YAṆA, from 'ya, stands for a “means of motion”, which in principle could be either a “way”, or else a “vehicle”. In what follows, occurrences of these two nuances of the term yaṆa in its early canonical usage will be examined, followed by considering its significance in relation to the concepts Hinayāna and Mahāyāna.

According to the definition given in the Vinaya, the term yaṆa could refer to various types of carts or chariots, as well as to a sedan chair or a palanquin (Vin. IV, 201). The sense of a vehicle seems to be in fact the most common nuance of yaṆa in the Pali discourses. References to such a vehicle or carriage form part of the standard description of how someone would approach the Buddha by driving in a yaṆa as far as this is possible, followed by descending and then proceeding on foot to meet the Buddha. (e.g. D. II, 7).

The bodhisattva Vipassi was travelling in a yaṆa when he encountered the sights of old age, disease and death, encounters that motivated him to go forth in search of awakening (D. II, 21). Generous King Mahāsudassana once decided to offer yaṆas to all those who might need it (D. II, 179). A yaṆa is in fact one of the goods that, in addition to food, drinks, clothing etc., one might offer to a recluse of Brahmin (D. III, 258). Those who do not own a yaṆa may need to borrow it from someone else (M. I, 366). To be able to avail oneself of a yaṆa appears to be characteristic of those who are wealthy and affluent (M. III, 177), in fact to drive a yaṆa was apparently considered a source of happiness to such an extent that the Kathākhātu lists the yānasakha as an evident example for the existence of happiness (Kuṇ. 209).

Responsible for the construction and eventually also the repair of a chariot is a cartwright, a yānakāra, described in a simile in the Anaṅgaṇa Sutta (M. I, 31). YaṆa as a vehicle also makes its appearance in another simile, which illustrates the predicament of one who gives up the celibate life and returns to indulge in sensuality with the imagery of a vehicle that is out of control (Sn. 816). For those who have gone forth, to travel in a yaṆa was not considered appropriate, though eventually concessions were made, such as in case of sickness (Vin. I, 191; Vin. II, 276 and Vin. IV, 338). As a matter of proper etiquette, it is also inappropriate for a monk or a nun to teach the Dhamma to someone who is riding a yaṆa (Vin. IV, 201). Finally yānakathā, talk about vehicle, is one of the unsuitable topics of conversation that those who have left the world should better avoid (e.g. M. III, 113).

In the fabulous country of Northern Kuru (see also UTTERAKURU), people can avail themselves of vehicles drawn by elephants or horses, as well as of divine vehicles, dibbayaṆa, (D. III, 200). A dibbayaṆa also features in the Makkhādeva Sutta, where it stands for the “divine vehicle” sent by Sakkha to convey King Nimi to the heavenly realm of the Thirty-three (M. II, 80). While these occurrences of the term dibbayaṆa have a ‘vehicle’ in mind, the similar term devayāna seems to rather intent a “divine way” or even a “way to heaven”. This can be deduced from the circumstances that, in a verse in the Sutta Nipāta, the devayāna is further qualified as “stainless great path”, virajaṁ so mahāpathaṁ (Sn. 139). The same nuance if a “way” or “path” would also underly a passage in the Kevaddha Sutta, which describes how a monk visited the heavenly realms after having developed concentration to such a degree that the devayāṇyasa maggo, the way to the heavenly worlds, appeared to him (D. I, 215).

The use of the expression devayāṇa has its precedents in ancient Indian literature: “As early as the Rigveda and the Brāhmaṇas mention is frequently made of the Devayāṇa, which was originally in all probability the way by which Agni bore the sacrificial gifts to the gods, or the latter descended to the gods”.

Some instances of yaṆa could accommodate both nuances of a “way” or of “vehicle”, such as a verse in the Saṁyutta Nikāya, according to which the yaṆa to liberation can be made use of by men as well as by women, uthiṣṭā purissassā vā, sa ve etena yaṆaṇa nibbāṇass eva santike (S. I. 33). The preceding verses speak of the “straight path” uṭhikena... maggo, and the “chariot that does not break”, ratho akṣajano, followed by describing various parts of this chariot. Though the sense of a “chariot” is clearly more prominent, the meaning of a “path” is not altogether absent from the imagery of the yaṆa to liberation that is open to men and women alike.

At times, a play on the two senses of the term yaṆa appears to be made on purpose in order to infuse a mundane statement with a deeper meaning. According to a discourse in the Saṁyutta Nikāya, when on one
occasion people applauded the beautiful chariot of a particular Brahmin as a brahmâyâna, the Buddha used the same term as a designation of the noble eightfold path, which more truly deserves to be reckoned a brahmâyâna, or else a dhammâyâna (S.V., 5). Though the idea of a dhammâyâna takes its occasion from an actual chariot, the circumstance that this dhammâyâna represents the noble eightfold path makes it probable that the nuance of “path” was also part of the intended imagery.

