

## **Mahayana as Meta-Buddhism**

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### **(Synopsis)**

In Japan, as a Buddhist country, highly detailed textual studies of Buddhist texts — mainly sutras and commentaries — have been written since the introduction of Sanskrit and Pali languages into Japanese among Buddhist academic circles from the Meiji period. Radical and in-depth inquiries on Buddha-dharma have rarely prevailed beyond the understanding of Buddha-dharma among distinguished traditional Buddhist scholar-monks, who lived before the Meiji period, and serious arguments over how the Mahayana sutras represent Gotama the Buddha's Awakening and their authenticity seem to have been forgotten.

Nowadays, almost all traditional Japanese Buddhist priests in line with their respective sect founders, take it for granted that the Mahayana sutras bear the true intent of Gotama the Buddha's message though they were composed by anonymous Buddhist leaders endowed with in-depth insight and scholarship some centuries after Gotama Buddha's passing., but generally speaking, they are not serious about searching for the common value which is to be found both in the Pali canon and the Mahayana sutras.

The common understanding should be shared between the Thera-vada Buddhists and Mahayana Buddhists.

Meanwhile, unlike the Judeo-Christian faith which holds rigid uncompromising doctrines related to God as Creator who created man and that man cannot become God, the message by Gotama the Buddha is that man should lead the way towards becoming a Buddha and awakening to Buddhahood, and attaining Nirvana (all being synonymous). The ways for this are rendered in a variety of literary expressions and practices. Therefore, Buddhists should be aware of the possibility of establishing a fresh hermeneutics, taking the Judeo-Christian faith into consideration.

Today, while Buddhism has spread beyond the boundaries of its traditional base the Buddha's message appears to have lost its integrity through the many interpretations of its meaning. Some prolific and renowned Buddhist scholars, independent of and those belonging to the traditional Buddhist denominations tend to claim that Gotama the Buddha was a rational thinking man, who lived a life of decency as a human being. They intentionally or unknowingly pay scant attention to the eternity of individuals as sentient beings, dealing with man simply as a biological being, thus the samsaric stream of individual lives in light of eternal perspective. This attitude toward the Buddha-dharma has been impacted by modern scientific ways of thinking as well as secularism and further, the tendency to describe the value of the Buddha-dharma as being one of religions, the definition of religion being heavily affected by Christian theology.

In this paper I propose that the core of the Buddha's message and his basic tenets can be interpreted to redefine the Buddha's message, taking an integrated perspective in understanding the Buddha-dharma.

The issues discussed here are as follows:

1. What is the Buddha's message? What is the basic Buddhist worldview and its double meaning of the world and tenets that are intrinsic to the Buddha's message?
2. The relationship between the Agamas and the Mahayana sutras.
3. What is Meta-Buddhism?
4. The Universal Culture of Meta-Buddhism.

**Keywords:** Meta-Buddhism / Mahayana sutras / Agamas / comparison of Buddha-dharma to Judeo-Christian faith / pratitya-samutpada / Engi

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## Preface

When referring to what the Buddha-dharma (Buddhism) is about, scholars usually try to explain it in the conventional history of a series of events related to Gotama the Buddha, or in terms of the various doctrines expounded and developed by Buddhist masters of scholarship and a caliber, or in purely linguistic or in archeological terms.

This paper, however, tries to ascertain and redefine the basic tenets expressed by Gotama the Buddha in an attempt to grasp the Buddha's message in a broader, integrated perspective than the traditional or conventional treatment of the subject.

To understand the Buddha's essential central tenets, quotations from the *Sutta-nipata*<sup>1</sup>, academically accepted as constituting the oldest part of the Buddha's discourses are used. These phrases are found in various parts of the Agamas, and Mahayana sutras in a richer, expanded form.

### 1. What is the Buddha's Message?

There is a variety of traditionally recognized interpretations of the central tenets that Gotama the Buddha (the historical Buddha, hereinafter referred to as "the Buddha") referred to during his lifetime. There is no

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\* In this paper no diacritics are used; whenever a word in Sanskrit or in Pali is left untranslated, it is printed in italics with the anglicized spelling established by convention.

