Mahayana is one of the two main schools of thought in Buddhism. The word Mahayana is Sanskrit for "Great Vehicle". Also this is the literal translation, it can be referred to as the Grand Method. This is because Mahayana Buddhism differs from other schools of thoughts because of "the monastic institution, the behavior of monks an nuns, and the ethics adopted by the laity (the religion's nonordained followers), as well as certain distinct beliefs" (Neumaier 1). This laity is simpler defined as followers other than monks and nuns.

Because elements that are centered upon ethics and moral conduct set Mahayana Buddhism apart, the idea of this "Great Vehicle" refers the religious question of how Mahayana Buddhists get to where they are going. For Mahayana Buddhists, where they are going can be better described as a goal and that is to reach Bodhisattvahood. This means that they aim to live in accordance with the Bodhisattva, who is "a being of enlightenment" (Hattstein 32). The Bodhisattva is the religious example for Mahayana Buddhists to follow because their goal is to reach this same enlightenment. The Bodhisattva although eligible for nirvana, the ultimate Buddhist goal, chose to stay in samsara, which is the world that consists of rebirth to guide other followers in reaching this enlightment. Because of this, the Bodhisattva is characterized by Mahayana Buddhists as having karuna, compassion and prajna, wisdom.

Another way that Mahayana Buddhists are guided in reaching Bodhisattvahood is in sacred texts. For them, "The major statement of its philosophy is contained in the prajnaparamita (perfection of wisdom) texts. The prajnaparamita sutras developed the concept of sunyata, or emptiness" (Irons). These texts teach wisdom on how to be in a state of enlightenment. The four central doctrines that this text contains are listed and defined below.

* "Prajna (wisdom), or insight into the true nature of things, will result in the understanding that all existence lacks inherent being and is for this reason empty" (Neumaier).
* "Compassion as a fundamental approach toward all that exists is a necessary balance to wisdom and leads to bodhicitta (awakened mind, or mind of enlightenment)" (Neumaier)
* "Wisdom and the awakened mind together provide the road map to enlightenment and constitute the path of the bodhisattva" (Neumaier) .
* "The ideal of the bodhisattva should be pursued as the goal of Buddhist practice" (Neumaier).
  + - For this reason, stating the ideals of the Bodhisattva every day at liturgy is important. They are the vow to liberate innumerable sentinent beings, the vow to cut off innumerable vexations, the vow to study approaches of the dharma and the vow to reach Buddahood (Neumaier).

Mahayana Buddhism, because it is so centered on how to live in order to attain enlightenment is based off of the Bodhisattva. Even sacred texts of Mahayana Buddhism refer to characteristics of the Bodhisattva when outlining the ethics that Mahayana Buddhists should have and the moral conduct in which Mahayana Buddhists should behave, These characteristics being a main part of Mahayana Buddhism means that ethics and moral conduct are the most essential characteristic to the religion.

Word Count: 508

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