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ASPECTS OF THE STUDY OF THE (EARLIER) INDIAN MAHÂYÂNA*

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Il est aussi facile dans l’Inde de constater des prolongements que malaisé d’assister à des ruptures. (L. Renou, Études védiques et pâñinéennes, tome VI [Paris, 1960], p. 11)

Proem

As a continuation of his monumental Histoire du bouddhisme indien, published in 1958, Étienne Lamotte once envisaged writing a second volume to be devoted to the Indian Mahāyāna. This second part was, however, never to appear, although Lamotte had already published in 1954 a preliminary study entitled ‘Sur la formation du Mahāyāna’.¹ He did, however, complete several major, and very extensive, publications on the Mahāyāna, such as his richly annotated translations of Śāstras like Asaṅga’s Mahāyānasamgraha, Vasubandhu’s Karmasiddhiprakaraṇa, and the Ta-chih-tu-lun (*Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa) ascribed to (a) Nāgārjuna,² as

* This paper had its origin in an outline of some important topics and problems in the history of Mahāyāna which was prepared for a conference on early Mahāyāna Buddhism in 2001. This will explain the necessarily minimalist, and somewhat aphoristic, treatment of certain topics in this paper. A full and complete study would of course fill volumes and constitute a comprehensive history of the subject. Needless to say, then, this paper claims to be neither an exhaustive account of the topics touched on nor a comprehensive survey of all research relevant to them. The purpose of these lines is also not to propound final — much less ready-made or theory-determined — solutions but, rather, to point up topics and problems in the history of Mahāyāna, and to indicate possible approaches to their study taking account of historical, philological, and theoretical issues. No hesitation has been felt in referring, in a few places, to a Tibetan source or interpretation because, although of course not contemporary with the issues being addressed here, for certain purposes such a source can be as valuable as the Western secondary literature.

² In addition to Lamotte’s Le traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse de Nāgārjuna (5 volumes, Louvain/Louvain-la-Neuve, 1944-1980), reference can be made to his Der Ver-
well as no less important translations of Mahāyāna Sūtras such as the Saṃdhinirmocana, the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa and the Śūraṅgamasaṃmādhi. He moreover published valuable studies on the Bodhisattvas Mañjuśrī and Vajrapāṇi. Lamotte’s works on the Mahāyānasamgrahā and the Ta-chih-tu-lun virtually amount to encyclopaedias of Mahāyāna, but not of course to histories strictly speaking of Mahāyāna.

It may be that Lamotte soon came to realize the truly daunting nature of any attempt to write a connected narrative history of the Mahāyāna as a whole, or even of the earlier Indian Mahāyāna alone. And this could explain why he never published such a work. In the circumstances, the most practical approach may well be the one actually adopted by him, namely the exploration of individual problems and topics in the Mahāyāna on the one hand, and on the other the copiously annotated translation of Mahāyānist canonical texts and their commentaries.

It might also be that any single project — such as the one discussed at the First (and only) Lamotte Memorial Symposium held in September 1989 in Brussels³ — for a comprehensive and connected history will fragment and break up in the face of the complexity of the Mahāyāna as a religious, philosophical and social movement.⁴

It is worthy of notice, moreover, that the great treatises of leading Mahāyānist doctors have actually utilized only a portion of the vast stock of ideas and impulses found in the Mahāyāna Sūtras. This appears to hold true for Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, and for Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, as well as for later masters who composed more or less encyclopaedic Sum-mae of Buddhist doctrine (such as the Tibetans Kloṅ chen pa [1308-1363] and Tsoṅ kha pa [1357-1419]).


⁴ An outline of several aspects of Mahāyānist thought has been provided by P. Williams, Mahāyāna Buddhism: the doctrinal foundations (London, 1989); but as is indicated by the subtitle, this book is not intended by its author as a history of the Mahāyāna in the sense under discussion here. Among other recent publications, reference can also be made to Hirakawa Akira, A history of Indian Buddhism (Honolulu, 1990), Part III: Early Mahāyāna Buddhism.
The terminology: Mahāyāna, Bodhisattvayāna, Vaipulya, etc., in relation to Śrāvakayāna, Hinayāna, Sthaviravāda / Theravāda, etc.