1. All the quotations from the *Sutta-nipata* and the *Dhammapada* are the translations by V. Fausböll and F..Max Müller respectively from the *Sacred Books of the East*. Vol. X , I do not necessarily agree with all of their interpretations of the terms in question, though.

doubt that the Four Seals of the Law, and the Four Noble Truths are the essential tenets regarding his *Bodhi* (Awakening). In the sense that Gotama became the Buddha by awakening to *Engi* (*pratitya-samutpada*),

logically and inevitably, the Four Seals of the Law and the Four Noble Truths and *Engi* are different interpretative phases of the same subject matter of the Buddha's message. ( I will use this Japanese term: "*Engi*" for the Sanskrit term: *pratitya-samutpada* for convenience to refer to the whole range of meanings contained in *pratitya-samutpada*, from the doctrine implied in the *Sutta-nipata*, and the *Madyamaka-karita* by Nagarjuna so far as it relates to the understanding expounded and perfected in the *Dashabhumika Sutra* ).

Said a different way, the Four Seals of the Law and the Four Noble Truths are two different interpretations of *Engi*. Thus awakening to *Engi* means attaining *Bodhi*. Further, as seen from the phrases from the *Sutta-nipata* (*Sn.*):

*Sn.* 654: By work (Pali. *kamma*) the world exists, by work mankind exists, beings are bound by work as the linch-pin of the rolling cart.

*Sn.* 653: So the wise, who see the cause of things (Pali. *paticcasamuppaddasa*; *Engi*) and understand the result of work, know this work as it really is.

*Engi* as intrinsic to *karma* is the working *karma* principle, thus Buddha and *karma* and *Engi* can be conceptualized as being dependent on and interrelated to each other. While Brahmanism proposes that man should seek the Veda (clear knowledge about the essential nature of sentient beings) in the samsaric world, Buddhism starts from the understanding that man knows no clear knowledge or *a-vidya* (without the *veda*), due to which he has repeated births and deaths, finding himself in the samsaric world. Buddhism opens the Brahmanism backdoor.

What has the Buddha attained from understanding *Engi* as the working principle of *karma*? According to some historical passages referring to Gotama's motivation behind his abandoning his family life and renouncing materialism including that which he was due to inherit, not only did he wish to cross the

samsaric realm to reach *para* (the other shore) free of anxiety of living and dying, but he also was said to have been entreated by Indian deities to take action so as to allow all suffering sentient beings to do so. The motivation behind Gotama's aspiration to seek the solution to human existence is said to be due to his *karuna* (compassion) for all sentient beings.

In many parts of the Agamas and Mahayana sutras, references are made to the *para* (the other end; the world-beyond; the realm of *Bodhi*). What is the *para* about? It is described as the way beyond gods and men in both the Agamas and the Mahayana sutras.

In the Pali canon especially along with the Agamas translated in Chinese, regard the Awakening indicated by the Buddha often as the following shows:

*Sn.82:* ' Birth( *jāti*) had been destroyed, a religious life had been led, what was to be done had been done, there was nothing else (to be done) for this existence,' so he perceived.

Another phase regarding the Awakening (*Bodhi*) tells us that the Buddha's way is the way beyond time and sentient beings in the samsaric world:

*Sn 521:* Whosoever, after having washed away all sins internally and externally in this world, does not enter time (*kappa*) amongst gods and men who are subject to time, him they call a Nahataka (cleansed).

From these passages, it can be seen that men and gods are subject to time (Skt.*kala*), therefore, *Bodhi* is to describe a state that is beyond time.

About four centuries after the Buddha's passing, while monk-scholars were studying in monasteries the *Abhidharma*, a Buddhist version of scholasticism, claiming proof of the existence of *dharma*s, though they accepted the *sunyata* of the ego (the "I") as part of the essential tenet expressed by the Buddha, there occurred a movement to be later called the *Mahayana* ('great way'). Those involved in the movement started composing the "Mahayana sutras." The *Prajna-paramita* sutras as the forerunner of the Mahayana sutras claimed the *sunyata* of both the ego (the *atman* or the being of "I") and the *dharma*s as the authentic truth awakened by the Buddha.

There is a concise phrase referring to *sunyata* in the *Sutta-nipata*, although some scholars claim that the idea conceived in the *Sutta-nipata* is not in the same vein as in the *Prajna-paramita* sutras nor in the later developed *Madyamika* doctrine.

*Sn. 1118:* Look upon the world as a void (*sunya*), O Mogharajan, being always thoughtful; having destroyed the view of oneself (as existing), so one may over come death; the king of death will not see him who thus regards the world.

What is as important as the *sunyata* is the idea of *vijnapti-matrata* (consciousness-only), the doctrine of which culminated in Vasubandhu's works. It is obvious that the *vijnapti-matrata* is intrinsic to the basic doctrine of the Buddha-dharma, as seen in the first passage of the *Dhammapada*.

