

24 Mahayana

The introduction to Mahayana is long. To skip directly to points, read the starred (*) material first then go to “Reminders about Mysticism etc.” below. I request that you read the entire introduction.

*Mahayana is the dominant form of Buddhism now. “Mahayana” means “big vehicle” as in “big ox cart”. Mahayanists call Theravada “Hinayana”, “small vehicle”, as in “small goat cart”. The comparison intends to denigrate Theravada and to assert Mahayana is better. Theravada rejects the term “Hinayana” and the idea that Theravada is less. Mahayana might have developed as early as 300 BCE (BC), or two hundred years after the Buddha, but more likely later. “Zen” is a movement within Mahayana, from around 500 CE (AD) in China, the subject of a later chapter. Mahayana is to Theravada somewhat as Romanticism is to the Enlightenment, or Christianity is to the simple original teachings of Jesus. A “sutra” is a Buddhist text, usually holy, like a chapter in the Tanakh, New Testament, or Koran. The term “Dharma” refers to how the world works or to useful teaching about how the world works. Nearly all that I say about Mahayana also applies to Hinduism and to other “systems that eat the world”. Usually I do not point that out but I do when the item is especially relevant.

*Mahayana combines:

- (1) The traditional teachings of the Buddha about suffering and how to avoid it. For me, the teachings include: life is not worthwhile, each life is not worthwhile, there is no great system that is worthwhile, participation in a great system does not make the self eternal and ideally soul-like, and both monks and lay people should be careful about their dealings with the sticky world.
- (2) A strong desire to see life and the world as worthwhile
- (3) A strong desire to see each life as worthwhile and potentially successful.
- (4) Belief in a system that is overall worthwhile and joyous even if particular lives do not seem worthwhile and joyous now. This system is a clear case of a “system that eats the world”.
- (5) Common ideas of mysticism such as individual union with a great system.
- (6) The bodhisattva, a mediator savior between humans and the great joyous system. The bodhisattva pledges not to go to full enlightenment until he-she brings all sentient beings to full enlightenment. There are many bodhisattvas in the big system.
- (7) A profusion of sacred texts (sutras) and stories. These are often beautiful.
- (8) Contradictions, such as between “this life is not worthwhile” but “this life is successful”.

(9) Confusing doctrine that tries to make sense of all this. The confusing doctrine uses mystical motifs to combine the above points, especially to combine traditional ideas of the Buddha with the idea that each particular life can be successful.

*Mahayana asserts it is the true teaching of the Buddha. Theravada is simplistic superficial ideology for people of limited capacity. The Buddha gave different teachings, at different levels, to different people, according to ability and situation, a practice called “expedient means”. (1) Public teachings were not deep. The Buddha gave (2) deeper teachings orally in private to advanced students. (2A) Some oral “inner teachings” can be written down but not all. (2B) Some inner ideas cannot be written down; they can be given orally only. (3) The Buddha gave the deepest teachings non-verbally through gestures or in a “Vulcan mind meld”; these teachings cannot be spoken, let alone written down. Monks with the proper deep feeling developed ways (4) for direct non-verbal transfer of true Dharma. A smart lay person could learn from another enlightened person, monk or lay person, or could find truth for himself-herself without needing a teacher. Monks who understood only the simplistic public teachings (1) wrote down versions for each other and lay people. Those monks and lay people needed structure, as evident in writings. Their writings were the basis for Theravada. Theravada is so shallow that it stops seekers from finding the true spirit of the Buddha’s teachings and so subverts the Buddha.

In contrast, Theravada feels its writings preserved the true simple clear teachings of the Buddha and the true simple meditation that leads to awakening. Mahayana is a fantastic elaborate unclear self-serving deviation from true Buddhism.

By about seven hundred years after the Buddha (200 CE), Mahayana had overcome Theravada in India. Theravada disappeared from India. It had already moved to Sri Lanka (Ceylon), Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, where it persisted to modern times. Theravada was like core American blues of the 1920s while Mahayana was like jazz, R-and-B, rock-n-roll, and hip-hop combined. Blues was great, and it bore great children, but was not congenial to mainstream American culture and most of human nature. When core blues had done its work, it shrunk under the shade of the larger trees it had grown. R-and-B, R-and-R, and H-H lived on as much larger institutions and for much longer.

Mahayana didn’t last in India. Mahayana was closer to Indian culture than Theravada, and suited human nature better; but, by the time Mahayana arose, India already was developing Hinduism, which is even closer to Indian culture and serves human nature at least as well. Mahayana was a temporary revival inside Buddhism of one version of dominant Indian culture, a version which was taken over by an even more mainstream revival in Hinduism. By about 500 CE, all but a few islands of Buddhism had vanished from India, its home. Mahayana was to Hinduism like Jazz was to American pop music: it came from the same tradition, was glamorous and beguiling, had its own character, was different enough to be fun, had variety, referred back to the main tradition of pop more than did blues, made a lasting mark, but was not so different as to keep from being absorbed back into the mainstream when its time was over.

Mahayana veered from Buddhism as I think of Buddhism. Mahayana tried to have the cake of skepticism about this life while eating the cake of worthwhile successful life too. Mahayana covered the cake with fantasy, mysticism, and spiritual glitter. Mahayana tried to combine seemingly incompatible ideas such as: life is suffering but to realize that life is suffering is great joy; everybody is already a Buddha but does not know it; already we all are enlightened yet we still have to try hard to awaken; we all are saved yet we

are in danger of hell; and you can have wealth and power while avoiding stickiness. Mahayana used the vigor of young Buddhism to fuel a vision in which power infuses smart people, soldiers, merchants, and lords. Smart metaphysicians recast non-mystical non-metaphysical Buddhist ideas, to make them serve the new mystical vision, by putting them in a cosmic-metaphysical system that is a pyramid scheme and “eats the world”. The mythical-metaphysical system was not true to original Buddhism. Along the way, Mahayana had some great ideas and wrote some great stories.

Despite declaring that true teachings should not be bandied about in public, and truest teachings cannot even be spoken, Mahayanists wrote a lot, including both highly technical treatises and charming dramas. Mahayanists claim for their technical writing and stories holy status equal to any writing in Theravada. In Mahayana, although ultimate truth cannot be spoken, writing is justified because Mahayana writing helps you get to where you can take the last leap of intuition on your own. This process of taking you along the path is where some of the great ideas of Mahayana come out.

Although Hinduism replaced Mahayana in India, Mahayana remained the dominant major religion in Tibet and Nepal, and Mahayana moved to China, Mongolia, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. East Asian cultures put their “spin” on Mahayana. Mahayana there is like an Asian version of Hinduism. Some new ideas and truths arose due to the East Asian spin, mostly in Zen. Zen stressed direct non-verbal transmission. My ideas about Mahayana have been influenced by Zen, maybe too much.

Regardless of differences in theory, most Mahayana monks live like Theravada monks, in monasteries, reading, chanting, teaching, meditating, and trying to figure out Buddhist aids. Most people could not tell the difference between the monks. Mahayana monks have similar ideas about suffering, illusion, clinging, morality, Dharma, karma, non-duality, self, Middle Path, rebirth, meditation, Emptiness, and Mind as do Theravada monks, but they get the ideas from different sutras. Lay people in Theravada and Mahayana do good deeds so they can be successful. In Mahayana, lay people might devote themselves to a bodhisattva so they and their families can be reborn into paradise much as Christians devote themselves to Jesus, Mary, or a saint so they and their families can go to heaven.

All major religions distinguish between what the “unwashed masses” believe versus true doctrines. It is easy to satirize any religion if we describe only the mass version. I try to avoid that, and to stick to the best ideas. Mahayana and Hinduism pose a problem because mass religion and official dogma are similar. Mahayana and Hinduism offer sublime versions of the same stances that appeal to masses. Mahayana and Hindu ideas aid mass practice even as they rise above it. I describe what an educated person or educated monk might believe.

Mahayana generated amazing logical-philosophical sutras but still Mahayana teaches more by stories than argument. I cannot retell its beautiful stories except as poor paraphrases. The Bibliography lists books that tell them. “Star Trek”, “Star Wars”, and the book and movie cycle “The Never Ending Story”, fairly well represent imagination in Mahayana and Hinduism. The first movie in the “Story” cycle is one of the best fantasy movies ever, and fine for most children but not young children – long live Atreyu and the Luck Dragon! The stories of Jorge Luis Borges (“Personal Anthology”) give a flavor of Mahayana and Hinduism, and show how easy it is to get lost in the hall of mirrors. The movie “The Magic Flute”, written by Bruce Lee, largely starring David Carradine, is a good example of the Mahayana imagination, multiple worlds, and the unity of the self and great system.

Like Hinduism, Mahayana depends on the idea of Dharma and on organizing the idea of Dharma into a mental and social system. Because I go into Dharma as a system in the chapter on Hinduism, here I go into the topic only as needed. The term “Dharma” always implies “system” and almost everything I say about Hinduism as a system applies also to Mahayana, and vice versa. I mean nothing bad by the term “system” but Mahayanists and Hindus probably won’t like it. Mahayanists might prefer something like “actions, thoughts, and their results, that occur through, and for, the Dharma” or prefer that I always say “Dharma system” instead of “system”. Some Mahayanists, Hindus, and Westerners might prefer that I say “game” or “deep play” instead of “system”. Games have systematic rules. Whatever has systematic rules is a system. Games should be fun. The dharma system is fun only for some people even if, in the idea, it should be joyous for all. For many people it is not fun. It is only really fun if it is true and it leads most of us to act well. I don’t think it is true, and it does not lead enough of us to act as we should. Keeping track of all this bickering is much too hard. I am making points about Mahayana and Hinduism from the outside, not making points from within them. So I stick to “system”.

In thinking about Mahayana, always keep in mind a simple question: What are they trying to get you to wake up to? Even in sudden enlightenment that cannot be spoken, you have to wake up to something, and you need words to guide you to it. From the chapter on Theravada, see the ideas that are good to know before awakening but are not what the Buddha had in mind to wake up to. The Buddha wanted us to go beyond those ideas. He had in mind that life is not worthwhile. Mahayana wants us to wake up to something more too but Mahayana is not often clear what. Why is Mahayana not clear? How does not being clear set us up for a system that eats the world, for a kind of spiritual pyramid scheme?

What if Mahayana is true enough anyway? In the first chapter of this book, I said that what matters is if ideas are true and good, not where they come from, not even if they are in a system that eats the world. Mahayana might be true even if it is a contrived system that eats the world, and it uses contradictions to channel minds. It does convey a lot of truth and does convey the need to be good to each other. I still think it is not true. I do not argue against each idea of Mahayana. I state them as clearly as I can for the purposes here, and make clear that I disagree. I argue against the system as a whole. Please read the Lotus Sutra and decide for yourself. I take the same stance toward Hinduism.

In arguing against Mahayana, I argue against all systems that eat the world, including: all major religions as they were developed formally such as Christianity; Romanticism; secular semi-religious systems such as Marxism; and movements such as post-modernism, “systems theory”, strong feminism, Liberalism, and Conservative ideas. I cannot here sort out what is right and wrong, point by point. They all develop the same form and spirit regardless of origin and original intent. Please see for yourself what is similar between Mahayana and what you believe, and decide for yourself what is right about what you believe despite how it works as a system that eats the world and works to channel minds. Then check what you find to be true against the moral teachings of Jesus and the political ideas described in the first two chapters of this book.

Optional Section: History of Ideas.

Here I speculate on a parallel history of ideas in India and Europe. I can’t recall who first said Theravada Buddhism (India) is like Protestantism (Europe) in compactness, simplicity, commitment, rationality,

individualism, and rejection of hierarchy while Mahayana and Hinduism are like Roman Catholicism. Other parallels of Europe with India also hold.

(1) One response to the widespread ideas at the time of the Buddha about rebirth etc. was strong austere stances such given to the young Siddhartha by his first teachers, and of a religion called "Jainism" ("Jine"-ism) that is strictly pacifist and vegetarian. Modern day "Vegans" are somewhat like Jains at the time of the Buddha. Theravada Buddhism is not supposed to be austere in this way. The Buddha deliberately moved away from this austere position.

(2) Another response was given by the Upanishads and Plato. Both Plato and the Upanishads took this world to be a pale transient imperfect shadow of something more important and more definite, stressed ethereal love as a proper response, stressed strong morality, and an immortal soul. The Upanishads stressed the links between people, and between people and nature. The idea is captured in a slogan famous in Indian thought: "you are that". Both advised clear separation from the normal world so as not to be contaminated and misled.

(3) The Buddha and Aristotle offered the middle way. Aristotle was partly a common sense response both to the widespread ideas about rebirth etc. and to Plato, just as the Buddha was partly a common sense response to the widespread ideas about rebirth etc. and to the kind of thinking that is found in the Upanishads. Both Aristotle and the Buddha were cool-headed and were not given to metaphysical flights. Neither stressed austerity although both advised discipline. Both stressed living in the world as it is and coping with issues as they come up. Neither condemned regular life although both knew that deep thinkers had to keep some distance from normal life. Both stressed moderation. Both disliked extremes. Both valued free thinking and were wary of ideologies. Both developed a theory of the self in which the self unfolds in a response to the world around. Both accepted the appetites that are part of a normal self, and accepted the results of having appetites. Both liked nature and both used examples from nature and from everyday life in their teachings. Jesus was similar, but later.

(4A) First Mahayana, and then later Hinduism, were partly a response to the austere tendency of some Buddhism and to other similar austere religions of around the same time such as Jainism. Neo-Platonism (late Platonism) was unlike original Platonism. Neo-Platonism arose at the same time as Mahayana and early Hinduism. Like Mahayana and Hinduism, Neo-Platonism stressed an elaborate system of many lives. The One system was one thing sufficient in itself although people experienced it as various. The One spawned the Many of everyday experience. People came in different grades. People varied in how close they were to the One. People could ascend to the One. After they had ascended to the One, and realized the unity of many in one, they could live separated from the world or they could carefully interact with the normal world. In Neo-Platonism, the world remained suspect and corrupt while in some Mahayana and some Hinduism the normal world and the One became the same. Mahayana, Hinduism, and Neo-Platonism offer some important helper beings such as the bodhisattva, avatar, and philosopher. All three systems allow for, or encourage, devotion to saints, teachers, helper beings, and the One, as a way to reach higher levels and-or to reach the one.

(4B) I think Mahayana, Hinduism, and Neo-Platonism represent long-standing Indo-European patterns in speculative thought that show up from time to time. I think Romanticism uses similar ideas. The ideology of the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, and then again in the 1700s and 1800s, with a stress

on saints, Mary, devotion, and hierarchy, might be another form. Protestantism arose against this pattern as a backdrop. This is the pattern against which Theravada looks like Protestantism. I don't know how the basic pattern is stored in our cultural background, why it lays dormant sometimes, and why it surfaces sometimes. I don't know why, when it surfaces, it surfaces in the particular form that it does at that time in those places.

Patterns One (austerity) and Three (middle way) can be found in many cultures although maybe not as well developed as in Indo-European culture. I believe patterns Two (Upanishads) and Four (Mahayana and Hinduism) represent deep-seated forms in Indo-European culture. I don't know if each pattern can exist as an independent idea set or if they need each other. I don't know if only one can dominate at a time. As with the Mahayana-Hinduism pattern, I don't know what governs when they surface or subside, and what governs how they appear when they do appear. I don't know if we can find patterns similar to Two and Four in other cultures and-or civilizations, such as in China or in the Americas. Other cultures have patterns that are distinct to that particular culture and-or are more developed in them than in Indo-European culture, such as Taoism in China.

Reminders about Mysticism, Metaphysics, and Systems that Eat the World.

From previous chapters, recall these ideas about mysticism and about systems that eat the world:

-Mystic visions can be partly true but no mystic vision offers full contact with the bigger-than-me and full truth.

-Mystics usually feel they are connected to the bigger-than-me, to all persons, and nature; feel everything that seems distinct is really one; and everything is really an aspect of the one bigger-than-me.

-We are all parts of a joyous organic whole, a system. Often, as part of full participation in the joyous system, we have many lives.

-Some mystics feel the bigger-than-me Descended into the World; Emanated into the different-but-united many things of the world, including all people; and remains in the world. We can Realize the bigger-than-me and our Unity with the bigger-than-me. We can Ascend to Union with the bigger-than-me.

-Mystics do not feel that other beings are necessarily more distant from the bigger-than-me than mystics simply because other beings do not have mystic vision. All beings are always united with the bigger-than-me even if they are not aware of it. Mystics are aware of it.

-I compared idea systems that eat the world with a painting that had colors but no images. We project onto the color splotches our ideas.

-While this particular life might be difficult, the system as a whole is joyous. Usually, eventually, we all have some particular lives that are wonderful, and these wonderful lives make up for the bad ones.

-Idea systems that eat the world typically feature ideas that are thrown together. The ideas might have a theme, or a "feel", but they are not necessarily consistent.

-Even so, there is a central idea, or focal idea, or focal person, or focal person-combined-with-idea. This idea is soft and “absorbent”, a “hole” like the eye of a hurricane, around which other ideas move, and which is the main maker of the feel of the system.

-The central soft core usually is a combination of a person with cosmic principles. In Mahayana, the central core is the combination of the bodhisattva (see below) with cosmic principles of Compassion, Emptiness, and Buddha Mind.

-From nonsense, you can assert anything. Contradictions are a kind of nonsense but they also sound deep and profound. Systems that eat the world use contradictions to beguile minds.

-People project onto the systems whatever they can that is consistent with the overall feel and style of the system. Systems can be compatible with many ways of life. Mahayana offers many “splotches” onto which people can project what they need. Contradictions make it easy to project.

-Metaphysicians later organize mystic visions into systems that eat the world. The inject ideas (“aids”) designed to explain the mystic vision. The aids usually have the effect of making the system that eats the world more inclusive, stronger, and more resistant to disproof; I do not explain how.

-Mystics tend to see the world as infinitely beautiful, and tend to assimilate all badness and ugliness into a greater beauty and goodness. Mystics see this world right now as heaven on Earth.

Anticipation, One.

This section is the first in a series of sections labeled “Anticipation” that sketch major points. I repeat these points throughout the chapter. You may skip these sections if you wish but I recommend that you read them. If you skip them, return here if you get confused. If you skip them, go to the section entitled “Simple Mahayana Mystic Vision”.

(1) Orthodox Theravada-like Buddhism is hard to accept. It has great ideas such as cause-and-effect, the not-absolute (fragmented) self, and individual self-determination. But it is hard to know what to do with the core message. It is hard to accept that life is not worthwhile and that we cannot have strong success in this ordinary life. We want this life to be fully meaningful.

(2) People have a feeling (mystic sense) of a bigger-than-me. They feel that the system is worthwhile even if any particular life is full of hardship. People feel the system will give their life meaning and will take care of them if only they can “plug into” the system.

(3) It is hard to put the full mystical feeling into words. Point (2) above is only an approximation. We don't have to put the feeling exactly into words to have the feeling. At the same time, words can help us to get the feeling.

(4) Despite what the Buddha said, some people do seem to succeed at being spiritual and succeed at this life. These people become one with the bigger-than-me. These people would not abandon everybody

else. They will help us to connect to the bigger-than-me and to make this life worthwhile and successful. They are mediators. In Mahayana, bodhisattvas play this role; in Christianity, Christ, Mary, and the Saints do; in Hinduism, avatars do, such as Krishna; in Islam, Mohammad did.

(5) If we are part of the big system, and successful people want to help us, then, really, there is no big difference between a holy life and an ordinary life as long as the ordinary life is a good life. Spiritual success (life) and worldly success (life) are the same.

(6) If you are a good person, you are part of the bigger-than-me and you are successful. If successful, you are part of the bigger-than-me and a good person. If you are part of the bigger-than-me, you are a good person. If you feel it, you are it; if you are it, you feel it.

(7) To succeed, all you have to do is adjust your attitude.

(8) The Mahayana system-with-a-hole-in-the-center-that-eats-the-world results from the above points embedded in a structure that allows us to project onto all this ideas that we think are important and that keep people interested. It results from allowing people to project their hopes for success onto a cosmic mystic system. Most major religions have similar ideas and structure.

Anticipation, Two: Stages of Possible History.

The development of Mahayana came in logical stages. I don't know how these logical stages correspond to actual history. I repeat from above, in words that make stages more obvious:

(A) Some Buddhists reacted against the idea that life is not worthwhile by using Buddhist ideas, such as cause-and-effect and dependent origination, to support a mystical vision in which the world is not really suffering. Instead, suffering is an illusion, we are all alright, and we are all linked. This vision supported the typically Buddhist ideas that we can find salvation ourselves and that the world is pretty much as it appears to be. This vision was minimally mystic and minimally fantastic.

(B) Early smart metaphysicians tried to explain the mystic vision using Buddhist aids such as Emptiness and Buddha Mind. They relied on the idea that the new core message (new waking up) cannot be put into words. This early elaboration was not necessarily an ideological system that eats the world. This vision and its elaboration appealed to successful lay people and it was important in the early success of Buddhism.

(C) Along with mystical visions and clever rationale came a full-blown system that eats the world, centered on the bodhisattva, re-interpreting rebirth and karma as a joyous system of many lives, and using Buddhist aids as the splotches onto which we project.

(D) The early metaphysical explanations opened the door to more elaborate fantastic mystical visions such as infinite Buddhas and bodhisattvas, unfolding of the Buddha Mind, Storehouse Consciousness, Western Paradise, multiple heavens and hells, etc. Now not only are you tied into the bigger-than-me, now you are really the Bigger in disguise.

Most of this chapter is about items (B) and (C).

(E) When Mahayana moved to East Asia, the Chinese developed Zen, likely as a fusion of Taoism and Buddhism. Zen might represent an attempt by East Asians to recover the original simpler mystic vision that began Mahayana, or to produce their version of a similar simple mystic vision.

(F) Why did Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha tell everybody that this life is full of suffering, advise us to turn away from this life, and tell seekers to live as monks? Because that is the level most people work on. His external teaching is a giant expedient means. The Buddha needed to shock people out of delusions about this world and away from other seductive wrong religions such as Brahmanism, Jainism, and (all teachings like) the Upanishads. He had to force people to face their stupidity and had to give them strong reasons to seek something better. When they had overcome stupidity, and learned how to be good on a deep level, they would be ready to face the truth of Mahayana and make their regular lives transcendent. The Buddha found that, when people were on the verge, any words would inevitably lead them astray and backwards. Better not to use words, and words are not needed. When students reach this level, they will intuit what the Buddha had been about all along. When students are settled into something better, then they can use words, and any expedient means, to help others along the path without confusing words and expedient means for the path itself. The Buddha did not mislead, deliberately or through ignorance. He merely used the best public means he could in teaching about suffering, and he saved the one best true private means for later.

I dislike secret inner (esoteric) teachings no matter what religion. True: many people cannot get deep ideas, and religions rely on deep ideas even when religions try to be plain. But limited human intellect does not mean that all hidden deep teachings are true – not even alluring ones. It is best to assume that all teachings that claim to be hidden, deep, and reserved for the smart few are wrong, and then to make the ideas themselves prove they are right. By this standard, nearly all deep teachings fail. We can assume they are not offered primarily because they are true but out of misguided hope, desperation, and/or as tools for control.

To be fair, Christianity had its share of deep inner secret teachings. Originally, if Christians believed “the truth shall set you free”, that truth was not public truth. I think simple public truth is more likely to set us free. Christian teachings are all “out in the open” now only because of Christianity’s long history and the fact that it became the dominant religion of a big region. Christians turned the Old Testament (Tanakh) into a secret code for generating deep opaque forebodings of Jesus that only Christians could decipher – against the intent of the Jews who “owned” the book. Originally the Eucharist (Lord’s Supper) was not given to all followers but only to a select few of the inner circle as a way to get immediate direct mystic participation with Jesus and with godliness, and as a way to exclude people who would not go along. I don’t like any of this either.

