Origins of the Mahayana

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Introduction

Mahayana Buddhism has been the largest form of Buddhism for over half of the religion’s 2,500 year lifespan but, even so, its origins are largely shrouded in mystery. This is the form of Buddhism in all of East Asia, including China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, to name its most populous centers. Tibetan Buddhism is also categorized as Mahayana even though it went through further development. In fact, when the average Westerner thinks about Buddhism, it is most likely the Mahayana form that comes to mind regardless of whether one is familiar with the term. The Mahayana is, however, very different from the “traditional” form of Buddhism that preceded its rise to prominence. The most influential Western scholar on early Mahayana Buddhism went as far as to say, even though he definitely overstated his point, that it is "almost a new religion, nearly as different... as Christianity is from Judaism.”1 The significant differences with the Mahayana form of Buddhism have compelled scholars to investigate how it came into existence as a movement on the Indian subcontinent sometime around or before the beginning of the Common Era.

In undertaking this task, some of the difficulties that scholars face include: (1) lack of Mahayana archeological records, (2) only a handful of the surviving Mahayana sutras can be definitely identified as coming from the earliest known phase of the movement, (3) conflicting versions of “the Mahayana” in available sources, and (4) there is not a single mention of the Mahayana in non-Mahayana writings during the early period of its development. Scholars have proposed at least six different theories to explain its origins, some of which are in polar opposition to each other. The objectives of this study are to evaluate the full spectrum of scholarship on the origins of the Mahayana, to determine the reasons for such radical divergence between competing theories, and to explore possible syntheses between them for a more inclusive paradigm of scholarship that accounts for all of the contributing factors that gave rise to the Mahayana.
Part I: Preliminary Information

The Historical Context

The Mahayana must be contrasted with the mainstream form of Buddhism that preceded its rise in order to understand the development of the movement. In the traditional sutras of pre-sectarian Buddhism, which are recorded in the Nikayas/Agamas, the Buddha only teaches a dharma of personal liberation from suffering. There is essentially nothing new in his soteriological paradigm, as it is a restatement of the ancient shramana goal of ending the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth by exiting phenomenal existence and returning to the unconditioned state, and to do so as quickly as possible. One that has accomplished this state of liberation is known as an arhat, a "worthy one." The arhat has "destroyed birth" so that there is "no more coming into any state of being" after death. Hundreds of monks attained this state in the Buddha's time. Throughout the traditional sutras, the oft-repeated phrase when a monk becomes an arhat is something along the lines of: "that is it, the divine life has been lived, there is nothing more to be done." This conception of Buddhism was inherited by the Theravadans ("Tradition of the Elders"), which emerged out of one of the 18 schools/sects of early Buddhism, and it remains the modern counterpart to the Mahayana.

Features of the Mahayana

At least within a few centuries, the mainstream soteriological paradigm was seen in some monastic circles as an inferior form of the Buddha's dharma. Some monks insisted that everyone should not seek to leave the phenomenal realm but should instead remain here out of compassion for the salvation of all sentient beings. This initiated a revision of the shramana paradigm inherited by Buddhism. The revisionist monks did not claim that the tradition of the disciples (srayakas) was false, but instead that it was a "lesser vehicle" (hina-yana) of understanding dharma. If the Buddha taught it, according to these monks, it was an "expedient means" (upaya) tailored to the spiritual
development of the general lot of hearers who could only understand his teachings through the lens of the pre-existing shramana paradigm.

This movement of monks vowed to continue to be reborn as "enlightenment-beings" (bodhisattvas) over innumerable aeons to fully develop all of the Buddha-like faculties to the highest potential. Their goal was to become Supreme Buddhas (samyak-sambuddha) like Gautama who "turn the wheel of the dharma" in worlds that no longer have the teachings of a Buddha. This is referred to as the "greater vehicle" (maha-yana). The proclamation of the bodhissatva path, after it admittedly suffered loss for a long time under the inferior understanding of the mainstream disciples, came to be seen as "the second turning of the wheel of dharma" in the world.

The bodhisattva path to Supreme Buddhahood is the essence of the Mahayana. In the beginning, the "movement" simply consisted of everyone who believed that the bodhisattva-yana (yana means "vehicle") to Supreme Buddhahood should be the ultimate goal for all disciples of the Buddha. But there were, of course, other important features of the movement. The Mahayana began to produce its own written sutras around the 1st century BCE. In addition to the bodhisattva-yana, most of these sutras sought a simplification of dharma to get to its most profound essence, believed in a highly deified Buddha, had an ingrained acceptance of the popular cultus with multiple bodhisattva quasi-deities, and a conception of nirvana that is not divorced from samsara. These are the elements that participants in the Mahayana movement more or less held in common.

However, apart from these elements, sutras that espoused the bodhisattva-yana often promoted entirely different things. For example, some of the earliest sutras promoted a return to forest dwelling asceticism as absolutely essential for bodhisattvas. But there were other sutras in which self-proclaimed lay bodhisattvas believed themselves to be superior to monks. Then there were sutras written around the same time that promoted an early form of Pure Land Buddhism in which one is supposed to continuously call on the name of a Buddha who is not mentioned in the traditional sutras. There was also a whole class of sutras that reduce dharma to the philosophical
concept of ontological emptiness and promote this as the sole key to awakening. All of these versions of the bodhisattva-yana occurred around the same time. Thus, from the outset there were multiple ideologies that, perhaps only later, came to be collectively referred to as “the Mahayana.”

The first occurrence of the word "Mahayana" in surviving literature is in the Lotus Sutra, which was written in stages sometime between the 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE. The word was used as a synonym for the older term, bodhisattva-yana. Soon the "Mahayana" was polemically contrasted with the hinayana ("small vehicle") of those who did not intend to become samyak-sambuddhas. However, there is no record of any sect based on the distinction between yanas for the next several centuries as it was not seen as a cause for division in the sangha.

**Emic Account of Origins**

It is important to understand that Gautama Buddha did not leave behind scriptures or provide a mechanism for a group of monks to decide matters of doctrine for the entire sangha. The Nikayan scriptures came from monks who remembered and passed on the words of the Buddha (buddhavacana) over the course of three hundred years before they were finally written down. The Mahayana would argue that, sometime along the line, the disciples who tried to systematize the dharma retained the most basic teachings about becoming an arhat for personal liberation but ignored the higher-level of teachings about attaining Supreme Buddhahood for the liberation of all beings. The Mahayana sutras were put into writing at the exact same time as the traditional sutras and, from their perspective, have an equal claim to continuance with the historical Buddha.

On the flip side of this appeal to continuance with an established tradition, there was also the acknowledgement that the rise of the Mahayana is "the second turning of the wheel of dharma in the world." Thus Mahayanists admit that a huge change happened in the sangha such as had not occurred since the time of the Buddha, "the first turning of the wheel." The usual justification for this is that the sutras were not supposed to be in widespread circulation until the time was ripe for
them to be properly understood. In some accounts the sutras were stored in a mythological realm of dragons. There are even sutras that made appeal to private revelations from the Buddha or celestial bodhisattvas that were received during meditative trance. Revelation-based sutras were regarded as "mystically authorized." But even when there was claim to historical continuance, the Mahayana went to great lengths to assert and defend its revolutionary nature as "the second turning of the wheel" that surpassed the mainstream tradition.

The foremost defense of the Mahayana in modern times comes from D.T. Suzuki, especially in his *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism* (1907). Suzuki proposed that the Mahayana was a legitimate "unfolding of the religious consciousness" from "germs in the original system" of early Buddhism. His explanation is that the founder of a religion simply states the basic doctrinal points and that it is left up to the successors to "develop" the doctrines "in all of their possible details and consequences." The successors will make "all the necessary alterations and ameliorations according to circumstances" to meet their diverse needs. This implies, according to him, that Buddhism had the right to "absorb and assimilate all the discordant thoughts that came in contact with it." For Suzuki, Buddhism is not a static religion, but rather the Buddha "inspired" the "spirit of that religious system" which, like everything else in the world, is a living organism that evolves and adapts over time. Suzuki further states that Mahayanists do not claim to be the "original form" of Buddhism, and that in fact they have always denied this, and instead intend to be a greater vehicle that conveys the "spirit and central ideas" of Buddha in its full development. However, he states that he does not attempt to "enter into any detailed accounts as to what external and internal forces were acting in the body of Mahayana Buddhism to produce the Mahayana system."