Doubtless, for many students of Buddhism, the expression Mahāyāna ‘Great Vehicle’ is (in part at least) tolerably well-understood as to its reference or denotation. The same does not, however, hold true for the entirety of the connotations and implications of this term and concept.

The meaning of the expression Mahāyāna may be defined for instance by reference to the correlative, but antonymic, term Hinayāna, or to the descriptive and more neutral term Śrāvakayāna — the ‘Vehicle’ of the Buddha’s Auditor-disciples — and eventually also by reference to Pratyekabuddhayāna and Vajrayāna or Mantrayāna / Mantranaya (on which see below). But the pair Mahāyāna and Hinayāna ‘Lower Vehicle’ is not always semantically well-defined and referentially unproblematic (see below).

Agrayāṇa ‘foremost Vehicle’ is regarded as an equivalent of mahāyāna. Whilst a follower of the latter — the mahāyānika / mahāyānīya — might very well describe himself as such, a follower of the other, ‘lesser’, Yāna would not normally call himself a Hinayānist. But the term śrāvakayānika / śrāvakānīya may be applied to him. As for the appellation Theravādin (or Sthaviravādin) for a proponent of the Theravāda (Sthaviravāda), originally its meaning does not seem to have been defined in opposition to the Mahāyāna (whatever may be the case in much more recent times; see below).

Mahāyāna may be defined in terms of its quasi synonym Bodhisattvayāna: the way, or ‘Vehicle’, of the Mahāyānist is indeed the way of the (aspirant) Bodhisattva leading, ultimately, to buddhahood. It also came to be widely known as the Pāramitāyāna (Tib. phar phyin gyi theg pa)

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5 It has been argued by S. Karashima that alongside the word mahāyāna the term and concept of mahājñāna needs to be taken into consideration in the present context; both terms being derivable from MIA mahajaña, a play on both meanings of this word was thus possible. See most recently S. Karashima, ‘Who composed the Lotus Sūtra’, ARIRIAB 4 (2000), pp. 171-2; id. ‘Some features of the language of the Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra’, IIJ 44 (2001), pp. 215-17. Cf. O. von Hinüber, Das ältere Mittelindisch im Überblick (2Vienna, 2001) §251.

The word yāna may mean either ‘vehicle’ (Tib. theg pa) or ‘way’ (Chin. dao). The connotations of the word have been discussed recently by T. Vetter, ‘Once again on the origin of Mahāyāna Buddhism’, WZKS 45 (2001), p. 62 f.

‘Vehicle of the Perfections’, even though pāramitās are recognized also within the Śrāvakayāna and although the Mahāyāna may on occasion embrace in addition the Vajrayāna or ‘Adamantine Vehicle’.\(^7\)

In addition to the expression bodhisattvavāyaṇa, the term bodhisatttvacaryā ‘practice of the Bodhisattva’ is also found. It is attested for instance in Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā xxiv.32 — a text of the utmost importance for the early history of the Mahāyāna since it is evidently as old as many a Mahāyānasūtra (and older indeed than some). This idea was later to be expounded in Śāntideva/Śāntadeva’s renowned Bodhi(sattva)caryavatāra.

