amoghavajira. They were recognised by the Tang Emperors and it flourished during the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD. Eventually this school had a greater impact in Japan than in China.

4. The San Jiao School - The San Jiao School (or The Three Ages) was the only school that developed in China but did not take root in Japan. Founded in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD by Xin Xin, it was the first Buddhist school to incur the disfavour of the Tang dynasty and as a result suffered suppression. The Three Ages refer to the Hindu and Buddhist notion that after a great teacher establishes *Dharma* on earth, there will be a succession of three ages in which the *Dharma* deteriorates progressively. This school stated that they were in the Third Age and that the *Dharma* had degenerated, where people were blinded by greed, hatred and delusion. They said that the appropriate beneficiary should be the *Sangha*. As a result, the monasteries accumulated great wealth. The school drew the wrath of the Emperor when it said in the Third Age no government could administer justice and prosperity and that they were not worthy of allegiance and respect. The Emperor declared this sect heretical and in 713 AD the wealth of the San Jiao School was confiscated by the empire. Subsequently, the sect did not survive the Tang dynasty's suppression of Buddhism.

5. The T'ian T'ai School - The T'ian T'ai School was established by the monk Zhi Yi (538 to 597 AD). He systematised the Buddhist doctrines and classified, integrated and harmonised the vast collection of scriptures. It is the first truly Chinese school of Buddhism. Zhi Yi wrote very little, but his lectures were recorded by his faithful disciple Chang An (561 to 632 AD). These lectures were concerned primarily with the basic tenet of the school, *The Lotus Sutra*, which teaches that the historical Sakyamuni was but an earthly manifestation of the eternal Buddha. The most important of these lectures comprise the three great works of the school:

a. *The Profound Meaning of The Lotus Sutra*. This was a systematic survey of the Buddha's teachings, with *The Lotus Sutra* as the nucleus.

b. *The Textual Commentary on The Lotus Sutra*.

c. *The Great Concentration and Insight*.<sup>27</sup>

The early believers were puzzled by the large volume of literature, with its many diverse doctrines and ideas. They questioned how one individual could preach so many sermons during one lifetime, or how could one explain the numerous contradictions and doctrinal differences taught in the scriptures. Zhi Yi divided the teachings into chronological periods and with a systematic arrangement. He divided the periods of teachings and his system is filled with encyclopaedic details and scholarship.

6. The Hua Yen School The Hua Yen School (or The Avatamsaka School) comes from *The Avatamsaka Sutra* (The Flower Garland Sutra).<sup>28</sup> It was translated by Buddhahadra in 420 AD. This school was initiated by Fa Shun (557 to 640 AD) and finally systematised by Fa Tsang (643 to 712 AD). Hua Yen uses a classification of sutras and doctrines similar to the 5 periods and 8 teachings of the T'ian T'ai school. However, it regards *The Avatamsaka Sutra* rather than *The Lotus Sutra* as supreme. There is no Indian counterpart of the T'ian T'ai or Hua Yen Schools. Both schools are Vijnanavada in orientation. They assert that mundane phenomena are impure aspects of the one, all-encompassing, absolute mind, of which *The Dharmakaya Buddha* is the pure aspect. All phenomena thus originate from and resolve into the Buddha as the ultimate metaphysical principle, just as all thoughts originate from and resolve into the mind. To illustrate the basic concept of both schools: just as the fish in my mind and the tree in my mind are not really different - both are merely manifestations of my

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 155 to 160.

<sup>28</sup> The Avatamsaka Sutra broadened the concept of the Six Perfections by relating them to the ten stages of bodhisattva practice. A list of ten perfections was given, the original six and a further four: skilful means, vows, force of purpose, and transcendental knowledge. The Avatamsaka Sutra expounded the ten stages of bodhisattva practice and is accepted by Mahayana Buddhism as a whole. The ten stages are:

mind in thought - so a "real" fish and a "real" tree are but manifestations of the absolute mind, and are therefore fundamentally not different.