Some scholars have criticized Suzuki as misrepresenting Buddhism, but his essays on Mahayana Buddhism merited posthumous publication in *On Indian Mahayana Buddhism* (1962) with Edward Conze as the editor. Conze’s introduction notes that, with the exception of one other scholar, Suzuki had the only comprehensive book focused on Mahayana Buddhism at the time and
that, in spite of some problems, his work is "substantially sound." Suzuki was in fact one of the most towering figures in Western scholarship on Mahayana Buddhism throughout the first half of the 20th century. His perspective was influential in establishing the principle that the Mahayana evolved naturally over the course of time from seeds that were present in earliest Buddhism.

More recent defenses of the Mahayana tradition appeal to a stream of Western scholarship that is agnostic towards determining the earliest form of Buddhism. These scholars emphasize that the earliest Mahayana sutras were put into writing at the same time as the Nikayas in the 1st century BCE, that both were produced from pre-existing traditions, and that the existence of multiple versions of Buddhism makes it impossible to pronounce on the actual teachings of the historical Buddha. Mahayanists have picked up on this stream of scholarship and, while of course having faith in their own tradition, state that academia should leave the issue of the origins of the Mahayana open and not say that one tradition is “earlier” than the other. On the positive end of the recent defenses of the Mahayana, its basic truths are regarded as self-evident from the need for compassion for the salvation of others.

The final point of consideration is that, according to tradition, state sponsorship of the Mahayana led to its rise. Mahayana tradition holds that emperor Kanishka (r. 78 to 123 CE) supported the Mahayana and, getting more into the realm of definite legend, that he convened a Fourth Buddhist Council in order to codify the scriptures of Mahayana Buddhism. This tradition is of course only preserved by the Mahayana. It is regarded by most historians as doubtful because Kanishka seemed to be non-sectarian. But at least one Western historian is willing to admit that the alleged state sponsorship of the Mahayana accords with related historical facts. In the time of his reign, it was the Mahayana form of Buddhism that began to spread throughout Central Asia and China from his domain. Furthermore, as will be seen, there is substantial archeological evidence that supports the notion that some kings promoted the bodhisattva-yana to their own advantage.
PART II: Survey of Western Scholarship

Historical Overview

Early Western scholarship on Buddhism, which began in the 19th century, was mostly concerned with Theravadan Buddhism. East Asian and Tibetan Buddhism were regarded as too far from the religion of the historical Buddha to merit their immediate attention. Also there were not yet enough source texts available to thoroughly study earliest Mahayana Buddhism in India. It was not until the middle of the 20th century that the origin of the Mahayana was seriously dealt with.

Apart from Suzuki’s work, which has already been addressed, the first comprehensive scholarly book on early Mahayana Buddhism was Nalinaksha Dutt’s Aspects of Mahayana Buddhism and its Relation to Hinayana (1930). It, however, did not attempt to theorize on the origins of the Mahayana. The first writers to do this were Etienne Lamotte in The History of Indian Buddhism (1958), which is a massive work of over 700 pages that became a standard tome of early Buddhism, and Edward Conze.

It was the Anglo-German scholar Edward Conze (1904-1979) who may be considered the “father” of Western scholarship on earliest Mahayana Buddhism. Conze translated mass amounts of important sutras that were hitherto unavailable, established the timeframe for the rise of the Mahayana, and proposed the first theories based on the new sources. His principle books that have sections dealing with the origins of the Mahayana are Buddhism: Its Essence and Development (1951), A Short History of Buddhism (1958), Buddhist Thought in India (1962), and Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies (1968). His work initiated a new era of scholarship on early Mahayana Buddhism, which picked up after the 1970’s.

The compilation and interpretation of archaeological records has also aided in the study to form a second source of information outside of surviving literature. The main authority on
archaeological remains is Gregory Schopen. His work has been the most influential after Conze. To date, the most comprehensive and well-rounded book on the rise of the Mahayana is Paul William's *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (1989).

The historical timeframe for the first traces of the Mahayana that Conze proposed continues to be accepted by all scholars. It is based on inferences from a collection of sutras that surfaced in Chinese translation during the late 2nd century CE. Conze reasoned that we can safely assume that the sutras were already circulating as popular literature at the time of their translation. Thus they may be dated from at least the 1st century CE. But there are reasons to push them back another century. Most scholars think that the sutras do not represent the earliest phase of the movement because they assume that their readers are already acquainted with developed *bodhisattva-yana* concepts. In consideration of how long the ideas in these sutras would have taken to evolve, and also in consideration of the fact that the sutras became popular enough to be the preferred sutras used to teach Buddhism in China, Conze pushed their composition back to the 1st century BCE. Scholars regard this as probable, but the earliest more or less certain date is the 1st century CE.

Although the dating is established, theories on how the Mahayana arose are diverse and contradicting. The theories range from it originating as a conscious lay reformation, a genesis from stupa worship, a state sponsored sociological shift, a conservative return to original forest dwelling asceticism, a proto-Mahayana sect, and a cross-sectarian literary movement. It is referred to as "the Mahayana" but sometimes, perhaps more accurately, it is treated as a spectrum of isolated elements that comprise multiple so-called Mahayanas. This is a very confusing picture indeed. Much work needs to be done to clean up the scholarship that has accumulated on the origins of the Mahayana.

**Lay Reformation Theory**

The earliest theory on the origins of the Mahayana was that it began as a lay movement. This was a reasonable hypothesis, as characteristic elements of the Mahayana movement, such as
the deification of the Buddha and the introduction of new *bodhisattva* quasi-deities, seem to have been inspired by lay piety. Furthermore, the Mahayana sutras criticize the institutionalized *sangha*, devalue the status of *arhats*, and increase the role of the laity. Some of the sutras even propose the notion that there can be lay *bodhisattvas* that are superior to the monastics.

For these reasons, Conze and Eitenn Lamotte postulated that the Mahayana originated with "the demands of the laity for more equal rights with the monks" and the sangha's "concessions to the aspirations of the laity." Conze even said that it is probable that the Mahamsamghikas, the sect that he traces the origins of the proto-Mahayana movement back to, got their name as the "Great assembly/*sangha*" because they "represented the viewpoint of the laymen against the monkish party," and that this trend continued with the development of the Mahayana in the following centuries. This theory has been interpreted as postulating an intentional lay reformation of Buddhism.

More recent scholars also concede that the Mahayana was much more lay-inclusive than the preceding form of Buddhism. For example, Williams said that, "a number of the early Mahayana sutras stress the importance of the laity," and he provides excerpts in the sutras when self-proclaimed lay *bodhisattvas* see themselves as superior to mainstream monks. However, the notion of a lay reformation against the monastics has been completely abandoned by all scholars because, as more sutras came into translation, it became evident that the earliest strain of Mahayana sutras were produced by monks who even sought a stricter form of monasticism than was practiced in the mainstream monasteries. Also, upon further consideration of the sutras that had been in translation for a while, scholars realized that many sutras promote an elite mysticism/philosophy that would have been entirely beyond the understanding of the laity.

**Stupa Worship Theory**

The other classic theory on the lay origins of the Mahayana is that it originated from worship at shrines of the Buddha’s relics called "stupas." Its principle expounder was the Japanese
scholar Akira Hirakawa, who continued to write on the topic long after lay origination theories were abandoned in the West. His theory was not that there was a conscious lay reformation, but rather that there was a separate lay bodhisattva movement that developed organically from stupa worship and then it eventually carried over into the monasteries.

