# Mahāyāna Sūtras in Recent Scholarship

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## Abstract

Mahāyāna sūtras are a large class of ancient Buddhist texts composed primarily during the first centuries CE. They take the literary form of more traditional sūtras, but are distinguished mainly in their claim to present special teachings intended for bodhisattvas. Although they were long considered the scriptural texts of "Mahāyāna Buddhism," their authors and users never split institutionally from so-called Hīnayāna Buddhists. Rather than the texts of a distinct form of Buddhism, it is better to regard them as a controversial class of text that spread within pre-existing Buddhist institutional structures. Although they were thought to have been composed and used chiefly in written form, they were mainly transmitted orally by figures known as *dharmabhāṇaka*s, or "preachers of Dharma," who recited and taught them in public preaching rituals. Rather than advocating that they become bodhisattvas, the authors of these texts depict their followers as having already become advanced bodhisattvas in past lives. Some have argued that early sūtras show an orientation toward

asceticm and meditation, but the texts rarely mention these practices. They mainly advocate practices oriented toward the supernatural and the afterlife, especially textual practices focused on Mahāyāna sūtras themselves.

## Introduction

Mahāyāna sūtras are arguably the most historically influential class of Indian Buddhist scriptural text, and by far the largest in terms of volume. Composed primarily during the first centuries of the common era, according to one scholar's estimate about six hundred sūtras of this class are extant, many of which are significantly longer than the lengthiest *nikāya/āgama* sūtras.[1] As a genre, they imitate the literary form of more traditional sūtras but claim to present especially profound teachings intended primarily for bodhisattvas. Though dozens survive in Sanskrit and related Indic languages, most are known only through Tibetan or Chinese translations. The term "Mahāyāna sūtra" seems not to have come into general use until the fourth century, centuries after the first of these texts were composed. Although even the earliest texts show a clear awareness of Mahāyāna sūtras as a distinct class, they use different names, such as "*vaipulya*" (extensive), "*gambhīra*" (profound), or "*evaṃrūpa*" sūtras (sūtras of this kind), to refer to them. Recent manuscript discoveries and critical scholarship have led to significant advances in our understanding of these texts and the movement that produced them.

[1] Skilton, *Concise History of Buddhism*, 101.

## Historical Background

It is unclear when and where Mahāyāna sūtras were first composed and used. Until fairly recently, the oldest datable evidence for these texts was a group of roughly a dozen sūtras translated into Chinese in the late second century CE. Since the first Mahāyāna sūtras were surely composed some time before this, scholars tended to guess that they were composed around the beginning of the first millennium. Somewhat more than a decade ago, fragments of several ancient Mahāyāna sūtra manuscripts began coming to light, the oldest of which seem to date to the first century CE.[2] By the same loose reasoning, this would push the composition of the first Mahāyāna sūtras back to the first century BCE. Harry Falk and Seishi Karashima have even suggested that an early version of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* may have been composed before this, though this is perhaps doubtful.[3] The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* and other apparently early texts depict themselves as being revealed in the period of the disappearance of the true Dharma, which was believed to have begun five hundred years after the Buddha's death. This might tend to push the date of the first Mahāyāna sūtras forward in time, though it is not clear when early Mahāyānists believed the Buddha lived. How long the composition of Mahāyāna sūtras continued is also difficult to specify. Most of the main texts were composed by the fourth century, though some were composed after this, even as late as the second millennium.

All of the recent ancient Mahāyāna sūtra manuscript discoveries came from Afghanistan or Pakistan, a fact that has focused attention on

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[2] For a list of the recent ancient Mahāyāna sūtra manuscript discoveries, see Harrison, Lenz, and Salomon, "Fragments," 117–18.

[3] Falk and Karashima, "First-century *Prajñāpāramitā* Manuscript—*Parivarta* 5," 100.

this area as a possible location for the initial composition of these texts, but the preservation of Mahāyāna manuscripts there may simply be an accident of its dry climate.[4] Mahāyāna texts later came to be used widely throughout South, Central, East, and Southeast Asia. Though they were surely used more in certain areas than others, patterns of use are difficult to reconstruct. Chinese pilgrims left records of whether Mahāyāna texts, non-Mahāyāna texts, or both were used in particular places.[5] Jens-Uwe Hartmann comments that Central Asian manuscript discoveries indicate that "Mahāyāna texts prevailed along the southern Silk Route, while so-called Hīnayāna scriptures dominated in the monasteries on the northern route."[6] Sculptural material that can be linked to the Mahāyāna has the potential to shed further light on this issue. One of the oldest pieces of evidence we have for the Mahāyāna is a pedestal of an image of Amitābha found near Mathura that dates to the mid-second century. Epigraphical evidence has not proven very helpful because few inscriptions have been linked to the Mahāyāna. This material has been studied primarily by Gregory Schopen, although his conclusions have been challenged by other scholars.[7]

The main problem with dating Mahāyāna sūtras is that their authors depict them as having been revealed in the time of the Buddha and give few clues as to their absolute or relative dates. The only objective date that can be assigned to most sūtras is the terminus ad quem of their first translation into Chinese, which can usually be determined with some precision. The dozen or so Mahāyāna sūtras translated into Chinese in the second century were thus long the oldest objectively datable Mahāyāna

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[4] Allon and Salomon, "New Evidence for Mahayana," 17.

[5] Lamotte, "Sur la formation," 392–96.

[6] Jens-Uwe Hartmann, "Buddhism along the Silk Road," 125.

[7] Schopen, "Mahāyāna in Indian Inscriptions" and, for example, Cousins, "*Sākiyabhik-khu/sakyabhikkhu/śākyabhikṣu;*" Harrison, "Laying Out the Field," 17–20. See also Willis, "Avalokiteśvara."

texts. With recent manuscript discoveries now suggesting that Mahāyāna sūtras were first composed two or more centuries earlier, however, the extent to which these translations can be taken to represent the early tradition is now rather dubious. Some of the second-century translations, especially Lokakṣema's translations of the *Drumakinnararāja* and *Ajataśatrukaukṛtyavinodanā* sūtras, clearly represent a more advanced state of development in the genre than the Sanskrit or Tibetan versions of texts such as the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* or the prose portion of the *Kāśyapaparivarta.* Several scholars have argued that certain sūtras, for example, the *Ajitasenavyākaraṇa*, *Ugraparipṛcchā*, or *Maitreyamahāsiṃhanāda*, are especially early on the basis of internal evidence, but other scholars generally have not found their arguments convincing. A certain circularity is difficult to avoid: Scholars tend to argue that a sūtra is early because it has characteristics that fit a certain hypothesis about early Mahāyāna and then present the sūtra as evidence that the hypothesis is correct.