The significance of *The Avatamsaka Sutra* lies in the experience of *abhishyanditakayacitta*. *Abhishyandita* means "dissolution", *kaya* means "the body", and *citta* the "mind". It is a state in which one is no more conscious of the distinction between mind and body. This state of complete dissolution, where there is no more distinction between subject and object (that is *noesis* and *noema*), is known as the realisation of absolute *Sunyata* ("Emptiness"), that is, Reality or Mind. Sitting at this centre, one looks around and perceives that this is a world of *Hsiang-chi* and *Hsiang-ju* (meaning "inter-relationship" and "inter-penetration" respectively). This is described in *The Avatamsaka Sutra* and explained by Fa Tsang and his School.

An analogy to illustrate the state of inter-relation and inter-penetration is that of Indra's Net.<sup>29</sup> This net is made of precious gems and it hangs over Indra's palace. In each of these gems are found reflected all the other gems in the net. When the net is picked up, we see in it not only the entire net but everyone of the gems within it. In a similar manner, every object in this world is related to every other object and penetrated by it not only spatially but temporally. For this reason, every minute we live contains eternity. Eternal Now is our life. We do not have to seek eternity anywhere else but in ourselves. It is the same with space. The point I

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1. The stage of joyfulness.
  2. The stage of purity.
  3. The stage of light giving.
  4. The stage of radiant wisdom.
  5. The stage of conquering difficulties.
  6. The stage of being face to face.
  7. The stage of bring far reaching.
  8. The stage of being immovable.
  9. The stage of meritorious wisdom.
  10. The stage of the *Dharma* cloud.

Kogen Mizuno, *Essentials of Buddhism*, Kosei Publishing CO, Tokyo, 1996, p. 29 and p.201.

<sup>29</sup> Indra is a Hindu deity. From Beatrice Lane Suzuki, *Mahayana Buddhism*, London, 1938, p. 11.

occupy is the centre of the universe, and it is in me and with me that it subsists. As a fact of pure experience, however, there is no space without time, and no time without space. Both are also inter-penetrating.

The Hua Yen philosophy appealed to the Chinese Emperors. By asserting the unity of all phenomena in the Buddha, it implied the unity of all subjects in the emperor. Moreover, by identifying all phenomena with one another, it implied the identity of all subjects of the empire with all others. It therefore provided an ideological basis for harmony in the empire and allegiance to the emperor.

7. The Pure Land School - The Pure Land School is based on *The three Pure Land Sutras*, the first of which appeared in Chinese from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. Like the Three Ages School it held that the spiritual quality of the world had been in decline since its zenith at the time of Buddha. It thus considers the current period as the utterly degenerate third age. It encouraged its followers to cultivate through prayers a sincere intent to be reborn after death in the heavenly paradise of the Buddha Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Radiance. The Pure Land school was not critical of the government and thus did not incur the disfavour of China's emperors.

8. The Chan School - The Chan School (or Meditational School) is better known as The Zen School. It came into prominence in the Tang dynasty (618 - 906 AD). The School emphasises meditation as the only means to a spiritual awakening beyond words or thought, dispensing with the doctrines and other practices of Buddhism. It has the most ancient roots in China and the most colourful history.<sup>30</sup> It was brought to China by the Indian monk Bodhidharma in 500 AD. He appeared first in southern China. He was summoned to Emperor Liang Wu Ti who asked him how much merit he had gained with the building of numerous Buddhist temples. Bodhidharma said that he had gained none at all and promptly departed.

Chan developed in China along with the Buddhist mysticism of *Sunyata*. It was partly influenced by the Taoist concept of *wu-wei*, and partly in

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<sup>30</sup> *The Buddhist Tradition*, p. 207 to 240.

accommodation with the Confucian emphasis on practical life. In Chan we find the efflorescence of this mind.