Anticipation, Three: Mysticism (again).

To properly evaluate Mahayana, I would have to convey its mystic visions clearly, place them in context with other mystic visions, show how all the visions were subsumed into particular ideological systems that eat the world, and evaluate everything all together. I would have to contrast mystic visions of Mahayana with my own ideas about God, Jesus, prophets, and Western values. I can’t do this task here. The best I

can do here is to give a feel for the elaborate Mahayana mystic vision and metaphysical system-that-eats-the-world and say why I am uneasy with it. I do this in bits throughout the chapter. I give a synopsis of the Mahayana mystic vision below.

The Mahayana mystic vision and system is well-intended but wrong. Mahayana ideas-aids create more hardship than benefit. Some people do benefit from Mahayana ideas-aids but they have to overcome the ideas-aids to do so.

To the extent that Mahayana stresses mystical union in something like Buddha Mind or the Storehouse Memory, I don't see how Mahayana differs much from other systems that stress mystical union, such as Neo-Platonism, the Upanishads, Transcendentalism, Sufism, or Hinduism. To the extent Mahayana stresses Descent, Emanation, Realization, and Ascent, I don't see how it differs much from similar mystic-metaphysical systems such as Gnosticism or Neo-Platonism. To the extent Mahayana stresses that you personally are equivalent to the system and are Big, I don't see how it differs from other similar ideas in Hinduism and some Islamic mysticism. I don't see how Mahayana sutras differ from metaphysical writings in other systems that deal with issues such as non-duality, merging with Void, or a Great Mind. I don't see how the Mahayana bodhisattva differs from Christianized Jesus, the Hindu avatar, or the Mohammad of irrational devotion. I don't see how devotion to a Mahayana bodhisattva differs much from Hindu bhakti, devotion to Mohammad, worship of Mary, worship of Jesus, or devotion to saints. How Mahayana can be like non-Buddhist mystic-metaphysical systems but remain essentially Buddhist is a question that I cannot answer and that I leave for Mahayanists.

I happily admit that all different mystical-metaphysical systems have a distinct feel to them, and that this feel is important to their adherents. Adherents do argue over which system is truer and better. I can get a sense of the distinct feelings. I do "get it" for each system. But the distinct feelings of various systems are not important to me. Other ideas and feelings are more important.

The important ideas of Mahayana are below. You do not need mysticism, metaphysics, or system to get these ideas.

-There is something out of which everything comes and to which everything returns.

-That one thing makes the diversity that we see. The diversity is not really distinct from the one thing. The particular things are not as distinct from the one thing as we think they are.

-We too are of the one thing. We are not as distinct as we think we are. We were "in" the one thing before we were born, and return to it after we die. Death is something of an illusion.

-Being part of the one thing is worthwhile and a lot of fun. It is not suffering.

-The one thing is the same as the personal bodhisattva, who wishes to save us all. We already are bodhisattvas even if we don't know it yet. The point is to see it.

-We can approach the one thing through aids such as Emptiness, Buddha Mind, non-duality, and the unity of the particular and general. Historically those were the most important aids in Mahayana.

Although these aids can help us approach the one thing, they are not the same as the one thing. Other important aids include the unity of the awakened and sleeping worlds, and the value of the person.

Anticipation, Four: A System with a Hole in the Center that Eats the World.

-Early on, Mahayana used Emptiness as the “splotch in the empty center onto which we project ideas”. The idea of Emptiness went to China. Early Chinese Mahayana also used Emptiness. Then it switched to the idea that Buddha Mind makes the world including us. Our minds know the Buddha Mind because we are Mind likewise. From China, the ideas of Emptiness and Mind spread through the Far East and became integral to Mahayana. The idea of Buddha Mind is like ideas of Mind that developed in the West especially with Neo-Platonism and afterwards.

-Mahayana asserts that the deepest truth cannot be spoken. China used Emptiness and Buddha Mind as ideas at the empty center. Together, these three motifs make it easy for me to describe Mahayana as a system that uses a hole in the center to eat the world. Emptiness literally is emptiness at the center onto which we project what we wish. Mind literally is all the many projections that spill out of Emptiness at the center.

-If Mahayana were so obvious, it would not have lasted. Mahayana does not go directly to Emptiness or Mind.

Rather, Mahayana uses stories to involve people and to imply emptiness at the center without specifying. That is one way to use words as an indirect means but not a direct means. Mahayana allows people to fill in the story as they wish. When some people want more, Mahayana philosophers give them “can’t be put into words”, Emptiness, Mind, or another Buddhist Aid. Mahayana tells stories by finding something concrete that people can think about. It shows how that concrete thing is not really important, often it is only an obstacle, but some other thing that we can’t really talk about is important. We should be concerned about the other thing that we can’t talk much about. Mahayana never has to specify the other thing as Mind or Emptiness. By remaining vague about what Mahayana has us wake up to, the center remains empty and we can project what we wish.

Even if it is true that the central secrets to which a person wakes up cannot be spoken, this tenet is more often a ploy to “suck people in” than a way to get people to find the right stance. I accept that some ideas-ways-insights cannot be spoken well but I do not accept that the central core of Mahayana is so strange that it cannot be spoken well enough. Insisting on “a big hush” is more often a ploy than a good religious stance in any religion.

-Here I retell Mahayana stories from the Lotus Sutra to get across the point. A man has been shot with half-a-dozen poison arrows. His fellows call for a doctor. When the doctor arrives, he does not ask what color each arrow is, if it uses feathers of eagle or vulture, if it has a shaft of willow or hickory. The doctor removes each arrow according to where it is and what wound it made. Taking away bad arrows is the first step to health. Here, health is the self-evident goodness at the center about which we don’t have to be specific. We can think of a healthy man any way at all.

Now that the doctor has all the arrows out, the doctor needs to remove the poisons. Poisons also are bad ideas. The doctor does not have to know the color, taste, texture, or atomic weight of each poison. The doctor only has to know how to counteract the poison and how to remove bad effects. The doctor does not have to go into details of bad ideas, he-she only has to remove bad ideas and then good ideas arise automatically. The doctor does not have to say what health is, the doctor only has to remove illness. The doctor does not have to say what it is we wake up to, he only has to remove bad ideas and we wake up to Mahayana Emptiness or Mind.

-Rather than use Emptiness or Mind to show the empty center, how emptiness works at the center, and how we project onto an empty center, later in the chapter I use the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva is a hero at the center onto which we project our ideals of success, who acts out the workings of a Dharma system, and to whom we can appeal for help.

When smart people first sense the Mahayana technique and the Buddhist aids, they tend to go “hog wild”. Often they don’t sense the technique at a conscious level but do get it unconsciously from repeated exposure, like people learn to play table tennis. Mahayana subtlety is not a hard technique to learn and it is powerful. People love to use it, usually not maliciously, but because it enhances feeling important and because it is partly true. In doing so, despite conveying some truth, they reinforce confused Mahayana in themselves and in “victims” too. They lead people astray. This veering happened not only in the sutra writers of yore but happens now with modern Buddhists. If you can sense the method and then not use it, you will feel good in another way.

Anticipation, Five: Good Words about Mahayana Mystic Vision.

Because I criticize Mahayana, here I offer a feel for some of the good in Mahayana by using examples from mystic-like visions-and-feelings that many Westerners have. I am not saying only Mahayana has these visions-and-feelings or these are more typical of Mahayana than any other stance. I only offer them to put Mahayana in a better context than mere logical argument.

(1A) Your friends cajoled you into a picnic. The sun was too hot; ants overran the food; mosquitoes attacked everyone; the drinks were not cold enough; the softball game went on but it was not fun the way you wanted because the skill level was too low; and your would-be girlfriend spent all her time with her friends and not much with you. Yet, as the afternoon fades into evening, you realize that it is all good anyhow. All of it is all good. You can’t explain.

(1B) The same thing happens on a trip to the beach. The wind blows too much, everybody gets burned by the sun, the surf is a little too high for anyone but the body surfers, the hotels have blocked off most of the access, the hotels have attracted tourists so now there are a lot of tourists but not many of you locals, food vendors have invaded, and now litter is everywhere. But still all of it is all good.

(2) You and friends watch the evening news. Terrorists have attacked a humor magazine and a tourist train. A White cop kills a misguided young Black thug in self defense, and Black people riot and kill five more of their own. The government says the unemployment rate has fallen to 6.5% but the only jobs you and your friends can get are in a chain store. A report says there are more added chemical residues in so-called organic food than in the food sold at the supermarket. Outside, the birds are singing and some

kids are playing football in a small park, dodging piles of dog shit. Your friends have warmed up for you a brand of frozen dinner that you particularly like. You have strawberries for dessert. You feel deeply that this world could be so good and so beautiful if only a few bad apples didn't spoil the whole barrel. Twenty percent of people ruin it all for the other 80%. If we could get the 80% to see what they've got, and get the 20% to stop acting bad even if they don't get it, then the whole world would change. That is not such a hard job. Maybe you can't make it your life's work but you can do your share.

The two situations go together. When we see that it is all so beautiful, we want to help. When we want to help, we see it all could be so beautiful. If you have never seen this, then you are not fully human, and you need to wake up to your humanity.

American sitcoms have their own version, effective in the 2010s because now all families have to be charmingly-functional-within-dysfunctional by fiat of the drama police. After a terrible drawn-out holiday experience, a family comes to see they all need each other, help each other, and love each other. Their family, and the world, is better for mutual love. They usually don't show mutual love, but it runs like a deep hidden river through all. It keeps them from doing much real harm, keeps them on the right track, and rescues them when in need. They don't have to feel it all the time or say it ever. They show it to each other often enough.

Even if we don't understand everything, still it is better to have the right attitude and try to help than to do nothing and miss the beauty and goodness of the world.

(3) As a business person, you might not have it all figured out intellectually but you know what the world is all about. Through your work you serve both the bigger-than-me and the people. You are plugged in. You don't have to be a monk, a wimpy wide-eye, or a tree hugger to know there is a force that drives the world, the force is good, the world is good, you are part of it, you know what is going on, the force does its work through you, and you do the work of the force in your business and your life. As long as you do the work of the force, it takes care of you. It gives you the answers that you need to know. You never hurt anyone or anything on purpose. You know how to work on the world - that the force created - and to get things done. You see behind mere appearances to what matters. You bring other people to their senses too. You are lucky and happy in your luck. See "Vimalakirti" below.

(4) "This world is fallen. The Devil (Satan) reigns here. The Tanakh, New Testament, and Koran all tell me so. Yet I can't help but enjoy this world. I can't help but love God, my family, country, church, and friends. I can't help but love nature sometimes, even if I don't really understand nature. Life can be so good. I know that bad people, bad events such as economic recession, and bad diseases such as cancer, all can ruin life for some of us sometimes. But, really, life can be so beautiful. I know I can get lost in bitterness at bad people; but I can also overcome bitterness to make something better of my life and the lives of the people around me. My church helps me. We can overlook the fact that this world has fallen. We can enjoy the beauty that is left over from God's original creation."

(5) "I made up my mind, I saw the light, when I was twenty. I became a feminist, or a crusader against abortion, Republican, Marxist, martial artist, economist, academic, Roman Catholic, or Buddhist.

"I know feminism is not all the truth; men are not all bad and women are not all right; women of the past were not all stupid; they had minds and they did what they thought was moral and was good for their families just as we do now; they were as free in many ways as we are now or can hope to be. But there is still so much work to be done. If I don't do it, nobody will. To get it done, we need a point of view. Somebody has to stand up for the highest moral standards. I might make some mistakes; hurt some people; not do as much as can be done; and overlook some bigger urgent problems. I might defend an entrenched position, like the people I fight. I might become moralistic; a crusader who uses morality to make myself feel better about myself. Still, overall, I will do more good than harm and I will help a lot of people. All of us will be better off for what I do. In the end, we can all be free and equal. This is what I can do now and this is what I have set myself to do now."

Anticipation, Six: All You Need Is Love.

I am not making fun of hippy, hippy revival, post-hippy, or New Age cultures. I asked what Mahayana wants you to wake up to. It is easy to say "Love" ("mindfulness"). We wake up to the love and beauty of the world, and we want to wake up everybody to love and beauty. This answer goes along with Jesus' teaching to love our neighbor as our self, to love our enemies; this answer goes along with current ideas of Christianity; and with a general yearning for love left over from formal Christianity. There is nothing wrong with this ideal; it is high minded; and it is one of the best stances when mixed with practicality. If Mahayana had merely stressed love and beauty, Mahayana might have avoided being only a system that eats the world and only a pyramid scheme. I don't think Mahayana can avoid that fate through getting everybody to see love and beauty but this issue is not the main point of this section.

Mahayanists of 2020 CE (AD) might say wake up to "love and beauty" but that is not what Mahayanists of 200 CE (AD) said. That is not how Mahayana was born. Love and beauty were a part of it all but, if you focused on them, you got distracted and fell into stickiness. The original answers were "Emptiness" or "Void", "(Buddha) Mind", "can't be said in any words", joy of system, and spiritual power in fantasy worlds. Originally "Emptiness" and "Mind" were not focused on "love, beauty, and mindfulness". I leave modern Mahayanists to sort out the relations between Love, Beauty, Emptiness, Buddha Mind, Silence, spiritual power, joy, suffering, and fantasy realized. They do not seem to succeed well.

Simple Mahayana Mystic Vision and Its Elaboration.

Now that we are past the anticipation summaries, I begin again.

An original simple mystic vision similar to the vision of Mahayana is common to many people who have a "Grand Canyon" experience, and the vision is found in many religions. In the cosmic scheme of things, we are small. There is something much bigger than me. Yet we are also important to the bigger-than-me. As parts of the bigger-than-me, people are all connected. We are tied to nature. We come out of the bigger-than-me and merge back into the bigger-than-me. As individuals now, we do suffer. But the bigger-than-me does not suffer in the same way, and the bigger-than-me gains through our suffering. It makes up to us for our suffering somehow. In Mahayana and Hinduism, the bigger-than-me is a Dharma system and a person while in Christianity and Islam it is a person.

As Mahayana developed, eventually some people had the feeling that we are not only a small member of the system but somehow we are the entire system too. Each particular person is the system as a whole but is temporarily manifest in particular bodies over the course of many lives. There is no bigger-than-me distinct from me because you are the bigger-than-me, although, while you are in any particular body, you feel smaller than the system as a whole and feel there is a bigger-than-me. The feeling of bigger-than-me that you get in a particular body is the gateway to the real feeling that you are the whole system at play. The bigger-than-me works through the particular me as I am right now.

This feeling is not necessarily crazy although it can be. This feeling is not as common as being a simple part of a bigger-than-me, and so it is hard to find positive examples from current pop culture. Imagine you are the tool of God because you are God acting through your particular body right now. You are both Jake Blues and Elmore Blues on a mission; and you are on some mission all the time. Sometimes you are Jake, sometimes Elmore, and sometimes some other character such as the character portrayed by Aretha Franklin. Or, you are a secret agent always on a case. You are the hero of all stories and hero of the entire system of the Big. You are a super hero. You can be every super hero if you want, depending on whichever hero is needed for a mission now. If you are a woman now, you are not only linked to all other women because you are all sisters but also because you really are every other woman even while you are this particular woman. Before, you were a little rock sloughed off by a mountain, rolling down the mountain. Now you are the mountain sloughing off all the rocks. You are all the birds, bees, and flowers that have ever lived.

Then smart people in Mahayana had to explain and justify this new vision. They had to explain so that other people might have the vision too, or at least could sense and respect it. For people slightly less smart, they used aids such as Nothingness and Buddha Mind. For some ordinary people, they used the character of the bodhisattva. For many other ordinary people, they used the idea of paradises to which devotion takes you. The various approaches can be combined.

Officially, the world is not worthwhile, and yet, if you look at the world the right way, the world is infinitely beautiful and worthwhile. The bad ugly world of everyday illusory life is the same as the good beautiful world of awakened life. We can assimilate ugliness and badness into greater beauty. Is this Mahayana mystic vision the same as what I earlier (in the chapter on Common Ideas) called “heaven on Earth”? Without going through texts in detail, I cannot argue the issue, but I think so. In Mahayana, I think the mystic idea of “heaven on Earth”, an infinitely beautiful world, overwhelmed the prior Buddhist idea that “life is not worthwhile”, and I think metaphysicians tried to merge the two so that the idea of an infinitely lovely heaven on Earth assimilated the idea that this life is not worthwhile. Metaphysicians used the idea of a joyous system of many lives to complete the merger. The result was Mahayana. Whether this story about Mahayana is true or false, if you have any feel for the idea of “heaven on Earth”, you can use your feeling to get in touch with the Mahayana vision, understand it better, and have some sympathy with it. Try seeing: this life as hard; the system of many lives is beautiful; and the system of many lives makes every life in it just as beautiful, including this hard life.

Most people can't reach the full version of identity between themselves and the whole system; especially they can't get the idea that they are both a particular individual and the system as a whole. Most people settle for something less but something that still has the flavor of an identity between the individual and the system. For most people, this identity is captured in the idea of the bodhisattva. The system has a

hero through whom it acts most of the time. You are both the hero and the hero's sidekick. Here, I do not dwell on the abstract metaphysical version of Mahayana but focus on a slightly lesser version, centered on the bodhisattva, but still greater than the initial simple modest version.

To illuminate Mahayana thought below, I use contradictions between an orthodox Buddhism that features fear of suffering versus Mahayana that goes beyond suffering.

Mahayana Motives for Elaboration.

Here I retell the story from above of mysticism systematized. Because Mahayana elaborated the early mystic vision to appeal to powerful people and the common masses, it is easy to dismiss Mahayana as hucksterism, like televangelism, aimed to recruit the rich and powerful by allowing them to feel successful both in spirit and in daily life, and to dazzle the masses into going along by using complex emptiness, projections, contradictions, fantasies, and paradises. All religions do that, and Mahayana is only a little worse than others. It is better to think of the situation like this:

The original teachings of the Buddha (similar enough to Theravada) were a great improvement on mass religion in India and on Brahmin ritualism. Buddhism's intellectual advances, such as self-determination, cause-and-effect, analysis of the self, assessing life, and waking up beyond ordinary self-indulgent life, were so strong that all religion in India and the East had to face them. Buddhism developed a big strong organization that had to be lived with and a group of adept people that had to be argued with – monks and educated lay people. All variations on Buddhism had to find a place for monks and for relations between monks and lay people.

Yet the core idea of Buddhism is hard to take, and most people cannot live as monks. People dislike the idea that life is not worthwhile. Even most Theravada Buddhists do not really live by the idea that life is suffering. People want religion to justify their ordinary lives and their pursuit of worldly success. Mystics think life is worthwhile and joyous. Mystics think the world is part of a joyous bigger-than-me system, and we are all important parts of the system. People dislike thinking the highest goal is to disappear forever after accepting that life is suffering. People like to think they will live in great joy forever after succeeding in this life. It was almost inevitable that somebody would combine the desire for justification in ordinary life with mystic participation in a great system.

Some very smart people and some mystics took over the ideas of Buddhism and the monastic structure, and they put the ideas into the service of well-intended mysticism. Metaphysicians explained the feelings and the system in a way that validated ordinary life and success in it, and gave spiritual "power" to ordinary life. This way appealed to lay people who were successful in the world and felt they were good people, did not want to be monks, and did not want to work toward vanishing after death. Lay people supported Mahayana monasteries rather than other monasteries. Mahayana won out. In the modern world, this is called the "marketplace of religions".

All this reinterpretation could not be done without some stubborn contradictions such as that people are both damned and saved at the same time, and without odd metaphysics such as that "form is emptiness and emptiness form". Contradictions and metaphysics actually support the package because they permit religious adepts to say anything, they provide ingredients for smart people to weave speculations, they

keep smart people busy, allow people to fool themselves, let smart people argue others into submission, and allow imaginative people to make up paradises. The contradictions and metaphysics let people feel good by acting out as normal people but with added drama, like the pseudo-reality TV shows of our time. They are the color splashes on which people project what they need.

Non-monk non-mystic non-metaphysical ordinary people enjoy the imagination of religion and enjoy the paradises but they are not comfortable with the mysticism and dense argument. Most people are not comfortable with the contradiction between “life is suffering” but “we are all in a joyous system”. Yet, if we want to have the good parts of Buddhism such as self-determination, if we want to feel justified in our ordinary lives, want fantasies and happy paradises, then we have to pay a price. In a Buddhist context, the price is Mahayana cleverness and clever metaphysics. In a Buddhist context, those are needed to overcome the tense contradictions so as to allow the justification in common life. Ordinary people were happy to pay that small price. Mostly they could ignore the heavy thinking and just carry on.

People need some idea framework. Because Mahayana theory is so abstruse, people needed something more relatable. The two biggest ideas are the bodhisattva and the idea of a paradise after death. I talk more about the bodhisattva later. A Buddhist paradise works much the same in ordinary religion as does Heaven in Christianity and Islam. Schools arose with different ideas of paradise and ideas of how to get there. In this chapter, I do not describe the paradises or how to get in them except for one example later in the chapter. One technique for getting to paradise was to recite the name of a Buddha or bodhisattva, or to recite a spiritual formula, like “Hail Mary etc.” Smart people made paradises spiritually acceptable by interpreting the paradises as a metaphor for how a person would see the world once he-she saw he-she was really already saved. Stories about how people lived in the paradises taught people how to act well here. Ordinary not-so-smart people took paradise at face value. As long as smart people could see that metaphor was the real basis for the paradises, then it was alright to let the masses believe in them literally and to recite formulas – another case of expedient means. Often enough, even very smart people go for the paradises.

The mystic-metaphysical take-over of Buddhism did not have only bad results; it had some good results too. Mahayana built solid arguments for the value of ordinary people and ordinary life, and for seeing the world as it is. Mahayana promoted connection and compassion. We all have the same mental ability to see the great joyous system. We all share the same mind. Mahayana did accurate analyses of mind in general and of human capacities for morality and spiritual insight. Here I cannot give the details of these ideas. Mystics are imaginative. Contradictions and metaphysics spur imagination. Mahayana opened up the imagination. As I said, it has wonderful stories.

One Reason Mahayana Failed in India and Why Confucius Keeps Resurging in East Asia.

In the chapter on Theravada, I explained how monks mesh with society to become a part of society even though officially they are not in society and even though in daily life they live a bit apart. They reinforce society even though they are not supposed to live in society. Although Buddhist-like religion can support society it does not always do as thorough a job as do more blatantly obvious society-affirming religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. If religion is going to support society, then it is better to have a religion that supports society “up front” in a clear strong positive way. Buddhism can support society, but only round-about.

In India, Hinduism also rejects ordinary life as most people see it but, at the same time, Hinduism offers a powerful obvious clear up-front support of ordinary life and society as it was lived when Hinduism arose and when it defeated Mahayana. See the chapter on Hinduism.

In the Far East, in particular China, Mahayana and Confucianism always carried on side-by-side, along with Taoism; and most people in their daily lives were more Confucian than Mahayanist. Buddhism was the religion for death and Confucianism was the religion for life. Confucianism provides a strong clear up-front fairly practical support for most of ordinary social life. In its elaborate forms, Confucianism offers a blueprint, for most social and political situations. Confucianism is poor at death and metaphysics. So Mahayana and Confucianism go well together, and neither can completely disappear as long as the other one is around, but Confucius usually has the upper hand because most people live in social situations and most people require guidance. See the chapter on Confucius.

Dealing with the Central Issue.