All that we are is the result of what we have thought; it is founded on our thoughts (Skt. *manas*), it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, pain (*dukha*) follows him, as the wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the carriage.

Summing up the passages regarding Buddha's core message and the essential phrases referring to *Bodhi* and *Engi*, the Buddha's way is presented as a 'double' conceptual structure of the world to cross the samsaric world to enter the *para* (the world -beyond or *Nirvana*); i.e. the samsaric world = the *tri-dhatu* = the six conditions graded by degree of happiness and anxiety on one side and the *para* on the other, both being — in a subtle way — interrelated and inter-fused, and becoming in the *Engi* of *sunyata* and *vijnapti-matrata*.

The Buddha was awakened to the special principle of *Engi* (*pratitya-samutpada*), thus he became

Buddha, and further perceived the principles working in both manners, one in the positive direction of leading man to *Nirvana*, and the other in the negative direction to cause man to be born in the samsaric world unless he is awakened to his own *a-vidya* or *Engi* in which his temporal existence (*bhava*) is involved.

Though the Buddha specifically talked about the special phase of *Engi* for sentient, especially human beings, the principle of *Engi* can be thoroughly applied to the total phenomenon, thus traditional Buddhist hermeneutics covers all scientific ways of thinking (physical and psychological), the diverse faiths practiced around the world and the whole range of history from human, earth, to the birth of the universe.

One thing that modern people should not forget is that Gotama took it for granted that in the samsaric state, there were not only physical living beings but also *devas* (various living beings unseen by the ordinary eye).

In short, the samsaric world is described in various synonymous terms such as the *tri-dhatu* (the realm of desire, physical living beings and spiritual beings), the sensible realm, the realm of the 4 dimensions (3 spatial dimensions and one temporal dimension), the realm of spatial and temporal modes of thinking, the realm of the six senses and the seventh *mano-vijnana* and the eighth *alaya-vijnana*, the dichotomy of mind-body or subject-object relationship, the realm in which the linear passage of conventional time of the past, present and future flows, the world where the “I” or ego (termed variously as *sattva*, *jiva*, *atman*, *pudgala*, etc.) and the *dharma*s (the environment objectified and conceptualized by the “I”), the stream of birth and death, the realm of historicity, and so forth..

Gotama took it for granted that an individual sentient being continued to live an existence (*bhava*) of *vijnana* (consciousness) or *mano-kaya* (the body of mind), within the realm of the *tri-dhatu* even after that sentient being’s physical body died and decomposed, until it reaches *Nirvana*.

The concept of the after-life is not the Buddha’s teaching, but it is the accepted situation in which every sentient being lives, repeating birth and death; the Buddha just took it for granted as a matter of fact for all sentient beings.

## 2. The relationship between the Agamas and the Mahayana sutras

In spite of historical arguments over the authenticity of the Mahayana sutras some Buddhist scholars and officials from traditional Buddhist denominations, seem to have lost interest in talking about it in an integrated perspective. The author of this paper, however, holds that the historical appearance of Mahayana sutras signifies the essential character of the Buddha’s tenets; that is to say, the Buddha-dharma is the teaching of becoming, based upon the Seal of *Anitya* (impermanence).

It may be too obvious even for Buddhist scholars to notice that in the Agamas, the Buddha talked extremely little about what the working of *Nirvana*, *Engi*, or the *para* really is about. In many places in the Agamas he referred to various practical ways and detailed discourses that lead to *Nirvana* or the way of destruction of birth (*jāti*) of the “I” (the individual sentient being), but strange to say, he never expounded the working of *Engi* in the *Bodhi* or *para* realm; even in the chapter on Parayana (‘the world-beyond’ or *Nirvana*) in the *Sutta-nipata*, he referred to the *para* in his many discourses, but he did not expound what the *para* was about. It is in the Mahayana sutras that on the way to living beyond the samsaric world or on the rebirth of the “I” as a Bodhistva after the destruction of the egocentric “I”, does the Buddha’s message well expound how the *Engi* of *Bodhi* works in the conceptual double perspective of the world, or within the frame of reference of the samsaric - the *para* dichotomy.

In other words, the in-depth meaning of the Agamas can be said to be uncovered in the Mahayana sutras; in this regard, the Mahayana sutras reveal the inner meaning of the Buddha’s message. In some Mahayana sutras some *shravakas* (the Buddha’s direct disciples of the Buddha’s discourses) are criticized because they just followed the literal meanings of the Buddha, devoting their time in making philosophical speculation and textual commentaries, or to use a Buddhist metaphor, they looked at the Buddha’s forefinger, not at what his finger was pointed at.