In this School the most important tenet is the belief that Buddha-nature is inherent in one's own mind and that the best means to salvation is to look into one's mind to see Buddha-nature there. This is what later Buddhists called "directly pointing to the human mind and becoming a Buddha by seeing one's own nature."<sup>31</sup> The result is the doctrine of salvation by oneself. What is more interesting, salvation is to be achieved here and now. And most interestingly it is to be achieved "in this very body."

### Chinese Humanisation of Buddhism

From the beginning, Buddhism in China was understood in human terms. The Pure Land and the Chan Schools have provided Chinese Buddhism with a general pattern of practice. In both schools, Buddhism has been humanised. The Chinese translation of the Buddha's title, *Sakyamuni*, was "*Neng-jen*," which means "the ability to be good." To pray to be reborn in paradise means to escape from the human world. But man occupies a central position in this movement. The school is not indigenous to China, for the doctrine was taught in India and the basic texts are Indian. But in spirit and character it is truly Chinese, and it now exists only in China and Japan. While in India, rebirth in the Pure Land meant a complete break with our earthly life, which was considered a life of suffering. However, in China it means an extension of earthly living. There is no deprecation of mundane life. Human relations are continued in the Pure Land. This is why one is encouraged to transfer his merits to his ancestors. As in Confucianism, this act is considered one of the most meritorious.

The Buddha is worshipped as a deity by the Chinese. The most popular Buddhist deity is *Avalokitesvara* or *Kuan Yin*. *Kuan Yin* is almost humanised. In India (3rd to 12<sup>th</sup> century AD) and in Japan, he retains his transcendental and heavenly features. In China he became a human figure. From the Tang Dynasty (618 - 907 AD), *Kuan Yin* changed into a woman, or *The Goddess of Mercy*, "mother" to millions of devotees. In pictorial interpretations, the Indian rosaries are still present, but they are

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<sup>31</sup> *The Buddhist Tradition*, p.208.



carried by a crane, a symbol of longevity. *Kuan Yin* holds a flower vase from which all kinds of blessings are poured over humanity. These blessings are not *Nirvana*, a world transcending our own, but human blessings such as health, wealth, long life, and most important of all, children. Instead of sitting in the heavens looking upon us with compassion, she is likely to sit by a bamboo grove, carrying a baby or holding a fish basket. She is spiritually close to mankind and is almost human.

Man is central, not only in Chinese government and the arts, but also in religion, which is other-worldly and transcendental. Most Chinese Buddhists aspire to go to paradise, the "Pure Land." But, significantly, what is more attractive to the Chinese is the Mahayana transformation of Buddhism from the doctrine of salvation in *Nirvana* after death to the doctrine of salvation on earth and that he can achieve it "in this very body." In the Mahayana, *Nirvana* is described in terms of permanence, joy, the self, and purity.

#### 4. The Bahá'í Faith and Mahayana Buddhism

Although they come very different backgrounds and with their histories separated by a lapse of 2,500 years, there are many similarities between Mahayana Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith. The comparison and contrasting differences will lead us to a better understanding of both religions.

##### The Three Stations of the Manifestation of God

As in Mahayana, where there is the concept of *The Triple Bodies of the Buddha*, Bahá'í writings also refer to the three stations of the Manifestation of God. From the chapter on "*The Three Stations of the Divine Manifestations*" in *Some Answered Questions*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains:

"Know that the Holy Manifestations, though They have the degrees of endless perfections, yet, speaking generally, have only

three stations. The first station is the physical; the second station is the human, which is that of the rational soul; the third is that of the divine appearance and the heavenly splendour.

The physical station is phenomenal; it is composed of elements, and necessarily everything that is composed is subject to decomposition. It is not possible that a composition should not be disintegrated.

The second is the station of the rational soul, which is the human reality. This also is phenomenal, and the Holy Manifestations share it with all mankind.