Like Theravada, Mahayana accepts that there is a problem with the way people usually live in this world and experience this world. Normal life leads inevitably to sorrow. Unlike Theravada, Mahayana denies that the problem is “in” existence, that life is inevitably not worthwhile. The problem is in how we live this particular life and experience this particular life, in how we carry on. The problem is in us, not in the world. Mahayana resolves the contradiction as below. The ways below are all mixed up in practice. If you don't understand all this, don't worry. Focus on the fact that Mahayana has methods to live with its contradictions and to gain strength from them.

(1) If we change how we live this life and experience it, if we change our attitude, then the problem goes away. With the right attitude, we overcome stickiness, clinging, and suffering. We don't have to make up our minds whether this life is worthwhile. We don't have to make up our minds about what the present world is like. We don't have to make up our minds about the system of many lives. We just have to find the right attitude first.

(2) There is a system to the world. The system is moral. It seems there is a mind behind the system. Although any particular life might be unhappy, most lives have enough happiness, and the system as a whole works. People who are unhappy now are happy later. Even if you are unhappy in your particular life now, you can be happy with the idea of the system as a whole just as a failed business person can still take comfort in the success of capitalism as a system. The system as a whole is joyous. The system as a whole takes care of the people in it.

(3) If we see our particular lives in the context of a joyous system, we can overlook the problems of our lives to focus on the system and its joys. For most normal people, the great joyous system meant some kind of paradise after death.

None of the solutions actually works; and they are not always compatible. Having the right attitude need not make you see life in the context of a greater joyous system, and seeing life in the context of a greater joyous system need not lead you to have the right attitude.

(4) Mahayana creates a hierarchy that folds back on itself, a hierarchy that folds back on the central soft dominant focus. The hierarchy is made up of spiritually adept beings. I explain this below. Rather than dwell on any contradictions, people find themselves in the context of the hierarchy, and relate to what is most relevant to themselves in the hierarchy. Usually they forge a relation to the bodhisattva, the highest level. The bodhisattva cares about ordinary people. Therefore the highest level (bodhisattva) and the lowest level (common people rather than monks) fold back to touch each other, and the system appears to be complete and not contradictory. This hierarchy plays a big role in the Mahayana version of a system that eats the world.

(5) Mahayana avoids its contradictions through one of its core ideas: Mahayana cannot be explained in words. It must be intuited without words. If you cannot explain, then you can hold any contradictions. In effect, you smother over contradictions with mysticism and metaphysics. Even if some of mysticism and metaphysics is true and good, it is so hard to tell the true from false, and good from bad, that the result is confusing. Mostly people succumb to confusion, and then try to find their own partial success by piecing together their version from the many floating ideas of Mahayana.

(6) In particular, Mahayana is vague about what a person wakes up to apart from usually waking up to the great joyous system. What we wake up to cannot be spoken. Because it cannot be spoken, we can use whatever works. Smart people wake up to resolving one of the metaphysical dilemmas such as non-duality or the Buddha Mind. Normal people wake up to the fact that they, and their families, will go to a joyous paradise when they die.

(7) “Expedient Means” and Relativism. No teaching in words is absolutely true. All teaching is only approximately true. Still, some teaching is more useful in moving you toward awakening than other teaching. Our teaching, Mahayana teaching, is more effect while the teaching of other religions is less effective. Our teaching is so effective as to be categorically right. Other teaching is so ineffective as to be categorically wrong. You don’t have to pay attention to them, only to us. We are entitled write a lot because what we write is useful. Even when our teaching seems confusing, it is still useful and correct.

This multi-pronged technique for “sucking people into the system” is not limited to Mahayana. It is a general tactic for making self-validating thought systems that “eat the world”. People who worship the market do this; people who cling to simplistic populist democracy and the culture of victimization do this; Christian theologians do this; and Muslim theologians do this; Hindu theologians are great at it. I do not explain how the combined approaches are so effective and how they work in other cases.

For most of Mahayana, the right attitude begins with an experience of bigger-than-me which includes the idea that me and bigger-than-me are the same. The right attitude comes in seeing this life only appears sad sometimes but really the whole system of many lives is joyous. You show you have the right attitude by helping other people to see the same thing. In helping others to awaken to Mahayana terms, you perpetuate Mahayana as a comprehensive self-validating thought system; you participate in a religious pyramid scheme.

I think the Mahayana approach is not what the Buddha had in mind. The Mahayana approach might be true, might be truer than what the Buddha had in mind, and might be more beautiful than what he taught; but it is still not what the Buddha had in mind. You have to decide if Mahayana differs from what the

Buddha had in mind and, if different, Mahayana is truer, more beautiful, or better. I think Mahayana is different, better in some ways, but not overall better. I have said I disagree with the Buddha in some things and especially I think life is worthwhile. Mahayana is good in fostering compassion and in valuing this life. Mahayana is more fantastic and interesting than Theravada but the fantasy is so misleading that I feel uneasy saying “more beautiful”. I understand the ideas that ordinary life is both worthwhile and not worthwhile, and that ordinary life and awakened life are both different and the same; I just don’t accept them in the Mahayana context of a greater system.

The ideas that normal life is valuable, and that the common sense naturalistic world is where we should stand, are great ideas. I agree with them. I am glad that Mahayana stresses them in its own way. Sadly, rather than take them at face value, most Mahayanists overlay them with mysticism and metaphysics, and so contradict them and nearly destroy them. I am sorry the ideas get so lost in contradictions, mysticism, metaphysics, aids, contrived resolutions, and attitudes, that most Mahayanists do not appreciate them as they should.

New Attitude.

Since the 1920s, Americans have seen a parade of movements and products that appeal by offering a change of attitude as the solution to all problems. You don’t have to change the world or change your deep self; you don’t have to seek good principles; you don’t have to assess the fit of world and principles; you don’t have to work hard on the world; you only have to change your attitude. To change attitude, you only have to join us or buy our product. Some examples are: “the Jazz Age”; “coolness”; “I got a new attitu-u-u-u-de”; “M-m-m-my generation”; “I gonna get all up in yo’ face”; “gangsta”, “be aware, mindful, and loving always”; “with your qpad, qbox, or qphone, you are cool”; and “those people are not assholes, they are just exuberant, or they have a legitimate grievance, they represent LIFE, and I should learn to put up with all the variety of LIFE”, “feminism”, “neo-conservative”, and “mindfulness”. To the extent “attitude alone” ignores real issues, it is hurtfully wrong. It is like popping pills or zealous crusading. The idea that you can change the world by changing attitude alone is narcissism. It might be well-intended nice narcissism but it is still narcissism. “Meet the new boss, same as the old boss”. It is a bad version of the idea that you are the whole system, you are God, instead of only a small part of a bigger-than-me.

I think: Instead of only changing your attitude, you have to start by accepting the way the world is and the way you are, the bad and good. The world really does have both good and bad. Bad and good are not only an illusion to make the play of the system more fun. Sometimes you have to change the world, and sometimes you have to change yourself on a deeper level than mere attitude. If your ethnic, gender, or religious group is bad, you have to change yourself, and change your group, or you have to abandon your group. Even if change in attitude is among the first steps, we can’t solve issues of world, self, and group just a change in attitude.

Mahayana reminds me of this silly mistake about attitudes. Westernized popular Mahayana goes along with “change your attitude”, and it feeds the silliest aspects of “New Age”, spiritualism, cheap mysticism, pseudo-rebellion, pseudo-Liberalism, and Conservative backlash. Mahayana says, “Look at the world in terms of a Dharma system in which you are only a small part but you are still what the system is all about, and, really, there is no suffering, everything is wonderful”.

Rebirth and Karma.

Among the ideas that were “in the air” at the time of the Buddha (after 600 BCE) were rebirth and karma. At first, the idea of karma was not as well developed as Buddhists and non-Buddhist Indians later made it. Now, Westerners tend to think of rebirth as like a magic carpet ride. We get many lives to have fun in and to improve spiritually. If we screw up this life, it doesn't matter much. We can have fun not only during this life but trying to remember our past lives. Karma is relevant but how is not clear, and so it doesn't matter. You can see the 1970s view of rebirth in the movie “On a Clear Day You Can See Forever” with Barbara Streisand. Among Westerners who knew a little bit about karma, it meant “poetic justice delayed for a while but certain to come”. If somebody treated the poor badly in a previous life, he-she would be born a worm or would become a homeless bum in a future life. “Instant karma”, as in the John Lennon song, is poetic justice on a faster track.

Contrary to the American misunderstanding, in the time of the Buddha, rebirth and karma felt much more ambivalent and sinister. Karma helped explain inequality, and it could give some comfort in the idea that things would even out over the very long run. At the same time, karma felt like harsh fate. What you are now is what you were doomed to be, and so you had to accept it. Life might be pleasant for a few people but not for most people and not overall. The idea of rebirth meant you were doomed to repeat a tedious suffering life forever and ever. Life is a long drawn out curse. Your only chance is to somehow snap out of it. Karma and rebirth were not boons but big burdens. The only silver lining to rebirth is that it gave you many chances to snap out of the cycle of death and rebirth. All this was how the Buddha took it, and how it developed in Theravada and “official” Buddhism. This is why the Buddha said that life is suffering and why he presented his ideas as a cure for suffering.

I am not sure when, and to what extent, Mahayana began to change the official version more to a version like what Westerners see in pop culture. Karma and rebirth are part of a system. The system might be harsh for some particular people for a short lifetime. Yet overall the system is tremendous fun. We suffer largely because we don't realize that we are part of the “emptiness” or “mind” that generated the system, and, anytime we want, we can return to the mind and go back out again into apparent reality. Suffering is only apparently real on the large scale although it is terribly real to particular people when it happens. Suffering is our way of sometimes reminding ourselves that we are not one particular life but part of a big system of joy. I have seen bits and pieces of the new view in various sutras, and it emerges in beautiful sutras like the Lotus Sutra, but, in most sutras, both views are together at the same time. That sustained dual view is also part of Mahayana. I cannot here argue about various passages in various sutras and how best to interpret them.

The Issues, and some Contradictions.

Mahayana ideas can contradict ideas from traditional “official” (like Theravada) Buddhism. Mahayana has to accept the official ideas because Mahayana is officially Buddhism. Mahayana holds its own ideas while not denying the official ideas that openly contradict its own ideas. The tension between official ideas versus Mahayana ideas actually helps reinforce Mahayana as an ideological system that eats the world, largely by keeping people off balance and making them seek rationalizations.

-Officially, this particular life is not worthwhile and-or is afflicted with deep suffering. In Mahayana, this life can be worthwhile; in fact, it can be joyous.

-Officially, suffering is real. In Mahayana, suffering is mostly an illusion.

-Officially, all life entails intrinsic necessary suffering. In Mahayana, we suffer only when we are trapped in illusions and errors, especially the errors that we are alone and incapable of awakening. As long as we are trapped in illusion and error, then we do suffer. We suffer when we are separated from the system and-or the essential stuff of the system. When we reunite with the essential stuff of the system, then we stop deep suffering.

-Officially, people wake up to the reality of suffering and that life is not worthwhile. In Mahayana, people wake up to the fact that suffering is mostly an illusion and to the fact that life is not assessed according to whether it is worthwhile. Once people are over the illusion of suffering, then they stop deep suffering, and then life is worthwhile. This particular life in the system of many lives is joyous.

-Officially, after people realize that life is suffering, they still feel the suffering, but it doesn't bother them that much because they are on the path out. In Mahayana, after people realize they are part of a bigger system and identical with the "stuff" of that system, a lot of the suffering goes away but not all of it. What remains does not bother them as much. They still feel the aches and pains of the flu but they don't care, they accept it, and they get on. The attitudes toward suffering officially and in Mahayana are similar but the explanations for the attitudes differ.

-Officially, there is no eternal unchanging soul-self, and no essential eternal "stuff" at the core of a system of many lives. We cannot identify our soul-self with the essential stuff of the system because neither is real in that way. The only thing real is that "stuff happens" according to the law of cause-and-effect. For example, our soul is not the Buddha Mind. In Mahayana, there is an eternal unchanging soul-self (see below), there is an essential identity to the system, and the two are the same. Each of us individually is the Buddha Mind or the Unborn; in the terms of Christian and Muslim mystics, each of us is God. Particular and general are resolved in the joyous system of many lives, and only in this way.

-Officially, although the self is not absolute, it is still self enough to save itself. "You can do it". You can work out your own salvation. Sometimes Mahayana carries over that confidence in the self, especially when the self is able to find its connection to the greater joyous system of many lives. More often, the self needs the joyous system of many lives to step in to help, especially in the person of a bodhisattva (see below). We can't find salvation without the help of a great semi-divine mediator. We find salvation only when we take our turn as the bodhisattva, the semi-divine mediator representative of the system, a self that helps all selves.

-Officially, the system of rebirth and many lives can be useful in allowing people to be reborn in a life that might lead to awakening; but overall the system is a burden, not worthwhile, and makes particular lives not worthwhile. In Mahayana, the system always is worthwhile in itself and it can make particular lives worthwhile.

-Officially, people live a sequence of lives. One life of a person is distinctly different than other lives of the same person. The particular soul-self of a particular life does not carry (“anatman”) on but karma does carry on. In Mahayana, all the lives of one person are really the same life. They are all lived together. There is no distinction between the lives of a given person as there is no distinction between any person versus a Buddha or bodhisattva. This self underneath it all is the same as the joyous system. Sequence is an illusion that helps give rise to illusions of separation and suffering. In terms more familiar to modern Western mystics, time is an illusion. What appears as a sequence is really a single simultaneity. What appears to persist through sequence, and to change through sequence, your soul-self, is really what was there all along and what continues as the same through the illusion of sequence.

-Officially, there is a difference between normal people versus a Buddha or bodhisattva. In Mahayana, there is no difference.

-Officially, there is a difference between the life of a common un-awakened person versus the life of an uncommon awakened person. There is a difference between samsara and nirvana. In Mahayana, there is no difference common life and awakened life, between samsara and nirvana. All lives are the same. (“samsara” is the term for misleading everyday life.)

-Officially, there is a difference between asleep people versus awakened people. In Mahayana, there is no difference. All people are already awakened (saved); they just don’t know it yet.

-Officially, normal un-awakened human lives might be as good as any other lives such as of angels, but even human lives are beset with confusion and clinging. In Mahayana, normal human life is filled with the success and joy of the system but normal people don’t know it yet.

-Officially, people are kept asleep by participating in the system of many lives. In Mahayana, people are awake in the system of many lives even if they don’t know it yet.

-Officially, a monk is better off than a lay person. Although you do not have to be a monk to awaken, it is hard to awaken unless you renounce the world, and hard to renounce the world unless you become a monk. In Mahayana, a monk is both better off than a lay person and not better off than a lay person. A seeker is both better off than a non-seeker and not better off. You can just as easily awaken as a lay person as a monk.

-Officially, this world is the only world but this world still is beset with stickiness, clinging, delusion, and dissatisfaction. In Mahayana, this world is as it is, and nothing is better. When the illusions go away, the world does not appear differently. This world is only one way that we look at a greater joyous system. The situation is like a movie, such as “Pretty in Pink”, in which, at the end, the hero (including heroines) discovers that, all along, life was just as it seemed, the apparent illusions were only confusions, the world as it is still is very good after all, and people did love her (him) after all.

-Officially, a person is responsible for his-her own awakening. A person can give some help, and can receive some help such as teaching from the Buddha, but a person has to figure out it for him-herself. In Mahayana, one person can be of considerable direct help to another. Without help, most of us have no hope. Because we need people to help, the system makes sure there are people to help.

-Officially, the highest achievement is to leave the system. In Mahayana, the highest achievement is to stay in the system forever, offering help, until all beings realize the above points, until all beings realize they too are already saved (awakened), realize suffering is an illusion, and realize the system as a whole is worthwhile.

-Officially, if ever everybody realized what is going on and awakened, humanity as we know it would be over. For the system to go on forever would mean that some people remain in dark slumber forever, and the Dharma is never fully realized. Officially, that is bad. In Mahayana, although some persons work to make every other person see the light, that probably won't happen. Some people are always in the dark. So it is more likely that the system will go on forever. The fact that the system goes on forever does not mean that people are trapped in dark evil slumber. It only means not everybody at once knows that he/she is already saved, already enlightened. A few people can wake up and the system still continues on. It works better if a few people do wake up. For the system to go on forever with a mixture of awakened and not-yet awakened beings is a good thing.

-Officially, emotions such as compassion lead to the stickiness of life and keep us from awakening. A moderate amount of compassion is normal, healthy, and helps us awaken, and it goes along with the intrinsic moral quality of the universe; but too much compassion is a trap. In Mahayana, overflowing compassion is a good thing, and it is necessary for the highest beings, the bodhisattva. We can have huge compassion and still avoid the stickiness of life. We need to have huge compassion if we are to see the total system of Dharma, find our place in it, and save all other people.

From contradictions, we can argue anything, including nonsense. From contradictions, Mahayana does argue many things, some of which are sublime, and some of which are nonsense: The idea that this life is worthwhile even if we don't know it is a good idea. Holding both that this life is not worthwhile and this life is worthwhile is a bad idea. "Suffering is an illusion" is a bad idea. "Pie in the sky" imagined kingdoms in which people live in bliss forever is a bad idea. The hope that we can have unlimited mundane and spiritual success at the same time is a bad idea. The hope that we can have wealth and power but not fall into stickiness is a bad idea.

Mahayana Aids: Metaphysics and Mysticism Again.

See Buddhist aids from the chapter on Theravada. Some interesting ideas from Mahayana are listed below. I do not here explain how these ideas lead easily into mysticism and fantasies.

-The bigger-than-me is unborn and undying, or, sometimes, just unborn.

-Emptiness.

-Form is emptiness and emptiness is form. Form and emptiness entail each other.

-Everything is mind.

-Buddha Mind.

- Buddha Nature.
- Buddha body in various forms such as Dharma body.
- The unity of particular things with the one source.
- The distinction of particular things even though they are unified in the one source.
- Everything is the same thing, or an aspect of the same thing.
- We are all already awakened.
- We are all already Buddha.
- Buddha nature is in everything and in nothing.
- Nobody ever really is born or dies.
- Non-discrimination: Don't stress good versus evil much. If you can, don't find any difference between them at all.
- Non-discrimination: Don't stress differences between things. Mountains become valleys and valleys fill up to become plains. Plains rise up to become mountains. Different people are similar.
- The unity of self and other, of particular and general. Particular remains particular even when unified in the whole. The whole remains whole even when distributed into the particular. The particular and whole are unified and distinct in time, through time, and out of time.
- The unity of opposites: we are both saved and damned, we are already lost and already saved, the everyday world and nirvana are the same, etc.
- Great compassion combined with detachment.
- Storehouse consciousness (memory) from which everything came and to which everything flows.

Theravada Monk Self is Wrong.

Not even most Theravada monks really live apart from society. Most Buddhists are not monks, so they cannot feel Buddhism in terms of being a monk and they cannot judge that life not worthwhile in the same way that a monk would. Most Buddhists need a different understanding of Buddhism, and of the relation between Buddhism and normal life. Although most Mahayana thinkers were monks, not all were. Some were lay people. Mahayana says that a person need not be a monk to succeed in Buddhism. This view requires re-assessment of the self in Buddhism.

The Buddha walked the middle path between picking apart the self and bolstering it. Mahayanists said Theravada monks were selfish. Being “selfish” in Buddhism is serious. It means to bolster the self, to make the self more than it is, and thus to contradict the Buddha directly. The usual way of clinging to the self is to see it as an eternal distinct thing; the Buddha debunked that idea. You can also cling to the self by trying too hard to get rid of it, and that mistake is just as bad as clinging to an unreal immortal soul-self. To Mahayanists, that is the mistake of Theravada monks. Theravada monks seek only their awakening and benefit, without regard for anyone else or for society. They cling to the self even while appearing to denigrate and lose the self. They make the same mistake the teachers of the Buddha made when they pushed rigorous self-denial on the young Siddhartha. Theravada monks do not follow the example of the Buddha, who taught after awakening, a sign the Buddha neither clung to the self nor denied it. The Theravada self is a bolstered delusion that Theravada monks use to justify selfish isolation. It is a false re-occurrence of the soul-self that the Buddha long ago had debunked, even though Theravada monks should know better. The Theravada self cannot truly awaken, the Theravada quest for awakening cannot be a true quest for awakening, and Theravada awakening cannot be true full awakening.

Mahayana Levels.

Mahayana thinkers could not just denigrate and discard Theravada monks. Mahayana thinkers had to accept Theravada monks as better than most average people and as true Buddhist monks but without giving them status as the highest grade of Buddhist adept. Mahayana thinkers went beyond a simple distinction between lay people and monks. Mahayanists divided people into grades according to level of “spirituality”. If you accept their system, the grades are fairly clear, and they do go along with human nature. The scale I give is not official but is fair enough. I avoid technical terms (“rysi”, “stream winner”, “arahant”, “shravaka”, and “pratyaka”). Levels (1) through (3) and maybe (6) appear in Theravada but are used differently; it is not worth explaining how.

(1) The first level is a person who understands Buddhism and is committed to eventually awakening but who is not ready to devote his-her life to the task.

(2) The second level is a person who is definitely on the road to awakening, and is ready to devote his-her life, but is not ready to awaken in this lifetime. These people likely will awaken soon, perhaps in the next lifetime. Most monks hope they are this level or higher.

(3) The third level is a person who soon could become awakened if he-she wished. Again, if this kind of person thinks only of his-her own awakening, Mahayana considers him-her to be selfish.

(4) The fourth level is a person who could awaken anytime he-she wished but who chooses not to fully awaken right now, and also not to “go away” and be “thus gone”. He-she chooses to stay in the normal realm of people and to teach people. He-she pledges to remain here in this life, and all future lives, until all people understand and are ready to awaken. In Mahayana, really, this is the highest being regardless of the next levels. This person is a “bodhisattva”. See below. Despite official Buddhist doctrine, the bodhisattva is higher than a Buddha, and people strive to emulate the bodhisattva rather than strive to be a Buddha.

There has been more than one historical Buddha. In fact, there have been millions, perhaps an infinite amount. Not all Buddhas are alike.

(5) The fifth level is a “normal” or “minor” Buddha. This is a Buddha who awakens but does not choose to stay and to teach. This Buddha vanishes from all existence when he-she dies. It is odd to call a Buddha selfish, but I cannot avoid seeing that Mahayanists thought this Buddha selfish. They accused Theravada monks of wishing to be this kind of Buddha and only this kind of Buddha.

(6) The sixth level is a Buddha who does stay to teach. Buddha’s are supposed to completely vanish from all existence when they die, but this kind of Buddha might live a very long time or might even come back more in future lives to continue teaching. I am not always clear on the difference between this kind of Buddha and a great bodhisattva. I think Mahayanists would not allow that a Theravada monk could be this kind of Buddha even if he-she were somehow awakened and then taught, because he-she would be teaching false doctrines. Thus this kind of Buddha was always a Mahayanist.

(7) The seventh level is a great Buddha who changes the world. This Buddha can live for a very long time if he-she wishes. This Buddha can depart after he-she teaches in this lifetime because he-she has changed the world through his-her teaching, and so need not come back in future lives. This Buddha leaves future work to his-her disciples and their disciples, in all their lifetimes. The Buddha of our world and time, Siddhartha Gautama, was this kind of Buddha. By implication, The Buddha was a Mahayanist.

(8) The eighth level is the union of everything while still remaining particular, including bodhisattvas, all Buddhas, and you. The union can be done in terms of emptiness, Buddha mind, or Storehouse Mind; it does not matter.

Although, in theory, a Buddha is above a bodhisattva, in Mahayana doctrine and practice, a bodhisattva is higher. The bodhisattva is the real hero, highest being, and role model of Mahayana – like Jesus or Mary in Christianity. Common people look to the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva ties the ladder of spiritual achievement to the common people and makes the religion come alive.

