1. **The Great Schism**

What did the two disagree over? The records give conflicting accounts. Some attribute the schism to a doctrinal dispute which turned on the status of the Buddha as compared with an Arhat. According to this version of events, a monk named Mahādeva advanced 'Five Theses' suggesting that an Arhat was inferior to a Buddha in certain respects, such as not having completely extirpated craving, and in lacking the omniscience which it was now claimed the Buddha possessed (the Buddha had not claimed this himself). The most likely cause of the schism, however, appears to have been an attempt by the Elders to modify the Monastic Rule by introducing additional rules of conduct. Underlying the schism were the more general stresses and strains which occurred as Buddhism began to spread beyond its home territory to other parts of India. As it expanded it encountered new customs and new ideas. How should it respond? Should it hold fast to the old ways, or change to accommodate new beliefs and practices? In the end opinion polarized on a range of issues and the two groups went their separate ways in what became known as the 'Great Schism'. In due course both the Elders and the Universal Assembly fragmented into a number of sub-schools. All of these have now since died out, with the exception of the Theravāda, which is descended from the Elder tradition. However, many of these early schools left a legacy in the contribution they made to a revolutionary new movement which became known as the Mahāyāna.

1. **The Mahāyāna: A New Emphasis**

Mahāyāna means the 'Great Vehicle', and is so called because it regards itself as the universal way to salvation. The early formative period of the movement occurs around the time of Christ, and may be dated roughly between 100 BC and AD 100. Although there is no firm evidence of influence either way between Christianity and Buddhism, there are some similarities between Christianity and Mahāyāna Buddhism which it might be helpful to note. The first concerns the concept of a saviour. Just as Christianity holds up Christ's self-sacrifice as a model for Christian service to others, so the highest ideal in the Mahāyāna is a life dedicated to the well-being of the world. Rather than seeking one's own salvation, in the way the earlier teachings had advised, the Mahāyāna places great emphasis on working to save others. This finds expression in the ideal of the bodhisattva, someone who takes a vow to work tirelessly over countless lifetimes to lead others to nirvana. Everyone who subscribes to the Mahāyāna technically becomes a bodhisattva, but for most this is just the starting point of their long course of spiritual development. So important was the bodhisattva ideal that, particularly in its early stages, the Mahāyāna was known simply as the Bodhisattva-yāna, or the 'Vehicle of the Bodhisattvas’. Linked to the idea of service to others is the notion of selfless love. Jesus gave love (agapē) great prominence in his teachings, and in the Mahāyāna compassion (karuṇā) is accorded a central place. Indeed, it is compassion for the suffering of others which motivates a bodhisattva to sacrifice himself on their behalf. Of course, a bodhisattva cannot 'redeem' others as Christ did. Instead, he devotes his efforts to becoming a 'good friend' to beings. He helps them by example, by reducing their sufferings in practical ways, by encouraging and helping them, and by teaching them the path to liberation.

1. **New Ideas about the Buddha (trikāya)**

As the figure of the bodhisattva comes more into the foreground, that of the Buddha begins to recede and become more sublime. By the time the Mahāyāna came into being, the Buddha had been dead for several centuries, and as the accounts of his life became more exaggerated and embellished, he came to be thought of as a semi-divine being. This mystique was heightened by the ambiguity surrounding his status in final nirvana: although the Elders taught that he had passed beyond this world into final nirvana, it was also possible to conceive of him as existing in a transcendent realm. Followers of the Mahāyāna reasoned that a being as compassionate as the Buddha would never cut himself off from others: they believed he was still 'out there' somewhere, actively working for the welfare of beings just as he had on earth. In line with this belief, devotional cults sprang up in which reverence and homage were offered and intercessions sought. If a bodhisattva resembles Christ in the love and service he gave to mankind, then the Buddha came to resemble God the Father as a benevolent supernatural being, not located in the world but positioned somewhere close by in a heavenly realm and taking a keen fatherly interest in the welfare of his children. Eventually these ideas gave birth to a full-blown Mahāyāna cosmology and new 'Buddhology', which envisaged the Buddha as having 'three bodies' (trikāya) or existing in three dimensions: earthly, heavenly, and transcendent.