Hirakawa's argument is as follows:

"...the establishment of stupas and the accumulation of the property around them enabled groups of religious specialists to live near the stupas. These people formed orders and began developing doctrines concerning the Buddha's powers to save. ... In some Mahayana texts, a bodhisattva group (bodhisattvagana) is mentioned as existing separately from the order of monks of the Nikaya schools (sravakasangha)."16

He states that worship at the stupas had profound psychological effect in the formation of the movement:

Thus Mahayana meditations in which the Buddha is visualized may have originated in the religious experiences of people worshipping the Buddha at stupas. Such religious experiences might have resulted in people coming to the belief that they were bodhisattvas.17

However, he only intended to address the earliest cause that gave rise to the Mahayana. The first stage of its development, which was the deification of the Buddha and the desire to imitate him as bodhisattvas, was caused by stupa worship, but in regards to the next stage, he states: "the origins of the advocates of the perfection of wisdom literature must be sought in different areas."18 Thus Hirakawa did not propose that the origin of the entire Mahayana tradition can be explained by stupa worship.

The foremost critic of Hirakawa's theory has been Schopen. He originally argued that the Mahayana sutras have an "unambiguously negative attitude to the stupa cult," but he later modified this to an "ambiguously negative attitude" and just said that there is no evidence in the sutras to
support Hirakawa's claim.\textsuperscript{19} This is ironic considering that Hirakawa said there are "references in many Mahayana texts to stupa worship."\textsuperscript{20} Schopen spent a considerable amount of time discarding the claim that it can be found in the sutras. The other issue that Schopen takes with Hirakawa's theory is that stupa worship has never been an exclusively lay phenomenon but instead has always been associated with the sangha, as is clearly the case in the Nikayas. He also argues from archaeological evidence that there were stupas at monasteries before the Common Era.

But Schopen did acknowledge that the cult of relics would have aided in the idea that the Buddha is "present" in the world.\textsuperscript{21} And Williams actually affirms the validity of the psychological argument, previously made by Hirakawa, that the cult of relics probably led to the deification of Buddha, imagined experiences of the Buddha in which revelations were received, and the desire to emulate him as bodhisattvas. Thus even scholars who reject the stupa worship theory as the cause for the Mahayana at least admit that it more or less contributed to some preconditions of the movement.

In support of the stupa worship theory, two centuries before the earliest historical traces of the Mahayana, King Asoka built thousands of stupas (84,000 according to the legend) throughout India and they would have been the only centers for lay gatherings that had relative independence from monastic control. The theory makes logical sense for the first stage of development. There is, however, no definite proof that it should be singled out as the cause for the origin of the Mahayana.

\textbf{Sociological Theory}

The sociological theory is the least considered explanation among Buddhist scholars. Ross Reet, in his \textit{Buddhism: A History}, honed in on the time when Buddhism became the state religion of India under King Asoka (r. 269-232 BCE) as the turning point that led to the rise of the Mahayana. One gets the impression from surviving archeological records that Asoka was sort of like a Buddhist version of Constantine in regards to his influence on religion. Reet states: "Shortly after Asoka made
Buddhism the state religion of India, the religious aspirations of the masses began to exert influence upon the canonical scriptures of Indian religion.  

He went on to state that, in contrast to the conservative monks, "Mahayana Buddhism appears to have been determined to incorporate popular devotionalism into the very fabric of Buddhist doctrine." It made Buddhism "more readily accessible to the average person.

The possibility for this becomes even more apparent when it is considered that the shrines and monasteries were sponsored by lay patronage. It is also a well-established fact that the influx of wealth into the monasteries around this time compromised the purity of the sangha. There is abundant archaeological evidence from inscriptions that monks were wealthy enough to make major donations even though it is against the monastic rules to handle money or have any personal belongings. The monasteries in fact had the ability to run businesses as, already in the third century BCE, Asoka described monasteries around pilgrimage sites like they were tourist destinations. Many scholars have noted that this close connection between the laity and the sangha led to mutual influences and proto-Mahayana developments. Williams gives some credence to this notion:

... for our purposes what is significant here is the phenomenon of extensive lay patronage, with monks and laity drawing closer together. As we shall see, I do not hold to the theory that Mahayana Buddhism arose under direct lay influence and involvement. Nevertheless perhaps it is in the increasingly close relationship between monks and lay patrons, and the concern of certain monks with the spiritual welfare of as wide a social group as possible, that we can trace one way or another at least some of the formative elements of the Mahayana.

He further says that there was a "doctrinal widening" in reference to monks ascribing "validity and doctrinal orthodoxy" to devotional activities that were previously only the concern of the laity. In regards to this he says: "Correspondingly, the religious activities held by some to be characteristic of, or of most benefit to, laypeople become respectable." He continues:
At our present state of knowledge of the origins and development of Mahayana it is difficult to give a completely satisfactory explanation of why this widening happened, although in socio-economic terms one relevant factor in India would have been the need to appeal in competition with other Indian renouncer groups to as wide a group of laity as possible for economic support, and in particular to appeal to kings for patronage.\textsuperscript{28}

On the flip side of the "doctrinal widening," the popularization of the \textit{bodhisattva} ideal made it possible for the laity to gain a new sense of self-importance alongside the monks.

According to Williams, the concept of the \textit{bodhisattva}, popularized in the \textit{Jataka Tales} which depicted the Buddha in his former lives as a prince operating for the benefit of others, was especially of interest to rulers. There is substantial evidence that rulers in Buddhist lands, even including Theravada-dominated Sri Lanka, wanted to declare themselves as \textit{bodhisattvas} to increase their public appeal. Williams notes that there was even a "willingness of monks to recognize kings as \textit{bodhisattvas}."\textsuperscript{29} He also says that there might be evidence that rulers outside of Buddhist lands saw themselves as \textit{bodhisattvas} due to their propagation of the dharma. This could have contributed to the popularization of the \textit{bodhisattva} ideal among the ruled masses.

Getting back to Reet, he thinks that it is at least possible that there is some truth to the Mahayana legend that King Kanishka promoted the Mahayana in the 1\textsuperscript{st}-2\textsuperscript{nd} centuries. He notes that it accords with the geographical spread of the Mahayana from Kanishka’s domain throughout Central Asia and China at that time. Judging by the actions of other kings, it would have certainly been in his favor to promote both the \textit{bodhisattva} ideal and the popular religion of the masses.

So far, the theories that involve lay influence, including the lay reformation theory, the stupa worship theory, and the sociological theory, account for the presence of the popular cultus within the \textit{sangha} in the Mahayana tradition. But these theories are insufficient of themselves to account for the Mahayana’s elite monastic elements.
Forest Dwelling Theory

The preceding theories assume that the Mahayana was a popular movement promoted by lay and state influences, but some recent scholars think it was just the opposite. As Schopen states, previous scholars "may have badly misunderstood the nature and character of the early Mahayana in India." The latest trend among scholars is to argue that the origin of the Mahayana is to be found especially in elite monastics that promoted a return to solitary forest dwelling asceticism. Paul Harrison and Daniel Boucher are two key supporters of this theory. Boucher wrote a whole book dedicated to it entitled Bodhisattvas of the Forest and the Formation of the Mahayana (2008). Reginald Ray, Williams, and Schopen also support it, but in a moderate form. The theory is based on the facts that some of the earliest Mahayana sutras promoted a return to forest dwelling asceticism as essential for the bodhisattva, criticized institutionalized monasticism, and referred to themselves as a minority.