The Bodhisattva.

For a funny satirical take on how pseudo-spiritual New Age Westerners see the bodhisattva, listen to the song “Bodhisattva” by Steely Dan, and listen to their entire album “Aja” (“Asia”).

“Bodhisattva, bodhisattva
Gonna sell my house in town”

People in chiefly and state societies need figures who are both human and god, and bridge the mundane and sacred realms. These figures are big, transcendent, powerful, and “sparkly” yet also homey and loving. The bodhisattva is an outstanding example of such a figure. Most bodhisattvas were pure made-up characters but some of them had a basis in real people, which makes them an even better example. How the bodhisattva works in the Mahayana system is typical of what happened to other similar figures and how they work in their systems, including people who were both made up and real such as Lao Tzu, Krishna, Moses, David, Jesus, Mary, Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha, Confucius, and Mohammad.

Believers transformed religious leaders even when real people insisted they were only human and were not God, such as did the Buddha and Mohammad. I do not describe similarities between the Mahayana bodhisattva and other figures. Look for similarities and think how the systems of religions have been molded around their figures as Mahayana has been molded around the bodhisattva. All this yearning for a bridge to the divine and all this mutual molding is true of Jesus too even if he really is God. How we see Jesus is shaped by our need for a divine-human mediator. Think what truth survives mutual molding, in any religion, and how we find the truth in the middle of the system with its glorious leader.

At the core of a system that eats the world is a vague idea, often negative. In Mahayana, the core idea at first was “emptiness” and later “mind”. Most core ideas are too vague for normal people, including mind and emptiness. So, the working core of most systems that eat the world is not an idea but a quasi-person. The person can represent ideas but cannot be too definite in ideas because that would hurt the ability of the system to eat the world. If you believe in him-her, you don’t have to get the ideas fully. You can still be saved. The person does not have to be god officially. Hindus call this solution “bhakti” or “devotion”, and aim it toward gods and avatars. Christians believe in Jesus and Mary, Muslims believe in Mohammad, and Taoists believe in Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, and in a variety of super people.

In Mahayana, that person is the bodhisattva. If you are a normal person and can’t work through the odd bewildering abstruse ideas of Mahayana, you can still believe in the bodhisattva and still follow him-her.

In Mahayana, unlike Theravada, you don’t have to save yourself because the bodhisattva does it for you, just as Jesus (and Mary) does it for you in Christianity. Because you don’t have to save yourself, you can participate in normal life and should. You don’t have to avoid normal life because you are saved even while going after normal life. You should vigorously pursue normal life because normal life is the way by which a bodhisattva saves the world. Without normal life, there would be no bodhisattva. Normal life gives rise to the bodhisattva and the bodhisattva sanctifies and saves normal life. You are part of that holy relation when you get promoted in your job, send your child to an elite school, or win a lawsuit. You give the bodhisattva something to do in saving you, and the bodhisattva gives you something to live for.

Bodhisattvas achieve almost perfect awakening. The only difference between a bodhisattva versus an awakened person in Theravada is that a bodhisattva declines to disappear until everybody else has awakened too. The bodhisattva promises to work hard always to make sure all sentient beings awaken fully, before the bodhisattva disappears. A particular bodhisattva might die in this one lifetime but he-she will come again in other lifetimes as the same underlying bodhisattva identity with the same good will and the same powers. Or, a particular bodhisattva might not die in any lifetime but live on until his-her work is done. Because the bodhisattva will not fully awaken until all sentient beings have awakened, in the end, when the bodhisattva does awaken, all sentient beings awaken all at once. All good Christians go to Heaven together in the Rapture.

The character of the bodhisattva satisfies the need of good-hearted people to help others. It gives them a reason to live and a way to live out their needs. In Christianity, a good-hearted godly person can be a priest or monk while in Mahayana the same type tries to be a bodhisattva. The role of the bodhisattva gives good-hearted religiously minded people a way to live their needs without themselves causing too much trouble socially, politically, intellectually, or religiously – they don’t have to win battles, support causes, or argue in churches – unless they wish. They don’t have to save everybody right away. They

can save whoever they can save in this lifetime and then keep plugging away through countless billions of lifetimes, or forever. They only have to meditate, do good deeds on any scale suited to them, be mindful, and preach sometimes to whoever is ready to listen.

The bodhisattva and the common people make a mutual support relation, as Theravada monks do with their people. Through the bodhisattva, Mahayana makes roles for all kinds of people with different hearts and tempers, as did Christianity in the Middle Ages and as did Hinduism until recently.

The bodhisattva lives simultaneously in spiritual and worldly levels. The bodhisattva is a huge success in both realms at once. The bodhisattva can have great wealth and power without being corrupted. The bodhisattva can have spiritual purity and aloofness while still being effective among common people and people of wealth and power. The bodhisattva is like how Roman Catholics see some great popes, how Protestants see Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, and Billy Graham. The bodhisattva is what Jesus would be like if Jesus saved everybody, Jesus overcame the temptations of the Devil in the desert, and yet Jesus took over the world physically. The bodhisattva is like Saint Francis absorbing early Renaissance power struggles. The bodhisattva combines Jesus and Michael; Mary the mother and Mary Magdalene; Elvis Presley, Jimi Hendrix, John Lennon, Paul McCartney, and Kurt Cobain; or sensitive Alt rock with head-banging Metal. The bodhisattva leads children into, and out of, the jaws of Hell. You too would follow the bodhisattva into, and out of, the jaws of Hell. Who can feel any spirituality at all and not want to be a bodhisattva?

Like a bodhisattva, you can live in both the spiritual and worldly realms at once, and succeed in both. Even if you do not fully succeed in either now, your trying is justified and your life is justified.

The bodhisattva is a cosmic principle embodied, "THE" cosmic principle embodied, all cosmic principles embodied, or the cosmic system embodied. A similar counterpart to the bodhisattva is the Christian idea of Jesus as The Word Made Flesh. "The Word" in Christianity is like one of the key ideas from Mahayana Buddhism such as Buddha Mind or Emptiness. The bodhisattva is Buddha Mind or Emptiness made flesh. I dislike thinking of Jesus as embodied cosmic principle and I dislike thinking of the bodhisattva in the same way. A similar counterpart in Hinduism is the avatar such as Krishna. Followers of any of the religions can get a feel for the other religions by thinking of how their major figures are the embodiment of a cosmic principle and then seeing how major figures in the other religions are similar embodiments of similar cosmic principles.

Unlike Christianity, which has Jesus alone (or Mary and Jesus in some versions), Mahayana has many bodhisattvas although people usually focus on one as their personal savior. In theory, bodhisattvas, like Jesus, start as normal humans. Some bodhisattvas likely once were real people but now, like Jesus, their mythical attributes eclipse their old human personality.

Mahayanists think Theravada monks are selfish. The good opposite of selfish is all-compassionate or all-loving. So, bodhisattvas are infinitely compassionate. They understand everybody no matter how bad, love everybody, see everything, hear every prayer, and respond to everybody in the way best suited to that person. The bodhisattva ideal of compassion embodies an important value in Mahayana, a value which people definitely feel even if they are not a bodhisattva. People know they are supposed to be

compassionate toward others, and actually try. This value of compassion is one of the most endearing features of Mahayana.

In Mahayana, everybody will get saved in the end because bodhisattvas are all-compassionate and they work actively to make sure each individual is saved. Bodhisattvas love everybody without conditions. Universal salvation is the guarantee of Mahayana that is not in Theravada. Over the long run, you need not worry in Mahayana. The Mahayana guarantee is not just in dogma, the guarantee is manifested in the body of the bodhisattva.

The compassion of the bodhisattva is not a mistake as it might be in Theravada. The compassion of the bodhisattva is not clinging and does not lead to suffering except as some bodhisattvas share the suffering of non-saved beings. The Buddha showed similar compassion when he stayed in the world to teach. The compassion of the bodhisattva is another version of the compassion of the Buddha and vice versa. The exalted compassion of the bodhisattva implies that compassion by ordinary people is usually not a mistake either.

We should not get confused about the idea of salvation in Mahayana. Unlike Theravada and Christianity, to be saved does not mean to escape the suffering of the world. To be saved means to see that you and the bigger-than-me are the same although you are distinct in your limited view here-and-now, and to see that suffering is a normal part of it all. What you feel in salvation is like joy at the beauty, grandeur, and infinity of it all. When you are saved, you go on about your business as an aware part of the greater-than-me, knowing that you contribute to the joy of the system and to the joy of all.

The bodhisattva personifies the cosmic principles of Compassion, Salvation, and Unity with the Bigger-than-Me. The bodhisattva unites Giant Person with Cosmic Principles. That is one what the bodhisattva becomes the soft core of a religious system that eats the world.

Because most people don't get ideas that are so abstract, for most people, the bodhisattva is a person who merges with Compassion, Help, Success, Love, and Heaven. For people who do understand the abstract principles, the lesser understanding of the common folk is alright because (1) they are part of the bigger-than-me even if they don't know, and (2) they will be reborn until they do know.

If you believe in the bodhisattva idea (Savior, Messiah, Christ, or "Maud Dib"), believe the bodhisattva is the representative of the entire system, have found a bodhisattva, have a personal relation with him-her, believe the bodhisattva cares about you, believe he-she can save you, and believe you might become a bodhisattva or become like a bodhisattva, then you are saved in the general Mahayana sense. You are also part of a system that eats the world.

As with Christian saints, there are many bodhisattvas. Each bodhisattva has his-her own personality and preferences. They are like patron saints. The most well-known bodhisattva probably is Avalokitesvara, who started as a man, and then became a woman. In China, (he)-she is known as Kwan Yim, in Thailand (he)-she is Kuan Im, and in Japan is Kannon. She is the equivalent of Mary, and has similar traits. She hears ALL cries for help throughout the universe and helps all needy beings. She appears in Chinese Mahayana fantasies as the Queen of Heaven. She appears in many Chinese movies. She appeared in a delightful TV miniseries about the Monkey King; the series is a good example of Mahayana imagination

mixed with magical Chinese culture; sadly I forgot the name of the series and cannot find it. Needless to stress, she appeals to women.

Mahayanists often become more devoted to their particular bodhisattva than to the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama, any Buddha, or Buddhism. They treat the bodhisattva as their patron god much as Christians treat their patron saints as patron gods. They worship their bodhisattva, and are devoted, in the same way that Christians de facto worship Mary and are devoted to her, worship saints, or even worship Jesus. As noted, Mahayanists practice the devotion that Hindus call "bhakti".

Just as the caring of the bodhisattva does not lead to clinging and suffering, in seeking to save people, the bodhisattva does not get caught up in the stickiness and clinging of life in general. Ideally, the bodhisattva is not like a modern-day tree hugger, anti-abortion crusader, worshipper of the free market, or old-style Communist. The bodhisattva can work to save people, love them, and get vested in their welfare, without him-herself getting confused. I am not sure exactly how this happens but in theory it does. The bodhisattva is an apparent exception to stickiness. If the bodhisattva does get trapped in stickiness and clinging sometimes, remember that we are all one with the Bigger-than-Me anyway, and such minor stickiness and clinging is part of the distinction of the bodhisattva within the unity of the bodhisattva with the One.

Because the bodhisattva does not get caught in clinging even though the bodhisattva cares and he-she lives in the world, in the same way, somebody who fully appreciates the bodhisattva ideal and the truth of Mahayana does not get caught up in clinging and he-she can fully participate in everyday life. Everyday life is not a danger to someone who appreciates the bodhisattva and the system. Everyday life is the fulfillment of the ongoing work of the system.

Bodhisattva and Avatar.

In a later chapter, we will see that the Hindu avatar is similar to a Mahayana bodhisattva. To avoid any confusion, it is useful here to point out how the bodhisattva and avatar differ.

The bodhisattva has active compassion for each particular person, wants to save each particular person, and works to do so. The bodhisattva not only helps people as in curing headaches or guiding them to a good used car; the bodhisattva aims to save individual people. In this way, the bodhisattva is much like the savior Christ. The bodhisattva cares about you personally and wants you personally to awaken and succeed spiritually. In Christian terms, the bodhisattva loves you personally, wants a personal relation with you particularly, and wants you personally to go to heaven. The bodhisattva is not mostly concerned with maintaining the system except as the system allows people to awaken.

In contrast, the avatar is more concerned with the system than with individuals. The avatar is here to keep the system going. Individuals need not awaken for the avatar to do his-her job of perpetuating the system. It is only necessary that the avatar get people to feel that they should do what they should do and do it; people need not see that there is a system; need not feel that they are a part of the system; and need not fully awaken even if they do see there is a system and see the need for their role. If sometimes some people do awaken, that is fine, but not necessary. The avatar need not have a personal relation with any particular person to help the system, even if, in some cases, as with Krishna and Arjuna, the

avatar does have a close relation with the person that he-she helps, and the avatar helps the person to see that the system is real (to partially awaken). The bodhisattva is more like Jesus than the avatar is like Jesus even if all three are divine mediators.

In practice, distinctions between bodhisattva, avatar, and the Christ are not great. In saving individual people, the bodhisattva also perpetuates the system. People believe the bodhisattva is concerned with them, and will save them, personally, because of the particular features of the bodhisattva. In that case, their belief perpetuates the system. When people believe the bodhisattva loves them because the bodhisattva is the representation of Buddha Mind and shows infinite compassion to all sentient beings, that belief keeps the system going. In Hinduism, people have a personal relation with a god or avatar through devotion, or “bhakti”. People do not always think of their own personal relation as helping the system, and people are concerned directly with their own personal salvation rather than with perpetuating the system. They do their duty out of devotion to a particular god or avatar rather than because they know their duty is needed for a system, as Krishna taught Arjuna.

I am not sure how much the average Mahayanist feels the love of a bodhisattva for him-her individually and feels that the bodhisattva wants him-her individually to succeed. I am not sure how much system-maintenance overrides personal relations in Mahayana. I am not sure how much difference the idea of a personal relation to a divine mediator makes in the Mahayana support for good institutions and good government. The idea certainly is present in theory. The situation might be as in Christianity, where the idea of Christ’s love for all of us individually is present in theory but the average Christian does not feel it on a daily basis.

This variety and these nuances are typical of systems that eat the world. Although Mahayana, Hinduism, and Christianity differ somewhat in theory but are closer in practice, it is still useful to know something of the similarities and differences in case you read more on any of the religions.

Bodhisattva Pyramid Scheme.

In Christianity and Islam, you are saved to a specific goal. You go to heaven. People who work to save other people work to save them for heaven. In Mahayana, this cannot be so. Heaven is not important in Mahayana. You do not save people to heaven. Because we are all already saved, even people who don’t know they are saved, you don’t save people by getting them to see they are saved. You could do that, but you don’t have to. You could save people in the sense that you open their eyes to the fact that there is a Great System (Emptiness, Buddha Mind) and that they are a part of it. But, again, you don’t have to because they already are a part of it and they already express its operation even if, in their case, its operation does not include knowing about its operation. If people know they are already saved, know they are a part of the Great Joyous System, their joy is greater. In that case, you could save them in the sense that you increase joy. But Buddhism, even Mahayana, is cautious about increasing joy and about guiding people through the promise of increased joy. The increased joy that you get by knowing you are a part of the Great Joyous System is not really much more of an addition than simply being part of the Great Joyous System without necessarily knowing it.

You could save people in the sense that you lead them to see that we are all linked and we all should be good to each other. But, if that is all Mahayana does, it is not different from any other religion. It is no

different than the many kinds of waking up that I listed in the chapter on Theravada, and those, in theory, Theravada went beyond. Mahayana wants to go beyond other religions and beyond those other ways of waking up too.

What do you save people to in Mahayana? To some Mahayanists, that was the point. You don't save them to anything. Most Mahayanists have trouble with this approach.

Yet there is still a sense in most Mahayana that people need saving and you save them to something.

Think about what a bodhisattva does and the causes-effects he-she sets in motion. (1) The bodhisattva puts off his-her own awakening so he-she can awaken other people. (2) What do they awaken to? They have to put off their own full awakening so they can bring other beings to awakening. What do they do as a result of this (moderate) awakening? They in turn put off their own awakening so they can bring other people to awakening. They make another link in a chain. (3) What does the next link do? Those people in turn do the same thing and form a third link in the chain. (4) And so on.

This is a religious pyramid scheme. It has no point. It has no end unless you think of the final awakening of everybody at the same time in a kind of spiritual Big Bang, and most Mahayanists don't really think that way. I distrust pyramid schemes. I return to this theme later.

The pyramid scheme becomes easier to accept if we think this way: Compassion and good deeds are part of the identity of a bodhisattva. You can't be a bodhisattva unless you feel great compassion and are ready to do good deeds. It is part of the bodhisattva pledge. While teaching some people to awaken, the bodhisattva also teaches them compassion and good deeds. When students delay final awakening and instead teach more people, they also teach compassion and good deeds. When those additional people also delay awakening, they teach even more people compassion and good deeds. And so on. Along the way, during the pyramid scheme, a lot of people learn compassion and good deeds. The compassion and good deeds are a pyramid scheme but one with some kind of point. So it is a good pyramid scheme even if misguided about its real mission (compassion and good deeds rather than waking up). This accumulating compassion and good deeds is what most people think of when they think of a bodhisattva and his-her teaching. This strategy is not so different from the idea that all Christians should go out to preach the Good Word, and so through the accumulation of many small efforts, the Kingdom of God will be reached on this Earth.

Unfortunately, many Mahayanists do not think of the compassion and good deeds but of the power and magical abilities of the bodhisattva. People want to tap into that. They do not think of the humanity of the bodhisattva but make him-her into a god. Then waking up is really about becoming god-like even if it is phrased in other words such as Nirvana, Emptiness, Buddha Mind, and Compassion. I can become like a god if I teach people to wake up. How do I get them to want to wake up so I can teach them about waking up and so become a god? By tacitly getting across the idea that waking up is about becoming god-like. This outcome too is not so different from what happened in Christianity, Islam, and Theravada Buddhism, and deliberately happens in Hinduism.

More Good and Bad Words about the Bodhisattva.

Hopefully, to many people, the bodhisattva is a high-minded goal and a high-minded person. The ideal likely comes from feelings similar to the feelings that guide me to work hard to help the world and guide some Christians and Muslims to help people get to heaven. Some people really do want to work hard for other people and the world. Some people really care about other people and are willing to work for them. This caring is not bad. It does not necessarily lead to bad stickiness. What is wrong with trying to make people better even if it does not necessarily lead them to full enlightenment? The ideal of the bodhisattva is another version of the spiritual knight – and that is a good thing, not a silly thing.

As with many Christians and Muslims who want to save people, the bodhisattva ideal also is often self-indulgence. Anyone who is familiar with Christian or Muslim proselytes knows that many act not so much to help other people as to help themselves. They feel righteous, powerful, and spiritual when they teach other people and when they think they save other people. They do not save other people to heaven, they save themselves to worldly glory. Buddhists are usually less bombastic but the underlying feeling is the same. People who want to be a bodhisattva, and who think they might be a bodhisattva, feel good about being fonts of spirituality. As a font of spirituality, you have to teach (save); if you do teach (save) then you are a font of spirituality (a bodhisattva). In its own softer way, this Buddhist stance is as annoying as the Muslim or Christian who knows the one-and-only way to heaven, and the way is through him-her. I know we all want to feel like spiritual heroes but the bodhisattva way might be a deceptive way to get that. Better to teach people and help them along rather than try to save them.

The bodhisattva enables magical wishful selfish thinking that I would like to minimize in all religions. The Jew, Christian, or Muslim who has an “in” with God trades on magical wishful thinking as much as the Buddhist. It is hard to deal with salvation and spiritual power without descending into mere ugly magic. Buddhists do it as badly as any religious people, and the bodhisattva is as much a magician of success as anything else.

We need to think how to keep good ideas including compassion, and good deeds including giving advice about spiritual advance and being a better person, without misleading elaborations that grow up around figures such as Buddha, Jesus, Mohammad, Chuang Tzu, and the bodhisattva.

Quantum Leap.

“Quantum Leap” was a TV show in the late 1980s and early 1990s, starring Scott Bakula. A scientist had found a way for his soul to leap through time and space. He could do so only by entering the bodies of other people in the times and places to which he leaped. While he was in other bodies, the minds of the people lived in his body back in his lab. In the situation to which the scientist went, some severe trouble was coming such as a car crash or kidnapping. Bakula had to solve the problem there so that everything turned out well and life went on properly. When he did, he would leap out of that body and into the body of the next person to help; and so on. The program was a variation of the “Lone Ranger” and similar shows where a hero helps other people despite that the hero is in distress. I think this is the first show in which the male hero took on the identity of women and gay men. The episodes were among the best TV at the time, one of the best shows never to win an Emmy as best show (I think it never won).

Ideally, when the hero had helped enough people with problems, he would leap back into his own body and stay there. As the show went along, the hero met angel-like beings who said they would help him get

back home. However, when it came time for him to get back home, the angels led him to see he did not really want to get back to his own limited body. He liked what he was doing. He liked helping. He liked sustaining life and morality. He liked being all kinds of life and all kinds of people. That was his true real self. In fact, he was like the angels, and among the leaders of the angels. When he saw his true real self, he was willing to abandon his original body and to live forever in limbo so as to keep helping people indefinitely. This is the ideal behind the Mahayana bodhisattva and the Hindu avatar. This same ideal drives James Bond and the characters in the movie “Sucker Punch”. People “get off” on this ideal.

Neither Scott Bakula nor the bodhisattva primarily aim to keep the system going but rather to save individual people; still, by saving people, Scott Bakula and the bodhisattva do keep the system going. In James Bond movies, and “Quantum Leap”, the self-sacrifice of the hero perpetuates the system; and the system was good for the vast majority of people. England, with its class antagonism, was a better option than Russia, China, or North Korea. When the bodhisattva saves people, people do not vanish from the system as in Theravada but keeping going and keep everything else going as well.

You have to decide if this ideal represents something true and deep about the universe, something about human nature, only a theme in Indo-European culture, only a theme in Mahayana as it went through Asia, only a theme in Hinduism, or all the options. You have to decide for yourself if Scott Bakula is more like a bodhisattva or more like God come down to Earth incarnate as perpetual Jesus; or if they are all versions of the same thing.

A Bit More on Waking Up in Mahayana.

Some schools of Mahayana stress the idea of “just wake up” without any preconceived notions of what the world is, you are, what you need to be saved from, or what you need to be saved too – see previous chapter on Theravada. In theory, that is what the idea of awakening without words implies. In practice, nearly all Mahayana stresses waking up to a bodhisattva and the system that the bodhisattva entails. You wake up to become a bodhisattva and to making the system work well. You wake up to getting other people to wake up to the same thing. Some schools of Mahayana have people wake up to being close to their favorite bodhisattva and to living in a paradise forever with him-her, much as Christians do with “being saved in Jesus”. These three versions of waking up are not compatible; they are examples of the basic contradiction of Mahayana. Mahayana schools use various means to make the get along, which I don’t go into here. Zen is the exception that does stress “just wake up”. It gets away with this primarily by ignoring the other ways of waking up and not trying to resolve the contradictions.

The first two ideas of waking up – be a bodhisattva or live with a bodhisattva in paradise – form the basis for a religious pyramid scheme. I don’t describe details more than above. The mix of a pyramid scheme with waking up to a glorious person or a glorious state is common. It is what we find in most Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Gnosticism.

An Imaginary Dialog between Two Advanced Mahayanists.

