ROUGH NOTES ON ORIGINS OF BUDDHISM

GOTAMA (later referred to as ‘The Buddha’) LIVED AROUND 500 BCE

TWO SETS OF RECORDS - PALI SUTTAPITAKA AND SANSKRIT ĀGAMAS

GOTAMA ON NIBBANA:

Suppose that, being myself subject to birth, having understood the danger in what is subject to birth, I seek the unborn supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna. Suppose that, being myself subject to ageing, sickness, death, sorrow, and defilement, having understood the danger in what is subject to ageing, sickness, death, sorrow, and defilement, I seek the unageing, unailing, deathless, sorrowless, and undefiled supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna.'

Although usually the language of negation is used, there are some references in the Suttapitaka to Nibbāna as a state of great happiness. For example, in M.i.509, Nibbāna is described as ‘the highest bliss’.

MEDITATION IN THE SUTTAPITAKA

Much more detail than in previous religious texts such as the Upanishads. However, many of approaches not original. For example, the Suttapitaka mentions other sanghas practising loving kindness meditation. The Suttapitaka also states, in some passages, that Gotama was taught one pointed meditation by Alara Kalama, and Uddaka Ramaputta. The latter taught him how to reach the stage of neither-perception-nor-nonperception. In other passages, these teachers are not mentioned. In both types of passage it is said that Gotama progresses to enlightenment through a concentrated mind.

Did Gotama invent meditation while in activity? Maybe, but there was a Jain tradition of the samii or warinesses, centuries before Gotama. Possible that a more sophisticated tradition grew up from this practice. Not clear historically.

SCHISM IN THE SANGHA

According to some traditional accounts, by the first century BCE the Sangha had split into eighteen different schools of thought. One of these schools was the Theravada.
THE MAHAYANA

Origins are unclear and for some time there was no separate Mahāyāna school. However, from about the first century BCE onwards, a new form of Buddhist literature began to appear that was different from that found within the mainstream tradition of the Āgamas and Nikāyas. Examples of this new literature are the Lotus Sutra and the various phases of the Prajñāpāramitā (Perfection of Wisdom) Sutras, the composition of which finally extended over about a thousand years. In time, these, along with many other new teachings and viewpoints associated with them, came to be referred to as the Mahāyāna (‘the Great Vehicle’). The doctrines of the early Buddhist schools now came to be known by some as the Hinayāna (‘the Small Vehicle’).

All phenomena are regarded as illusory and empty of inherent existence. However, adherence to the view of emptiness should not necessarily be seen as nihilism. This is clarified by the Ashtasāhasrikā’s description of ‘Suchness’ (Tathatā):

Subhuti: ‘What, then, is the supreme enlightenment?’

The Lord [Buddha]: ‘It is Suchness.’

‘In consequence all this Suchness - the Suchness of the Tathāgata [the Buddha], of the skandhas, of all dharmas, of all holy Disciples and Pratyeka-buddhas - is just one Single Suchness, is without any trace of the variety of positivity and negativity, as being one, nondifferent, inextinguishable, unaffected, non-dual, without cause for duality. That is this Suchness which the Tathāgata has, thanks to the perfection of wisdom, fully known.’

Nāgārjuna

One of the most influential Buddhist philosophers at the beginning of the Common Era was Nāgārjuna (c.150-250 CE)

According to Nāgārjuna’s view, if there is no existence there can be no non-existence either as these are relative concepts:

The teacher [Buddha] has taught the abandonment of the concepts of being and non-being. Therefore, nirvāna is properly neither (in the realm of) existence nor non-existence.(25.v.10)

Yogāchāra

The major founding fathers of the Yogāchāra are Asanga and Vasubandhu

Controversy as to meaning of some of Yogāchārin teachings.

But....It would seem that there is general agreement that both early and later Yogāchāris at least believed that our perceptions are dependent on the mind, however that was conceived. Moreover, whatever the disagreements over the early teachings, many scholars agree that, in the later phase, the Yogāchāris taught that Mind or Consciousness is the sole reality and that the external world is merely a mental creation projected from it. One of the major implications of the views of both early
and later Yogāchārins is that, as our perception of the world is dependent on the distortions of the mind, attachment to it is illogical.

Asanga and Vasubandhu were not just theoreticians. They promoted sophisticated forms of one-pointed meditation

**The Tathāgatagarbha Doctrine**

The *Ratnagotravibhāga* (also known as the *Uttaratantra*). This is a major treatise on the Tathāgatagarbha doctrine, possibly composed as early as the third century CE:

The Body of the Supreme Buddha is all-pervading,

The Absolute is [one] undifferentiated [Whole]

And the Germ [Essence of Buddhahood] exists [in every living being],

Therefore, for ever and anon, all that lives

Is endowed with the Essence of the Buddha. (I. 27)

**MEDITATION IN THE MAHAYANA**

Building on the techniques of early Buddhism but far more comprehensive. For example, much about the subtle body.