Sutras that promote forest dwelling asceticism include the Ugrapariprccha Sutra, Candrapradipa Sutra, Ratnakuta Sutra, Rastrapalapariprccha Sutra, Maitreyasimhanada Sutra, Ratarnasi Sutra, Samadhiraja Sutra, Kasyaparivarta Sutra. The Ugrapariprccha Sutra is in the collection of sutras that were translated into Chinese in the 2nd century and is regarded as some of the earliest available Mahayana literature. It says: "The bodhisattva who has left the world must reflect that dwelling in the forest was ordained by the Buddha, and therefore he must live in the forest; for thus there is fulfillment of the pure Law." Schopen states: "Such exhortations to live in the forest—though, again, until recently largely overlooked—appear to be very common in a surprisingly large number of early Mahayana sutras." The Astasahasrika Sutra, which has been regarded as the earliest Mahayana sutra in existence, seems to assume the prevalence of the trend that made forest-dwelling essential because, although not agreeing with these sutras, it spent an entire chapter trying to downplay the position that bodhisattvas must be forest dwellers. But on the
other hand, it can be regarded as proof that forest-dwelling was not a universal practice among the earliest known bodhisattvas in the movement.

Schopen has gone to great lengths to demonstrate that the Mahayana was "an extremely limited minority movement." He cites sutras such as the Astasahasrika Sutra, which states: "in this world of living beings, few are the bodhisattvas who have entered on this path of Perfect Wisdom" and "far greater numbers of bodhisattvas do turn away from unexelled, correct and complete awakening." Schopen also uses the lack of archaeological evidence to support this notion:

It is again a demonstrable fact that anything even approaching popular support for the Mahayana cannot be documented until the 4th/5th AD, and event then the support is overwhelmingly by monastic, not lay, donors.

He theorized that the lack of Mahayana archaeological records could be because the movement consisted of mostly roaming forest dwellers who would have left no traces. But, at the same time, he thinks that it is probable that there were also some discontented Mahayana monks living in the mainstream monasteries. In further support of the forest dwelling theory, Schopen proposed that non-sedentary monks would have been more inclined to migrate outside of Buddhist lands than monks in the established monasteries would have been. This is used to explain how Mahayana was the form of Buddhism that spread to China while it was supposedly still a minority movement.

The forest-dwelling theory has some more strong points that are worth noting. It seems logical that elite monks who promoted the bodhisattva path to become Supreme Buddhas, a goal far beyond what most monks strove for, would have sought the complete emulation of the Buddha in itinerant forest dwelling. Also, their separate existence accounts for how the authors of the sutras could have been so outspoken against the hinayana monks of established monasteries. But the forest-dwelling theory does not account for the lay elements in the Mahayana movement. For this and other reasons, most of the scholars, such as Schopen, who offer credence to the forest dwelling
theory for the origins of the Mahayana believe that there must have been other factors at work as well.

**Mahasamghika Theory**

Along with the lay reformation theory, early scholarship on the origins of the Mahayana postulated that the movement derived from the Mahasamghika sect/school due to their proto-Mahayana characteristics. The designation of a group of the *sangha* as the Mahasamghika ("Great assembly/sangha") came as a result of the first schism in the *sangha*, which occurred around the time of the Second Council which convened 100 years after the Buddha's death. As its name suggests, it was most likely the majority faction. The other group was known as the *Sthavira*/Pali: *Thera* ("Elders"). All of the 18+ sects/schools of early Buddhism emerged out of these two groups. Several hundred centuries later, the only school that at least partially survived intact claimed direct decent from the ancient *Sthaviras/Theras* and refers to itself as the *Theravada* ("Doctrine of the Elders"). This is very interesting because, just as in the Great Schism, there are still two main groups of Buddhism, now called the Theravada ("The Doctrine of the Elders") and Mahayana ("Great Vehicle"), which continue to have the same "spirit" as the original two groups. It seemed logical then for scholars to look to the Mahasamghikas for the origin of the Mahayana.

The similarities between the Mahasamghikas and the Mahayana are quite striking. Mahasamghikas denied the perfection of *arhats* against the *Sthaviras*, believed that the Buddha was a transcendent being that only appeared to be human and was more like a deity, promoted the *bodhisattva* ideal of becoming Supreme Buddhas, believed in multiple Buddhas existing at the same time, most likely had a doctrine of ontological emptiness, and a unified lay-monastic cultus. In regards to lay influence, Conze states that the Mahasamghikas probably called themselves the "Great assembly/sangha" because they "represented the viewpoint of the laymen against the
monkish party.”\textsuperscript{35} This is doubtful, but the proto-Mahayana elements of the Mahasamghikas are acknowledged by all scholars.

There is even a detailed account from a monk in the 6th century named Paramartha that states that the Mahayana originated from the Mahasamghikas. He said that the Mahasamghikas composed the Mahayana sutras and then subsequently split into three groups divided over whether they should be considered as "words of the Buddha" (\textit{buddhavacana}). Paramartha even describes the details of the sects/schools including their names and geographical locations, which increases its historical reliability. To make this even more interesting, the Mahasamghikas supposedly disappeared in the 7th century and it was only a century earlier that there is record of the establishment of official Mahayana monasteries in the same regions. All there would need to be is a gradual change in the ending of their name from Maha-samghika ("assembly/sangha") to -yana ("vehicle").

The theory of Mahasamghika origins was proposed throughout the middle of the 20th century. Edward Conze states: "The Mahasamghikas became the starting point of the development of the Mahayana by their more liberal attitude, and by some of their special theories."\textsuperscript{36} The biggest supporters of Mahasamghika origins since the 1970's include A.K. Warder and André Bareau. Also, scholars such as Stephen Hodge and Williams have determined that many of the Mahayana sutras were composed by Mahasamghikas. There is evidence that the Mahasamghikas had copies of the Mahayana sutras, which is a confirmation of this. However, almost all more recent scholars now reject the notion that the Mahasamghikas were \textit{uniquely} responsible for the rise of the Mahayana.

\textbf{Cross-Sectarian Literature Theory}

More recent scholars think that, while there are indeed proto-Mahayana elements in the Mahasamghika sect that might have been instrumental to the rise of the Mahayana, the Mahasamghikas were not its exclusive proponents and thus it must have been a cross-sectarian
movement. In support of this, these scholars argue that: (1) some monks in non-Mahasamghika sects/schools, especially among the Sarvastivadans, believed in the *bodhisattva* ideal and read the Mahayana sutras, (2) monks who visited India in the 6th century said that the only substantial difference between Mahayanists and non-Mahayanists is that they read the Mahayana sutras and worship the *bodhisattvas*, and it is assumed that they lived in the same monasteries, (3) the Mahayana did not exclusively identify with a particular sect/school, (4) there is no record that there were separate Mahayana monasteries until sometime between the 5th to 7th centuries, (5) differences in doctrine were not considered to be a cause for schism (only changing the monastic code was) and the Mahayana did not have a different Vinaya, (6) and finally, there is the precedent that some *vadas* (the term for sects/schools) did not have their own monasteries and thus were not sects at all but were instead cross-sectarian “ideological schools.” These points are well-accepted among scholars.

Richard Cohen has demonstrated in *Discontented Categories: Hinayana and Mahayana in Indian Buddhist History* that the gap between the Mahayana and so-called "Hinayana" was not as large as is often supposed. In fact, the distinction between vehicles (*arhat* / *sravakabuddha*, *pracyetabuddha*, and *samyak-sambuddha*) is even present in Theravadan Buddhism. So the Mahayana claims would not have been rejected wholesale. If a monk in any of the sects/schools strove to become a *samyak-sambuddha* then he probably would have been applauded by his peers. Williams, quoting Nattier, refers to the *bodhisattva* ideal as a "spiritual vocation" that was pursued within pre-existing communities.³⁷ "To be a ‘Mahayanist’ – that is, to be a bodhisattva – thus does not mean to adhere to some new kind of ‘Buddhism,’ but simply to practice Buddhism in its most rigorous and demanding form."³⁸ Monks in the various sects/schools would have been free to privately read any sutras and believe in an exalted view of the Buddha.