The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* has long been the proverbial sūtra to beat in terms of age. Although several scholars have argued that certain sūtras are older, no sūtra has yet come to be generally regarded as such, and recent developments have only strengthened the text's status. The text is said to have been one of the first two Mahāyāna sūtras translated into Chinese in the second century, and fragments of a first-century manuscript of an early or prototypical version of the sūtra are now the oldest datable evidence we have for the Mahāyāna of any sort. Fragments of another, second- or third-century manuscript of the text are also among the oldest Mahāyāna sūtra manuscript material we possess. It is possible that an early version of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* was the first Mahāyāna sūtra to rise to prominence, though we know that other Mahāyāna sūtras were composed before it reached its current form, since they are mentioned indirectly in later chapters of the text.

Other sūtras translated into Chinese during the second century in-
clude the *Pratyutpanna*, *Akṣobhyavyūha*, larger *Sukhāvatīvyūha*, *Kāśyapapa-
rivarta*, *Ugraparipṛcchā*, *Śūraṃgamasamādhi*, and parts of what is now the
*Avataṃsaka*. A lengthy, incomplete manuscript of a previously unknown
Mahāyāna sūtra related to the *Akṣobhyavyūha* and *Prajñāpāramitā* sūtras
was among the recent discoveries from Afghanistan/Pakistan and is cur-
rently being edited by Ingo Strauch and Andrea Schlosser. Manuscript
fragments of the *Samādhirāja* and *Pratyutpanna* sūtras, apparently dating
to the first or second century CE, have also recently come to light. Some
fragments of the latter have recently been published.[8] Some sūtras, such
as the *Saṃdhinirmocana* and *Laṅkāvatāra*, can be dated to later periods on
the grounds that they present ideas developed in the Yogācāra tradition,
or by other means.

Scholars long considered Mahāyāna sūtras the scriptural texts of
"Mahāyāna Buddhism," which they envisioned as one of two main forms
of Buddhism that existed in ancient India, but this is incorrect, since the
people who used and transmitted these texts did not separate institution-
ally from so-called Hīnayāna Buddhists, and Mahāyāna monastics contin-
ued to take ordination in traditional *nikāya* lineages. Chinese pilgrims and
Mahāyāna sūtras themselves make reference to monks who studied
Mahāyāna sūtras and lived in the same monasteries as those who did not.
Mahāyāna *śāstra*s also seem to show no awareness of any sort of
"Mahāyāna Buddhism" apart from Mahāyāna sūtras and the commentar-
ial traditions associated with them. As late as the seventh century, the pil-
grim Yijing defined Mahāyānists as people who worship bodhisattvas and
read Mahāyāna sūtras, and specifically stated that the *nikāya*s cannot be
classified as Hīnayāna or Mahāyāna. Mahāyāna sūtras contain many ref-
erences to their being rejected as fraudulent compositions and to

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[8] Harrison, Lenz, and Salomon, "Fragments."

Mahāyāna preachers facing abuse and expulsion from certain monasteries. Many early Theravādins accepted the authenticity of Mahāyāna sūtras and they were not definitively rejected within this tradition until the tenth century.[9]

Rather than the products of a separate form of Buddhism, Mahāyāna sūtras can better be thought of as a genre of text that emerged and spread within pre-existing Buddhist social and institutional contexts, but always remained controversial. With this understanding, the term Mahāyāna can be used to refer to the movement or trend focused on the production and use of these texts and the beliefs and practices they advocate. Applied to people, the term Mahāyāna or Mahāyānist can best be used to refer to those involved with this movement. Some scholars have suggested that these terms be used to refer to people who identified or identify as bodhisattvas, but many individual people historically, and in modern Theravāda, have identified as bodhisattvas without identifying as Mahāyānists or accepting the legitimacy of Mahāyāna sūtras.[10] This suggestion is thus at odds with the usage of Buddhists themselves, and treats Mahāyāna as an aspect of all forms of Buddhism, rather than a specific historical tradition.

## Textual Practice

Unlike earlier sūtras, Mahāyāna sūtras often encourage their users to write them down and worship them in written form. This fact led many scholars to envision Mahāyāna as being specially associated with writing. Several scholars, going back to the nineteenth century, identified book worship as a distinctly Mahāyāna practice. In 1975, Schopen discussed a

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[9] See, for example, Walters, "Mahāyāna Theravāda."
[10] Drewes, "Problem of Becoming a Bodhisattva."

small number of passages in a few Mahāyāna sūtras that state that places where people use these texts in various ways will be "*caityabhūta*," a difficult term that could literally mean either "a true *caitya* (shrine)," or "like a *caitya*." Whereas earlier scholars tended to take the term in the latter sense, Schopen argued that it in fact means "a true shrine" and claimed that the passages indicate that Mahāyānists created special book-shrines that served as "institutional bases" for early Mahāyāna groups.[11] Though his argument was tenuous, it was widely accepted and celebrated. Other scholars, encouraged by Schopen's work, argued that written texts were important for the Mahāyāna in other ways. Richard Gombrich argued that "the rise of the Mahāyāna is due to the use of writing," in the sense that writing enabled Mahāyānists to preserve new texts outside of traditional oral transmission lineages.[12] Other scholars argued that the use of writing was responsible for the development of aspects of Mahāyāna thought.

Closer study of Schopen's *caityabhūta* passages has made it clear that they do not refer to actual shrines. In addition, though scholars have claimed that ancient Mahāyāna sūtra manuscripts have been discovered in stūpas, none ever actually has been, leaving nothing to suggest that Mahāyāna book *caitya*s ever existed.[13] Schopen apparently now accepts this, writing more recently that "when Mahāyāna literary sources refer in any detail to the location of books, those books are typically in domestic houses" and that "nowhere in these texts is there any suggestion of . . . depositing [them] anywhere but at home."[14] The oldest Buddhist textual material known to have been interred in *stūpas*, and the vast majority in all periods, is non-Mahāyāna in nature.

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[11] Schopen, "Phrase '*sa pṛthivīpradeśaś caityabhūto bhavet.*'"

[12] Gombrich, "How the Mahāyāna Began," 21.

[13] Drewes, "Revisiting the Phrase."

[14] Schopen, "Book as a Sacred Object," 49, 53; cf. Drewes, "Oral Texts," 118n4.