In the final analysis, Mahāyāna may be understood as ‘Buddhayāna’. The term buddhayāna is found for example in the Aṭṭhasāhasrikā Prajñā-pāramitā xvi (p. 319), alongside bodhisattvavāyaṇa (and bodhisattvavāyanika), and in the Kāsyapaparivarta (§§ 12 and 118). This idea may be understood against the background of theories of the Buddha-lineage or Buddha-class (buddhagotra) and the Single Vehicle (ekayāna), and hence of the doctrine of the ‘Embryo’ of the Tathāgata (tathāgatagarbha) according to which sentient beings (sattva) without exception are ‘buddhamorphic’, that is, that they all possess within themselves a naturally existing ‘lineage / gene’ (prakṛtisthagotra) for supreme and perfect Awakening (anuttarasamyaksambodhi) and thus have the capacity of sooner or later becoming buddhas. On the other hand, the idea of the Bodhisattvavāyaṇa, or of the Buddhayāna, can also be understood within the frame of the theory of three ultimate Vehicles (triyāna) according to which only those beings possessing the gotra of buddhahood — i.e. those following the Bodhisattvavāyaṇa / Mahāyāna — will finally become buddhas, whereas beings of the śrāvaka and pratyekabuddha classes follow the Śrāvakayāna and Pratyekabuddhayāna and so ultimately become Arhats and Pratyekabuddhas.\(^8\)

\(^7\) Also attested is the term pāramitānaya, which is then contrasted with mantranaya, i.e. Vajrayāna or Mantrayāna. Together this pair pāramitānaya and mantranaya constitutes the Mahāyāna in Advayavajra’s Tatvaratnavālî. This is of course not the place to pursue the question of the classical dichotomy between Sūtra and Tantra, it being recognized that in earlier times texts classified as Sūtras may contain (proto-)Tantric elements.

\(^8\) For aspects of these doctrines see D. Seyfort Ruegg, La théorie du tathāgatagarbha et du gotra (Paris, 1969).

In his Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya xii.36, Candrakīrti interprets mahāyāna — which he derives in this case from *mahad-yāna according to the pṛṣodāra formation in Pāṇini.
The Mahāyānist is known in canonical sources as mahāyānīka, and also as mahāyānāmyayin ‘following the Mahāyāna’, mahāyānasamprasthita, ‘set out (or: entered / engaged, Tib. yaṅ dag par žugs pa) in the Mahāyāna’, and mahāyānādhumukta ‘adhering with conviction (Tib. mos pa) to the Mahāyāna’. The mahāyānīka is contrasted with the śrāvakayānīka and the pratyekabuddhayānīka. As for the bodhisattva, he is described as the child of the Buddha or Jina (jinaputra, etc.). But as said in Candrakīrti’s Madhyamakāvatāra (i.1) following the Kāśyapaparivarta (§ 88), buddhas are born of bodhisattvas; and, as also stated in Nāgārjuna’s Ratnāvalī (ii.74), the triad of great compassion (mahākaruṇā), the mind of non-duality (i.e. non-dual discriminative knowledge, prajñā), and the bodhicitta are the causes of the bodhisattva, mahākaruṇā being here the chief. Prajñāpāramitā is the mother (mātṛ, Tib. yum) or genetrix of the bodhisattva and buddha (jinajanī, etc.).

The contextual position of the Mahāyāna

The question arises as to how, in the Buddhist traditions, the expressions Mahāyāna ‘Great Vehicle’, Śrāvakayāna ‘Vehicle of the Auditor’ and Hinayāna ‘Lesser / Inferior / Defective Vehicle’ have actually been used. Meaning is, after all, determined through use, that is, through linguistic usage and the corresponding discursive concepts.

In the first place, it has to be observed that Śrāvakayāna is not necessarily just a polite (and perhaps ‘politically correct’) expression for Hinayāna. The word ‘Śrāvakayāna’ has been used by scholars as a general (if sometimes imprecise) term to cover (i) teachings of ‘Early Buddhism’ (reputedly) delivered by the Śākyamuni to his auditor-disciples (śrāvaka) and contained in the old canon (the Āgamas / Nikāyas, the Vinaya, and even the Abhidharma in canons where the latter has been accepted as buddha-vacana), and (ii) doctrines set forth in commentarial and scholastic treatises belonging to the various old orders / schools (nikāya) (such as the

(VL.ii.109) — as the yāna of the buddhas (ed. La Vallée Poussin, p. 400.9-10). In the same passage he refers to the ekayāna doctrine, describing the triyāna doctrine as only abhiprāyika ‘intentional’ (p. 399.10).