As far as I know, nothing like the following appeared in Mahayana writing. I can find the ideas in some sutras but I do not cite the sutras. The ideas are mine in that I take responsibility for them but not in that I thought them up. I make fun of Mahayana and Christianity but do not ridicule them. The ideas belong as

much to Hinduism as Mahayana, so keep them in mind. The speakers need not be monks and gender is not specified. "Sati" is spoken "sa tee" but the "ee" is shorter than in American speech. The little girl in the "Matrix" movies is named "Sati". Both "Jit" and "Sati" can translate as "mind".

Jit: Hey, Sati, how you doing?

Sati: Hey, Jit, doing fine. Hope the same for you.

Jit: Yeah. I've been thinking about bodhisattvas. I think something screwy is going on.

Sati: I've been wondering the same. Tell me what you think, and we can compare.

Jit: The goal of the bodhisattva is to enlighten all other beings before the bodhisattva lets go, right? There is more than one bodhisattva. They can't all enlighten all beings at different times. They have to succeed all at once. They all have to enlighten all beings at the same time and then let go at the same time. So, imagine they all succeed all at once. Then what? Suddenly everybody wakes up. Zillions of them all at once. Then what happens to the world?

Sati: Exactly. Does the world snuff out like some simplistic Theravada candle-headed monk? Does the world start over and do the same thing, and then again, and then again? Saving the world only to have it totally snuff out, or only to start again and need saving again, does not seem like what a bodhisattva has in mind when he-she sets out to save everybody once-and-for-all.

Jit: How about this instead: The world does not ever start or stop completely. Instead, all the time, everywhere, a few beings reach enlightenment, but most beings don't, at least in this lifetime. The bodhisattva wishes to awaken all beings in their turn but not all at once right now. The bodhisattva enlightens all beings but only in the course of many lifetimes. It's like "Steady State" instead of "Big Bang".

Sati: That helps but it doesn't stop the world from ending. If every being goes out when he-she awakens, then, eventually, all beings go out. The fire smolders to a stop instead of having the bodhisattvas throw water on it a cupful at a time. It's like "the big chill" or "the big rip".

Jit: Ok, then, when beings awaken, they don't go out. That is only a bad Theravada idea anyway. They go on.

Sati: What do they do as they go on? What do they go on as?

Jit: That depends. Some of them go on as a Buddha or bodhisattva. But all of them get reborn so that the world does not run out of beings and vanish.

Sati: Why not just have new beings come into being whenever old beings go out? That would be more like Steady State.

Jit: I suppose you could do that but, then, where do the new beings come from? Why are there only so many total beings at a time? Why are the new beings necessarily asleep? If you think about it, there is not much difference between having new beings come into being versus recycling old beings. It works either way. There are still a few kinks to figure.

Sati: I see what you mean. OK. We can forget about new beings for now. Let's say old beings get recycled even if they awoke in the previous lifetime. They get reborn just like beings that have not yet awakened. But, if they get reborn, aren't they asleep again?

Jit: They are if they don't remember they were awake in a previous lifetime, which, of course, most won't. But that sleeping isn't so bad because it is not the drug-like illusionary not-worthwhile sleep of Theravada. To awaken, and then get reborn, is to become a link in a chain that runs from bodhisattva-to-Buddha-to-common-person without end – in a good way.

Sati: I get it. Everybody gets his-her turn but not all at once. It's like the world is both being enlightened and being reborn not-yet-enlightened all the time in little pieces all over. It is always enlightened and always asleep.

Jit: Yeah, I think that's okay. Anyhow, it gives a Buddha and all the bodhisattvas something to do while they are around. It means their work is never done and always worthwhile.

Sati: And always done.

Who knows but maybe all the beings right now were once awakened but we just don't see that clearly yet? Even if some of the beings have never yet been awakened, still, the world will go on as it is, in a good way, and that means the work of making-and-saving the world is done.

If the work of the bodhisattvas is always done, then what is the difference between being in the world for awakened people and for not-yet-awakened people? People are always fretting about illusion but, if you get this idea, illusion doesn't matter. It is only illusion if you let it get to you. If you don't let it get to you, but go on about your Dharma business, even if you are not yet awakened, then it is the same world for both awakened people and not awakened people. If it were a different world, that would be really odd and lead to contradictions.

Jit: I am glad we don't have to go through all the contradictions. I can follow all that logic but I don't have a knack for it like some people, and it gives me a headache. If the world is the same for both awakened and asleep people, then what is the difference between an awakened person and a sleeping person? Of course, an awakened person knows we are all born and reborn in a wheel of Dharma while the sleeping person does not right now, but so what? We all eat and sleep. We all see the same stars. We all sigh the same sighs.

Sati: Yeah. That has to be true. We were always enlightened, and now we know it. It is good knowing about it but it doesn't make you special or better, unlike what Vim thinks. Even most shitheads are worth something but I wish they would stop being shitheads all the same.

Jit: What about bodhisattvas then? If everybody is already cool, then I wonder why bodhisattvas do what they do. Of course, if they didn't do it, then we wouldn't know about the Dharma, and the upper part of our brains would go on meandering, seizing, sticking, chattering, and being obnoxious. To help people quiet down the annoying part of the mind for both help giver and help receiver. In this way, eventually a wannabe bodhisattva can figure it all out. Helping other people helps both them and yourself. Whenever you have beings who have reached sentience, you have to have a bodhisattva so the sentient beings can use sentience properly, or else sentience is more of a burden than a help.

Besides, in helping people, you have to lead people to see the value of goodness, at least most of the time. Goodness is good. So helping is worthwhile even when it doesn't lead immediately to knowing you are already enlightened.

Sati: A bodhisattva promises not to fully awaken until he-she teaches the true Dharma to everyone. But all bodhisattvas seem to know (almost) all the true Dharma already, so they likely know that other beings don't need to know the true Dharma in an intellectual sense to act according to the true Dharma and so to be awake in their own ways. What is going on here? If a bodhisattva knew all the Dharma but was just holding back until everyone was enlightened, then the bodhisattva does not know all the true Dharma. It is hard to put this in words.

Jit: I can think of a couple things.

First, when a bodhisattva says "until all true beings are enlightened", he-she doesn't mean "all at once". He-she knows that all beings really are enlightened but just don't know it yet, and he-she sticks around to help them all awaken in their turn. Bodhisattvas don't explain it that way because that way is confusing. Normal people think of enlightenment as like heaven, and they want to go to heaven, so the bodhisattva puts it in a way that makes it seem as if everybody will go to heaven all at once. There is nothing wrong with putting it this way as long as the bodhisattva knows better. A bodhisattva who knows this is more like a Buddha than a bodhisattva.

Second, it might be that some bodhisattvas know everything about the Dharma except the one fact that not all beings can be enlightened at once, and so they do dream of enlightening all beings. This seeming lack of knowledge about the Dharma is not much of a lack. It is the last small step before the bodhisattva is enlightened and lets go him-herself. When the bodhisattva figures out that not all beings can awaken at once but they are already awake anyway, then the bodhisattva has done the task and can let go.

The apparent small lack of the bodhisattva is like the little bit of sleep that allows the dream and so allows all the world to be made. Without the desire of the bodhisattva to save all beings, then the world would not be at all. When seen this way, it is not a lack but a fulfillment even better than what would be if the bodhisattva did lead all beings to awaken all at once.

Sati: We need bodhisattvas to teach us. Bodhisattvas remind us of how things work. They remind us that the world cares about us, not in the common way of caring which is finite and sticky, but in its way of caring, which is infinite and not screwed up. When we do good work, we follow the example of the bodhisattva. When we see other people as sentient beings and treat them with respect, we follow the example of the bodhisattva. When the world works through all of us to fulfill its goodness, we follow the

example of the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva reminds us how the world made itself, and continues to remake itself all the time. In effect, the world was made through the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva is the world become conscious of itself through him-her and the others, and through us together; and that is a good thing.

The bodhisattva can represent the goodness and caring of the world. The bodhisattva personalizes the world. The bodhisattva gives people someone to think about when they think want to think a more useful matter besides their breakfast muffin or how cool it would be to have those sunglasses. People can think "You've got a friend in the bodhisattva". Each particular person can think about the bodhisattva however they want. In that way, some people use the bodhisattva to focus attention on becoming a better person and getting along with the Dharma.

Jit: Doesn't that open the door to people thinking whatever they want about the bodhisattva and thinking really weird and selfish stuff like justification, black and white salvation, heaven, hell, levels of heaven and hell, grace, works, God, the Will of God, theocracy, and snuffing out like a candle?

Sati: Yeah, but what are you going to do? There really are bodhisattvas. They do care about the people. Whatever you say, people are going to get wrong ideas. It is up to the community of bodhisattvas (saints) and monks (bishops and priests) to keep all believers (church) on the right track. To do that, they have to be free to think and to share ideas (councils). They have to treasure the sutras. It is up to thinkers to stir things up when needed, like the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama did.

Jit: So, here's the situation. Because the bodhisattva tries to get everybody to awaken all at once, it can't be true that everybody can awaken all at once, or that everybody even needs to awaken. Because not everybody can awaken all at once, we need bodhisattvas to teach. Some bodhisattvas might be a little incomplete but their lack is very small and it helps everybody and themselves, and that is what they mean by holding back the last step until everybody is enlightened. I know that sounds like a contradiction but it isn't. If the bodhisattva did not try, nobody would know what is going on. Because the bodhisattva does try, not everybody all at once can know what is going on. Because not everybody all at once can know what is going on, the bodhisattva has to try. It is good if sometimes some people do know what is going on but not good if everybody all at once knows what is going on.

Sati: You know you come perilously close to logic when you describe the contradiction. The bodhisattva wants to awaken everybody all at once but it is not possible to awaken everybody all at once, at least not without destroying the world. "Damned if you do and damned if you don't"; "I am my own negation". I can overlook that small amount of logic if you can.

Jit: Ha ha. You should hear yourself too.

Sati: You do know that the Buddha did not want to set up an order of monks and nuns at all, don't you? Now both that he didn't want to do it but finally did do it makes sense too. If everybody is already plugged in, then the awakened world is not different from the sleeping world. If the awakened world is the same as the sleeping world, then everyday life is the same as enlightened life. Everyday life is enlightened life. All we need to do is live everyday life in a good way. So this is what the Buddha was really getting to. I can see now how people could screw it up and go on strange diversions. I feel sorry for the poor Buddha.

He had to set up the order of monks so that people wouldn't go off along even weirder roads than being a monk. Monks might not have it all, and might not be able to get it while they are monks, but they are needed so most people can get started along the path, so sentient beings don't abuse the intellectual part of their minds, and so the mind of the world doesn't abuse its intellectual part.

Jit: It feels good to talk this out and to talk with you. I know this is how it should be for everybody, but it can't be like this for everybody all the time anymore than everybody can awaken all at once. Still, the fact that it can't be happy and cordial all the time for everybody does not make the world worse but better. I have a kind of peaceful feeling like everything is alright anyhow.

Sati: Me too. I like talking with you too. Everything is just as it should be. We need the bad stuff to learn from, appreciate the world more, appreciate good people more, and finally wake up. I've see that, most of the time, people can turn bad stuff into good if they try and they have help. When it seems we can't turn one of our particular bad episodes into good, other people can learn from our bad experience and avoid more badness. The world can turn even badness to a greater good. If it weren't like that, then the bodhisattva couldn't eventually save all beings. If the bodhisattva can eventually save all beings, then it has to be like that. All in all, everything really is just as it should be. Ack. We are getting more than a little too sweet here.

Jit: OK. So what do we do? I don't like buying and selling; the hot sun out in the fields makes me dizzy; deciding cases in court pisses me off because most people are such short-sighted selfish jackasses; and if I have to recite one more hearth fire ceremony, I am going to literally piss on the fire and the house holder instead.

I think I will write abstruse sutras explaining all of this. If a person gets them, he-she will think he-she is really smart but really he-she is just too intellectual for his-her own good. That will keep those annoying kind of monks out of our hair so we can live properly. Maybe not-so-annoying monks will talk to us in their free time.

Sati: We could preach along a circuit like Siddhartha did. I hear a dozen monks went somewhere far to the east teaching similar ideas, including our smart friend Bodhidharma. Maybe I will help you write your sutras. If we throw in a few puzzles too, that should keep them busy for hundreds of years.

Jit: I've got an idea for a kickass sutra. If you think about it, the world is about sentient beings yearning for the bodhisattva and about the bodhisattva helping sentient beings. If you think about it, as we agreed above, the bodhisattva makes the whole world. The world would not be what it is without the bodhisattva, so the world could not be made without the bodhisattva. Nothing real and important gets made without the bodhisattva. Everything that is real and important is made through the bodhisattva and only through the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva is the body of Dharma, that is, the world. The ideas of the bodhisattva are the blood of the world. The bodhisattva is all the words of all the sutras come true in a person. Run that through your logic mill.

Sati: Thankfully, most ordinary people have the sense to ignore what we write for monks and to carry on with their lives, being as good as they can. If they listen to good teachers, the good bodhisattvas, without paying too much attention to what we write for monks, then that is best anyhow.

A Kind Word About Mahayana: The World Is as It Is.

Mahayana mystic vision and metaphysics can support the idea that the world is as it is. The world is as we see it and it is not otherwise. This idea is important in Mahayana because it overcomes the idea that the world is full of suffering, and it allows Mahayana to appeal to ordinary people who want to succeed in this world and who want to feel good about succeeding.

Mahayana holds four views about the world: (1) the orthodox Buddhist view that the ordinary world is characterized by suffering and, ultimately, failure; (2) its own view that the world is not really suffering, the world is as it is, and we can succeed in the world; (3) Mahayana used the idea that the world is plastic to imagination (Mind), and used fantastic images of gems, flowers, time, and bodhisattvas to get across the system and our role in it; and (4) [from (2) and (3)], the world is both a fantastic playground and we can succeed. Mahayana never reconciled these views. That it never reconciled the views contributed to its power as a system that eats the world. It is worth looking at the idea that the world is as it is because of its role in visions such as Zen. We can see this Mahayana idea better in contrast to Theravada.

If the awakened world and sleeping world were not the same, then there would be a difference between awakened people and sleeping people. In Mahayana, there is not. So the awakened world and sleeping world have to be the same. The two ideas support each other.

On the one hand, if an idea, practice, or work of art does not change our world then there is little point in committing to it. It is only an amusement. Great ideas and works of art change the way we see the world so much that, in effect, they reveal a new world to us, different than the world in which we had been living. In moving from the old world to the new world, we discredit the old world. We find the old world false in some important aspects. The old world is not necessarily false in the sense of a pernicious delusion but might be false by not living up to its promises and-or our needs. On the other hand, the new world can't be too different than the present world or the difference would be so bizarre that we could not handle it. Even in "The Matrix", the imaginary world is very close to the normal world before the apocalypse, and, while the real world is bleak, still it has people, food, water, machines, programs, life, and death. We have to be able to adapt. The new world must be truer than the old world. If we test the new world, and find it false, then we return to the old world although we know it is not entirely true. Sometimes people can abandon a discredited old world without having a better new world to go to right away, but not very often. We can't leave "here" unless we have a better "there" to go to.

Theravada does not have to prove the world false, only show that it is not worthwhile. But, as a matter of fact, Theravada does harshly discredit the world so as to get us to stop clinging to the present world. The world is not what it seems because people are deluded and follow illusions. People think the world is all about love, affection, planning for the future, and having an immortal soul that goes to heaven. Instead, the world is all about cause-and-effect on bundles that only appear to be a full human self; there are no selves as we think; and we do not have fully free will. As a result of seeing all this, an awakened person lives in a different world than does a person who is still deluded and asleep.

Mahayanists rejected this attitude toward the world. Mahayanists had four motives. (1) To discredit Theravada, Mahayanists had to pick apart the Theravada discrediting of the present world. They had to

discredit Theravada discrediting. They had to re-credit the present world, at least in some ways. They had to place the Theravada discrediting in the greater context of their own style of discrediting and crediting. They had to show that Theravada ideas were wrong. They had to make sure the present world is much as it seems to be. (2) Mahayanists really like this world. They think this world is much more worthwhile than Theravada did. (3) If Mahayana was to appeal to many people, it had to give them a world with meaning for them. It had to come up with a world that preserved the freedom that Theravada had given common people as people and as individuals. Theravada freedom was enough to attract landowners, merchants, soldiers, and the aristocracy but not enough to hold them. Mahayana had to give those people a world that was essentially like their everyday good world but that allowed them to tap into spiritual power too. Mahayana had to give them a world in which they could pursue success while feeling religiously correct. Christianity did the same thing in its arena, using the words of Jesus. (4) To extend (1), Mahayanists had sparkling imaginations. They had another vision of real world, a vision that mixed wonder with mundane reality. To support their glittering vision, they could not allow Theravada to discredit the world in Theravada fashion. Mahayanists might need to discredit this obvious world a bit to shift over to their alternative world but they would not need to discredit this obvious world the same way as Theravada did. To support their vision, Mahayanists still need to discredit the Theravada discrediting of this world and to re-credit this world somewhat.

The motives are not all compatible, but I don't sort out what can go with what. Mahayanists show all four motives and mix them up. There is no point speculating too much about which is the real motive.

It helps to look at how mechanistic reductionism discredits this world and how I respond. Like Theravada, mechanistic reductionism also says that everything is a matter of cause-and-effect, we are all machines, we are nothing but machines, and we have no immortal souls with total free will. I don't dispute much of that. My issue is not whether this idea is accurate but whether it is complete and whether I can live by its picture. It is accurate as far as it goes. I think it is not complete, and I know that I can't live by it. I don't have to return to a made-up world of souls and free will to live by a better alternative. All I have to do is assume the real world is much as it seems. The world is as it is. Clouds might be the product of cause-and-effect but they are real just the same. The color red might arise out of cause-and-effect but it is a color, and it is red, all the same. Love is real. My wife, kin, and friends are real. I allow qualities. I allow that various things are real. To allow qualities and a rich reality does not mean I have to live in a false world of illusion and delusion. That depends on how open-minded I am.

Mahayana takes a similar attitude toward the present world as I do but not exactly as I do. The world is not an ugly delusion. An awakened person does not reject the present world as an ugly false delusion, and that is not how he-she sees the world after awakening. After awakening, the world is as it always has been. Cause-and-effect go along but they contribute to the richness of the world. To a person before enlightenment, the wonder of the world seems like magical illusion, as science would seem to a stone age person. To a person who has awakened, the wonder of the world seems like the natural scientific play of mind, a richer deeper science. What we now think of as fantasy and illusion are really an integral part of the same world. After we wake up, we can accurately gauge the extent to which we ought to commit ourselves to anything. Thus there is no reason to distance yourself from this world. You might as well participate in this world because it is the only world. You only have to not cling to anything in this world more than it merits.

If this were the extent of the Mahayana re-crediting of this world, it would be charming. I would love to go along with this version of the re-credited world. But this version would not have caught on. People need much more. So, instead, Mahayana offered people an augmented re-credited world: The world is as it is. In addition, everybody gets saved eventually. You are part of the joyous system of many souls. You and the real world are at one with the deepest level of truth. Because everybody gets saved eventually, you can continue to do what you want as long as you want. Although the world is mostly as it seems, it is not entirely as it seems. The ways in which it is not as it obviously seems do not undermine your desire for worldly success, as in Theravada. There is a gap between the obvious real world and the real world only because the real world is more fantastic and interesting than most people can imagine. The identity between your soul and the real world is only one aspect of how interesting the real world is. The world goes on forever. To be saved is to understand the identity between your soul and the real world. Because your soul and the real world are identical, you are already saved, you only need to see this. Eventually you will see it. In the meantime, you have all the help you might need in the bodhisattva.

Mahayana could not have offered this version of the world and the self if it had not said first that the world before awakening and the world after awakening are the same world.

This view of self and world is like the metaphysical-ized Bhagavad Gita as I gave it in an earlier chapter on Codes. This Mahayana view is much like the intellectual Hindu view. Once Mahayana developed this view, it no longer differed from standard Hinduism, and so it disappeared. (Standard Hinduism did not develop until several hundred years after Mahayana disappeared, but the precursors were firmly in place, and so the argument stands.) In other places where this view was not already widespread in the culture, Mahayana because the principle vehicle for this view, caught on, and spread, in places such as China, Korea, Japan, and, eventually, the West.

Some Zen thinkers saw this situation and saw that the augmented re-credited world likely was a mistake. They developed the idea of “just wake up” without necessarily waking up to any pre-conceived ideologies. Unfortunately, Zen never got out of the Mahayana metaphysical heritage and often is mired in difficult doctrinal traps.

What is a world like where the awakened world and the sleeping world are the same? If I could convey this idea, I would be a Buddha, and I am not. According to Mahayana doctrine, it cannot be described. To me, if the awakened world and the sleeping world were alike, the situation would be much like the mystic idea that this world already is perfect and heavenly. I cannot see how the two ideas differ. I have already rejected that mystic idea in the chapter on common themes. In any case, here are some hints: (A) It is like watching a parade while marching along with the parade. (B) It is like being a character in a play in a play, like the “play within a play” in “Hamlet”. (C) It is like watching the “Matrix” world of numbers and then realizing you were also a sequence of numbers, watching numbers, and that somewhere there were other sequences of numbers watching you, as a sequence of numbers, watching them. (D) It is like watching a drug addict desperate for a “fix” and thinking that is part of it all too, it adds to the variety, and it is good in its own way. (E) It is like hearing the birds singing then realizing they are screaming at the top of their lungs “I, me, me, mine. Mine, mine, mine, stay away you shitheads, stay away”. (F) It is like realizing that the nuclear energy of the sun that sustains all life is the same nuclear energy that powered the bombs dropped on Japan in World War Two.

Think of the re-credited present world in light of the dialog above. This world is the awakened world. If the awakened world is worthwhile, then this world must be worthwhile. If this world is not worthwhile, then the awakened world cannot be worthwhile. If this world is worthwhile, then daily life is as it is even if we don't see all of it at once, and daily life is good even if we don't appreciate it all the time. It really can be that simple.

The idea that this world is the awakened world, this awakened world is alright, and so this world must be alright too, played a role in Zen. This attitude toward the world merges easily with the Taoist view of the world. Please keep all this in mind for the chapters on Taoism and Zen.

Optional: “Suffering is an illusion” and “Everything already is as it should be”.

The ideas in the slogans are fairly common. There are akin to “eternity in a moment” and “the universe in a grain of sand”. “Everything already is as it should be” is like the idea from above that we already are in heaven. I cannot here go into the ideas much more. Please see essays apart from this book. The idea-slogan that “suffering is an illusion” appears often in Mahayana and Hinduism, and it confuses people, so I say a few words. If this material annoys you, skip this section.

Within any one life, a person might suffer. But “the show must go on”; and so the system goes on. If we could see the system, then we would see that the system of many lives is joyous. The suffering of one life is needed to make the system fun to play, and to enhance the overall joy of the system, just as, for some people, rugby is more fun than golf, and rough sex is more enjoyable than nice sex. Suffering does not characterize the system as a whole. So, suffering is not really real.

If suffering is not real, then either Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha must have been confused, or he must have said the world is plagued by inevitable suffering only as an expedient half-truth to get people over a hurdle to where some people might see a bigger full truth. Mahayana chooses the second option. I don't think you can have this cake and eat it too but I leave that issue to Mahayanists.

Suffering is not real because it is only something that takes place within the context of the system and is useful primarily because it carries the system along. Nobody really suffers forever or dies forever, and whoever suffers now is likely to experience joy in a future life. Everything within the system has a place within the system and takes its place in the system. Everything contributes to the continuation and joy of the system, including suffering. Suffering is not what the world is about even when suffering contributes to what the world is about. Anything that does this cannot be true deep suffering but can be only transient apparent suffering. Real suffering is never to know that you are a part of the system and that your own suffering now contributes to the greater system. “Hold up. It only lasts for a while. You can get through it. Other sentient beings can learn by your example.”