Other claims that have been made about the importance of writing for Mahāyāna have overlooked certain problems.[15] First, Mahāyāna sūtras make reference to and advocate memorizing, reciting, and teaching them significantly more often than they advocate writing and book worship and explicitly depict the former activities as more important. The confusion on this point resulted mainly from a general misunderstanding of the meaning of the words *udgṛhṇāti*, *dhārayati*, and *paryavāpnoti*, which, along with *vācayati* (recite), are the most common words that Mahāyāna sūtras use to refer to and advocate textual practices. While scholars long generally understood these terms to refer to written texts, all three actually refer to memorization. These texts also make very frequent reference to figures known as *dharmabhāṇaka*s, itinerant preachers who specialized in the composition, memorization, and transmission of Mahāyāna sūtras, depicting them as the central figures in the Mahāyāna movement. Mahāyāna sūtras seem to have been disseminated primarily through *dharmabhāṇaka*s' preaching rituals.[16]

Along with the fact that oral/mnemic practices remained central for Mahāyānists, writing seems to have been used for Buddhist texts from significantly earlier times than is generally thought. Since the nineteenth century, scholars have generally held that Buddhist texts were not written down until the first century BCE, but the only basis for this idea is a short passage, two verses long, found in both the fourth- or fifth-century *Dīpavaṃsa* and later *Mahāvaṃsa*, that states that the Tipiṭaka and commentaries were first written down at this time. Several leading scholars have suggested over the years that this passage has little or no historical value. Even if it is a record of fact, however, it fairly clearly does not even intend to record the first time writing was ever used for Buddhist texts, but the creation of the first complete set of written scriptures in what is now Sri

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[15] On the issues discussed in the remainder of this section, see Drewes, "Oral Texts."

[16] On these figures, see Drewes, "Dharmabhāṇakas." See also Harrison, "Laying Out the Field," 16, 26n18.

Lanka. Though early Buddhist authors do not mention the use of writing for Buddhist texts, since we know that Indians possessed a written script since at least the time of the Aśoka, Buddhists could have begun writing texts or portions of texts as early as the second, or even third, century BCE. The likelihood of this is strengthened by the recent discovery of actual Buddhist manuscripts that date to the first or second century BCE.[17] It thus seems most likely that writing was used for Buddhist texts well before the emergence of the Mahāyāna.

Overall, there does not seem to be any reason to think that any variance in textual practice was responsible for the emergence of Mahāyāna sūtras or any of their ideas or perspectives, or that Mahāyāna textual practices were ever distinct from those of the non-Mahāyānists of their day. Like the texts of all premodern Indian religious traditions, Mahāyāna sūtras were primarily used orally and mnemically, though like Hindu epics and *purāṇa*s, and non-Mahāyāna Buddhist sūtras, they were simultaneously used and venerated in written form.

## Multiple Mahāyānas

Several scholars have argued that individual Mahāyāna sūtras were composed and used by separate communities.[18] Schopen asserted this in the final sentence of his 1975 article discussed in the preceding section: "Since each text placed itself at the center of its own cult, early Mahāyāna (from a sociological point of view), rather than being an identifiable single group, was in the beginning a loose federation of a number of distinct

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[17] See Falk, "Split Collection," 19; Allon and Salomon, "New Evidence for Mahayana," 10–11n39.

[18] On the issues discussed in this section, see Drewes, "How Many Mahāyānas Were There?"

though related cults, all of the same pattern, but each associated with its specific text."[19] Jonathan Silk has argued similarly that "we must stop referring, at the very least provisionally, to 'the Mahāyāna' in the singular. Until and unless we can establish affinities between texts . . . we must—provisionally—suppose each scripture to represent a different community, a different Mahāyāna." At some later point, he suggests, "there was a kind of leveling, perhaps by the time of Nāgārjuna, leading to a more generalized 'Mahāyāna.'"[20] Similar views have been advocated by most scholars in the field.

While the idea of multiple Mahāyānas may seem a plausible explanation for the differing perspectives sometimes found in these texts, it is contradicted by the evidence we possess. Many sūtras, including some of the earliest sūtras, such as the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, *Pratyutpanna*, *Kāśyapaparivarta*, *Samādhirāja*, larger *Sukhāvatīvyūha*, and *Bhadrakalpika*, along with other well-known texts, such as the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, *Vajracchedikā*, and others, explicitly advocate the use of Mahāyāna sūtras in the plural. Some sūtras caution against rejecting sūtras that one has not heard before or directly encourage the revelation of new sūtras. Several sūtras present revelatory scenarios in which the Buddha entrusts Mahāyāna sūtras in general to specific bodhisattvas or groups of bodhisattvas and appoints them with task of revealing them in the future. Moving forward in time, translators, from the second century onwards, typically translated multiple sūtras with divergent perspectives, Mahāyāna *śāstra* authors cite sūtras with different perspectives as proof texts, and Mahāyāna sūtra anthologists take passages from a wide range of texts. There are no known references in any Mahāyāna sūtra, *śāstra*, Chinese pilgrim's report, or any other source to any person or community that accepted the legitimacy of a single Mahāyāna sūtra or group of sūtras but not Mahāyāna sūtras in general. Rather than being composed and used

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[19] Schopen, "Phrase '*sa pṛthivīpradeśaś caityabhūto bhavet*,'" 181.
[20] Silk, "What, if Anything," 369, 371.

separately, Mahāyāna sūtras seem clearly to have been understood and used as a coherent group at all points for which we have evidence.

To a large extent, the genre of Mahāyāna sūtras can be considered agglomerative in nature. Though there was certainly some slippage, authors generally sought to adopt the basic vision, standard characters, stock phrases, themes, narratives, and lore established in earlier sūtras and expand on them in various ways. Though we occasionally find what seem originally to have been non-Mahāyāna texts that were later Mahāyānized, for example, by adding bodhisattvas to the audience or other superficial means, most were clearly composed in close conjunction with the broader mass. Though certain sūtras and interpretations undoubtedly became more popular than others in certain areas and time periods, and some texts must have been rejected as inauthentic or considered unworthy of preservation, Mahāyānists seem generally to have been willing to accept new sūtras into the Mahāyāna corpus as they were revealed.

## Standard Interpretations

The most influential readings of Mahāyāna sūtras have represented attempts to uncover ideas or practices relevant to modern religious concerns or beliefs. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries scholars envisioned Buddhism as a rational moral philosophy. When the ideas of Auguste Comte, who coined the term 'altruism' (altruisme) and presented it as the highest stage in the development of human ethics, came into vogue, T. W. Rhys Davids considered whether altruism was found in early Buddhism and concluded that it was not. In a section titled, "The Duty to the Race in Buddhism and Comtism," he writes:

Early Buddhism had no idea, just as early Christianity had not, of the principle underlying the foundation of the higher morality of the future, the duty which we owe, not only to our fellow-men of to-day, but also to those of the morrow. . . . Buddhists and Christians may both maintain . . . that the duty of universal love laid down in their Scriptures can be held to involve and include this modern conception; but neither the early Buddhists nor the early Christians looked at the matter quite in this way. . . . So far as I know, it never occurred to the Buddhist teachers to inculcate a duty towards the beings that will exist in the ages yet to come.