To summarize the near consensus of recent scholarship on the non-sectarian origins of the Mahayana, in the words of Williams: "Mahayana did not originate on a sectarian basis, and we have
no historical evidence to identify the Mahayana as a whole with one particular group of early Buddhist sects or schools."\(^{39}\) And, "It is unlikely therefore that as such it was a result of schism (\textit{samghabheda})."\(^{40}\) Then Williams states: "it is possible for members of any Buddhist sect, any Buddhist tradition with a separate Vinaya, also to embrace Mahayana."\(^{41}\)

Recent scholars point to the re-introduction of writing in India as the precondition for the rise of Mahayana to popular status. Richard Gombrich is frequently cited as saying that it is unlikely that the movement would have arisen without the use of writing. Following previous scholars, Schopen argues that the Mahayana was basically a literary movement. Schopen is notorious for his claim that it was a “cult of the book” in competition with the “cult of the stupa.” He spent considerable time attempting to prove that the Mahayana sutras were a focal point of worship and that the holy places where they were housed became the nuclei of the Mahayana movement. This theory has been taken up in part by a host of authors, including Williams. However, the Buddhism Encyclopedia states in criticism that,

> Gregory Schopen was almost certainly wrong—and his theory too must go the way of Hirakawa's—in seeing in these passages only an attempt by the "new" movement to substitute one similar cult (the cult of the book) for another similar cult (the cult of relics).

> That such a substitution occurred—and perhaps rather quickly—is likely, but it now appears that it is very unlikely that this was the original or fundamental intention.\(^{42}\)

Setting aside the “cult of the book” nonsense, the movement certainly spread in monastic circles through the use of writing. But there seems to have been a parallel means of propagation that made it popular among the laity: the cultus. This is because the sutras were principally elite monastic literature.

The cross-sectarian literary theory explains how the Mahayana was popularized across whatever sectarian boundaries may have existed. But it does not account for the \textit{origin} of the movement because it does not explain how the ideas in the sutras came into existence. The sutras
certainly did not write, promote, or worship themselves. Rather, the sutras presuppose a living Mahayana "tradition" that was believed by a moderate amount of monks, even if it was not ancient.

**Timeframe of Evolution**

The consensus of scholars is that the Mahayana took many centuries to evolve. Strong states: "In any case, whatever their views of its origins, scholars are, for the most part, inclined to talk of "emergences" and "evolution" of the Mahayana rather than of radical departures."43 And: "it is indisputable that it took centuries for some of the Mahayana's fundamental doctrines to emerge fully."44 In regards to the size of the movement, the massive amount of Mahayana sutras has led earlier scholars to believe that it was a popular movement. But Williams has cautioned against assuming the size of a movement based on the volume of sutras that were produced.45 Many scholars, including Williams, think that the Mahayana was an unpopular and influential minority until the 5th century. This is entirely based on the archaeological work of Schopen, who has concluded that it is "a demonstrable fact that anything even approaching popular support for the Mahayana cannot be documented until the 4th/5th century AD."46 In summation of Schopen's work, Williams writes:

> With the exception of one inscription from perhaps 104 CE (Indian dating is an extremely precarious business), the earliest inscriptions containing recognizably Mahayana formulations date from as late as the fifth or sixth centuries CE. ... As far as inscripational and indeed artistic evidence is concerned, Mahayana appears to have been an uninfluential minority interest until well into the Common Era, originating firmly within the framework of other monastic traditions thought of as non-Mahayana. 47

But there is a significant problem with Schopen's claims from archeological records. Williams cites David Ruegg as pointing out that the "absence of evidence for Mahayana in, e.g., art and inscriptions
does not in itself indicate that Mahayana was not present, or how many followers of Mahayana there were,” and then quotes him as follows:

[Early Mahayana would appear neither to have been generally established as an organized institutional entity nor to have been constituted a socio-religious order separate and apart from the Nikayas [sects] of the sravakayana [i.e. non-Mahayana Buddhism], which are better attested epigraphically at this early time. Accordingly, the absence from many a donative inscription of mention of either the Mahayana or the Mahayanist is perhaps just what might be expected in the circumstances. . . . [A]n argument from silence can have force only if there exists a cogent reason for expecting a given document to refer to something had it in fact been in existence at the time of the writing of the document. 48

This moots the trend in recent scholarship that sees the Mahayana as an extremely small minority movement. It has been based on an argument from silence.

In fact, when the methodology of Schopen is taken out of the equation, there is every reason to believe that the size of the movement was moderate to large by the beginning of the Common Era because: (1) it produced a large amount of sutras, (2) the form of Buddhism that entered East Asia was exclusively Mahayana, (3) archaeological records indicate that the mainstream laity believed in the proliferation of bodhisattvas despite the fact that there are no inscriptions that use the word “Mahayana,” (4) and the Mahasamghikas and their off-shot sects/schools, which constituted over half of the sangha, at least had a definite Mahayana “orientation.” However, most people would not have considered it to be a distinct movement because the changes, which occurred over several hundred years, would have most likely been imperceptible within a single lifespan. The references in some sutras to it being a minority could have come from the earliest days of the movement.

There is another point on which modern scholarship needs to be called out on. Almost all scholars place the origins of the Mahayana in the 1st or 2nd centuries BCE. But there is actually no reason to place the date for its origin there. They should say that it existed "at least from the 1st or
2nd centuries BCE," as it could have been much earlier than this. In fact, as Conze and Williams have mentioned, there is no reason to doubt that there could have even been a parallel tradition to the mainstream Nikayan tradition, which went back, in one form or another, to the time of the Buddha.

**Need for a Two-Tiered Model**

The fact that there are polar opposite theories on the Mahayana, which propose that it either originated with the popular lay cultus or with very unpopular forest dwelling monasticism, begs the question of whether scholars might have been talking about different things under the name of "Mahayana." It must be remembered that Buddhism consists of dual components, the **sangha** and the laity, which are very different from each other in their religious outlook. Granted, the gap between these components lessened in the Mahayana tradition, but there was still a "monastic Mahayana" that the laity did not participate in and a "lay Mahayana" that was not necessarily the central concern of monks. Therefore, in order to present a balanced thesis on origins, scholars must adopt a two-tiered model of the Mahayana in which both the **sangha** and the laity have their own causes and conditions for their development.

The two-tiered model was addressed by the earliest Western scholars of Mahayana Buddhism. Dutt contrasts the differences between "popular Buddhism" and "monkish Buddhism." And Etienne Lamotte says that "one must admit the existence of two distinct and often opposed Buddhisms: that of the religious and that of the layfolk." Reginald Ray, in his *Buddhist Saints in India*, has an excellent study of more recent scholarship on the interplay between **sangha** and laity during this period of Buddhist history. But what has not been adequately considered is that the polar opposite features in the Mahayana, such as the promotion of forest dwelling monasticism as essential for **bodhisattvas** and, on the other hand, the concept that lay **bodhisattvas** can be equal to monks, can be explained by the fact that there are **intrinsically** two opposite ends of the movement: **sangha** and laity.
The distinctive elements of the two tiers of the Mahayana are somewhat allusive because, for the first time in the history of Buddhism, there was a lot of convergence between *sangha* and laity. Elements that were shared in common between the *sangha* and laity components of the movement included: the deification of Buddha, introduction of multiple *bodhisattvas* and Buddhas, the *bodhisattva* ideal, and simplification of dharma presentation. Some elements that were the especial concern of the laity included devotionalism and the notion that lay members can be great *bodhisattvas* that are superior to the monks. This can be referred to as the first-tier. The second-tier, the monastic end of the movement, focused on critique of the mainstream institution, return to forest dwelling monasticism (at least in its earliest phase), elite spirituality/mysticism, philosophy of ontological emptiness as the key to awakening, and contemplation of the sutras. These monastic elements would have been of little interest to lay people who were inspired by the *bodhisattva* ideal.