Know that, although the human soul has existed on the earth for prolonged times and ages, yet it is phenomenal. As it is a divine sign, when once it has come into existence, it is eternal. The spirit of man has a beginning, but it has no end; it continues eternally...

The third station is that of the divine appearance and heavenly splendour: it is the Word of God, the Eternal Bounty, the Holy Spirit. It has neither beginning nor end, for these things are related to the world of contingencies and not to the divine world. For God the end is the same thing as the beginning. So the reckoning of days, weeks, months and years, of yesterday and today, is connected to the terrestrial globe; but in the sun there is no such thing - there is neither yesterday, today nor tomorrow, neither months nor years: all are equal. In the same way the Word of God is purified from all these conditions and is exempt from the boundaries, the laws and the limits of the world of contingency. Therefore, the reality of prophethood, which is the Word of God and the perfect state of manifestation, did not have any beginning and will not have any end; its rising is different from all others and is like that of the sun..."<sup>32</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh also wrote in *Gleanings* as follows:

<sup>32</sup> 'Abdu'l Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p 151.

*“These Manifestations of God have each a twofold station. One is the station of pure abstraction and essential unity. In this respect, if thou callest them all by one name, and dost ascribe to them the same attributes, thou hast not erred from the truth. Even as He hath revealed: ‘No distinction do We make between any of His Messengers.’ ...*

*The other station is the station of distinction, and pertaineth to the world of creation, and to the limitations thereof. In this respect, each Manifestation of God hath a distinct individuality, a definitely prescribed mission, a predestined revelation, and specially designated limitations. Each one of them is known by a different name, is characterised by a special attribute, fulfils a definite mission, and is entrusted with a particular Revelation...*

*It is because of this difference in their station and mission that the words and utterances flowing from these Well Springs of Divine knowledge appear to divulge and differ. Otherwise, in the eyes of them that are initiated into the mysteries of Divine wisdom, all their utterances are, in reality but the expressions of one Truth...*

*Even as He saith: “I am the servant of God. I am but a man<sup>33</sup> like you.”... Were any of the all-embracing Manifestations of God to declare: “I am God,” He, verily, speaketh the truth, and no doubt attacheth thereto.<sup>34</sup>*

The “three stations” mentioned by Abdu’l Baha do not directly correlate with the Triple Bodies of Mahayana Buddhism, but are very similar. The Body of Essence roughly corresponds to the “Word of God”, the third station. The Body of Transformation is obviously similar to the “physical” station. The Body of Bliss however, more accurately corresponds to the Holy Spirit, rather than the “rational soul”. The Holy Spirit in the Bahá'í writings is described to be an emanation of the Word of God (The Body of

<sup>33</sup> Here Bahá'u'lláh was also referring to the Prophet Mohammad.

<sup>34</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, XXII, p 50 - 55.

Essence). It is likened to the rays of the Sun, where the Sun represents God or His Manifestations.

### Salvation of the Individual

In the Bahá'í Faith, the individual's salvation is a personal journey from him to God that covers both this physical world and the next (that is the spiritual world). He has to develop his spiritual faculties to the fullest in this earthly life. In the next life, he will then be able to attain a higher spiritual station and his soul can move closer to God.

The Bahá'í Faith has no clergy. All believers are required to work towards salvation and this privilege is not restricted to the clergy, as in the case of *The Sangha* of Theravada Buddhism. Similar to the Bahá'í Faith, Mahayana offers salvation to all sentient beings besides those in *The Sangha*. It teaches that all sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature in them and the potential to achieve enlightenment is inherent in everyone. In this respect, both Mahayana Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith are more accessible and acceptable to the peoples of the world and less elitist in orientation.