For the Bodhisattva in general, Har Dayal’s The Bodhisattva doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit literature (London, 1932) remains useful.
Abhidharma and the writings of the Sautrāntikas). Between these two uses of the word there is, unfortunately, room for overlapping and, hence, imprecision and ambiguity. As for the term ‘Hīnayāna’, it is conceptually narrower than ‘Śrāvakayāna’, and strictly speaking it would apply to doctrines antithetical to the Bodhisattvayāna (regardless of where these doctrines might be found). At all events, the fact remains that usage has varied through the enormous and (synchronically and diachronically) various literary output of Buddhism, and that the two words have not always been sharply defined in relation to each other. In practice, they have sometimes been used with a virtually identical reference in so far as the two may denote the same thing: the way of the Arhat. But even on the level of the old canon it would be possible to distinguish between what is (broadly speaking) Śrāvakāyānic (that is, more or less continuous with Mahāyāna) and what is, strictly speaking, Hīnayānic (that is, discontinuous with and antithetical to Mahāyāna).

Secondly, even if ‘Arhat’ and ‘Bodhisattva’ appear as contrastive, antithetical, terms and if the types of persons referred to by these two expressions are not only distinct but opposable, it has nevertheless to be recalled that arhant — alongside bhagavant and samyaksambuddha — is a regular and altogether standard epithet of a buddha. In other words, it cannot correctly be held that, in all circumstances, the ideal of Arhatship is antithetically opposed to (and even contradictory with) that of bodhisattvahood or buddhahood. This well-established and essential fact is sometimes lost sight of in discussions of the denotation and connotations of the terms Bodhisattvayāna and Mahāyāna.9

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9 It may be observed that a word such as *arhad-yāna does not seem to be attested, so that the distinction between the two Vehicles is not reflected in a technical vocabulary of this particular sort. For the ‘way of the Arhat’ in Chinese, however, see T. Vetter, loc. cit., p. 63.

Concerning the old canonical (Nikāya/Āgama) metrical formula that lists epithets of the Bhagavant, see H. Bechert, “Alte Vedhas” im Pali-Kanon (NAWG, Philol.-hist. Kl., Göttingen, 1988), pp. 126-7, where in a Sarvāstivādin version of the formula the word arhant is lacking (reading bhagavāṃs tathāgataḥ… against a Mūlasarvāstivādin version in the Divyāvadāna, p. 196, which reads bhagavāṃs tathāgataḥ ’rhan…). The Pali formula lacks the word tathāgata and reads bhagavā araham… (The different versions all have sugata.)

As for the Mahāyāna, in the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā (pp. 48, 368), arhant follows immediately on tathāgata. The formula has been explained by Haribhadra, Abhisamayālamkārālokā i.i.11 (p. 183), as well as in the *Prajñāpāramitopadeśa ascribed to Nāgārjuna (see E. Lamotte, Le traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse, i [Louvain, 1944], p. 127).
Among the great Mahāyānist treatises, the fourth chapter of the Madhyamakahṛdayakārikās — the Śrāvakatattvaviniścayāvatāra — by the sixth-century Mahāyānist doxographer and master of the (Śvātantrika-)Madhyamaka school Bhā(va)viveka (Bhavya) contains a critical discussion of Śrāvakayāna in relation to Mahāyāna. Asaṅga’s earlier Mahāyānasamgraha can also be mentioned. The works by Mahāyānist masters referring to the Śrāvakayāna are too numerous to list here.