The adoption of the two-tiered model of the Mahayana might resolve this comment from the Buddhism Encyclopedia:

While it is true that scholars not so long ago made a series of confident claims about the Mahayana, it is equally clear that now almost every one of those claims is seriously contested, and probably no one now could, in good faith, confidently present a general characterization of it. In part, of course, this is because it has become increasingly clear that Mahayana Buddhism was never one thing, but rather, it seems, a loosely bound bundle of many, and—like Walt Whitman—was large and could contain, in both senses of the term, contradictions, or at least antipodal elements.\(^{51}\)

In the two-tiered model, there can actually be two opposite theories that explain both its rise in popular lay Buddhism and its rise within the monastic *sangha*. For example, the stupa worship and sociological theories can be used to explain its emergence in popular religion and, on the other hand, the forest dwelling monasticism theory pinpoints the monks from which it initially arose.
within the *sangha*. At the same time, there are most likely common origins for the central elements of the movement, such as the *bodhisattva* ideal, which are held in common between the two tiers. Multiple contributing factors can be expected because the movement also has several other elements. This necessitates a detailed description of their development, one element at a time.

**PART III: Thematic Study on the Features of Mahayana**

**The Deification of Buddha**

The Mahayana concept of the *bodhisattva* ideal presupposes the quasi-divine status of a Supreme Buddha (*samyak-sambuddha*). But in the traditional sutras, the Buddha is presented as an *arhat* that differs from his disciples only in that he reached full awakening on his own without a teacher when the dharma had disappeared from the world, has perfected his qualities and faculties to the highest extent, and that in his great compassion he turns the wheel of dharma in the world as the first awakened teacher of the era. This understanding of Buddha has been preserved in Theravada Buddhism. In contrast, the early Mahayana tradition believed that the Buddha only appeared to be human, was an emanation from a transformational celestial body, had super-human attributes such as omniscience, and continues to interact with his "children" in the world.

The first evidence for the development of the transcendent Buddha is found in the Mahasamghikas. In the *Lokanuvartana Sutra* and the *Mahavastu*, which are both Mahasamghika works, the Buddha is depicted as being free from the need of earthly things such as sleep, food, and bathing, and he is said to be omniscient, and his death is considered to have only been an appearance. These works have been dated to as early as the 2nd century BCE, but it is impossible to know the date of their composition with certainty and they could be much later. Also, according to Guang Xing in *The Concept of the Buddha: Its Evolution from Early Buddhism to the Trikaya Theory*, the Mahasamghikas believed that the Buddha was an embodiment of a transcendent Buddha, has
transformational bodies, and is even omnipotent. This is the full-fledge Mahayana conception of the Buddha.

Xing believes that the Mahasamghika’s understanding of the Buddha came from an idealistic interpretation of some verses in the traditional sutras. For example, a verse that states that the Buddha is "without taint in this world" was interpreted to mean that he was not subject to the earthly "defilements" of mundane existence such as hunger, etc. It might be beneficial to make a comparison with the Christian interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels in order to demonstrate Xing’s thesis. The Synoptic Gospels do not teach the deity of Jesus but later interpreters stretched the meaning of some verses to the furthest limits in order to make him claim to be God. This situation, according to Xing, appears to have been at work in regards to the interpretation of verses in the traditional sutras about Buddha.

In this view, the deification of the Buddha derived, not from extraneous influences, but from the orthodox scriptures themselves as interpreted by the sangha. This should be contrasted with theories that looked for outside influences. Lamotte, for example, argued that the deification of the Buddha was a concession to the laity. But even so, that does not change the fact that the deification of the Buddha became fully endorsed within the sangha. Another view about the deification of the Buddha, as will be recalled, is that stupa worship made the Buddha become more and more exalted in the popular imagination. There might be some truth to this, but it could not have directly caused the docetic theories that denied the real humanity of the Buddha.

It cannot be known whether there was a pre-existing tradition that the Mahasamghikas were drawing from for their understanding of the Buddha. But, because their conception of Buddha was not accepted in most of the Sthavira off-shot sects/schools, it can be assumed that the Mahasamghika understanding of Buddha was not a universal feature of pre-sectarian Buddhism. The trend towards the deification of the Buddha can simply be seen as an instance of the common phenomenon in which, over a long course of development, the adherents of a religion end up
turning the founder of their religion into a deity. With the Christian religion as a perfect example of this religious phenomenon, there is no reason to assume that there must have been an extraneous cause beyond the orthodox scriptures and the indigenous religious ethos.

The Bodhisattva Ideal

The concept of the bodhisatta (Pali: bodhisatta), an "enlightenment-being" that is headed toward becoming a samyak-sambuddha, was already established in the traditional sutras. In the Mahapadana Sutta, which is near the beginning of the first Nikaya of the Pali Canon, the Buddha enumerates the norms for bodhisattvas (14.1.17):

"It is the rule, monks, that when a Bodhisatta descends from the Tusita heaven into his mother's womb (...) That is the rule. It is the rule that when a Bodhisatta has entered his mother's womb (...) That is the rule. It is the rule that when a Bodhisatta has entered his mother's womb (...) That is the rule... [etc.]"

The word "bodhisatta" appears over 25 times in this sutra. In this sutra it refers to a being that has reached a high degree of awakening and is about to be reborn to become "an Arhant, a fully-awakened Buddha, one who draws back the veil from the world." This is the concept of the samyak-sambuddha, one that is awakened to the highest degree and sets in motion the wheel of dharma. The previous Buddha Vippasi and Gautama are the only characters that are specifically referred to as bodhisattvas in the Pali Canon. But it should not be assumed from this that the word bodhisatta had already become a technical term that can only be used for a being that is about to become a samyak-sambuddha within the next rebirth. The Pali Canon elsewhere uses bodhi ("awakened") in reference to the Buddha's partially awakened disciples, so they might as well be called bodhisattvas ("awakened-beings"). The precedence for the use of the term bodhisatta for lay people is even established because Gautama himself was a lay bodhisatta for 29 years until he became a monk.
Furthermore, the notion that there is an option to choose to become a *samyak-sambuddha* was already present in earliest Buddhism. Skilling states:

Available scriptures of the eighteen schools allow all three options: it is one's own decision whether [to] become an Arhat, a Pratyekabuddha, or Buddha, and to practice accordingly.

That is, the eighteen or four schools embrace the three yanas.\(^{53}\)

The concept of the *bodhisattva-yana* is even present in Theravada Buddhism. One of the greatest Theravada monk-scholars, Ven. Bikkhu Bodhi, stated:

During the age of Sectarian Buddhism, the Early Buddhist schools came to admit three "vehicles" to enlightenment: the vehicle of the disciple arahant, the sravaka-yana, to be taken by the greatest number of disciples; the vehicle of the "solitary enlightened one" who attains realization without a teacher but does not teach, the pratyekabuddha-yana, which is still more difficult; and the vehicle of the aspirant to Buddhahood, the bodhisattva-yana. Once it became widespread in mainstream Indian Buddhism, the idea of the three vehicles was not only taken up by the Mahayana but was eventually also absorbed into conservative Theravada Buddhism.\(^{54}\)

Actually, there is evidence that the intention to become a Supreme Buddha was accepted, albeit as non-normative goal, by the entire Buddhist tradition from the earliest times.

However, there is no evidence in the Pali Canon that the Buddha promoted the so-called *bodhisattva* “ideal” of Supreme Buddhahood for everyone to follow. Bikkhu Bodhi points out that in the traditional sutras,

"he says nothing to suggest that he had been consciously following a deliberate course of conduct aimed at the attainment of Buddhahood. Moreover, soon after his enlightenment, when the Buddha considered whether or not to teach the Dhamma, he says that he first inclined to "dwell at ease" (appossukkataya cittam namati MN 26/ I 168; Vin I 5), that is, not
to teach, which suggests that even after his enlightenment he might not have fulfilled the function of a samma-sambuddha, but could have become a paccekabuddha."55

It seems then that the notion of becoming a Supreme Buddha that sets in motion the wheel of dharma in this world was an afterthought to Gautama’s own awakening.

The bodhisattva-yana movement tweaked the bodhisattva concept with: (1) the inherited assumption from popular Buddhism that samyak-sambuddhas are deity-like figures with omniscience, etc., and that it takes innumerable aeons to get to that status even under the Buddha’s doctrine and monastic discipline (2) inclusive usage of this term for everyone who intended to reach full awakening (3) and prescriptive promotion of the ideal that everyone should become a samyak-sambuddha.