### The Differing Views on Suffering

In Theravada, suffering is something to be escaped from. However, in Mahayana suffering is considered to be necessary in the journey to deliverance for the believer. If we recall, the bodhisattva's primary concern is to bring others to enlightenment even if his or her practice remains unperfected. This concern is inherent in the first universal vow<sup>35</sup> of the bodhisattva, "However innumerable sentient beings are, I vow to bring about their release." He is not preoccupied with concern over suffering but volunteers to share the suffering of the masses.

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<sup>35</sup> The other three of the four universal vows of the bodhisattva (*pranidhana*) are:

- (2) However limitless my defilements are, I vow to extinguish them;
- (3) However immeasurable the Buddha's teachings are, I vow to learn them;
- (4) However infinite enlightenment is, I vow to attain Buddhahood.

See Kogen Mizuno, *Essentials of Buddhism*, p.213.

Bahá'u'lláh teaches that suffering is not just the consequence of being cut off from God's love. Suffering tempers the individual and makes him realise his vulnerability and spiritual need. It renders him accessible to God's love. From Bahá'u'lláh:

*"The true lover yearneth for tribulation even as doth the rebel for forgiveness and the sinful for mercy."*<sup>36</sup>

### The Need to Serve Humanity

For the Bahá'í, to serve humanity means to be active in attaining individual spiritual progress and to be of service to society. He has to participate fully in the life of society and to help build a new World Order, based on the blueprint drawn up by the Central Figures of the Faith. Bahá'u'lláh stipulates that:

*"all men have been created to carry forth an ever-advancing civilisation."*<sup>37</sup>

The Bahá'í's mission in life has some similarities to the bodhisattva. A good Buddhist is a bodhisattva in the making. The latter is the foundation of the morality of Mahayana. He postpones his entry to *Nirvana* to remain in this earthly abode to help all sentient beings in *Samsara* attain salvation. Bahá'u'lláh states, "The heaven of divine wisdom is illumined with the two illuminaries of consultation and compassion."<sup>38</sup> Similarly, for the bodhisattva it is Compassion and Wisdom.

In Mahayana, the believer is exhorted to follow the example of the bodhisattva who is motivated by a desire to serve all sentient beings and lead them to salvation. The Bahá'í writings exhort the individual to develop his innate spiritual potential:

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<sup>36</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, p.15.

<sup>37</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p 215.

<sup>38</sup> *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 126-7.

*"How lofty is the station which man, if he but choose to fulfil his high destiny, can attain! To what depths of degradation he can sink, depths which the meanest of creatures have never reached."*<sup>39</sup>

### The Concepts of the Soul

In Theravada Buddhism there is the notion of a composite or compounded soul – this does not survive death and is similar to the animal self of human nature in other spiritual traditions. On the other hand, there is a non-composite or uncompounded entity, usually referred to as a stainless or perfect Mind (see quotations below). The Mind and its purification is similar to the soul of other spiritual traditions. Buddhism does not reject the existence of the soul, it prefers to speak of the mind and its purification.

*"Instructing all the world I will show to it Nirvana; those Four Noble Truths must be heard first and comprehended by the soul."*<sup>40</sup>

*"This body composed of the five Skandhas, and produced from the five elements, is all empty and without soul, and arises from the action of The Chain of Causation."*<sup>41</sup>

*"Listen all of you for your happiness, with your minds free from stain, -- I will declare to you step by step this Chain of Causation."*<sup>42</sup>

*"and in the end he shall even become a Buddha, -- he, possessing a thoroughly pure intelligence, shall obtain these eight sublime rewards of merit."*<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 206.

<sup>40</sup> *The Buddha-Kanta of Asvaghosha*, verse 11, From F M Muller, *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. 49: Buddhist Mahayana texts, p. 175.

<sup>41</sup> F M Muller, Verse 28, p. 177.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* Verse 35, p. 178.