Both senses of the term may still be of relevance when yâna is used to stand for a particular form of practice. One example is the commerential distinction between vipassanâyâna and samathayâna (e.g. MA I, 240), which revolves around the emphasis given to the development of insight or tranquility in one’s meditative progress to liberation (see also SAMATHA & VIPASSANA). Another distinction is that between three yânas, namely the yânas that lead to the awakening of a disciple, sâvakâyâna/sâvakayâna, to the awakening of a Paccekabuddha, paccêka-buddhâyâna/pratyekabuddhâyâna. In regard to these three yânas, the “available scriptures of the eighteen schools allow all three options... that is, the eighteen or four schools embrace the three yânas”. Thus those who followed the yâna of the bodhisattva could have been members of any of the early Buddhist schools.

In fact, the bodhisattva career is a yâna that has been practiced and is still being practiced within the Theravâda tradition. Hence the term Mahâyâna does not represent a distinct school in ancient India, but rather refers to a particular vocation. The term Hinayâna, then, is even less representative of the historical reality of ancient Indian Buddhist schools, wherefore “Hinayâna is not an appropriate category of historical analysis”. From beginning to end the Hinayânist was a person of straw, a will-o-the-wisp, and the term “Hinayâna” was a catch-all label coined by Mahâyânis... to stigmatize a rhetorical other”. In modern scholarly writings, the term Hinayâna is in fact usually avoided, not only because it does not refer to a clearly identifiable historical school, but also in order to avoid perpetuating what is clearly derogatory terminology, as the qualification hinâ stands for what is low, inferior, contemptible and despicable (see also HINAYÂNA and MAHÂYÂNA).

Though the terms Mahâyâna and Hinayâna do not reflect distinct schools in the history of Indian Buddhism, they do have historical significance in so far as their coming into use corresponds to stages of development in Buddhist thought. “It seems likely that the sequence of development of this terminology began with the straightforward expression bodhisattvayâna, which was then qualified with the epithet ‘great’ (mahâyâna), and which finally lead to the creation of the term hinayâna as a back-formation ... the term bodhisattvayâna would thus represent the emergence of the path to Buddhahood as a distinct vocational alternative, the term mahâyâna a mere expression of admiration for that path, and the term hinayâna an expression of a derisive attitude toward non-bodhisattva practitioners.”

When examined from the perspective of the term yâna and its two chief connotations, it seems that the expression Mahâyâna in its early instances was predominantly understood as a “great way”. This suggests itself from the way this expression was translated by the early Chinese translators and also from descriptions of inumerable beings embarking on the Mahâyâna, which would fit the idea of a ‘path’ better than the image of a ‘vehicle’. The nuance of a ‘way’ could thus be seen to continue the sense of yâna in early canonical expressions like devayâna, the path leading to heaven, and to some extent also of the dhammâyâna, the eightfold noble path that leads to final liberation.

References

1 Deussen: The Philosophy of the Upanisâds, Delhi 1979: 334-335; cf. also Chândogya Upanisâd 5.3.3.

2 Cf. also Thig. 389: moggâtha-nîgâyâhâyânya


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5 Skilling, op.cit.: 142

6 Cf. Monier Williams: A Sanskrit English Dictionary, Delhi 1999: 1296; and Rhys Davids: Pali-English Dictionary, Delhi 1993: 732. Kimura: A Historical Study of the Terms Hinayāna and Mahāyāna, Calcutta 1927: 116, suggests that the term Hinayāna may have come into use in retaliation for such terms as adharmavādin, which apparently were used by opponents of the Mahāyāna.


8 Nattier: A Few Good Men, Honolulu 2003:174 note 6

9 Vetter: “Once Again on the Origin of Mahayana Buddhism”, Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Sudasiens, 45, 2001: 62 ff. Har Dayal: The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature, Delhi 1970: 321 note 22, suggests that though ‘yāna... originally denoted ‘way, career... the connotation... changed after the publication of the Saddharma-puṇḍarīka with its famous parable of the three yānas (chap. III). That play on words let to the substitution of the idea of ‘vehicle' for that of ‘way'.

According to the Sāmaññaphala Sutta, some of the Buddha’s contemporaries completely rejected sacrifice. The Sāmaññaphala Sutta reports that Pārīna Kassapa affirmed that no merits would result from sacrificing, yajanto yajñeno n’āthi tato nidānena nām puṇṭhānām (D. I, 52); and Ajīta Kesakambali denied that anything could meaningfully be sacrificed or offered, n’āthi yīṭha n’āthi hūtaṃ (D. I, 55; see also SĀMAÑÑAPPALĀ SUTTA). While early Buddhism was also critical of contemporary sacrificial practices, it did not go so far as to reject them entirely. In fact, the Mahācattārīsaka Sutta’s definition of right view, in direct contrast to the position taken by Ajīta Kesakambali, affirms that there is what is sacrificed and offered, aṭṭhi yīṭha aṭṭhi hūtaṃ (M. III, 72).