With reference to the Mahāyāna as a canonical literary corpus or teaching — in other words the Bodhisattvapiṭaka —, the term vaipulya, denoting one of the (twelve) aṅgas, has also been used in Sanskrit sources.\(^1\)

It should be observed, moreover, that certain Mahāyānist sources relativize, or perhaps rather deconstruct and so to say ‘zero’, the very notion of a ‘Vehicle’ (yāna) — even mahāyāna itself and ekayāna — by invoking the idea of ayāna ‘no-vehicle’.\(^11\) Such deconstruction or ‘zeroing’ of a concept is a frequent and very characteristic feature of Mahāyānist thought which is applicable also to the Tathāgata’s verbalized teaching (aksara, deśanā, etc.), i.e. the object and content of a ‘yāna’.

The semantic value of the term Mahāyāna will, then, vary according to whether the context in which it is invoked is the triyāna system — that

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\(^1\) See Asaṅga, Bodhisattvabhūmi (ed. Wogihara), p. 96, and Abhidharmasamuccaya (ed. P. Pradhan), p. 79 — where in addition to vaipulya (zin tu rgyas pa’i sde) the equivalents vaidalya (nram par ‘thag pa) and vaityulya (mtshu’is bral) are enumerated, as they also are in the Abhidharmasamuccayabhāṣya, p. 96, where the three terms are in fact described as paryāyas of mahāyāna — and p. 83 ff.; and Vasubandhu, Vyākyāyukti (D), ff. 82b-83a, 96b ff. In some texts vaityulya replaces vaipulya. The Vībhāṣāprabhāvytti on the Abhidharmadipī (ed. Jaini, p. 101) refers to the vaityulikaśästra; elsewhere the same work refers several times to the vaityulika.


\(^11\) See D. Seyfort Ruegg, La théorie du tathāgataagarbha et du gotra, pp. 74, 181, with Lankāvatārasūtra ii.203-205 (and x.457-459) (cf. iii.1a = x.188a).

\(^12\) See Lankāvatārasūtra iii.1b (= x.188b); and the Tathāgataughasūtra (quoted by Candrakīrti, Prasannapadā xviii.7 [p. 366] and xxv.24 [p. 539]). Cf. D. Seyfort Ruegg, Three studies in the history of Indian and Tibetan Madhyamaka philosophy (Studies in Indian and Tibetan Madhyamaka thought, Part I, Vienna, 2000), p. 113. In its turn, this idea of ayāna is no doubt linked with that of Āryan Silence (ārya-tāṣṇabhūva), on which see ibid., pp. 154-5, 213; and id., Two prolegomena to Madhyamaka philosophy: Candrakīrti’s Prasannapadā i.1 and Tsöṅ kha pa / rGyal tshab rje’s dKa’ gnad / gnas brgyad kyi zin bris (Studies in Indian and Tibetan Madhyamaka thought, Part II, Vienna, 2002), pp. 19 (on the difference from mūkata ‘speechlessness’), 99.
is, the system of three essentially different, and potentially opposed, spiritual ways of the Śrāvaka, Pratyekabuddha and Bodhisattva (or future Buddha) — and the connected system of three distinct ‘lineages’ / spiritual ‘genes’ (gotra) which postulates ultimately and finally distinct spiritual goals (i.e. buddhahood vs. arhatship) as well as paths, or whether, on the contrary, the given context is the ekayāna system of the Single (unique) Vehicle — according to which the way of the Śrāvaka merges, at a certain stage, with that of the Bodhisattva or future Buddha.\textsuperscript{13}

In addition, as noted above, Mahāyāna has often been used as an an equivalent of Pāramitāyāna / Pāramitānaya ‘way/method of the (Mahāyānist) Perfections’ (and of the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras), in contrast to the Vajra-/Mantra-yāna / ोनaya (which, as a so-called ‘experiential’ way, may also be complementarily opposed to a scholastic and analytical Lakṣaṇanayāna / Lakṣaṇanayāna, the way or method of technical philosophical analysis and definition).\textsuperscript{14} But at other times Mahāyāna comprises both the Pāramitāyāna and the Vajrayāna.