Returning to the matter in an appendix, he introduced what was to become arguably the single most influential perspective on Mahāyāna in Western scholarship:

What was it that gave to [Mahāyāna] that superior vital power which enabled it to outlive the earlier teaching? [Samuel] Beal . . . places the distinguishing characteristics of the newer school in certain metaphysical subtleties which could scarcely have gained for it the ear of the multitude. I venture to think that the . . . theory of Bodisatship, is the key-note of the later school. . . . The Mahāyāna doctors said, in effect: "We grant you all you say about the bliss of attaining Nirvāṇa in this life. But it produces advantage only to yourselves. . . . Greater, better, nobler, then, than the attainment of Arahatship, must be the attainment of Bodisatship from a desire to save all living creatures in the ages that will come." . . . They might have been wiser had they perceived that their duty to the race would have been more completely fulfilled by their acting up to the ideal of

Arahatship. But it was at least no slight merit to have been
led, even though they were led astray, by a sense of duty to
the race.[21]

Though it was little more than a projection of Comte's evolutionary vision
onto ancient India, the idea that Mahāyāna emerged from a new spirit of
altruism quickly rose to prominence. Building on Rhys Davids' vision, Jean
Przyluski later attributed the putative selfishness of the arhat ideal to
Buddhist monastics and the supposed compassionate reaction against it
to the laity, creating the lay-origin theory of the Mahāyāna, which became
dominant in Western scholarship for much of the twentieth century.[22]
Even after its connection with Comtism had been forgotten, and even
though the sudden upsurge of compassion it posits may now seem rather
far-fetched, Rhys Davids' idea has continued to seem plausible to many,
perhaps because it depicts Mahāyāna in a way that fits in with the still
common idea that religion is fundamentally about ethics.

Closer study of the way Mahāyāna sūtras talk about bodhisattvas
and the attainment of Buddhahood has suggested that identifying as a bo-
dhisattva appealed less to feelings of compassion than, as Jan Nattier puts
it, a sense of "the glory of striving for the highest achievement that the
Buddhist repertoire had to offer."[23] Paul Harrison similarly suggests that
the bodhisattva ideal was "a kind of power fantasy, in which the Buddhist
practitioner aspires not simply to . . . arhatship, but to the cosmic sover-
eignty and power represented by complete Buddhahood—not the destruc-
tion of ego, but its apotheosis."[24] While Mahāyāna sūtras often depict bo-
dhisattvas as compassionate, they hardly ever encourage anything like so-
cial service, working for the poor, overcoming the caste system or other

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[21] Rhys Davids, *Origin and Growth of Religion*, 110–12, 254–55; cf. Rhys Davids, *Buddhism: Its History and Literature*, 200–205.

[22] See for example, Przyluski, *Légende de l'empereur Açoka*, 203–4; *Bouddhisme*, 48.

[23] Nattier, *Few Good Men*, 147.

[24] Harrison, "Personality of the Buddha," 19.

forms of social injustice, or anything along these lines. Bodhisattvas are compassionate because they aim to become Buddhas; they do not actually need to work for the benefit of others in this life. In terms of so-called "real" religious significance, identifying as a bodhisattva probably meant little more than that, rather than envisioning a series of heavenly rebirths after death and eventual transformation into one sort of exalted supernatural being (the arhat), Buddhists began to envision themselves eventually being transformed into a different sort of even more exalted supernatural being.

In the nineteen-twenties and thirties the paradigm of Buddhism qua moral philosophy was rapidly overtaken by the idea that Buddhism is fundamentally about meditation and the attainment of a romantically conceived, supposed form of awakened consciousness depicted as the goal of human existence. This new vision was first developed by D. T. Suzuki, under the strong influence of the work of William James.[25] The existence of this form of consciousness was accepted by scholars, even though no evidence was presented for it. Suzuki's vision quickly became so influential, and remains so today, that it can be difficult to recognize how unprecedented it was both in scholarship and Buddhist traditions themselves. Though Suzuki conceded to Pāli scholars that early texts provide little support for his view,[26] scholars immediately began to read it back into early texts. This happened so seamlessly that it is now generally imagined that the understanding of Buddhism as a philosophy or way of life centered on meditation is based on the Pāli canon.

Though it took some time, scholars eventually developed a coherent theory that fit early Mahāyāna into Suzuki's paradigm in a positive

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[25] Sharf, "Zen of Japanese Nationalism;" "Buddhist Modernism."

[26] Suzuki, "Zen as Chinese Interpretation," 301–2.

way, the so-called "forest hypothesis," which emerged in the mid-nine-teen nineties and became the most influential theory in the field for roughly the following two decades.[27] According to this theory, Buddhism degenerated into institutionalization and ritual in the centuries after its origin and early Mahāyānists tried to revive its original focus on the quest for awakening. This theory makes it possible to imagine Tibetan Buddhism and Zen as preserving traditions of meditation that go back, through early Mahāyāna, to early Buddhism, providing strong support for the funda-mentally mistaken idea that Buddhism is essentially about meditation.

The main innovation of the forest hypothesis was a move to take references to forest-dwelling and ascetic practice as evidence for the prac-tice of meditation, which Mahāyāna sūtras rarely encourage, or the quest for awakening. Mahāyāna went overnight from being a form of lay devo-tionalism to a hardcore, monastic, meditation movement. Descriptions of glorious Buddhas and otherworldly paradises filled with perfumed rivers and jeweled trees were re-imagined as prescriptions for the practice of meditation. Apart from the dubiousness of equating advocacy of harsh discipline with the pursuit of religious experience, the theory's main problem is that few early Mahāyāna sūtras actually encourage forest-dwelling or ascetic practice any more than they do meditation. Only two of the roughly dozen sūtras translated into Chinese in the second century, for instance, advocate these practices, and they do so only indifferently or inconsistently. The large majority of other sūtras also do not advocate them and there are no known sūtras for which they are a primary focus. Instead of advocating harsh discipline, Mahāyāna sūtras are more often concerned to provide justification for behaviour, especially sexual behav-iour, that is prohibited by traditional Buddhist morality. Unusual sūtras that focus on criticizing the immoral behaviour of others may represent attempts to counterbalance the general trend or even merely to impress

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[27] On the issues discussed in the remainder of this section, see Drewes, "Forest Hypothe-sis."

preaching audiences with virtuous-sounding talk. The fact that the forest hypothesis found support among so many normally rigorous scholars may seem difficult to comprehend, but can perhaps be taken as a cautionary example of the strength of the perennialist paradigm and how it has distorted Buddhological research.

