Theravada/Mahayana Comparison

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|  | **Theravada** | **Mahayana** |
| **Location** | Southern (Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, parts of Southeast Asia) | Northern (Tibet, China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, parts of Southeast Asia ) |
| **Schools and Sects** | One surviving school (as many as 18 existed at one time) | 8 major schools: four practice-based (Zen, Pure Land, Vajrayana (Tibetan), Vinaya); four philosophy-based (Tendai, Avamtasaka, Yogacara and Madhyamika) |
| **Buddhist Scriptures** | Pali Canon/Tripitaka only | Books of the Theravada Tripitaka plus many other sutras (e.g. Lotus Sutra) |
| **Buddhas** | Historical Buddha (Gautama) and past Buddhas only | Gautama Buddha plus Amitabha, Medicine Buddhas, and others |
| **Bodhisattvas** | Maitreya only | Maitreya plus Avalokitesvara, Mansjuri, Ksitigarbha and Samanthabadra |
| **Goal of Training** | Arhat | Buddhahood via bodhisattva-path |
| **3 Buddha Bodies (Trikaya)** | Very limited emphasis; mainly on nirmana-kaya and dharma-kaya | Emphasized, including the samboga-kaya or reward/enjoyment body |
| **Original Language** | Pali | Sanskrit |
| **Language of Transmission** | Tripitaka is only in Pali. Teaching in Pali supplemented by local language. | Scriptures translated into local language. |
| **Buddha's Disciples** | Historical disciples described in Scriptures | Many bodhisattvas that are not historical figures |
| **Mantras and Mudras** | Some equivalent in the use of Parittas | Emphasized in Vajrayana; sometimes incorporated in other schools |
| **Bardo (Limbo)** | Rejected | Taught by all schools |
| **Non-Buddhist Influences** | Mainly pre-Buddhist Indian influences like concepts of karma, sangha, etc. | Heavily influenced by local religious ideas as transmitted to new cultures (China, Japan, Tibet). |
| **Buddha Nature** | Not taught | Emphasized, especially in practice-based schools |
| **Rituals** | Very few; not emphasized | Many, owing to local cultural influences |