*"He, having his soul pure, will attain these eight forms of absolute spotlessness; yea, wherever this method of the Law will prevail universally."*<sup>44</sup>

Although the Buddha's emphasis is on the mode of conduct of sentient beings, He has referred to the existence of the universal Mind or the "Element":

*"The Element (Cause) is without beginning in time. It is the common foundation of all dharmas. Because it exists there also exist all places of rebirth and the full attainment of Nirvana."*<sup>45</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh writes that in the next world, the soul "... will assume the form that best befitteth its immortality".<sup>46</sup> And 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that:

*"... in the other world the human reality doth not assume a physical form, rather doth it take on a heavenly form, made up of elements of that heavenly realm,"*<sup>47</sup> and it remains "in the degree of purity to which it has evolved during life in the physical body."<sup>48</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá, referring to the condition of the soul after death, said that at the physical death when the body is decomposed:

*"... only consciousness ... is left ... After death the condition is one which cannot be clearly explained in words. It is one of comprehension, understanding, which involves all other things --- feeling, etc.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, Verse 112, p. 187.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, Verse 117, p. 188.

<sup>45</sup> *Ratnagotravibhaga*, p. 72 - 73. *Abhidhamma Mahayanasutra*, See *The God of Buddha*, p. 131.

<sup>46</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p 157.

<sup>47</sup> 'Abdu'l Bahá, p 194.

<sup>48</sup> 'Abdu'l Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p 66.

*You will retain your individuality and will not be swallowed up in one vast spirit. Concerning the condition of the human soul after its ascension from the material world: the essence of the human soul is clarified from material substances and purified from the embodiment of physical things. It is exclusively luminous; it has no body; it is a dazzling pencil of light; it is a celestial orb of brightness.*"<sup>49</sup>

The Bahá'í Faith explains that for man as an individual, his earthly life is only a preparation for the life beyond. The soul will take the consequences or reap the fruits of its life in this world. This view is close to Buddhism. Bahá'u'lláh writes:

*"Every pure, every refined and sanctified soul will be endowed with tremendous power, and shall rejoice with exceeding gladness"; "... all men shall, after their physical death, estimate the worth of their deeds, and realise all that their hands have wrought", "... the souls of the infidels ... shall ... be made aware of the good things that have escaped them"*<sup>50</sup>

It is evident that the souls occupy different stages in the world beyond according to "what they acquire of virtues or vices in this world".<sup>51</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

*"Know that immortality belongs to such souls as have been imbued with the spirit of life. Beside them all the others are lifeless -- they are dead,<sup>52</sup> as Christ explained the Gospel."*<sup>53</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in "Studies in Immortality," in *Star of the West*, xiv, pp. 37 - 38.

<sup>50</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 154, 171, 170.

<sup>51</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 233.

<sup>52</sup> "Spiritually dead" as in the Christian tradition.

<sup>53</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 189.

## The Journey of the Soul

When the body disappears, the mind, which is linked to the body,<sup>54</sup> disappears. When the mind disappears, animal and human nature will disappear too. There is no longer any tension between the physical and spiritual nature typical of man's earthly life. This is called the dual nature of the soul. The unremitting necessity of choosing between material and spiritual attraction, typical of this earthly life, disappears. The soul's journey will be a progressive and continuous "approaching unto God,"<sup>55</sup> through the bounties of the Manifestation of God. Whoever has learnt during his earthly life how to profit from His bounties, will profit from them all the more in the next world.

The condition of the soul after the death of the body is not stationary as it proceeds in its never-ending journey back to God. In the next world, the soul's progress is influenced by the bounties of the Manifestations of God and by the intercession of other souls. These are those souls who are still in this world and those souls who have ascended into the Abha Kingdom. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

*"... it is certain that those who are near the Divine Court are allowed to intercede, and this intercession is approved by God. But intercession in the other world is not like the intercession in this world. It is another thing, another reality, which cannot be expressed in words."*<sup>56</sup>

This condition of the soul is not a static one. It is explained by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

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<sup>54</sup> In the Bahá'í texts the mind is described as the manifestation of the mental faculties of the soul through the agency of the brain. Since mind is not the only cognitive means at man's disposal, it follows that though man's intelligence (or reason, or intellect) is conditioned by his mind, yet it is not identical with it.