Scholars point to the Jakta Tales of the Buddha as the cause for the popularization of the bodhisattva ideal. The Jakta Tales, which have been around since at least the 4th century BCE, depict previous lives of the Buddha as a bodhisattva in the form of monks, lay persons, and animals. He performs heroic deeds that increase his merit to the extent that he is able to be reborn as a samyak-sambuddha. These tales were popular among everyone from children to elite monastics. Almost all scholars think that the Jakta Tales produced the desire to imitate the Buddha on his bodhisattva path. Bikkhu Bodhi outlines the initial development of the bodhisattva ideal in this manner:

We can imagine a period when the bodhisattva-yana had been consciously adopted by a growing number of Buddhists, probably first within small circles of monks, who sought to guide themselves by the sutras of the Nikayas or Agamas and the Jakta stories dealing with the Buddha’s past lives. They were still members of early Buddhist communities and probably had not yet even become conscious of themselves as branching off to form a new tradition.56
The next stage in its development occurred when these monks started to believe that the
bodhisattva ideal is more or less essential to following the Buddha. Skilling summarizes this stage as
follows:

"Eventually some of them exalted this yana to the point of asserting that everyone else
should do the same. For them the Bodhisattva-yana became the Great Vehicle, the
Mahayana."57

Thus the exclusive promotion of the bodhisattva-yana was the point when the movement became
“the Mahayana.”

New Mythology

One of the most distinguishing marks of the Mahayana is its mythology of new bodhisattvas
and Buddhas. This most likely preceded its rise. The heavenly bodhisattva Maitreya was already
mentioned in a traditional sutra. New mythology about him, as with the Jakta Tales of the previous
lives of the Buddha, simply came from popular piety. Myths about Maitreya would have set the
precedence for the introduction of other bodhisattvas. Also, legends about previous Buddhas in the
traditional sutas set the precedence in the popular imagination for the existence of multiple
Buddhas that, in accordance with the understanding of the laity, continue to provide assistance for
better rebirths. It is possible that this mythology developed at the same time as the Jakta Tales.

Beginning at least with the Mahasamghikas, and continuing in Mahayana movement, the
cult of bodhisattvas and multiple Buddhas came to be fully endorsed by the monastic sangha. This
may be regarded as a general trend in Indian religion at that time. Between 200 BCE to 200 CE
devotionalism (bhakti) was introduced into the subcontinent. In this regard, Reet states:

both Buddhism and Hinduism began to incorporate forms of devotionalism—apparently in
a bid to gain the allegiance of the masses—at about the same time, shortly after or perhaps
during the reign of Asoka.58
Reet believes that popular Buddhism, with the exception of conservative monks, incorporated objects of devotion to take the place of Hindu deities when Buddhism became the state religion.

Shortly after the time of Asoka, sculptures of laymen, replete with long hair, mustaches, and jewelry appear in religious monuments alongside the Buddha. There are no inscriptions of exactly who these sculptures were meant to portray, but they definitely represent lay bodhisattvas. Therefore, the concept, mythology, and perhaps cultus of the bodhisattvas were part of mainstream Buddhism before the earliest traces of the Mahayana appear on the historical record.

There also seem to be unidentifiable Buddhas alongside the Gautama Buddha in surviving archaeological records, although the bodhisattvas appear more frequently. The first definite record of new Buddhas is found in one of the earliest Mahayana sutras. It was in the collection of sutras translated into Chinese in the late second century CE. The Pratyutpanna Sutra instructs devotees to always call the Buddha Amitabha to mind in order to be reborn in his pure realm. However, it is uncertain how widespread this kind of devotion was during the formative period of the Mahayana.

**Earliest Sutras**

The Mahayana sutras were put into writing in the same century as the traditional Nikaya sutras. Like the Nikayas, the Mahayana sutras claim to be the word of Buddha (buddhavaccana) and always open with the traditional formula, "Thus have I heard." Nevertheless, Western scholars do not accept them as the actual words of Buddha. Skilton remarks that Western scholarship "tends to assume that they [the Mahayana sutras] are not the literal word of the historical Sakyamuni Buddha." And Williams states, in regards to the claim that Mahayana sutras are the actual words of the Buddha, that "historical awareness has made it impossible for the modern scholar to accept this traditional account." There is also a camp of scholars that hold to an agnostic position on whether the Nikayas depict the original teachings of the Buddha. But almost all scholars believe that the content of the Nikayas is from an earlier tradition than the content of the Mahayana sutras.
The Nikaya sutras are believed to come from an earlier tradition because they were accepted by all sects/schools. Thus the Nikaya sutras, at least in oral form, must have originated in pre-sectarian Buddhism. Also, the Mahayanists completely accepted the Nikayas even though these sutras seemed to be at odds with their vision. They in fact went to great lengths to develop a theory of “transformation of the dharma” to reconcile their ideas with the doctrine of the established Nikayas. Then there is the fact that, unlike the Mahayana sutras, the Nikayas are internally consistent in doctrine. The Nikaya sutras are also replete with embedded mnemonic devices for memorization and oral transmission, which means that the content is very ancient.

On the other hand, there is considerable textual evidence that the Mahayana sutras are later. First of all, the sutras themselves claim to have appeared later. This closes the case. But the most obvious reason, which is manifest on each page, is their excessive embellishments. There is also a lot of radically different content from the Nikayas. The Mahayana sutras accept the deification of the Buddha, new bodhisattvas, and the unification of nirvana with samsara. There is also little stylistic semblance to the Nikayas. Furthermore, unlike the Nikayas, the Mahayana sutras critique traditional and mainstream understanding of the dharma. This presupposes an antecedent tradition. All of these factors contribute to dating the content of the Mahayana sutras later than the content in the Nikayas, even though they were put into writing at the same time.

However, scholars are divided on whether the Mahayana sutras have evidence of oral transmission before being put into writing. There are at least some scholars that are willing to admit that the sutras could represent a parallel tradition that goes back to the Buddha, not in word but at least in spirit. Williams even states:

it is not always absurd to suggest that a Mahayana sutra or teaching may contain elements of a tradition which goes back to the Buddha himself, which was played down or just possibly excluded from the canonical formulations of the early schools.\(^{61}\)
In fact, it is not possible to know when the content of the Mahayana sutras was developed. It might as well predate the 2nd century BCE. He continues with the statement that it is also "not absurd" to see Mahayana sutras as,

a protest against what were thought of as the innovations of certain Abhidharma developments and scholars, and perhaps an attempt to return to a perceived earlier understanding of the Dharma and the world.\textsuperscript{62}

In this sense the Mahayana can even be regarded as an attempt to return to the original form of Buddhism.

Scholars have determined that a certain class of these sutras, known as the “Perfection of Wisdom” (prajnaparamita), constitutes the earliest Mahayana scriptures. Since the work of Edward Conze, who translated these sutras into English for the first time, the Astasahasrika Prajñāparamita Sutra (“Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines”) is traditionally believed to be the earliest within this class. It is related to the Ratnagunasamcayagatha, its summarized verse form. However, some Western scholars, such as Schopen, think that the Vajracchedika Prajñāparamita Sutra ("Diamond Sutra") is older based on its words usage and less-developed content.

There are in fact many other sutras that can be dated to the same era as the Astasahasrika. In the collection of the Chinese sutras translated by the monk Lokaksema between 178-189 CE, which are the earliest known sutras, there is even a Pure Land sutra that instructs devotees to continuously call to mind the Buddha Amitabha to be reborn in his realm. A lot of writers on this topic seem to blindly follow Conze’s determination that one of the sutras is earlier than the rest in Lokaksema’s collection. But the so-called “less-developed” and “more-developed” sutras could have been composed at the same time but in completely different locations.

