

Buddhism 4.

Buddhism is an old religion with around 2500 years of history, originating from Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. Though starting from the same origin, there are different versions of Buddhism being Theravada Buddhism focused on 'individual' experience, and Mahayana Buddhism focused on 'group' experience. The differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism in terms of their sacred texts and religious practices allow for a better understanding of the concept of Buddhism and the final goal of it.

Theravada (The way of the elders) Buddhism, originally titled Hinayana (Little raft) Buddhism is focused on the experience of an individual in accomplishing their goal and understanding Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism (wisdom) revolves around developing prajna, and arhatship to escape Samsara and be liberated. To them, the Buddha is an example of a successful 'arhat' who has ascended the physical realm and they rely on the Pali Canon, containing his teachings, to follow in his footsteps and attain liberation. The Pali Canon teaches the 4 Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and most importantly, the Tripitaka consisting of Vinaya, Sutta, and Abhidhamma Pitaka.

Following the strict monastic rule that only monks and nuns are able to handle these sacred texts and cultivate arhatship, monasteries and nunneries exercise a strict observance of the rules in the Pali Canon. For example, they have a practice of reciting the rules of the Vinaya Pitaka everyday, as well as reciting them more if any rules are broken. Furthermore, Theravada Buddhists use Sutta Pitaka as the basis of the life they have to lead, following the stages mentioned. The first being to let go of ego, reliance on rites and rituals, and indecisiveness. The second stage being to let go of lust and physical desires. The third stage describes entering the realm of no rebirths and the fourth step is realizing the true self and reaching arhatship. As observed, the texts of Theravada Buddhism are very focused on an individual's understanding of the teachings of Buddha. The emphasis placed upon looking at one's internal self and gaining prajna to escape samsara and liberate oneself celebrates independent achievement. To add on to that idea of individual success, the practices within Theravada Buddhism are also focused

on the internal self. Monks and nuns often practice either Samatha meditation or Vipassana meditation, foregoing distracting and "useless" religious rituals to focus instead on gaining knowledge. While Samatha meditation allows for one to clear the mind and focus on their inner realms more easily, Vipassana meditation includes a harder step of disregarding one's previous understanding of the world to allow for a new way of knowing Buddhism and the world around them. These studies and practices are facilitated by the Sangha who promote the respect for the three gems; Buddha, the dharma, and the Sangha, thus making the practice of Theravada exclusive to monks and nuns who are willing to forsake their individual lives to live the strict life of a Theravada Buddhist. Therefore, the emphasis of cultivating prajna of self and internal practices to help with individual enlightenment reveal how individual experiences in Buddhism are that of Theravada Buddhists who seek to liberate themselves through their individual efforts.

In contrast, Mahayana (big raft) Buddhism is focused on a

group experience when it comes to understanding Buddhism and accomplishing their goal. Compared to cultivating prajna and arhatship, Mahayana Buddhists believe in Samyakcambuddhism where one cultivates both prajna and karuna (compassion) and helps in the enlightenment of others. Mahayana Buddhists disagree with the exclusive nature of Theravada Buddhism, believing that everyone has the potential to reach liberation from Samsara, thus making their texts and practices more suitable for laypeople and not just for monks and nuns, while still using the Pali Canon, Mahayana Buddhism also relies on texts like the Lotus Sutra and Heart Sutra from the prajnaparamita. These sutras originate from the teachings of Bodhisattvas who are people like the Buddha who have attained enlightenment but returned to the physical realm to assist others to accomplish the same success, demonstrating what Mahayana Buddhism really is about. Some Bodhisattvas include Maitreya, Tara, and Avalokitesvara who each have their own versions of Mahayana Buddhism. The Heart Sutra, Avalokitesvara states that while cultivating knowledge

is important, being selfless and developing compassion is the way to become a bodhisattva. With similar teachings in other Mahayana sacred texts, Mahayana Buddhists developed practices that focus on the group experience and helping others. An example is the creation of a sand mandala. Mahayana Buddhists work together to create the Trikaya with coloured sand. While they express the same teachings as Theravada Buddhism in that all material ideas are temporary by destroying the sand mandala, they differ in that the end product benefits a group of people instead of the self and individual. The hours and focus placed in creating a sand mandala helps cultivate karuna. However, instead of reaping those benefits for oneself, Mahayana Buddhists will give those blessings to others to help in their pursuit of enlightenment.

Another example that could highlight the difference between individual and group experiences in Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism respectively is when they prostrate before idols of the Buddha or Bodhisattvas. While Theravada Buddhists do not pray to worship but to form a deeper connection with

oneself, Mahayana Buddhists actually pray for the blessings of bodhisattvas to guide their path to liberation. With such emphasis on helping others to reach the goal of enlightenment in Samyak sambuddhism, the practices and texts of Mahayana Buddhism illuminate how group experiences in Buddhism are that of Mahayana Buddhists who seek to help others be liberated.

In conclusion, individual and group experiences are both believed to lead to the final goal of liberation from samsara. However their differences lie in their methods of approach to their respective understandings of the meaning of Buddhism. While Theravada Buddhism believes that individual practice of cultivating prajna will lead to their arhatship, Mahayana Buddhists believe that the merit of Buddhism lies in karuna and achieving liberation together as a group, thus using methods of group cultivation instead.