The Buddha's 'Three Bodies' (trikāya):

* Dharmakāya: The Buddha as identical with ultimate truth
* Sambhogakāya: The Buddha's 'heavenly body', located in a splendid paradise
* Nirmāṇakāya: The Buddha's earthly body: a physical, mortal, body like that of any human being

The earthly body (nirmāṇakāya) was the human body he had on earth. His heavenly body (sambhogakāya) was in a blissful realm located somewhere 'upstream' from the world we now inhabit, not unlike the Christian heaven. The transcendent body (dharmakāya) was the Buddha conceived of as identical with ultimate truth, in some respects not unlike the way Christian mystics and philosophers have spoken of God as the Absolute or ultimate reality (Mahāyāna schools understand these terms in various ways). One final resemblance to Christian doctrine might be mentioned: just as there will be a 'Second Coming' on the Day of Judgement, the belief arose that a Buddha known as Maitreya would appear at the end of the present eon when there would be a utopian era in which multitudes would gain enlightenment. This idea (which is also found in Theravāda Buddhism) laid the basis for a number of Messianic cults which have been popular from time to time throughout both north and south Asia.

1. **Mahāyāna Sūtras**

The nucleus of the Mahāyāna was a series of new scriptures which appeared in the early centuries of the Christian era. Whereas the earlier sūtras contained in the Pali Canon were believed to be the Buddha's own words, the new sūtras could not easily be attributed to the founder. These texts -- which were all composed anonymously and often show the work of many hands -- none the less came to have great authority because they seemed visionary and inspired. The new Mahāyāna cosmology, furthermore, made it possible to claim that the Buddha was, if not the human author of the new sūtras, at least the spiritual one, since his wisdom continued to emanate from the higher levels of the cosmos down to the human sphere. The major Mahāyāna sūtras, such as the Lotus Sūtra ( AD C.200) embark on a drastic revisioning of early Buddhist history. They claim, in essence, that although the historical Buddha had appeared to live and die like an ordinary man, he had, in reality, been enlightened from time immemorial. As a wise and compassionate teacher, however, he had gone through an elaborate charade to accommodate the expectations of the people of the time. Just as an experienced teacher would not teach an advanced topic such as calculus to students just beginning mathematics, so the Buddha had revealed only limited teachings -- a spiritual ABC -- which he knew his early followers could assimilate. The reason for this was that the true depth and scope of the Dharma -- now fully revealed in the Mahāyāna -was profound beyond measure, and rather than confuse and overwhelm people the Buddha had used 'skilful means' (upāya-kauśalya) to put the truth before them in a simplified form.

1. **Lotus Sutra**

There is a famous passage in the Lotus Sūtra -- the Parable of the Burning House -- which compares the Buddha to a wise parent who, seeing that the house his children are in is ablaze, ponders how best to lead them to safety. The children, being engrossed in their games, do not realize the danger they are in and are reluctant to leave. The Buddha, therefore, promises the children that new toys await them outside, and the excited children follow him out and are saved from the flames. In the parable, the burning house stands for saṃsāra -- the world of suffering and impermanence -- and the children are the early followers. Since they are childish and self-absorbed, the Buddha appeals to them by promising teachings of the kind he knows they will find attractive. Now that the children have been saved from the immediate danger, however, the full truth can be revealed. The Mahāyāna perspective, then, is that the early doctrines -- although not false -- were incomplete, and a 'second turning of the wheel of the Dharma' was required for them to be fulfilled. The Mahāyāna sūtras often poke fun at the earlier schools -- which it dubbed derogatively the Hīnayāna or 'Inferior vehicle'. Some, like the highly popular Teachings of Vimalakīrti ( AD C.400), portray the learned monks of the early tradition being baffled by a mere layman, Vimalakīrti, as he playfully reveals the higher teachings of the Mahāyāna.