## The Idea of the Bodhisattva

The idea of the bodhisattva was the point of departure for authors of Mahāyāna sūtras, but not in the way that is often imagined. Since the time of Rhys Davids, scholars have tended to envision Mahāyāna emerging from people or groups making a decision to become bodhisattvas. The main question of early Mahāyāna has thus long been: Why did they do this? As we shall see in the next section, however, when Mahāyāna sūtras first emerged, Buddhists did not believe it was possible to become a bodhisattva or meaningfully undertake the path to Buddhahood in this life. Rather than encouraging their followers to undertake the bodhisattva path from the beginning, Mahāyāna authors made it possible for them to identify as bodhisattvas with the bold claim that they had already become advanced bodhisattvas in previous lives. It thus seems most likely that these texts were responsible for the emergence of a coherent bodhisattva tradition, rather than the other way around. This conclusion additionally makes it possible to understand the important fact that no bodhisattva tradition is known ever to have emerged that was not associated with these texts, which most theories neglect. Indeed, most previous theories do not attempt to explain the composition, transmission, and preservation of Mahāyāna sūtras—a vast enterprise that is virtually all we know for certain that early Mahāyānists actually did—at all. Early Mahāyāna

sūtras sometimes include people pursuing arhatship and pratyek-abuddhahood in their intended audiences, suggesting that some people involved in the early movement did not identify as bodhisattvas.

Along with serving as a soteriological ideal, the figure of the bo-dhisattva was the key to the presentation of Mahāyāna sūtras' distinct on-tological, cosmological, and Buddhological perspectives. Early, non-Mahāyāna sūtras clearly depict the Buddha as possessing vast knowledge that he never imparted to his disciples. They generally present this as a reflection of his pragmatism: He taught his *śrāvaka*s only what was neces-sary for them to put an end to suffering and avoided topics of merely the-oretical interest. At the same time, pre-Mahāyāna texts recognize the ex-istence of bodhisattvas, and depict them as central figures in the Buddhist world, but never present any teachings for them, leaving a lacuna in the Buddhist vision that was recognized as a problem by Mahāyānists and non-Mahāyānists alike. The non-Mahāyāna author of the *Abhidharmadīpa* commentary, for example, accepts the Mahāyāna claim that the Buddha must have given teachings for bodhisattvas and dubiously tries to argue that such teachings are contained in the Tripiṭaka.[28] Since bodhisattvas sought the omniscience of a Buddha, rather than mere liberation, they needed to know precisely the things that the Buddha did not teach his *śrāvaka*s. Presenting texts with the Buddha's special teachings for bodhi-sattvas thus gave Mahāyāna authors free rein to explore the content of his hidden knowledge, enabling them to dramatically expand and transform the early Buddhist vision, while at the same time presenting their follow-ers with a path to a higher religious attainment.

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[28] Jaini, "Note on 'Mārabhāṣita.'"

## Soteriology

One of the most common misconceptions about early Mahāyāna sūtras is that they encourage people to become bodhisattvas, an idea which can perhaps be seen as a legacy of Rhys Davids' depiction of the bodhisattva as an ethical, rather than supernatural, ideal. When Mahāyāna emerged, however, it was not believed to be possible to become a bodhisattva by simple choice.[29] According to both non-Mahāyāna and early Mahāyāna understanding, one can only enter the path to Buddhahood in the presence of a living Buddha, and one only becomes a true bodhisattva, assured of one day attaining Buddhahood, when a living Buddha gives one a prediction that this will take place. This understanding was shared by all known *nikāya* traditions throughout the history of Buddhism in India, and is maintained by Theravāda traditions today. It goes back to the oldest known account of how the future Śākyamuni became a bodhisattva, which depicts him making a resolution and receiving a prediction, aeons ago, in the presence of the Buddha Dīpaṃkara.

Resolutions to attain Buddhahood made in this life were seen as having little significance because they were believed most likely to be abandoned or forgotten. Presenting a traditional perspective, the influential modern Burmese Theravāda commentator, Ledi Sayadaw (1846–1923) compares those who make such resolutions to small plants, "only one in a thousand or ten thousand [of which] might survive the long, dry, hot months."[30] The *Dazhidu lun*, an important commentary on the *Prajñāpāramitā* composed by an Indian or Central Asian monk with a Sarvāstivāda background, similarly compares such people to fish eggs: Out

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[29] On the issues discussed in the remainder of this section, see Drewes, "Problem of Becoming a Bodhisattva."

[30] Ledi Sayadaw, *Manual of the Excellent Man*, 24.

of a vast number, only a few will survive to become fish. Even if a person were to get some traction and make some progress on the path over several lifetimes, her or his status would remain tenuous for aeons. A story in the same text states that the Buddha's foremost disciple, Śāriputra, practiced the bodhisattva path for sixteen aeons before giving up and deciding to become an arhat.[31]

Though scholars often depict Mahāyāna sūtras as encouraging their followers to become bodhisattvas, they apparently never actually do so. They also never present any ritual or other means of entering the path to Buddhahood, and apparently never depict anyone doing so outside of the presence of a living Buddha. Like non-Mahāyāna texts, they also depict new bodhisattvas as having little chance of ever reaching Buddhahood and as being in constant danger of falling away from the path. In order to work around these problems, Mahāyāna authors boldly claimed that people who accepted and used their texts had already become bodhisattvas in past lives, and either already received, or gotten close to receiving, a prediction from a living Buddha.

From early times, it was believed that a great deal of merit (*puṇya*) was necessary for one to be able to encounter and accept Buddhist teachings. Mahāyāna authors extended this idea and claimed that only bodhisattvas who have made significant progress on the path will be able to encounter and have faith in Mahāyāna sūtras. The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, for instance, makes this claim in more than twenty distinct passages. One states, for example, that "those sons and daughters of good family for whom this *Prajñāpāramitā* will even come within range of hearing will be those who have done service to former [Buddhas], with good roots that were planted under many Buddhas . . . how much more so those who will

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[31] Lamotte, *Traité,* 1:257, 2:701.

memorize this *Prajñāpāramitā*, retain it in memory [etc.]."[32] Another states:

> It is just like a man leaving a [great] wild forest. While leaving, he would see foretokens, [such as] cowherds, animal herders, or boundaries … by which a village, town, or market town would be indicated. Having seen these foretokens, he thinks, 'Since these foretokens are seen, my village, town, or market town is near.' He becomes relaxed and no longer has concern for robbers. In just this way, Bhagavan, that bodhisattva-*mahāsattva* for whom this profound *Prajñāpāramitā* appears should understand, Bhagavan, 'I am very near unsurpassed, complete enlightenment. I will obtain a prediction to unsurpassed, complete enlightenment before long.' He should no longer fear, be frightened of, or afraid of, the level of *śrāvaka*s or the level of *pratyekabuddha*s.[33]