Composers of the Mahayana sutras, who used and invented symbol, ritual, metaphor and narrative, actually heard the voices of Buddhas, and composed them in rich literary expressions.

In the *Sukhavati-vyuha Sutra*, there is a passage referring to the *shravaka* attitude towards understanding *karma*.

63. Ananda said; "Inconceivable is the maturation of deeds (*karma*), Blessed One, inconceivable the accumulaton of deeds."

The Blessed One said; "You have understood that here the maturation of deeds, the accumulation of deeds, is inconceivable; but you have not understood the inconceivable Buddha-power of Buddhas, blessed ones, or the inconceivable abundance of merit possessed by living beings who here have practiced meritorious deeds and have planted the roots of merit." (p.86. Luis O. Gomez.1996. *The Land of Bliss*)

What is suggested in this passage is that more inconceivable is the mystical (*a-cintya*) working of Buddha-power (*Buddha-adhishutana*) than the working and mechanism of *karma*. This is also well expounded in the Mahayana sutras, not in the Agamas.

Our ordinary or conventional way of ego-centric thinking and reasoning always tends to be enclosed or encircled or glued within itself or within the *tri-dhatu* (the enclosed realm of reference). It is the *sunyata* or *vijnapti-matrata* that breaks the vicious circle and vaporizes the core of self-centered ego. The Mahayana sutras expounded the in-depth meaning of *Engi* as *sunyata* and *vijnapti-matrata*, both of which reveals two phrases of the nature of *Engi*. The *sunyata* theory is the inter-fusion of every opposite and contradictory dichotomy or the deconstruction of the core of ego constituting self-centered emotions and rational thinking, the attachment of which will never allow one to perceive the working of *Nirvana* or *para*. The *vijnapti-matrata* means consciousness of oneness of the subject and object as both hold themselves as they are, intrinsically interrelated to *sunyata*; however, both concepts were already noticed and perceived by the Buddha in his limited literary expressions in the *Sutta-nipata*.

### 3. What is Meta-Buddhism?

What is meant by *Engi* is the working principle of everything that is changeable and ever changing, evolving and becoming, and at the same time, any possible relationship between things and within a thing itself; where there is no disconnection at any moment in the relationship proper.

What is meant by Meta-Buddhism here is the perspective, based on *Engi*, aptly suggested and fully revealed by the Mahayana sutras in general. It is the panoramic perspective in which all things of the same category or different categories can be viewed in a relativized manner. In this perspective Gotama Buddha's direct discourses, traceable in the *Sutta-nipata* and the Agamas, hermeneutical achievements from Buddhist studies called *Abhidharma*, and the emergence of Mahayana sutras are all one inevitable development of *Bodhi*. The ultimately and kaleidoscopically comprehensive perspective of *Engi* was expounded in the *Dashabhumika Sutra*.

In the Meta-Buddhist perspective, Brahmanism, the Buddha's discourses, the *Abhidharma* theories and the emergence of Mahayana sutras are all viewed as one stream of development of *Bodhi* within the double conceptual structure of *Engi*. This further means that the working of all universal phenomenon, within which the history of all religions, the history of Buddhism; the history of mankind, the history of the Earth, and the dynamics of the universe are all included. In this sense, Meta-Buddhism is beyond the conventional intent of the Mahayana sutras, but its intent is best suggested and inspired by the Mahayana Sutras, the source of which springs from the *Bodhi*, which Gotama once attained in the conceptual, double-structured frame of reference of the *tri-dhatu* and the *para*.

Within the Meta-Buddhist perspective, the summary of what is mentioned above is shown in a diagram as below:

(diagram 1)