<sup>55</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p 66.

<sup>56</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p 231.

"... nothing which exists remains in a state of repose, ... as the spirit continues to develop after death, it necessarily progresses or declines; and in the other world to cease to progress is the same as to decline; but it never leaves its own condition, in which it continues to develop."<sup>57</sup>

In Bahá'u'lláh's *Seven Valleys*, the individual's search for Truth is written in mystical language. These valleys represent different stages in the progress of the soul and are described in the following way:

"the seven stages which the soul of the seeker must needs traverse ere it can attain the object of its existence."<sup>58</sup>

The soul's journey involves going through seven stages before it reaches the object of its existence, which is unification with its Creator. In the first valley, called the Valley of Search, Bahá'u'lláh uses passionate terms. The soul longs to be reunited with its beloved. The searcher is anguished as he does not know which path to take. The subsequent valleys show him the way. Bahá'u'lláh says the search is one of burning intensity. It is the fire a true lover feels when he is separated from his beloved.

Whoever has entered into the Seventh Valley, called *The Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness*, has reached a climax in his spiritual life: he has transcended his own personal self, so that he becomes "nothing", "empty", and perfectly mirrors the light of God. The spiritual condition of *The Seven Valleys* is similar to the *Sunyata* (Emptiness) of Mahayana and the *Nirvana* (Nothingness) of Theravada.

"Yea, all he hath, from heart to skin, will be set aflame, so that nothing will remain save the Friend."<sup>59</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh says that:

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<sup>57</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p 233.

<sup>58</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 140.

<sup>59</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, p. 36.

*"O My Servant, Thou art even as a finely tempered sword concealed in the darkness of its sheath and its value hidden from the artificer's knowledge. Wherefore come forth from the sheath of self and desire that thy worth may be made resplendent and manifest unto all the world."*<sup>60</sup>

We have to free ourselves from our intellectual baggage and stand simple and naked before God, like a humble little child. We have to "empty" the self completely of what we imagine ourselves to be until we find the Manifestation of God residing within our heart.

*"O Son of Spirit!....Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find Me standing within thee, mighty, powerful and self-subsisting."*<sup>61</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

*"... the human spirit is a Divine Trust, and it must traverse all conditions, for its passage and movements through the conditions of existence will be the means of its acquiring perfections ...when the human spirit passes through the conditions of existence, it will become the possessor of each degree and station."*<sup>62</sup>

Human life is thus a "journey of the soul back to God," and "the pathway of life is the road which leads to divine knowledge and attainment"<sup>63</sup>. "Every atom in existence and the essence of all created things" declares Bahá'u'lláh, "is for our training."<sup>64</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, No 72, translated from the Persian, Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 45.

<sup>61</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, Arabic, no. 13.

<sup>62</sup> 'Abdu'l Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 200.

<sup>63</sup> 'Abdu'l Bahá, *Promulgation*, pp. 294, 336, 294.

<sup>64</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, Persian, no 29.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has given a brief introduction of Mahayana Buddhism and compared some of its doctrines to the Bahá'í Faith. There is common ground between them in terms of their ultimate goal for individual spiritual development, and the Mahayana concept of *Sunyata* (Emptiness) is similar to Bahá'u'lláh's 'Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness'. There is also convergence in the way Mahayana Buddhists and Bahá'ís attempt to describe the nature of their respective founders. The Mahayana doctrine of the "Triple Bodies of the Buddha" has points of similarity with the Bahá'í "Three stations of the Manifestations". Common also to both Faiths is the injunction to strike a balance between individual self-enlightenment and universal salvation.

Within the constraints of time and space this paper has only made a provisional attempt at finding and highlighting the common ground between Mahayana Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith. The author hopes that it will inspire more detailed studies in the future.

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