Other passages state that those who believe in or are not frightened by the text are already "irreversible" bodhisattvas who have received predictions from Buddhas in past lives. The way the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* presents it, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* itself serves as a sort of signpost on the bodhisattva path that indicates to whomever encounters it that he or she is either an irreversible bodhisattva, or nearly an irreversible bodhisattva, already. An important passage in the text criticizes bodhisattvas who reject the text because they do not trust its claim that they are irreversible since the text does not mention them specifically by name. This suggests that the claim was intended to be taken literally and that convincing people that they

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[32] Wogihara, *Abhisamayâlaṃkār'ālokā*, 459, my trans.; cf. Conze, *Perfection of Wisdom*, 153.

[33] Wogihara, *Abhisamayâlaṃkār'ālokā*, 471, my trans.; cf. Conze, *Perfection of Wisdom*, 156.

were already bodhisattvas was an important part of the presentation of the text.

Similar passages are found throughout Mahāyāna sūtras, in such texts as the *Pratyutpanna, Akṣobhyavyūha,* smaller and larger *Su-khāvatīvyūha*s, *Ajitasenavyākaraṇa, Samādhirāja, Śūraṃgamasamādhi, Druma-kinnararājaparipṛcchā, Vimalakīrtinirdeśa, Ratnarāśi,* and many others. Later Mahāyāna authors developed other ways of attributing bodhisattva status to their followers. The *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka,* for instance, claims that all beings are destined to become Buddhas, and explicitly states that receiving a personal prediction from a Buddha is not necessary. Yogācāra authors developed the theory that beings belong to distinct lineages (*gotra*) that inherently predispose them to the eventual attainment of arhatship, *pratyekabuddha*hood, or Buddhahood, making it possible to attribute bodhisattva status to Mahāyānists without forcing it on others.

Several scholars have claimed that early Mahāyāna sūtras depict the bodhisattva path as extremely difficult, or even "grueling," but this is not at all the case. Certainly, this is how the path was, and is, envisioned by non-Mahāyānists, but Mahāyāna sūtra authors, going back to the earliest known texts, devoted much of their considerable theoretical acumen to devising ways of presenting the path as being able to be traversed quickly and easily. First, the doctrine that the followers of Mahāyāna sūtras were already irreversible, or nearly irreversible, which we have just discussed, meant that most of their difficulty was already in the past. Some Mahāyāna sūtras and *śāstra*s make use of a division of the bodhisattva path into ten stages (*bhūmi*) and generally place the attainment of irreversibility on the eighth stage, which would mean that they were about eighty percent of the way to Buddhahood.

Along with this head-start, Mahāyāna authors developed several creative shortcuts to enable their followers to complete the remainder of

the path with little trouble. These shortcuts focus primarily on the acquisition of merit, the universal currency of the Buddhist world, a vast quantity of which was believed to be necessary for the attainment of Buddhahood. Though it has been overlooked in scholarship, one such practice that early texts advocate frequently is *anumodanā*, or "rejoicing," in meritorious actions or the teachings of Mahāyāna sūtras, typically combined with the dedication of the resulting merit to either the attainment of Buddhahood or to all beings. The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, *Pratyutpanna*, and *Samādhirāja* each devote a full chapter to the practice and many other sūtras advocate it as well, including such texts as the *Ugraparipṛcchā*, *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, *Kāraṇḍavyūha*, *Upāliparipṛcchā*, *Bhadracarīpraṇidhāna*, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, *Tathāgatagarbha*, *Ratnaketuparivarta*, and *Suvarṇabhāsa*. According to the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*'s presentation, the practice involves considering all the merit made throughout all time by all Buddhas, in all worlds, as well by all bodhisattvas and other beings, forming a vivid mental image of it, rejoicing, and dedicating the resulting merit to the attainment of Buddhahood. According to the text, doing this will result in one obtaining more merit than the total amount of merit possessed by all beings.

Since ancient times Buddhists have believed that merit could be produced not only through meritorious acts of one's own but also through *anumodanā* in the meritorious acts of others. The idea is found in the Pāli canon, and other non-Mahāyāna texts such as the *Mahāvastu*, Sarvāstivāda *abhidharma* texts, and the *Divyāvadāna*. Even today in Theravāda traditions it is believed to be possible to make more merit through *anumodanā* in another's gift than the giver her- or himself. The key to the Mahāyāna version of the practice is that rather than rejoicing in the merit made by others' individual gifts, say some food or robes, one rejoices, for example, in all the merit ever made by all Buddhas and other beings. If *anumodanā* in a gift can enable one to make more merit than its giver, the amount of merit that can be generated by rejoicing in all the merit ever produced is surely just as vast as the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* says it is. This is emphasized at the

end of the text's *anumodanā* chapter when a group of gods amazedly states in unison that the merit generated by this practice surpasses the merit bodhisattvas are normally only able to accumulate over a vast expanse of time.

Perhaps the best known of all the shortcuts to Buddhahood advocated in Mahāyāna sūtras are practices said to enable people to be born after their deaths in special worlds, commonly referred to as pure lands, where Buddhas currently live, and where one can easily make rapid progress to Buddhahood. The two main pure lands are Sukhāvatī, the pure land of the Buddha Amitābha, also known as Amitāyus, and Abhirati, the pure land of the Buddha Akṣobhya. The basic belief is that Akṣobhya and Amitābha performed especially difficult bodhisattva practices in order to endow their worlds with all manner of luxuries and make it possible for beings born there to acquire the merit and knowledge necessary to attain Buddhahood with little effort. Schopen has drawn attention to the fact that promises of rebirth in Sukhāvatī and Abhirati are not only found in sūtras focused specifically on Amitābha or Akṣobhya, but throughout the corpus of Mahāyāna sūtras in general.[34] Practices said to enable one to be born in these pure lands are typically exaggeratedly easy, such as merely giving rise to a desire to be born there, focusing one's attention on Amitābha's name, hearing the names of certain Buddhas or bodhisattvas, and, most commonly, hearing, memorizing, or writing various Mahāyāna sūtras or parts of Mahāyāna sūtras. According to some sūtras, including the Sanskrit larger and smaller *Sukhāvatīvyūha*s, after being born in a pure land, one can acquire merit and knowledge so quickly as to be able to attain Buddhahood in one's very next life.