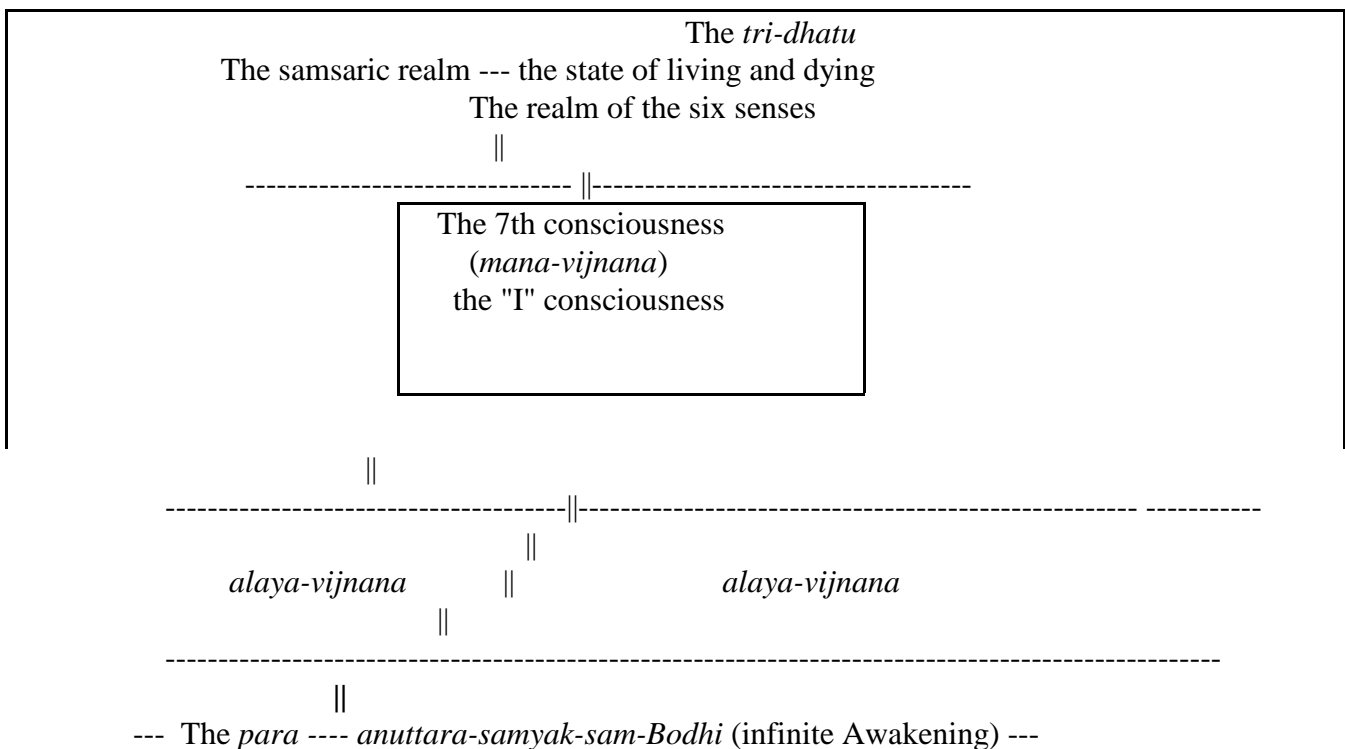
[The Whole of *Engi*]

The <i>tri-dhatu</i> : the Realm of <i>duhkha</i> (anxiety and pain)
<i>samsara</i> ; the six realms of sentient beings graded by degrees of suffering and pleasure
The realm of the "I" ( <i>atman</i> ) and things ( <i>dharmas</i> ) objectified by the "I"
The realm recognized in the 4 dimentional mode of recognition
The situation of impermanence and non-substantiality
Physical sentient beings and invisible sentient beings

The world of living in the manner that living means eating, means killing  
 The realm of ordinary parlance  
 The realm of the whole human history ----- The objectified realm of the universe  
 ----- *sunyata* ----- *vinjnapti-matrata* -----

-----(*sunyata*)----- the *Para*:(realm-beyond of *sukha* (happiness): *Nirvana* ---(*vinjnapti-ma*)-----  
*A-cintya*• The ten dimensional realm • the *Dharma-dhatu* • *Para* • *Prajnaparamita*  
 The realm of source of *Maha-karuna* (great compassion)  
 (as described in the *Dashabhumika-sutra*)

(diagram 2 with the *jijnapti-matrata* doctrine incorporated)



#### 4. The Universal Culture of Meta-Buddhism

The principle, by being awakened to which one becomes Buddha is the subjective principle of *Engi* which leads the one to the way of attaining *Nirvana*, but that didn't mean that he understands all the physical mechanisms of the universe. This, however, suggests that human beings need to search for the unknown related to the world, and for further advances in scientific research into the universe following the objective principle of *Engi*.

From the Meta-Buddhistic point of view, cosmological research into the universe is really the search for the inner realm of our never-ending consciousness. The never- ending universe is really the depth of our consciousness.

Following the Meta-Buddhistic perspective, all sentient beings will continue to live until they attain *Nirvana* or become Buddhas.

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