Because suffering is only for a time and only on the surface, and everything matters in the system, then everything already is as it should be. We need not change anything, not even suffering. If we do act on a big component of the system such as suffering, then likely the system had already anticipated what we would do, and we only contributed to what had to be anyway. It is still meritorious to act against suffering because acting against suffering is as much a part of the system as enduring suffering. When we have to endure suffering, it can help to know it is not what the world is all about.

Suffering is only one part of the system, a part that the system has anticipated, and a part that plays its part to support the system. Yet the same is true of EVERYTHING in the system, including Buddhas, bodhisattvas, apple pie, mothers, Zen, preaching, caring for sentient beings, medical practice, cherry blossoms, and joy. There is no difference between them. That is one reason why Mahayanists insist the enlightened (awakened) and unenlightened (sleeping) worlds are the same. If suffering is not real, then all these other things are not real either. Yet Mahayana insists they are real. They are real because they are parts within the system and help carry it along. That is the definition of real in this world.

So suffering is real too. It is just as real as anything. Pain really hurts, at least for a while. Suffering over love or errant children really hurts, at least for a while. I have seen enough people on their death bed with cancer to know that is real. Suffering might not be as real as the whole system – but nothing within the system is. The joy that is characteristic of the system as a whole might outweigh any suffering within the system. But, still, given the rules of the system, suffering is real. It is not merely an illusion.

It can be useful to say “suffering is only an illusion” to some people to get them to see beyond the narrow confines of their life now to the big system. But teachers who use this expedient means should be careful not to set up bad discriminations between suffering and other real aspects of the world within the system. Once students see that suffering is an illusion, they must also be taught that all the rest of the world is an illusion too, and so all the world, including suffering, is equally illusory and equally real.

We would like to believe that everything we don't like is only an illusion or is much less important than everything we do like. We would like to believe that suffering is only an illusion while bravery, facing up to duty, love, loyalty, and the ability to overcome, are all really real. To think this way can point us in the right direction but it can also mislead. Try to see both at the same time.

The fact that we should not hold on to strong distinctions between suffering versus the good qualities of the world is a case of how we can go astray if we hold on to distinctions between things, between this and that, and especially between good and bad. This issue arises in Taoism and Zen. To anticipate, we need to overcome (1) aversion to distinctions as much as we need to overcome the ideas that (2) suffering is not real and is real and we need to overcome (3) holding on to distinctions. We have to see what to hold on to how and when, and what to let go of how and when.

As with much in Buddhism, you have to make up your own mind. Not even a bodhisattva can make up your mind for you.

A deistic view might go like this: The ultimate reality is God, and God does not suffer in the same way that humans suffer. God knows suffering because he knows it through us but he does not suffer as we do. Rather, God feels joy because, overall, his creation is good. True suffering for humans is not to know God; true suffering is not a broken nose or a disappointing date. Even so, within the context of what God created, given what it means to be human, humans do suffer, that suffering is real, and God knows it is real for us. If we trust God, God will reward us later, and that will far more than make up for any suffering we do now. God does not look down on us because our suffering is limited and small compared to his mind. We need to keep all perspectives in thinking about suffering. Sharing our experience in suffering and in overcoming suffering can help other people, and God wants that.

Dual Attitude: This World is all there is but there are also many Fantasy Worlds.

The contradictions in Mahayana show up in contradictory attitudes about reality, fantasy, and the world. On the one hand, this world is all there is, and it is just as it appears. On the other hand, this world is a giant fantasy, of which we see only a small part. If we were awake enough, we would see the fantasy, the true world, and see that our normal world is only a dim shadow of the deeper more fun fantasy. That is how we see eventually that suffering is only an illusion. Suffering is real in this world but not in the fantastic world of which this world is only the dim shadow. Which attitude wins depends on the writer and the audience.

Along with the dual attitude to this world comes another dual attitude about many worlds: Mahayana valued this world but Mahayana also spun out fantasies of extravagant paradises. This world is only a dim shadow of another fantastic and realer world. There are other shadow worlds. Some of those other shadow worlds surely are more interesting and better than our dim shadow world even if they are not ultimate reality either. Still, they would seem like paradise to us. Rather than aspire to final awakening, we can aspire to one of those other better worlds. In those other better worlds, we learn truer versions of Buddhist ideas and are more likely to learn spirituality. Each better world has its own patron bodhisattva. Mahayana was a giant fantasy world factory. This aspect of Mahayana can be much fun.

In theory, good teachers can use this aspect of Mahayana to teach spiritual lessons and to guide people to better belief and better action. That is part of what is included under “expedient means”. This does not happen as often as it should.

In practice, this trend toward other worlds and paradises turned into “millennial” movements. People use this world as a stepping stone to other better worlds. Teachers develop methods that people can use to go to other worlds, such as reciting sutras, chanting verses, sitting in certain kinds of meditation, eating or not eating foods, paying money, having sex, etc. People love this sort of thing, and Mahayana obliged. Kipling made fun of it in his novel “Kim” in the relation between the rich woman and the monk. Mahayana seems to be more prone to this fantasy fulfillment than other major religions except Hinduism. Christianity and Islam had their versions as well. I give a brief example below of a Mahayana version.

Another Kind Word: Everybody is a Valuable Person.

If all we are is a bundle of grasping tendencies, it is hard to feel good about ourselves. The Buddha did say that everybody is capable of working out his-her own salvation, and that idea helps us recover good feelings about ourselves, but it is not always enough. Mahayana said that we are all equal parts of a great system, and that idea does appeal to ordinary people. It makes them feel important. Mahayana supported this idea by saying we are all already the heroes of the system, bodhisattvas, even if we don't know it yet. Because the overall system is good, we are its heroes, and the awakened life is the same as ordinary life, we can pursue ordinary lives feeling justified and confident. These ideas too helped promote Mahayana. I don't think we are important because we are the hero-of-the-system in disguise, but the idea that people are important is a good idea, and I agree with it. It is worth looking at this idea in Mahayana for its own sake and because it played a part in later developments in Mahayana, in particular the development of Zen.

In trying to explain how everybody is capable and already saved, Mahayana had to provide a model for (1) individual minds, both as they are effective and as they are deluded, (2) the effective one general Mind of which every particular mind is a part, and (3) their union. Mahayana had to show how we think at several levels in several ways. In doing so, Mahayana anticipated modern analyses of the mind. It advanced the work already begun by the Buddha. Here I cannot go into the details of these Mahayana analyses of mind and Mind.

One of the most important sutras in Mahayana is the “Vimalakirti” Sutra. It is named after an awakened layman, a merchant, who knows far more than most monks and who kicks the spiritual pants off most of the Buddha’s best students. Vimalakirti is fabulously wealthy. He “owns the world” but is not owned by the world. Vimalakirti understands wordless direct transmission of the Buddhist Dharma. He knows that the regular world is also the divine world but that we are confused and do not know. Vimalakirti differs from other lay people in being quite intelligent but that is not why he is spiritually successful. Vimalakirti is successful because he knows he already is a Buddha-bodhisattva while ordinary people, including most monks, do not know. It is not clear why he knows about the world and about being a bodhisattva while other people do not know. Anyhow, his knowledge gives him power over the world, over magical spiritual beings, and over people. Vimalakirti can tap into knowledge to defeat the other students of the Buddha. Often, Vimalakirti defeats other students through his control of reality and illusion, and his ability to make seeming fantasy come true. It is an excellent example of fantasy worlds in Mahayana. The Vimalakirti Sutra is short and really fun to read.

The sutra is largely the story of Vimalakirti leading a group of advanced-but-not-quite-there-yet students of the Buddha on spiritual and fantastic adventures, and through tricks, until they “get it”. The sutra is a good example of the mixture of logic, stories, and fantasy.

A fully advanced disciple of the Buddha, Gatsyapa, is having trouble with other advanced disciples who know a lot and have spiritual power but don’t get the last important step(s) both moral and for waking up. The advanced-but-not-advanced-enough disciples don’t quite see yet how they are the great system, and so they are all other people, and so should be nice to all other people. Gatsyapa takes the not-advanced-enough students to Vimalakirti. Of course, they look down on him because he is not a monk, and, in fact, he is a merchant. They don’t know he is rich and powerful. Gatsyapa and Vimalakirti pose questions and tasks to the not-advanced-enough disciples in the form of a contest versus Vimalakirti. Vimalakirti defeats them always. More importantly, in defeating the not-so-advanced students, Vimalakirti teaches them and shows them compassion. He helps them in the only way that they would take help – expedient means – and gives them what they truly need most.

In several of the tasks, Vimalakirti shows his mastery of the great system, and his unity with it, by making the appearance of reality change. He causes flowers to rain down and jewels to sprout up. He changes the shape of being such as by making them big and small or by making humans into animals and vice versa. He causes beings to change gender.

In mixing supposed reality with fantastic events and imaginary worlds, Vimalakirti shows that Mind is the source of all reality; the Great Mind and our minds are one; and so we too can create reality according to our attitude toward reality. At the same time, Vimalakirti shows that the present reality is just as real, as

fantastic, and relevant as any made-up apparently fantastic reality. Vimalakirti both relativizes and affirms normal everyday life.

The sutra deliberately makes the point that women can excel too; I won't tell you how women do it; read the sutra and see if it supports modern feminism or not.

The excellence of Vimalakirti the layman, and the fact that he affirms the normal world, allows non-monks to have great hope in Mahayana and to find a place for themselves in Mahayana. I think the sutra is early in Mahayana, so the ideas and attitudes expressed in the Vimalakirti Sutra were part of the basic ideas and attitudes in Mahayana.

This sutra led rich people, aristocrats, soldiers, and peasants to adopt Mahayana. Mahayana wanted to make normal people the equal of monks because it was still fighting Theravada and it needed the support of the community. Mahayana succeeded in taking over through ideas such as are found in the Vimalakirti Sutra. That effect does not mean the Sutra is wrong or right, but it should lead us to look at the ideas with a grain of skepticism.

Despite all the good points of the sutra, it has some bad aspects, and, for me, the bad outweighs the good.

Mahayana suggests all we need is a new attitude. I do not like this stance. The Vimalakirti Sutra is a good example of why I don't like this stance. Vimalakirti might be clever but he is not (what I consider) a good person. He is manipulative, deceitful, and arrogant. He knows he is better than almost all the other students, and acts like it. He knows he is advanced and superior, and he enjoys it. He enjoys power. He manipulates the real world as a fantasy out of his own imagination, mostly to show off. He makes fabulous worlds of flowers and gems. He enjoys being able to bend the whole world. He enjoys his tricks and status. The Sutra officially makes the point that his tricks are all designed to bring the other students to full awakening but that is not the impression I get. The idea that his behavior is expedient means toward the enlightenment of inferior others seems like a rationalization for acting badly. Maybe strong people were supposed to act like that in India at the time but I still don't like it. If Vimalakirti represents the system of the world in Mahayana, I don't like that either. Don't get me wrong. The Sutra still is worth reading. But read it critically and not with devotion.

I think the attitude of Vimalakirti is typical of Mahayana adepts and powerful lay people, and it is also typical of adepts and powerful people under later Hinduism. The Sutra gives a good idea of the direction of Indian culture after the Buddha.

In Theravada, a person who is close to awakening is usually a monk. The fact that Vimalakirti was not a monk has always been important in Mahayana. Anybody can be a spiritual hero; even a rich powerful merchant can be a spiritual hero. Vimalakirti is a role model for people who want to succeed in this world and to be spiritual heroes too. The stress varies between how much stress is put on his spiritual prowess versus how much is put on his character as a good person.

Vimalakirti is saved and knows it. We don't see how Vimalakirti got to know that he is saved but the sutra makes it seem he realized his status as a hero fairly quickly. This situation leads to a few problems.

First, on the one hand, it takes a lot of time and effort to get saved while, on the other, it takes no time or effort but simply a realization. Second, Vimalakirti knew he was saved but most of the lay people who might use him as a role model don't know. They might use him as evidence they are saved but they don't know it or feel it in the same sure way Vimalakirti does. Lay people want assurance that they are saved even if they don't know it. Third, Vimalakirti manipulates the world with miracles and displays of spiritual prowess. The world that Vimalakirti lives in does not seem like the ordinary world that ordinary people live in. It does not seem as if the world is as it is and is not otherwise. Fourth, suppose we are all already saved. Vimalakirti is rich and powerful. Most people are not. In fact, many people are miserable. It is little consolation to know you are a bodhisattva if your children are hungry. What good does it do to know that secretly you are saved and a bodhisattva? What difference does it make?

Mahayana never solved these problems. These problems played roles in the metaphysical elaborations of Mahayana. Other religions also have problems, and their problems play a role in their metaphysics. Jesus and the Trinity in Christianity is a good example.

While trying to solve an insoluble problem, Mahayana did some good. It forced Buddhists to look at the quality of normal life. It forced Buddhists to accept that normal life can be quite good and that normal people can be intelligent and adept. It forced good Buddhists to give up pretensions. It forced good Buddhists to think about involvement in this world rather than simply escaping this world, and to think about what is good or bad about involvement in this world. It reinforced the idea that the bodhisattva loves each of us individually and works for the salvation of each of us individually.

I solve some of these problems by pushing them off on to God. There is no absolute success. We don't make it on our own although we can help ourselves. Finally God decides. I don't have to speculate on grades of people. All I have to do is assume nearly everybody has the ability to be good enough and to act well enough. My assumption is not fully true but is true enough. With the dilemma settled, I can focus on the quality of life and on getting people to see more and to act better. In effect, this is what most Buddhists do too but with more theological drama along the way. Sometimes the drama is entertaining and worthwhile but often it is annoying.

Good Result: Buddhism and Imagination.

Fantasy is not always bad. Usually fantasy is good. Mahayana opens up imagination. Theravada is not very imaginative. It can be dour. Theravada countries have imaginative religion but it is usually outside mainstream Buddhism. The people of Thailand, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, and Laos certainly do not lack imagination. Mahayana does not guarantee that Buddhism will be more imaginative but it does open the door, and it provides idea grist for the fantasy mill.

Wherever Mahayana goes, there goes Buddhism too. As with Christianity carrying along the message of Jesus, Mahayana carries along the core teachings of Buddhism: personal responsibility, a critical attitude toward the world, a critical attitude toward relations with the world (clinging), a critical attitude toward selves and their relations, respect for sentience, respect for life even when life is not worthwhile in a deep sense, respect for beauty, profound morality, empathy with people not like you, cause and effect, judging according to outcomes, analysis, not picking apart without cause, picking apart properly when useful, not bolstering without cause, and bolstering properly when useful. Buddhists, even Mahayanists riddled with

fantasy and ideology, tend to have a good attitude. While Buddhism officially declares life not worthwhile, Buddhism is one of the worthwhile things in life, and tends to make life worthwhile.

If you have an aptitude for Mahayana and Hinduism, then run with it. Imagine about many lives, systems of many lives, and the joy that goes with such systems. Imagine what it is to lose your self in order to make such a system, to lose your self in a system, and to find your self again. Imagine what it is like to really help somebody in a system. Imagine what it is like to succeed or fail in such a system. Imagine when hurt is real and when it is not. Create art about it, including painting, music, and poems. I ask two things: First, don't look down on other people as deficient in depth or imagination. Second, don't create religious pyramid schemes based on worldly success or misleading spiritual success, especially if the winners in those pyramid schemes look down on people in other religions as losers.

To really get across the idea of Mahayana imagination, I would have to tell Mahayana stories. I cannot retell a Mahayana story but I can give my short version of a story from the Lotus Sutra:

A rich man had six children. They all lived in a beautiful house in a beautiful estate. The man picked up his children after school to take them home, and often brought home their friends too. One day, he picked up the friends but did not find any of his children at school. Instead, they were all at home doing various activities that each of them liked personally such as playing computer games, watching movies on TV, cooking, playing guitar, surfing the Net, texting, and talking on the phone. Unfortunately, the house had caught fire, and the father could not run in to save the children. Instead, he called them on their cell phones to tell them the house was on fire and they should run out. But, like many children, they did not believe their father, and would not come out. Luckily their friends were still in the car. So, the father had the best friend of each child call the child, and tell the child something that would make the child come out of the burning house. One friend told a child that a great guitar wizard was playing an impromptu concert in the park, and they should go see it. One friend told a child that he just got the latest version of Xbox, and they should go to his house to play it. One friend told a child that a new Thai restaurant had just opened, and was giving lessons on how to make Tom Yam Gung (shrimp soup), so they should go learn. One friend told a child that the local artsy movie theater was showing the director's cut of "Blade Runner" that day, and they had to see it. All the children came out of the house, and all were saved. Although the phone calls are lies, they serve the greater truth of getting the children out of the burning house into the beautiful estate, where they are safe, know they are safe, and can go on to the other activities described in the phone calls when appropriate. This story is an example of the good use of "expedient means" of teaching that are suited to particular people in particular situations.

Mind of Dead Ashes.

Mahayana was right in some of its criticisms of Theravada. There is no point in reviewing all the disputes between the schools. One judgment merits repeating. When we pre-judge the world as "not worthwhile", we tend to reject it completely and blindly. When we see clinging as the root problem, we want to end clinging rather than manage clinging. Clinging is an intrinsic part of the mind. We cannot have a mind without clinging. So, to eliminate clinging, we are tempted to eliminate the mind altogether. We ask of meditation that it helps us to eliminate clinging by eliminating the mind. Mahayanists said of people who follow this path that they seek to turn the mind into a "heap of dead ashes". Trying to deaden the mind and body is the mistake that the young Siddhartha made when he first studied under ascetic masters.

Young Siddhartha had to get over this mistake before he could fully awaken. Clinging might be part of the mind but we cannot get rid of the mind while we are still alive. Somehow, we can manage to have a mind and yet not cling in ways that undermine waking up. We can manage clinging. Mahayanists said Theravada had returned to the error of trying to eliminate the mind so as to eliminate clinging, and so had subverted the progress the Buddha had made. To cling to the mistaken idea of a dead mind is still to cling, and so still to have the mind that you seek to kill. This is one of the sublime ideas that can surface in Mahayana.

From what I have seen, Mahayana meditation is just as rigorous as Theravada and just as likely to turn the mind into a heap of dead ashes. Japanese Zen meditation is extremely rigorous; sometimes ironic given its goal of spontaneity. Maybe the difference between good Buddhist meditation on the one hand, Theravada or Mahayana, versus sterile asceticism on the other hand, is the guidance of an adept master who knows how to train the mind and still preserve the mind. In this regard, I think both Theravada and Mahayana fair about equally. I think adept Buddhists in both schools know how to train the mind and still keep it lively. The difference is that Mahayana has a clear doctrine that helps to keep masters aware of the problem while Theravada masters have to re-learn the idea on their own. Mahayana masters have a doctrine that tells them about the mistake of clinging to a dead mind while Theravada masters simply get to know. I am not sure how much of a difference that makes in actual practice.

Bad Results: Spiritual Pyramid Scheme (again) that Supports Fantasies.

In the 1960s, a Mahayana monk came from Europe (likely Germany or Austria) to live on Koh Samui (Samui Island of Thailand) in the Gulf of Thailand, a short hop across the water from Temple of the Foggy Garden (Wat Suan Mohk) on the mainland in Thailand. He often visited Suan Mohk. In the large meeting hall, he painted images to illustrate Buddhism. I never met him, so I can't be sure he was a Mahayana monk, but the Theravada monks that I did meet and who met him said he was a Mahayana monk, his images are from the Chinese Mahayana tradition, and most Western monks I have met are Mahayanist. His painting is skilled. I enjoyed it, and learned from it. To sum up his vision in writing, he wrote in big letters in the painting hall: "What great joy to know there is no happiness in this world". That slogan captures a core idea in Mahayana. Mahayana is a way of having joy while pretending the world is full of suffering. It is a way of having your cake and eating it too. The quest for joy pushes aside the issue of suffering. Joy replaces happiness. If we get joy, we don't have to worry about happiness or suffering. If we can't work for happiness, we can work for joy. I think, if we seek joy like this, we have left the Buddha behind. This new path might be better than the original path of the original Buddha, but I think we need to be cautious about assuming so. The slogan quickly becomes double talk. Mahayana does express some great truths but at great danger.

The German monk was intelligent, sincere, and somewhat correct. I see what he aimed at. On lesser levels, his slogan is true, and it is an important lesson in life. If we quit trying to be super-rich, we can enjoy the considerable success we already do have. If we quit pining after the air-brushed version of a movie star, we could enjoy our present spouse and family. But this is not what the monk was after, and it is not what comes out. What comes out is something like "freedom is slavery" from the novel "1984" or the contradictory chatter of the Chesire Cat and Red Queen from "Alice in Wonderland" in which words mean what the cat wants them to mean. We have a contradiction, from which we can assert whatever we want. We can make "happiness" and "joy" mean what we want. Hucksters do that. In these cases, we

have to trust the good will of our teachers, and we have to read a lot of sutras to make sure we are not fooled and we get it right.

In Mahayana, the world is not invalidated by suffering. The world can be a source of joy. If the world is illusory, we live in illusion, but illusion is not something to worry about, illusion in itself does not cause suffering, we can enjoy illusion, and we can easily overcome illusion when finally we wish. There is nothing odd to realize, so there is no awakening except to know there is no awakening. The point is the journey, not the destination. Countless bodhisattvas work all the time unceasingly for uncountable eons to save us all, that is, to get us all to realize that we have already been saved and so don't need to be saved. We don't even have to do anything ourselves except to allow bodhisattvas to save us. We need only allow ourselves to become a Buddha. We can carry on doing whatever we want to do for as long as we want to do it because the whole game does on forever, and our brief time right now need not worry us. We are saved because we are caught up in illusion, not because we get out of illusion.

This is a spiritual pyramid scheme. There is no point other than getting other people to see the same as you do. Mahayana became a religion in which some people save some other people, so the other saved people can save more other people, and then the more other people can save even more other people, and so on. You feel good not from teaching people about the value of this world but about saving them so they can save others. Yet there is no point to the saving except to go save more people. There is no point except the continuation of mystic joy in the continuation of mystic joy. There is no intrinsic message, such as "this world is not worthwhile, it is beset with suffering and illusion". I am suspicious of pyramid schemes that have no goal other than self-continuation.

This paragraph won't make full sense until the chapter on Hinduism, but it fits here. In Mahayana, you do your duty in this life so other people can do their duty, other people do their duty so you can do your duty, and the world can go on. In future lives, other people might have the role that you do now, and you might have the role that they do now. You might be the bodhisattva now but they will be the bodhisattva later. The only salvation is that it all keeps going in the joy of knowing there is not necessarily happiness in this particular life but there is joy in the total system. In Mahayana, the bodhisattvas and Buddhas are much like avatars in Hinduism. They are like Krishna from the Bhagavad Gita, or like other avatars of the god Vishnu, the god who sustains the world. They are manifestations of one of the high gods, come down to Earth to save us and to keep us going in the self-sustaining, self-justifying joyful game that is existence. This conclusion is specifically against the teaching of the Buddha. It might be true, but, if so, then the person who believes it cannot be a traditional Buddhist. Movies about the Buddha tend to take this view. People who see movies about the Buddha ought to hold in mind that the Buddha insisted he was only human and never in any way a god or an avatar of a god.

In the chapter on Theravada, I said that particular activities in life might not make life worthwhile, but, somehow, the whole experience is worthwhile anyway. Life is worthwhile. This is not the same as saying there is joy in the whole system even if this particular life is not necessarily happy. The flavor of the two ideas is different, and the difference is important. Both Mahayana and I disagree with Theravada, and we both affirm this life, but we do so in different ways, and the different ways matter.