Several scholars have suggested that pure-land practices were originally the product of ascetics or forest-dwellers. Schopen and Gérard

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[34] Schopen, "Sukhāvatī."

Fussman have argued on the basis of passages that state that only advanced bodhisattvas are born in Sukhāvatī that it was originally understood as a destination for what Schopen calls "the religious virtuoso," rather than an easily accessible paradise.[35] This, however, overlooks the central doctrine, discussed above, repeated throughout the early texts, that everyone who accepts the authenticity of Mahāyāna sūtras is already an advanced bodhisattva. Harrison suggests that Lokakṣema's translation of the text fits in with the forest hypothesis on the grounds that it states that women born in Sukhāvatī are born as men, which he suggests is a reflection of "uncompromising anti-female sentiments of . . . male ascetics."[36] Since the presupposition that all women hope to be reborn as men is widely attested in Mahāyāna sūtras, however, this assertion seems more likely to have been intended to appeal to women. Harrison also suggests that Sukhāvatī is "the forest hermitage celestial" and that the text's well-known descriptions of glorious trees made of gold and jewels are intended as a template for meditative visualization, "the effect" of which would "presumably [be] brilliant and kaleidoscopic,"[37] but the text never advocates using its descriptions in this manner. Nattier more plausibly interprets even the oldest datable versions of the larger *Sukhāvatīvyūha* as depicting rebirth in Sukhāvatī, and Buddhahood itself, as being obtainable with "ease," but argues that the earlier *Akṣobhyavyūha* depicts difficult or ascetic practice as being necessary for rebirth in Abhirati.[38] She, however, overlooks the main passage in the text that explains how to be born there, found already in the oldest surviving version of the text, which presents a series of methods ranging from relatively to extremely easy, including being mindful of Akṣobhya, memorizing the text of the *Akṣobhyavyūha*, or

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[35] Schopen, *Figments and Fragments*, 189; Fussman, "Place des *Sukhāvatī-vyūha*," 564–78.

[36] Harrison, "Women in the Pure Land," 564.

[37] Harrison, "Mediums and Messages," 142, 121–22.

[38] Nattier, "Realm of Akṣobhya," 91, 93, 99–101.

simply giving rise to a desire to be born there, each of which is explicitly said to be sufficient for rebirth there.

Although Mahāyāna sūtras often recommend *anumodanā* and pure-land practices, the shortcuts they mention by far the most frequently are ones involving the use of Mahāyāna sūtras themselves: listening to them, memorizing them, reciting them, preaching them, explaining them, copying them, and worshipping them. Time and again they tell us that such practices will generate more merit than offering universes full of treasure, erecting billions of stūpas, or leading vast numbers of beings to liberation. In the past, scholars generally ignored these passages, or dismissed them as simply "cult of the book" related material. Often, they have seen them as gimmicks for encouraging people to preserve Mahāyāna sūtras that have little to do with the actual concerns of these texts. It seems more likely, however, that Mahāyāna authors recommended these practices more frequently and enthusiastically than all others simply because they saw them as the most important practices leading to Buddhahood.

Overall, between the claim that their followers are already irreversible and the shortcut methods they advocate, Mahāyāna sūtra authors present a path to Buddhahood that can be traversed with little difficulty in as little as two lifetimes. Mahāyāna sūtras also often mention bodhisattvas who choose, or are predicted, to be born in luxurious circumstances for aeons, always in the presence of Buddhas, before finally becoming Buddhas themselves. In this regard, these texts can be seen as building on the soteriology of *avadāna* texts, according to which, as Jonathan Walters explains, commenting specifically on the Pāli *apadāna* collection,

> each *Apadāna* actor experiences in his or her cosmic biography a period of transition between the first performance of a Buddhist action—often a trivial gesture or fleeting rec-

> ollection—and the final attainment of *nirvāṇa . . . .* This pe-
> riod of transition lasts for countless eons, but it is entirely
> pleasant: only birth in heaven or on earth, and always in a
> state of luxury that vastly magnifies the original piety.[39]

Étienne Lamotte has made the important observation that Mahāyāna sūtras make use of formulae and phrases that are only otherwise found in *avadāna*s and Hajime Nakamura has plausibly suggested that "the Avadāna literature was the matrix of Mahāyāna sūtras."[40] According to Mahāyāna sūtras, simply listening to a Mahāyāna sūtra and believing in it simultaneously locates one's existence in a cosmic biography in which one has already been practicing as a bodhisattva for aeons and guarantees that one is destined to encounter only glory and bliss in future lives.

## Ontology and Buddhology

Mahāyāna sūtras develop perspectives on the nature of reality, the nature of Buddhas, and the cosmos that significantly extend more traditional Buddhist visions. The most influential ontological perspective they present is the concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Although *Prajñāpāramitā* and other sūtras do not present this idea in a clearly articulated manner, several passages suggest affinities with Madhyamaka understanding, such as a denial of the *svabhāva*, or "own-being" of *dharma*s, the idea that objects neither exist nor do not exist, and the idea that reality is beyond the ability of language to describe. Although realizing emptiness through the practice of meditation is often depicted as one of Mahāyānists' central aims, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* and other early sūtras depict this as something that bodhisattvas must be careful to avoid. Since realizing emptiness results in

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[39] Walters, "Stūpa, Story, and Empire," 178.

[40] Lamotte, *Histoire du bouddhisme indien*, 654; Nakamura, *Indian Buddhism*, 153.

liberation, if a bodhisattva were to do so before accumulating all the merit and other requisites of Buddhahood, she or he would attain liberation as an arhat or *pratyekabuddha*, making the attainment of Buddhahood impossible. Some passages express a concern to avoid realizing emptiness by mistake. Another common idea about emptiness is that it does not legitimate violating the Buddhist precepts, but the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* and several other early sūtras clearly depict it as making traditional Buddhist morality, especially sexual morality, largely irrelevant.

Much of the ontology and Buddhology of Mahāyāna sūtras is presented in narrative form. One thinks of the famous stories of Vimalakīrti's silence in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, the burning house and prodigal son in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, Maitreya's pavilion, or tower, in the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, the dance of *śrāvaka*s and low-level bodhisattvas in the *Drumakinnararāja*, Dṛḍhamati's attempt to discover Śākyamuni's lifespan in the *Śūraṃgama-samādhi*, and similar stories found throughout these texts. Although it is often precisely such material that attracts scholars to the study of Mahāyāna sūtras, it has received little significant study.[41] Scholars sometimes suggest that such material is an expression of meditation experiences, but this is unwarranted. Rather than explaining these stories, such interpretations explain them away, propping up the Suzukian vision of Buddhism as a tradition focused on the pursuit of meditative or transformed experience, while doing little to clarify the texts' actual vision. Some of the most highly articulated ontological and Buddhological perspectives are presented in sūtras, such as the *Saṃdhinirmocana* and *Laṅkāvatāra*, which reflect the influence of *śāstra* traditions more than that of earlier Mahāyāna.