The attempt to find the earliest sutra is ultimately based on conjecture. As Williams states: "It is not possible at the present state of our knowledge to make very many certain statements
concerning either the origins or the development of the Prajnaparamita literature.” Bikkhu Bodhi describes the reason for this:

Exactly how these sutras were first composed and made their appearance is a matter about which contemporary scholarship is still largely in the dark; for all we have at our disposal are Mahayana sutras that are fairly well developed and represent Mahayana Buddhism at what we might call "stage two" or even "stage three" of its development. Unfortunately, we cannot use them to peer back into the very earliest stage of the Mahayana, when these sutras were first starting to take shape, or even past that period, when Mahayanist ideas were still in the stage of gestation, seeking articulation without yet having come to expression in any literary documents.

The sutras are based on an earlier tradition that we have no access to. It is therefore difficult to use them to determine the origins of the Mahayana.

While scholars believe that certain Mahayana sutras originated with the Mahasamghikas, there is a consensus that it was not limited to them. Gethin states: "this was not a sectarian literature disseminated by one of the existing schools." In regards to the acception of the sutras, he states:

The question of the status and authority of the new literature was thus initially not decided along sectarian lines; monks from various of the existing schools would have been more or less favorably inclined towards the new sutras.

While this is true, it seems that there is also some validity to the earlier view that Mahayana sutras were most popular among certain sects/schools, especially the Mahasamghikas and Sarvastivadans.

**Doctrinal Emphasis**

In general, the Mahayana favored a simplification of dharma presentation. Many scholars have seen this as a reaction to the Abhidharma literature, the “further explication of doctrine,”
which was in the process of being added to the scriptural canons of the various schools. Schopen, however, has cautioned against taking this view too far and concluding, as some have done, that the Mahayana was entirely against the scholastic approach. In fact, the Mahayana developed a scholasticism of its own. The Mahayana sutras intended to simplify dharma presentation for the sole reason of getting to the essence of the dharma. To understand this essence in its depths is regarded as "the perfection of wisdom" and the exclusive focus on it is the "higher vehicle" that is believed to surpass the traditional method of teaching.

The "higher teaching" of the Mahayana pertains, not so much to new doctrine or practice, but to a difference of emphasis in its presentation. John Strong characterizes Mahayana as: "a movement that had a tendency to take certain elements of early Buddhism and extend them to the limits of their logic, expanding, embellishing, and sometimes questioning them in the process." In other words, Mahayana doctrine grew from seeds that are in the traditional sutras. As Reet summarizes it, the Mahayana "developed naturally and comprehensibly from the teachings preserved in the scriptures of Nikaya Buddhism." In other words, Mahayana doctrine grew from seeds that are in the traditional sutras. As Reet summarizes it, the Mahayana "developed naturally and comprehensibly from the teachings preserved in the scriptures of Nikaya Buddhism."68

The new emphasis in presentation required a development of the concept of "skillful means" (upaya). This concept as found in the traditional sutras pertains to the Buddha’s ability to tailor his teachings to the subjective dispositions of individual hearers. The idea is that one should use "cleverness" in the appropriation of dharma. Mahayanists, however, believed that they developed the best objective method of teaching, or "skillful means," that is of most benefit for everyone. It is therefore itself a kind of "further explication of doctrine" (abhidharma). But, again, it is not so much an issue of new doctrines, because the principle development consisted in getting to the essence of the dharma and focusing on it above all else.

The development of "skill in means" concept is related to another central theme in Mahayana sutras: the emptiness of doctrine. The emptiness of doctrine means that the Buddha’s teachings are only words that are attempting to convey realities through conceptual constructs. But
these constructs are ultimately empty, i.e. not absolute nor ultimate reality. Therefore, while they may be useful means, the actual reality that the teachings point to must be realized through direct experience. This understanding is in fact taken straight from the traditional sutras. The Buddha taught that his dharma is like a raft that helps one get to the other shore, and that after one gets there it can be discarded, as it is no longer necessary for one that has a complete realization of reality. The Perfection of Wisdom sutras teach that one should understand this from the outset and focus on the emptiness of the mind from all forms so that one can be free to see reality as it is.

In regards to actual doctrine that was emphasized by the Mahayana, at least beginning in the Perfection of Wisdom class of sutras, the ontological emptiness of all phenomena was regarded as the most important key to awakening. The seeds for this doctrine are in the traditional sutras. One of the most essential teachings of the Buddha in the traditional sutras is that there is no absolute phenomenal existence, as everything is in a state of change, has an origin that is dependent upon causes and conditions, and will ultimately come to cessation. He even made a declaration that "the world is empty." But it was not usually referred to as "emptiness." Shortly before the rise of the Mahayana, the concept received a philosophical development in the latest scholastic theories. They proposed that all phenomena can be reduced to certain building blocks from which everything else is made. The Mahayana took this a step further in their assertion that even the minutest elements that comprise compounded entities are empty. Some scholars, such as Williams, see evidence that this philosophy of ontological emptiness was endorsed by sects/schools in mainstream Buddhism, and from this they argue that it has nothing to do with the Mahayana as such. In fact, as Gethin points out, the early Mahayanists themselves did not see their understanding of emptiness as a unique feature of their movement. However, it cannot be denied that the "Perfection of Wisdom" class of sutras emphasized ontological emptiness above all other doctrines and that the degree of their emphasis on this is not present in non-Mahayana literature.
Conclusion

The final assessment of the six theories that have been presented is that all of them more or less have some truth and are probably contributing factors to the rise of the movement but, when considered in isolation, each individual theory is an insufficient explanation for its origin. Furthermore, in order to balance the polarities in scholarship, this study has determined that there should be more consideration of the two-tiered model of the Mahayana, which allows for dual causations in regards to the lay and elite monastic ends of the movement. In fact, historians of religion should never expect there to be a single cause for a complex phenomenon. The origins of the Mahayana are much more complex than any single explanation can account for because it is a living organism that evolved over several hundred years with various causes and conditions.

The conclusion of this study is that the Mahayana developed naturally from the following causes and conditions: (1) seeds already present in the Nikayas, (2) popular mythology as encapsulated in the Jakta Tales, etc., (3) zeal to imitate the Buddha, (4) elite spiritual idealism that ended up setting the standard for everyone else, (5) the need to revise the shramana soteriological paradigm, (6) the theories of the Mahasamghikas spread outward to other sects/schools, (7) the desire to simplify doctrine down to its most profound essence, (8) influence from the wider Indian religious ethos, (9) inclusion of the general population into the religion after the state sponsorship of Buddhism. Some of these elements are unrelated to each other but that can be expected as the movement developed over a long period of time and was not originally homogeneous.

Scholarship on the origins of the Mahayana has reached the initial maturation phase. It has gone through the course of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. The early theses of popular lay and sectarian origination were proposed in the 1950’s and 60’s by Conze. It was later met with the antithesis stream of scholarship, headed by Schopen, which proposed the polar opposite view that it originated with very unpopular forest-dwelling monasticism and non-sectarian sutra worship. Both of these extreme polarities came to a synthesis in Paul William’s Mahayana Buddhism: The
Doctrinal Foundations in 1989. He was heavily influenced by the antithesis stream of scholarship but nevertheless made considerable concessions to the role of the laity. However, his synthesis is incomplete. There is serious need for a comprehensive book that deals exclusively with the origins of the Mahayana and presents a complete analysis and synthesis of all previous scholarship.
End Notes


2. The *shramanas* were a parallel religious movement to orthodox Brahmanism in India. Buddhism and Jainism are the surviving *shramana* sects. Their soteriological paradigm became accepted into Classical Hinduism.


30. *Ugrapariprccha Sutra* [in the process of locating the information for an exact citation]


33. *Astrasahasrika Sutra* [in the process of locating the information for an exact citation]


49. Dutt, Sukumar. *The Buddha and Five After-Centuries.* (Calcutta, India: Sahitya Samsad, 1957), 144
50. Etienne Lamotte says that "one must admit the existence of two distinct and often opposed Buddhisms: that of the religious and that of the layfolk" (59, BSI p. 20).


57. Skilling, Peter. [in the process of locating the source]


59. Skilling, Peter. [in the process of locating the source]


69. Samyutta Nikaya 35:85