An annoying result of Mahayana is the development of fantasies about paradises. When people don't know exactly what it is they are saved to, and being saved so you can save other people doesn't make it

as a deep guide for this world, then people find goals in traditional kinds of salvation such as paradises. Bodhisattvas save us to paradise. As the basis for spiritual pyramid schemes, the idea “not happiness but joy” supports these fantasy kingdoms. It helps people to substitute magical formulas and gigantic housing developments in the sky for serious consideration of what this life is all about and how to live it well. Anytime we have an idea that supports bad misuse, we have to go back to the idea, look it over carefully, find where it went wrong, and correct the problem. We have to correct the problem not by adding layers of mysticism but by making the situation clearer. Here I don’t describe any particularly Mahayana paradises because it takes too long. The example below has to serve.

Fantasies about joyous religious success are found in all mass popular religion in state societies. It can be hard to tell if a fantasy kingdom owes more to bad Mahayana or to bad mass religion. It helps to see an example that is not explicitly Mahayana although I think it reveals the Mahayana spirit. My wife, Nitaya pointed out a sect like this in Thailand in the 1990s. Because Thailand is Theravada, the sect should not have had features of bad Mahayana; but it did. The sect was called “Thammagai” or “dharma body of the Buddha”. The phrase is from the orthodox scriptures but that is not relevant. The sect twisted the original meaning of the scriptures so as to support a pyramid scheme in which you could buy your way into levels of joyous Buddhist heaven. If you are not happy enough here, you can buy joy in the afterlives. Orthodox Theravada allows for heaven but heaven is not important in Theravada; it is merely a leftover idea from other times. In contrast, Thammagai stresses heaven. Thammagai heaven is divided into many levels, each with its own vision of the Buddha. You get to a particular level with a money donation appropriate to that level. The sect became wealthy. The central temple was imposing, like the central church in an American mega-church network. The sect was on its way to building other luxurious temples around Thailand. Then the governing council of Buddhism in Thailand reviewed Thammagai ideas and declared them not orthodox and not Buddhist. Thailand has freedom of religion, so Thammagai can continue in some form, but it cannot present itself as orthodox Theravada Buddhism. My wife and I were not able to study the sect enough to guess if it did more harm than good overall. My impression is that Thammagai gave lip service to good Buddhist conduct but was far more focused on the money donations of believers than on their behavior.

The Benefits of Being in a System, Both East and West.

For some decent Mahayana ideas in the West, I suggest the websites of Shambhala Press and Wisdom Press, especially books for self-help. The books by the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh and the nun Pema Chodron are well-known and generally useful. Most books on all subjects are short and are written in graceful English.

Robert Thurman pioneered in presenting Tibetan Buddhism to the West. For here, we can take Tibetan Buddhism as Mahayana. As a youth with a growing interest in spirituality, Thurman writes of having the following ideas-and-feelings, and of having them validated by experiences:

- Thurman was not alone; he was part of something bigger than himself
- Something protected him
- Something guided him along, opening doors as needed, and preventing severe badness
- There were tasks for him to do to help the bigger-than-himself
- There was a plan for his life

- In serving the bigger-than-himself, he found the greatest fulfillment for himself as well
- The guiding hand was a combination of his particular karma and the greater dharma of all
- Doing all this was a source of great joy
- Tibetan Buddhism provided the best rationale for all this

These ideas-feelings are true of all major religions. For particular people that have them, the feelings-ideas are validated by experiences that reinforce their own religions; a Buddhist finds the right meditation technique where a Muslim finds the right Mosque and-or the right prayer, and both attribute that finding to forces that guide us on the right path. Where Mahayanists see karma or feel the hand of a bodhisattva in caring for them, Christians feel the guiding hand of God, Jesus, or Mary. I am not sure about Judaism as a formal religion but particular Jews do have these feelings-ideas and the feelings-ideas are in Jewish writings. Even hard-core materialists think science and morality are a bigger-than-me to which they contribute, and think that the scientific-and-moral community guides them to be a better person. Their community (scientific method practiced in a group of real people) corrects them when they are wrong, and keeps them on the right path to a greater whole.

Christians often have told me of the feeling that God guides them, helps them to find good things to do, keeps them out of trouble, gives them ways to serve, and gives them ever greater understanding. Many Christians believe God has a plan for each person. The greatest joy imaginable is finding God's plan for you and doing what God wants as part of that plan. That is the best way to worship God and to value his creation. The biggest difference with formal Christians versus Mahayana Buddhists is that Christians worship God rather than belong to a system; but that seems like not much of a difference to me when these feelings come into play.

I do not know Thurman. I cannot speak for Thurman. I guess he would not deny or belittle the feelings-ideas of any other people in any other religion. I doubt he would even say he was more accurate than other people or religions. He simply reports what works for him and what feels right to him. He acts from humility and from good-hearted useful religious relativism.

The fact that this mindset (stance) appears in all major religions does not mean either that it is true or false. It is not true just because it is common; the belief in ghosts is common but still false. Likewise, this stance is not false just because it is widespread and fills the needs of vulnerable human beings. This stance is neither true nor false just because the basis for it evolved. We have to judge what parts are true and what not.

I have already denied karma previously in the book, and I have denied in this chapter that bodhisattvas secretly guide us. I doubt God has a detailed secret plan with a goal for each of us. I doubt God interferes directly in the world to help individuals, nations, or religions, although he might intervene a little bit sometimes. Rather, God, through evolution, gave us enough natural abilities to enjoy the world, get along pretty well, and be good people. God set up the world with enough variety and opportunities so we each can make lives that are meaningful to us and serve God. I try not to mistake the richness of the world, and the cleverness that God-through-heredity gave me, for direct divine intervention in everything. I try to enjoy the results when I can, and to use the richness and opportunities to good ends.

The Mahayana vision in general is like Thurman's feelings-ideas. If you feel any of these feelings, similar to Thurman about being part of a big system, or even have ideas more in line with what I think of being a small player in God's carefully crafted world, there is nothing wrong with you, and you have nothing to be ashamed about. Think what might really be true and not true. Think what difference it makes to what you do or don't do. Would you do what you do anyway even if you were not guided by the hand of God or by the dharma? Would you act according to the right principles anyway? You can still find a role for God, dharma, or science even if you base your acts on right principles.

Mahayana and Good Institutions.

Like Theravada, Mahayana does not intrinsically give rise to good ideas and institutions such as respect for law, the Western value given individuals, teamwork, democracy, science, charity, schools, hospitals, social justice, and taking care of nature. Mahayana can understand their value when it sees them, and it can be interpreted to support the institutions once they are set up. Mahayana can lend itself to good government and society once they get going. Japan and Korea are examples. It is up to the people of particular countries to value proper institutions, set them up, and to find in Buddhism the right attitudes to keep good institutions going. I think that will happen in most Buddhist countries, even in China where Buddhism supposedly died out, and even in Burma (Myanmar) where socialist tyranny has tried to stamp out Buddhist rationality for many decades.

Mahayana, Bodhisattva, Formal Christianity, and Jesus.

This section is not a comprehensive comparison of formal Christianity with Mahayana. This section only makes a few points of comparison. Formal Christianity, Mahayana, and Hinduism are systems that eat the world. I do not explain here how. In this section, I mix items from formal orthodox theology, Christian and Mahayanist, with items of common belief. I do not pick silly items of common belief. I do not defend my choices here.

Either formal Christianity or Mahayana might be true despite being a system that eats the world. It is not likely both can be true but I don't argue here which might be most true. I am already on record declaring that the teachings of Jesus are the most important. People with good intentions who argue that "both are true" mean the points that the systems share in common are true, such as we should be good to each other and that God and the Dharma both care for us and guide us. You have to decide what the points are and how true they are. You have to decide if these true points make either Christianity or Mahayana as a system true, true enough, or more true than alternative systems.

Keep in mind these different views of Jesus:

(1) The idealized Jesus who is fully God, and who is perfect in all ways. This view of Jesus might be true. You have to decide.

(2) The human Jesus of official Christianity who had difficulties but overcame them because he was God and was effectively perfect. This Jesus is included in Jesus (1) unless otherwise stated.

(3) The real human Jesus from my point of view, who was human, made mistakes, sometimes erred, but still managed to convey great truths and start a great movement.

A large share of the Jesus that we think about was not the real historic Jesus but is the mythical idealized Jesus of a system that eats the world, like the bodhisattva. Formal Christianity holds that all these Jesus-es coincide exactly.

The fact that both Jesus and the Buddha were real persons does not bear on these issues. The fact that Jesus was real while bodhisattvas are largely made up might bear on these issues in another account but not here. The fact that Jesus might have been resurrected does not bear.

Above I said both Christians and Mahayanists feel they are guided by something bigger-than-me, and this common feeling makes the religions more similar than different. This feeling can be part of a system that eats the world by keeping people part of the beliefs. I cannot here go into detail how this effect happens in general or in each of Christianity and Mahayana.

In theory, Mahayana and Christianity differ in this: In Christianity, people can go to hell forever. Most people are not saved. Only a few people go to heaven to be with ideal Jesus. In Mahayana, everybody is saved eventually; everybody awakens eventually even if only to the fact that they have been saved-and-awakened-as-part-of-the-Dharma-system all along. Awakening feels good, even better than heaven. Some people might go to heaven or hell for a few lifetimes but eventually everybody awakens, and then heaven and hell are irrelevant.

In practice, there is less difference between the two religions. Nearly all Christians believe they and their families will go to heaven to be together and to be with ideal Jesus forever. Only really bad people go to hell such as Judas, Hitler, popes if you are Protestant, John Calvin if you are Roman Catholic, current (2016) politicians that we hate such as Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, people of ethnic groups that we hate, and people of religious groups that we hate. So, in effect, almost everybody is saved. Jesus did not come to save only formal Christians; Jesus came to save the world. Some Christians do believe in hell, some people do not believe in hell including some Christians, some Christians (and Muslims) in effect worship the Devil through fear of him although they think they worship God, and some Christians “spout fire and brimstone”. Likewise, some Mahayana teachers spout the horrors of being almost-forever a stupid un-awakened “hungry ghost” (“pret”), who clings to this and that, and never feels satisfied. But most people, in Christianity and Mahayana, do not much fear a bad fate personally or for their families. So, the theoretical horror is there and it is real for “them” but not for “us”. We all get perfectly saved even if we are not perfect.

I have said already what I think: many people are not saved even if they don't go to hell. Most people meet God and then vanish.

Both Mahayana and Christianity have elaborate systems and theologies.

Both religions need intermediaries to help people through the maze. Both have a divine hero that can transcend sin and-or karma to forgive people and get them to heaven. In both, the divine hero is not quite identical to utmost reality – utmost reality is God-the-Father in Christianity and Dharma-Buddha-Mind-

Void in Mahayana. But that small difference doesn't matter. People have more to do with the divine intermediary than with ultimate spiritual reality. In practice, I see little difference between idealized Jesus, a great bodhisattva in Mahayana such as Kwan Yim, and a great avatar in Hinduism such as Krishna. (I avoid the question of whether, as God, Jesus is identical to God-the-Father.)

Christianity, Mahayana, and Hinduism have an army of secondary helper figures such as saints; religious heroes; founders such as Paul, Peter, Wesley, and Luther; lesser avatars; and lesser bodhisattvas.

The most important way that people relate to the divine intermediary is worship or devotion. People pray to the divine mediator. People conduct ceremonies with and through the divine mediator. People seek a personal relation with the divine mediator.

The divine mediator is the ultimate principle manifested as physical presence. The divine mediator does not merely represent the ultimate reality through a mere a physical "spokes person" but actually is the highest reality in physical form. There would be no physical reality without the divine mediator. All things are made by and through him-her. It is no clearer how this happens in Mahayana than in Christianity but it is just as certain.

The mediator is so vague that we can project onto him-her whatever qualities and character we wish. He-she is everything to every person. He-she is loving, wrathful, kind, stern, indulgent, strict, a teacher, a punisher, a judge who sends us to hell, a teacher who leads us to heaven, a parent, sibling, child, lion, or lamb. He she can easily validate whatever ideas we have about religion and the world because we can project onto him-her whatever evidence we need to validate our ideas. We make him-her into us.

The mediator figure sacrifices him-herself for us. The mediator figure makes an ultimate sacrifice. Only that big of a sacrifice can save us, and that big of a sacrifice is sure to save us. In Christianity, Jesus lets himself be crucified, but Jesus sacrifices more than that. He endures stupidity, taunts, hatred, jealousy, stubbornness, vindictiveness, and all the badness hidden in human souls. The bodhisattva endures as much, and contrary to what Christians misunderstand, bodhisattvas do sacrifice their lives for us. Stories in the sutras feature bodhisattvas giving their lives so common people might have their lives and might progress spiritually. Bodhisattvas allow themselves to be eaten by tigers or fabulous beasts, bitten by snakes, and torn apart by nasty kings. More importantly, bodhisattvas deny themselves final release so they can stay down here in the ugly world with us sinners, thereby win us all, and thereby make this world the real heaven. They stay down here a very long time, much longer than Jesus did. This long painful residence among the many ignorant often vicious beings is at least as hard as dying on a cross.

The next point needs a prior point: The potential in Christianity for good deeds in themselves, for doing the right things for the right reasons, is undercut by what Christians actually do and why they do it. Christians theoretically have specific tasks as a result of believing in God and Jesus. Christians need to follow the points outlined in Chapters One and Two. Christians need to follow the Golden Rule, and to treat everybody as a near neighbor. Sometimes Christians teach, provide medical care, build dams, protect forests, carry out offices honestly, etc. but they do all as specific acts of true Christian caring. In fact, far too few Christians really do this even if Christians as a whole do this better than others. Rather than do what Jesus told us to do, most Christians simply worship Jesus. Christians think that worship can make up for not doing. Christians substitute worship for doing the right things for the right reasons just as

Christians accused Jews of substituting temple sacrifice for a right heart. Buddhists don't have the duty of compassion spelled out in specific acts and attitudes.

Because of the real behavior of Christians and Mahayanists, the religions tend to be pyramid schemes. Believers act so as to go to heaven. They espouse general good principles such as "love your neighbor" and "compassion" so as to go to heaven but they do not do the specific acts that make the ideals more than empty. When they do specific acts, the acts are merely means to heaven, not good things done for the right reasons, not ends in themselves. Believers recruit others people so as to make other people like themselves and to win points for heaven. In Mahayana and Christianity, you should go out and recruit. In Mahayana, you try to be a bodhisattva and to bring more people to enlightenment. In Christianity you bring more people to see that Jesus is God and to worship idealized Jesus. "Believe as we do, do as we do, go out and get others to believe the same and do the same, and you will be saved. Worship as we do and you will be saved." There is nothing in particular you have to do out of belief. In some Mahayana, people can go to heaven simply by chanting the name of a bodhisattva or chanting a verse from scripture. It helps you if you recruit others to chant. In Christianity, you go to heaven if you eat the body and drink the blood of Jesus, and only that way. It helps a lot if you get others to drink the blood and eat the body. Rather than think about what you really need to do or don't do, and rather than scare potential converts with the need to do more, you can simply worship earnestly and get other people to do the same.

A fun way to see the difference between doing for its own sake because it is good versus doing good to go to heaven is in the movie "This is the End" with Jay Baruchel and Seth Rogen. Despite silliness, the movie is serious and well done. The fact that Jews use specifically Christian themes from Revelations to make the point does not matter.

Christians stress that Jesus was a real person. Bodhisattvas were not. In fact, idealized Jesus (1 and 2) hardly differs from a Mahayana bodhisattva. Even pseudo-human Jesus-(2) of official Christianity differs little from humanized bodhisattvas in stories, heroes who have to struggle with character faults, overcome their faults, and so carry themselves onward and carry humanity along. Although Jesus-(2) was a real person while most bodhisattvas were imaginary, still, in all, because real Jesus is assimilated to idealized Jesus, he did not differ from them much.

But in real life, Jesus (3) differed. Jesus was a great prophet but also had limitations and made mistakes. Despite limitations and mistake, Jesus conveyed truths. His limitations and mistakes are not a sign of greatness, as in Romanticism and the modern day cult of the flawed hero or anti-hero. His limitations and mistakes were not something to be overcome for the sake of greater advancement both for himself and humanity, as in Mahayana. We can gain insight and help from the teachings of Jesus but cannot expect to use him as an intermediary to make everything automatically all right with us and God. We have to work on that ourselves.

Mahayanists would see the pro-active compassion of Christianity, from the teachings of Jesus, as hurtful clinging and a mistake. I don't see it as a mistake or as clinging. It can be a mistake. It can be self-serving and can support zealotry if it is misused. But it need not be a mistake. When done with open eyes, empathy, sympathy, consideration for other religions, vigor, commitment, and without hurtful zeal, it is only what it is. When done in the spirit in which Jesus taught and the early Church taught, it is a great

good thing. This is what modern people all over the world in all religions work toward even if they don't know where it came from.

Moreover, it is hard to see Christian dedication to compassion and good works as a clingy mistake when that is precisely the vow of the bodhisattva. Certainly it was not a mistake for Jesus, and it can hardly be a mistake for great Christians such as apostles. It is not worth deciding if it is a mistake for Christians in general when it is the lifework of the bodhisattva and all Mahayanists who aspire to be a bodhisattva. So, effectively, there is little difference between the honest Christian who deeply wishes to help others and the honest Mahayanist who deeply wishes to help others. If it is not a mistake for the bodhisattva, then it cannot be a mistake for Jesus, Christians, and people in general. For Christians and Mahayanists, caring for others is not a mistake but the fulfillment of the way the world works.

Given the strong commitment to a hero at the center in both Mahayana and Christianity, the big difference between Mahayana and Christianity is in the vagueness of "compassion" in Mahayana versus specific-enough commands of Jesus. In Mahayana, you can get away with vague well-intentioned self-serving ideas of compassion. In formal Christianity, you can get away with simply worshipping Jesus (1) and (2). In following Jesus properly, you cannot. You must see in terms of the Golden Rule and you must act accordingly such as by giving to charity, helping neighbors, respecting "applies equally", and promoting rule of law. Christians try to get by with simple worship and a vague idea that they love their neighbors but that is not enough and they know it is not enough. While this distinction between Mahayana and following Jesus does not seem like much, in fact, it makes all the difference. This is why Mahayana does not foster good institutions on its own. I take up vague "compassion" versus the teachings of Jesus in the chapter on Hinduism so I don't go into it more here.

Thankfully, Mahayana, like Theravada, can accept and nurture good institutions when it sees them.

When faced with major religions that (a) have so much in common, and in which (b) believers can get by with worship and with vague feelings of loving neighbors, but (c) the religions are not exactly alike, as in (c1) orthodox Christianity's view of Jesus versus (c3) orthodox Mahayana's view of the bodhisattva, we tend to make a few typical mistakes.

(1) We tend to "write off" both the religions. Both cannot be literally true. So, both must be fully false. We dismiss them both as figments of the evolved imagination brought out under conditions of agrarian state societies and carried forward into our world. They are self-serving delusions. They are the "opium of the masses". They are tools of control by powerful people over the masses. We see priests as self-serving, out for the benefit of themselves and their extended families.

While it is perfectly natural (evolved) to dismiss similar-but-not-identical idea systems, especially when they arise under similar conditions, and when both cannot be fully true, to do so is absolutely wrong. We cannot use "nothing but" this way. We cannot dismiss out of hand. This attitude of dismissal is another layer of self-serving. People with this attitude often think they are smarter than everybody else, when, in fact, they are only half-clever. They take this attitude from the wishes to feel better than everybody else, and to feel justified, just as they accuse the priests.

(2) It is also wrong to say one religion is absolutely true while the other religion is absolutely false. To defend Christianity entirely and to condemn Mahayana entirely, or vice versa, is as wrong as to dismiss both out of hand. We do not have to fall into wishy-washy useless relativism but the attitude of “us versus them” is hurtful.

(3) Common features of the religions are not necessarily true because they are common or necessarily false because they are common. Sometimes the common points are wrong; sometimes they are wrong because they are common imaginary misleading wish fulfillment. Sometimes common points are correct because they come from wisdom. Communism and fascism both have many points in common but that does not make those points items of good government or bad government. We have to look at the points to decide their value for good government. If we hear two advertisements both claim they can save us on our car insurance, that fact does not mean one or both are necessarily lying and it does not mean both firms are bad to buy car insurance from. One has to be lying but the other might still be worth buying some insurance from. Some common points of fascism and democracy really are good for government in general such as the need to work together.

I find it hard to see how a Christian could understand the construction of the Mahayana bodhisattva and not wonder how Christians had constructed Jesus the Christ – and a good Christian should not look at the bodhisattva as merely a demonic imitation of the Christ. In the same way, a Mahayanist should look at what the Christians did to Jesus and wonder how Mahayanists construct bodhisattvas. What is true and useful about the common points and what is false or bad?

(4) Rather than focus on what is common, instead believers in one religion focus on the few distinct points and make those overly-important. Christian focus on Jesus as God while Mahayanists focus on the idea that we are all saved but don't know it. The distinct points might not be true regardless of the common ideas. Both sets of distinct points might be false. Even if some of the distinct points in one religion are true, they might not be important. Even if Jesus is God, what matters is what he wants us to do. Even if we are all saved in Mahayana, what matters is how we act as good people and good citizens right now, what kind of societies we build right now.

The better approach is careful assessment. In the past, many smart dedicated fairly honest people from two places came to similar conclusions, especially about compassion and about the specific acts that go along with being a good person. In the past and present, many smart dedicated fairly honest people followed them. Forget about all the bad stuff and self-serving stuff. What is correct about the ideals and ideas of the religions? How did they come to these ideas and ideals? What can we, now in our situations with our knowledge, fairly believe from what they offer? What can we, as aspiring good people, take from them? Mahayanists and Christians before us, as real flawed evolved people with real needs and active imaginations, acting in good faith, with good intentions, and not from bad intentions, made mistakes. What mistakes did they make? Can we avoid their mistakes? Can we avoid the mistakes and still have something plausibly real to hold on to? We will make mistakes too. Can we use their mistakes to avoid our own mistakes? In making this assessment, it is alright to adopt some supernatural.

I find it much easier to adopt the full teachings of Jesus, including specifics about attitude and acts, when I think of Jesus as Jesus (3) (only human) rather than Jesus (1) or (2). I find it easier to assess religions honestly, both the good and bad, when I think of Jesus (3) rather than Jesus (1) or (2). Thinking primarily

in terms of Jesus (1) and (2) blocks my mind and keeps me further from what Jesus wanted and from God. Having done my own assessment accordingly, I prefer the teachings of Jesus, combined with practicality and Western ideals, to any alternatives. But I have learned much from alternatives. I urge people in all religions, including Judaism, Islam, Theravada, Taoism, Confucianism, and Zen, to look past their versions of (1) and (2), at least for a while. I am pretty sure Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha and wise people in all religions would agree.

Not for Smart Weird People Only.

In my version of the teachings of Jesus, you don't have to be very smart or educated to get the basic ideas and to do what needs doing. You don't need an unusual character although it helps to be a little stubborn and helps to be a lot compassionate. Everybody can understand. Everybody can do to some extent. In the modern affluent world, we can do through giving and through volunteering even when our own immediate communities are wonderful safe clean little heavens. Neither being smart nor educated are necessarily assets or liabilities. They usually help, although sometimes they can cause problems in the short run. They have helped me. But they are not necessary. When we face God, he will not give us an IQ test, personality profile, catechism test, or ask for our resume. He will ask what we did with our talents to make the world better.