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[41] But see Gómez, "Bodhisattva as Wonder Worker."

## Conclusion

While older attempts to make sense of Mahāyāna sūtras tended to be based primarily on authors' broader understanding of Buddhism or religion in general, recent research has opened a new window on the movement that produced, used, and spread these texts and the religious world they envision. Rather than addressing hot button issues of nineteenth and twentieth scholarship—ethics, monasticism, meditation, or noetic religious experience—Mahāyāna authors' concerns were confined primarily to the sphere of Buddhist supernatural belief, and are difficult to interpret as having significance outside of it. Rather than encouraging their followers to adopt the bodhisattva path as an expression of a new spirit of altruism, or as a higher "vocational alternative," Mahāyāna authors worked to convince them that they belonged to a cosmic elect, who had already been bodhisattvas for aeons, and whom the Buddha had entrusted with the task of spreading Mahāyāna sūtras in the world. Rather than showing any interest in the this-worldly, ineffable, religious experience of theorists like William James, Rudolf Otto, D. T. Suzuki, or Aldous Huxley, they aimed to attain the very specific, unrelated state of Buddhahood in another universe after death. Rather than practicing meditation, they devoted themselves primarily to theoretically complicated practices dedicated to the acquisition of merit. Rather than making a conservative attempt to return to what modern scholars have imagined to be the focus of early Buddhism, they made a bold, highly controversial effort to push a tradition already focused primarily on the supernatural, past lives, and the afterlife further in this direction, perhaps more so than any other major world religious tradition before or since.

### Appendix: Overview of Scholarship

Mahāyāna sūtras were first distinguished from other sūtras by Eugène Burnouf in his 1844 *Introduction à l'histoire du buddhisme indien.* Burnouf generally referred to these texts as *mahāvaipulya* sūtras, though he also used the term Mahāyāna, and contrasted them primarily with *avadāna*s, which he regarded as early sūtras. He argued that Mahāyāna sūtras were composed later than the *avadāna*s, and that they represented the compositions of a separate Buddhist school (*école*).

The enduring theoretical perspectives on these texts all developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: An article published in 1856 by H. H. Wilson and E. Edkins identified the aim of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* as being "to shew, that without quitting the world, a deep acquaintance with the Buddhist doctrine may be obtained."[42] The following year, V. P. Vasil'ev suggested that these texts represent a form of Buddhism that was more open to lay involvement than earlier forms of Buddhism.[43] The idea that Mahāyāna sūtras represented the emergence of a new spirit of altruism not found in earlier Buddhism was first presented by Rhys Davids in 1881.[44] The idea that Mahāyāna emerged from the Mahāsāṃghika *nikāya* was apparently first suggested by Hendrik Kern, and later advocated especially by André Bareau.[45] The idea that Mahāyāna emerged as a lay reaction to Buddhist monasticism and the supposed selfishness of the arhat ideal was first suggested by Przyluski and later spread

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[42] Wilson and Edkins, "Notes of a Correspondence," 331.

[43] Vassilief, *Bouddisme*, 156.

[44] Rhys Davids, *Origin and Growth of Religion*, 254–55.

[45] Kern, *Histoire du buddhisme*, 2:440; Bareau, *Les sectes bouddhiques*, 296–305, but cf. "Le bouddhisme indien."

widely by the influential work of Lamotte.[46] Though these were all very erudite scholars, none of them presented any significant argument for their theories, and the evidentiary basis on which they rest is so insignificant that there was never any reason to take them seriously.

The main theories to emerge over the last several decades have been Schopen's theory of the cult of the book, Richard Gombrich's theory that the emergence of Mahāyāna was made possible by the use of writing, the so-called forest hypothesis, advocated primarily by Schopen, Harrison, Reginald Ray, and Daniel Boucher; and Nattier's related "few good men" theory. Like those of earlier scholars, these theories were based primarily on speculation, with little or no evidence to support them.[47] Mahāyāna sūtras are so voluminous, abstract, and repetitive, and their basic thought is so dependent on aspects of Buddhist metaphysics, lore, and practice that have been largely ignored in scholarship, that it has been difficult for scholars to make sense of them.

Over the past quarter century, there has been a major sinological shift in the field, with almost all of the Western scholars involved now focusing primarily on Chinese translations. Since Chinese translations preserved what were until recently the oldest datable versions of Mahāyāna sūtras, scholars hypothesized that studying them would open a new window on early Mahāyāna. Unfortunately, this has generally turned out not to be the case. While the study of these translations has led to a number of interesting philological insights, scholars have not been

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[46] Przyluski, *Légende de l'empereur Açoka,* 203–4; *Bouddhisme*, 48; Lamotte, "Sur la formation," 378–79; *Traité*, 3:xxvi-xxvii. The Japanese scholar Akira Hirakawa also developed a theory according to which Mahāyāna developed amongst groups of lay people who congregated primarily at stūpa sites, but this theory never became influential in the West. Hirakawa, "Rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism"; *History of Indian* Buddhism, 270–74.

[47] Drewes, "Revisiting the Phrase," "Oral Texts," "Forest Hypothesis," "Problem of Becoming a Bodhisattva."

able to use them to identify a distinct historical stratum of Mahāyāna tradition. This is probably because the tradition had already reached a significant state of development by the time these translations were made, with recent manuscript discoveries now suggesting that they postdate the emergence of Mahāyāna by two centuries or more. Though the fact is often obscured, the main theoretical perspectives advocated in sinological scholarship are not actually based on or supported by the early Chinese translations.[48] Most importantly, these texts do not show any greater orientation toward ascetic practice or meditation than other sūtras.

A basic presupposition of the sinological method is that significant changes were made to Mahāyāna sūtras over periods of hundreds of years, but in most cases this does not seem to be true. Most of the differences between versions of individual texts seem to reflect their circulation in multiple recensions, or trivialities such as the expansion or abbreviation of stock phrases and standard lists, rather than significant linear development. An unfortunate result of the sinological shift has been a marked decrease in the emphasis put on close study of Indic-language versions of these texts, which previous generations of scholars, going back to Burnouf, regarded as essential. A great deal was lost in translation and it is generally not possible to develop a good understanding of what is going on in these texts without spending a significant amount of time with their surviving Sanskrit or Middle Indic versions.

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[48] See Drewes, "Forest Hypothesis;" "Problem of Becoming a Bodhisattva."

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