In practice, in formal Christianity, Theravada, Mahayana, and Hinduism, and too often inadvertently in Taoism and Zen:

(1) You have to deal with a lot of difficult ideas. It helps to be really smart, clever, well educated, and have a monkish intellectual argumentative character. Sometimes it helps to have a mystic personality. It seems you cannot succeed unless you master and-or overcome the abstract ideas of dharma, karma, rebirth, no-self, mind only, etc. That is why people need many lives. Even when people do master those abstract ideas and develop the right personality, it is not entirely clear what you should do afterwards other than teach other people to master the same abstract ideas.

(2) You get joy from belonging to an amazingly complex convoluted beautiful system. The system is hard to understand. Not everybody can see the system or get the joy.

(3) It is theoretically possible to wake up directly without dogma but very people actually do this or can do this. If you want to get over dogma and deal directly with waking up, even that task is really hard and requires the right kind of person to succeed. It is not clear if it takes the right kind of person to do this as to succeed in a minefield of difficult ideas, as in point (1).

Contradicting me, Theravada, Mahayana, Hinduism, Taoism, and Zen would insist that, at least in theory: (1) You don't have to be smart or well-educated. (2) Anybody can see the great system and feel the joy of being in the great system. (3) Even simple-minded uneducated normal people can awaken. It is not hard to awaken. Mahayana rose was partly because it could explain how lay non-monks can succeed. To some extent, the movement in Hinduism called "bhakti", or "devotion", arose to address these issues, as we will see in a later chapter. Despite what they say, they are still wrong. In fact, they still wrestle with many difficult ideas, seek great joy in a system, and insist that only special people can succeed. Waking

up is hard to do. Even Zen masters think only special people can succeed, and they take more-than-a-little pride in being a special person who succeeds.

When we die and face God, likely few of us will get great praise. That is not the same as saying few of us have succeeded, most of us have failed, we need many lives to succeed, or God will give us many lives to help us succeed. What happens is what happens. Many of us will be satisfied with how we used our lives. All of us will feel we could have used our lives better, and all of us will feel acutely our failures. But that is not the same as saying we, in effect, failed because we did not have some great insight about a wonderful system. We can succeed enough even if we never succeed perfectly. I do not know how God deals with people who do succeed only just enough or how he deals with people who do not succeed enough.

It is a mistake to think people need to wrestle with complicated ideas to succeed. Nobody can master the complicated ideas of any of the great religions. You should not have to be a combination of Einstein and a Supreme Court Justice to succeed. Religion should not be this hard, convoluted, or indirect. We need clearer simpler ideas of what is going on and what to do. We can have clear simple ideas without fooling ourselves and without falling into misleading harmful clinging.

When Christianity, Islam, or Judaism insist that people believe particular difficult points of dogma so that people can be justified before they face God, those religions make a similar bad mistake. The idea of the Trinity is just strange, and there is no way to make it clear and believable. If we have to explain it to God when we die, we are all doomed. If we have to believe Mohammad was the greatest and last of the prophets, than most of us are doomed. There is no clear guidance about just what you can believe or not believe when you face God. I would rather people not believe foolishness. But I think it is better to stress good deeds with a well-intended heart than any points of dogma.

You should not have to be a strange religious genius or a mystic to succeed, that is, you should not have to break through all dogma mysteriously so as to act well and to succeed enough. Very few people are that kind of person. I think most of us will not get many lives so we can gradually transform into that kind of person. We have to act as best we can on the basis of the principles (dogmas) that we have now. As long as the principles are good, acting on that basis also is good enough. If, as we go along, we learn to overcome our dogmatic weights, then all the better.

I understand what religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism mean by waking up. On the simplest level, they mean seeing that we are not selfish mechanical bastards-bitches but sentient moral aesthetic beings who should have empathy and sympathy. We should understand “do unto others” and “applies equally”. Life is not simply what it appears to be. All religions teach this kind of waking up. When people wake up to that vision, then people feel joy as well as obligation. If that joy were what Buddhism and Hinduism were talking about, then I would have no problem telling people to seek the joy that comes of waking up. But Buddhism and Hinduism want more waking up and, with Mahayana and Hinduism, they want more joy. The more is unreasonable and causes problems.

I know people need rewards to act well. Yet, if you can understand a system and feel the radiating joy, then it seems you should also understand that seeking joy is not what it is all about, and you should not teach that idea to other people. If you seek joy, even in a good system, instead of doing good for its own

sake, then you act badly. You act according to Pascal's Wager (see chapter on codes) rather than act well. If you need to wrestle with abstract ideas or be a religious genius to see the system or feel the joy, then the problem is even worse.

On the one hand, we have following abstract difficult dogma, pursuing the strange joy of belonging to a huge system, or trying to wake up in a way that is very hard. Only unusual people can even think about doing any of this. On the other hand, we have a clear simple idea of what is going on and what you need to do. This way can bring the simple joys that are part of common human life and sometimes can lead to the joy of doing outstanding deeds and having great ideas. Everybody can do the basic part of this. It is not perfect success but it is success enough. If you have more than average ability, then use it. If you have only normal human ability, that is enough. To me, this difference between needing only what is already given to nearly all of us versus having to become superhuman is the biggest difference between following Jesus versus following any other teachings.

More on the False Joy of Systems and on Accepting Smallness.

The ideas to which I respond in this section are also in Hinduism.

From "Lord of the Rings" by Tolkien: Frodo offered the One Ring to Galadriel. Galadriel knew that she, likely alone on Earth, could use the One Ring to defeat Sauron, the great evil. She could be Queen of the world, and rule in apparent goodness. She refused. She said: "I diminish and remain Galadriel". She knew, if she ruled, all beings would love her, yet be slaves and live in fear. The Ring would change her and change the world even if all appeared well. She did not want to set herself up as the hero of her own system, a hero that must make a bad system despite good intentions, as must all would-be rulers of the world. She would not put the world in danger in the name of saving it. Better to risk freedom. Sam also carried the Ring for a while. Sam dreamed of being the world's great gardener, and of setting the whole world aright through sound gardening tenets writ large. Sam had the sense to know it was all a delusion of the Ring. Frodo could not throw the Ring into the fire because he came to believe he could be the hero of his system for the world – the circle of fire. It is dangerous to be the hero of your own world system even with all the good intentions in the world.

You can do a lot of good without being the hero of a great system. You can still work hard to make the world better and still work hard in a great cause. You can still fight evil. In seeking to be the hero of a great system, you will undercut your ability to do good and you will support a bad system.

The bodhisattva is the would-be hero of a great world system. The world system is made by Mind or Emptiness. The bodhisattva represents Mind and Emptiness. So, the bodhisattva is the hero of a world system that he-she makes. Because the bodhisattva is the role model for Mahayana, all Mahayanists, indirectly or directly, seek to be heroes of their own system that eats the world. The system is not overtly about power but neither would Galadriel's intend power at first. Certainly Vimalakirti takes much joy in demonstrating his power. The most efficient power is not control over bodies but control over the mind and over hopes, including the hope for salvation-and-success for you and your family.

Here are some silly examples from my life to show that I have some sense of the mysticism suitable for Mahayana, I am not simply defending God and Jesus because I grew up in a Christian nation, and I am

not simply reacting against something I have no feel for: I have: mind-melded with a bug; floated for a long time on sparkling waves; felt the illusion of time; and felt the endless variation of the world and endless interest of being. In Mahayana and Hinduism, after the present joys have been appreciated, more joys will come; what seem like troubles now are not really troubles but are only joys in disguise; more outright joys and joys-in-disguise will always come in endless variation.

I understand “not discriminating”. When we seek heaven, we imply hell. When we know that, we know it is better not to have either extreme. We make problems when we discriminate, such as we need ugliness to appreciate beauty or need badness to appreciate goodness. Splitting hairs leads to badness and suffering. I understand Emptiness; I know Emptiness is not simply nothing; and I know how we can think that all things flow out of Emptiness. I know we help to make reality. I know that a Mind lies behind it all, and that our minds are like the great Mind behind it all.

I understand: being part of something bigger than myself; the idea that I am a reflection of God; the idea that God sees the world through me; the idea of an original “Buddha Mind”; the idea that I might be the same as it; and the “Storehouse Memory” which holds all things in a vast puddle of indiscrimination, and from which all things flow.

I understand: how we can be both this particular me and the whole all at once; how the individual does not lose his-her identity on being one with the whole; and how the whole does not get broken by dividing into particular individuals. I know how we can think of the individual, whole, Buddha Mind, Emptiness, and the Storehouse Consciousness as all the same thing.

I understand how suffering can seem more than it is, that a lot of suffering is temporary, and that the joy we feel often more than makes up for the suffering. I see how the joy that Sally feels seems as if it can make up for the suffering of Bob.

I understand the idea that I might, in a way, be God. The idea of being God goes well with the ideas that we are part of a system in which joy flows out endlessly and that we should not discriminate.

Yet I reject that we live in a system of endless joy and that really we are God, Emptiness, Dharma, or Mind. The world is not one whole homogenous indiscriminate pudding. We must discriminate “this from that”, part from whole, and creature from creator, to live at all and to live properly. I accept differences between good and bad, bad and evil, beautiful and ugly. I reject the idea that not discriminating can lead us to a system of joy in which we are the eyes of God and the heroes of the system.

I am sure most people who hold the bodhisattva ideal intend well and have a good character. To wish to save all people, even at great cost to yourself, reflects a good person with good intent. Any Christian who does not understand this kind of person and this goal should not call him-herself a Christian. Yet you can have a good character and high ideals and still be wrong.

This situation is like that of a “saint” in Christianity. Good people give up trying to be a saint. Rather than set out to be a saint, just do what you have to do, and don’t worry about sainthood. Whether you achieve sainthood is irrelevant. Sainthood is something other people think about. If you did what you could do, that is enough. There is nothing better. If what you could do saves some system, then fine; if it does not,

then fine too. When you work on your tasks, you will find the size that you are is the right size. Rather than trying to be the hero of your own endless joyful system, simply do what good you can right here right now. Diminish and remain yourself. You will do much more good that way.

The situation is like that of a brave soldier who is labeled a hero and given a medal. The soldier likely did not think of him-herself as a hero when acting, and usually does not like it now. He-she did not do it for a great system, to save the world, or to be the center of a great system, but usually to save friends nearby. The soldier endures a label because of the need for role models.

Saints, soldiers, and anybody, still can work hard to make the world better and still work in a good cause. Sometimes we have to work in a worldwide cause such as fighting evil, fighting fascism, figuring out capitalism, fighting poverty, or helping nature. But that does not make us heroes of our own great system anymore than Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt were heroes of their own great system and were bodhisattvas.

In the Indian tradition, in both Mahayana and Hinduism, a great person can either totally renounce the world or totally conquer it. I deny either extreme. To not renounce the world does not mean instead that you must try to conquer the whole world. To not conquer the world does not mean instead to renounce the world entirely. People who try to conquer the world often find themselves so at odds with reality that, in effect, they renounce the world. To renounce the world is too often an indirect way of trying to conquer it, as with the bodhisattva. The two poles can be the same thing in disguise. Instead, simply accept your place in the world and the limited good that you can do if you try hard to make the world better. That is my idea of the middle path in this situation.

The bodhisattva effectively conquers the world by first renouncing the world and then by delaying his-her own awakening (renouncing his-her renouncing) so as to save everybody. You cannot indirectly conquer the world by renouncing the world for yourself but conquering it for others. You cannot use other people as an excuse to conquer, not even if you are a good person with good intentions. All terrible tyrants think they are doing the world a great favor. (To avoid this mistake, this trap, and the badness that flows from it, you likely have to accept that not everybody is saved.)

(The Buddha thought life was not worthwhile ultimately; but his stance does not mean he renounced the world in the same sense as did the ascetics that he rejected or as a bodhisattva delays final awakening so as to save the world. I do not try to find the correct middle path between conquering and renouncing for the Buddha or people like him.) (As Indo-Europeans, the West carried the false dichotomy between conquering versus renouncing, including conquering indirectly through renouncing, into images such as Christian ascetics, Jesus' trial by Satan in the desert, and starving artists. Tolkien tried to work his way through this false dichotomy but did not always succeed.)

An easy good way to get out of this dichotomy is to stop thinking in terms of a system that eats the world (conquers and-or conquers by renouncing) and how to be its hero.

We think more clearly when not in a system that eats the world. Simple belief in God does not lead to a complicated, contradictory, confusing system that eats the world, as do Mahayana, Hinduism, formal Christianity, and some Islam. Only rare people can think well when befuddled by aids that are supposed

to make sense of Mahayana contradictions and when beguiled by paradises and get-saved-quick schemes. The people who can think clearly then do not usually conclude they are the hero of their own system. We need to accept objective reality, that joy and suffering are real. We are entitled to reject some things while embracing others. When we can think clearly, we more likely will act well and support the right institutions.

Why do you wish to face an endless joyous system instead of a personal God? Why do you wish to be part of an endless joyous system? Why do you wish to be the hero of an endless joyous system? It is selfish, prideful, and creepy to think of yourself as God in an endless joyous system or to think of yourself as God in any context. It is only a little less creepy to think of yourself as the hero of such a system. Even if we live in a system with a lot of joy in it, that fact does not mean the system is essentially joyous; the joy goes on forever; you go on forever joyful; you are God of the system; or that holiness, the joyous system, and you are identical. To think so is to raise you beyond what you should be. You raise yourself not in the good way of striving “to be all that you can be”. You do not transcend your limited self in a good way. You raise yourself in the bad way of striving to be what you cannot be, perverting your nature, avoiding the goodness you could have made, and destroying the goodness you could have made.

To get a proper perspective, think of raising yourself to the status of God-or-hero in a system that is not joyous but is neutral, focused on power, or focused on righteousness. Dwelling on the system as joyous allows you to fool yourself about the system, your place in the system, and your true nature.

I see the affinity between the idea that God loves us and watches over us with the Mahayana ideas that we are always already saved and the world is Dharma's playground. But there is a difference between the feeling that I am a small, finite, creation of God versus the Mahayana feeling that I am a part of the system, and that each part of the system, including me, reflects the whole system. I can accept one role but not the other.

We are better off, and the world is better off, if we accept what we are, even if that means we are limited, we cannot be all, our finite limits are not an indirect way for God to be infinite, we will not suffuse in joy, we are not God, and we will not go on forever. God can work through you even if you are not infinite or not a spark of the infinite. We get more if we accept this than if we seek what corrupts us.

Don't “pretend let go” (don't let go in a pretend way). Don't “let go” of the finite individual person from the perspective of right now so you become a part of the great joyous system from the perspective of eternity. Don't accept small as a devious way to be the hero of a big system. Really let go. Really accept your smallness. Forget about system entirely. Forget about being God, hero, or saint in any way. Just accept being a limited you, and that is all. It is enough.

Don't let go because you think your sacrifice somehow indirectly does save the system. That is not letting go. That is another stronger stickier clinging. Sacrificing yourself that way does not indirectly save the world, as in the movie “Sucker Punch”. In fact, this world, Planet Earth, the only relevant world for you and all humans, might not be savable now. It might end up an overpopulated slum stink. To pretend to be little here as an indirect way to save this planet will not save this planet. Diminishing yourself here, by trying to be a bodhisattva or in self-sacrifice to save this planet, will have no effect on the other millions of planets with sentient beings.

People who have seen an endless joyous system and believe in it have trouble accepting that others can have an equally clear powerful vision of a system yet not believe in it. People who have seen a personal single moral God have trouble accepting that others can see a personal single moral God yet can prefer an endless joyous system. I don't know how to get over these impasses without the sort of relativism that I find as distressing as playing the hero in an endless joyous system.

It can be alright to work hard to be an ordinary hero both because it feels good to be a hero and because heroes do help others. This is a lesson of decent capitalism and a theme in "Huckleberry Finn" and "Tom Sawyer". We are only human, and striving to be a merely human hero often enough led to success when we evolved our human nature. When we accept that we strive to be heroes as part of limited finite human nature, we are more likely to act well and do good than when we strive to be heroes of our own system. Also, some of us must fight evil.

Some professions seem to have built into them the desire to be a hero of your own big system, such as academia, politics, religion, and business. Some individual people have a hard time letting go. If you can't let go fully, try this: Don't stop trying to be a hero entirely. Don't stop building a system entirely. Remember that your system is not the only system. Force yourself to let go a little. Channel the energy of frustration at letting go a little into being a better person and doing a better job.

If you love to build systems that eat the world, then go ahead. Share your systems with other people who love to build systems that eat the world. Such comparison will help you see that your system is not the final word. Ponder inscrutable problems such as free will versus determinism, the Christian Trinity, does Jesus save everybody, how Jesus saves in a unique way, faith versus acts, and free will versus karma and Dharma ("Why did Bodhidharma go to China?").

Most people in Mahayana and Hinduism do not seek to be God and do not seek joy in a way that leads to much badness. Vimalakirti aside, as far as I can tell, awakened people do not act badly and do not act like vain gods. Mostly they act well. It seems they are infused with humility along with their achievement. I think their humility includes seeing "I am not God and I am not the center of a big system". That's what Siddhartha Gautama seemed to be saying. You should go to the original stories by enlightened people to make up your own mind.

What difference does it make? It makes a small difference yet a big difference. As long as people act well and create the right institutions then it does not matter much if they believe in a personal God and believe we are limited creatures or if they believe in a joyous Dharma system in which I am the hero and we are all infinite. God does not condemn to eternal Hell people who believe in Dharma but act well, and the Dharma does not condemn to eternal Hell people who believe in God but act well. Yet, as a matter of historical fact, people think more clearly, act better, and create the right institutions when they believe in a personal God and accept their own smallness.

I wish Mahayana and Hinduism could be recast in a more limited way. I think limited accounts of recast Mahayana and Hinduism can be found in the writings of Zen adepts. It is not my place to do the task of recasting. I think young Buddhists and Hindus are doing this.

The Buddha advised against clinging to the world and against clinging to bolstered images of your self and the world such as in Mahayana and Hinduism. I advise accepting the world as it is and not thinking you are the world or the hero of the world. Mahayana wishes well but misleads by making the world into a fantastic playground and by making each person the king of the playground. Is the Buddha's advice about limiting the self and not clinging the same as my advice? I think they are similar but not exactly the same. Just because the Buddha and I might be united against an overly-elaborate Mahayana does not mean we are the same. It does mean that I exercise my ability to figure out things for myself, to which stance the Buddha would approve. I do not compare myself to the Buddha or to any prophet. The fact that the Buddha and I do agree on some ideas is good.

Jesus as Bodhisattva.

It is easy enough to see that formal Christianity built Jesus much as Mahayana built the bodhisattva, so I don't go into details here. Here are two points. First, Jesus as role model affects Christianity as a formal system in much the same way that the bodhisattva as role model affects Mahayana. Second, we can use that insight to think about how true are Mahayana and Christianity.

In the first few chapters of the Gospel of John, John explains how Jesus made the world and explains that the world could be made only by Jesus. As the Word, Jesus works much like Emptiness or Mind. He is behind everything. Jesus saves the world. Jesus does not delay his own ascension until all of the world is saved but he does everything that he can to save those people who are willing. He did spend the time between his Death and Resurrection in Hell doing what he could there. You can be saved only by and through him. In all this Jesus is like a bodhisattva. Jesus and the bodhisattva become THE principle of the cosmos.

Christians want to be like Jesus but nobody (except deluded sad people) thinks he-she can be Jesus or be exactly the same as Jesus. In theory, Mahayanists can become a bodhisattva but in practice nobody thinks like this except a few monks and strong believers (they are not considered crazy as in Christianity). Instead, people want to be like a bodhisattva in that they are moral and spiritually advanced. To be a bodhisattva is an ideal goal and a guide, like the attitude that Christians take in works like "The Imitation of Christ". Like some Christians, such as Pentacostals among Protestants and Roman Catholics, some Mahayanists wish to be like a bodhisattva so as to have powers along with spiritual advancement. So, while in theory, differences persist between Jesus and the bodhisattva, Christians and Mahayanists, in practice, Jesus and the bodhisattva, Christians and Mahayanists, are much the same.

The nature of the bodhisattva, the nature of the system that eats the world of which the bodhisattva is the hero, and the nature of the relation of followers to the bodhisattva and the system, all affect Mahayana, Mahayanists, and how Mahayanists think and act. I don't explain in detail. In much the same way: the character of Jesus as divine super-hero mediator; Christianity as a system that eats the world of which Jesus is the hero; and relations between Christians, Jesus, and the system; all affect Christianity, Christians, and how Christians think and act. Christians and Mahayanists live in much the same world system, led by much the same kind of hero, and so they think and act alike. To an outsider, similarities are much bigger, and differences are much smaller, than to an insider. If you don't like how the Mahayana system and hero affect Mahayanists then you shouldn't like how Christianity and Jesus affect

Christians. If you like how Jesus and Christianity affect Christians then you should like how the bodhisattva and Mahayana affect Mahayanists.

Where an idea comes from does not matter as much as whether the idea is true and-or useful. The facts that Christianity and Mahayana are quite similar but have minor differences should be less important than whether each is true and useful, which is truer, and which more useful. Those issues you have to decide for yourself. You have to decide if Christianity or Mahayana is true(r), which is truer, and which is more useful. The same requirement holds for the other major world religions.

You can use the similarity of Christianity and Mahayana to argue that both are mere products of evolved human imagination under particular natural-socio-economic-historical conditions and so both are not very true and not very useful. They are mere delusions that the powerful use to control the weak. Or you can use their similarity to argue that evolved human imagination used under various conditions leads us to more-and-more approach real truth. Or you can use the same fact to argue that God so arranged things that human imagination would more-and-more approach real truth. You can offer interpretations yourself, and I wish you would.

Whatever the arguments, you have to think through them and decide yourself what is most true and most useful, and what that result implies for what you do and what institutions you build.

I think through these issues much better when I do NOT think of Jesus, the bodhisattva, the Buddha, Lao Tzu, Confucius, or Mohammad as a semi-divine (or fully divine) hero of the world and hero of a system that eats the world. I think clearer when I do not think in terms of salvation as in formal Christianity and Mahayana. I think better when I do not think that Mind, Emptiness, Jesus, the Buddha, or a bodhisattva is the same as God, Mind, or Emptiness and so created (creates) the World. I suppress any system that eats the world - Christian, Buddhist, Taoist, or otherwise - to the extent that I can escape such systems after having lived most of my youth trapped in them.

I think through these issues much better when I think of all these people as real historical figures who are merely human, or as idealized figures (the bodhisattva and avatar) created by real people. I think better when I don't think in terms of rival gods or rival systems. I think better when I think of the heroes of religious systems that eat the world as made up for the needs of followers, priests, and rulers – even if the person was historically real and even if later I think the real person and the made-up person coincide in some ways.

Of course, the truth and usefulness of an idea should not be assessed by how followers, priests, and rulers use the idea. Take account of these factors so as to think through them and think past them. They are tools, not ends. “Nothing but” is not very useful even when it might be used to undermine power.

Think of the message first, then the person. Jesus had the Golden Rule, lived by it, and tried to make a society along its lines. What does Mahayana want you to wake up to? What message does the life and teaching of the bodhisattva convey? What does it call you to?

After you have thought through the issues in terms of “human only”, with maybe God, and in terms of the message, then you can think through the issues again with the possibility that Jesus or the bodhisattva are divine heroes of their own world system and of a thought system that eats the world.

When I have thought about how it might matter if Jesus or a bodhisattva were a divine mediator, I am led back to the idea of following Jesus the merely human person as distinct from formal Christianity in which Jesus is God and is a divine mediator. Then I compare following Jesus the merely human person with Christianity, Mahayana, Islam, Theravada, Taoism, or any religion.

The result of my thinking in these terms is this book. Thinking in these terms did not stop me from seeing God and accepting God, from accepting morality, and even from accepting some supernatural.

(Much the same logic applies to academic stances such as systems theory, theories of evolution, theories of adaptation, structuralism, post structuralism, post modernism, Marxism, etc.)