The terms just discussed — mahāyāna, pāramitāyāna, śrāvakayāna, hīnayāna, sthavira / thera-vāda, etc. — are thus not wholly symmetrical and neatly demarcated as either synonyms or antonyms. And it is clear that, philosophically (gnoseologically) and soteriologically, the term and concept mahāyāna has had several distinguishable uses and connotations, and sometimes indeed even denotations, depending on the exact way it has been employed in a particular context or situation.

\textit{Theravāda / Sthaviravāda, and the question of a ‘Common’, ‘Mainstream’ or ‘Conservative’ Buddhism}

Terminological and historical confusion has unfortunately been injected into our discussions by writers who (perhaps out of a desire to be polite

\textsuperscript{13} See D. Seyfort Ruegg, \textit{La théorie du tathāgatagarbha et du gotra}.

\textsuperscript{14} T. Vetter has, however, argued for the existence at an early time of a major difference between Prajñāpāramitā and Mahāyāna in his article ‘Once again on the origin of Mahāyāna Buddhism’, WZKS 45 (2001), pp. 59-89, opining that Prajñāpāramitā was once connected with Śrāvakas rather than with Bodhisattvas and the way to Buddhahood. See also his earlier article ‘On the origin of Mahāyāna Buddhism and the subsequent introduction of Prajñāpāramitā’, AS/EA 48 (1994), pp. 1241-81.
and non-judgemental) have, quite unwarrantedly, renamed the Śrāvakayāna or Hinayāna ‘Theravāda’ (or ‘Sthaviravāda’).

The Pali word *theravāda* has (at least) three distinct meanings: (i) ‘Teaching of the Elders’ (and thus not a particular school or Nikāya but, rather, the pristine tradition of the Buddha’s immediate disciples, this usage being attested in several sources including ones counted as scriptural); (ii) the tradition of the Mahāvihāra in Sri Lanka (statistically this may be the most common use of the word in non-canonical Pali); and (iii) the Pali equivalent of Skt. *sthaviravāda* (i.e. a primary Nikāya of which, e.g., the Sabbatthivīdā [Sarvāstivāda] is a division, this being accordingly a doxographical use of the word).

In terms of the last usage, *theravāda* is, of course, only one of the many orders / schools (*nikāya*) of the Śrāvakayāna. And it cannot therefore be considered as coextensive and coterminous with either Śrāvakayāna or Hinayāna.

Furthermore, it appears that the Bodhisattva’s career as a spiritual model is not entirely unknown to Śrāvakayānist schools such as the Theravāda and the Sarvāstivāda, which is regarded as a division of the old Sthaviravāda / Theravāda.\(^\text{15}\)

The use of the description ‘mainstream Buddhism’ basically to refer to the Śrāvakayāna, or to the way of the Arhat, is also problematic. It would seem to imply that, beside it, the Mahāyāna was somehow just a turbulent eddy or stagnant backwater in the great flow of Buddhist thought (which is, incidentally, tantamount to suggesting that the Mahāyana was no true mahāyāna). Some scholars have instead preferred the appellation ‘Conservative Buddhism’, an expression not open to the objection just

mentioned. But it should be remembered that, in some of its traditions, Mahāyāna itself may be ‘conservative’ (those following it sometimes, e.g. in Tibet, incorporate Āgamic and Śrāvakayānist elements into their practice, and follow a Vinaya; see below, pp. 30-31).

The degree to which the Mahāyāna was a minority movement has still to be explored thoroughly. It was presumably so at the very outset. But — the testimony of the literary texts being sometimes difficult to assess (and notoriously subject to more or less tendentious interpretations), and it being no simple thing accurately to evaluate the evidence of inscriptions — how in fact are the relevant materials to be understood and checked for any given epoch and region? For example, are Hsüan-tsang’s (602-664) and Yi-ching’s (635-713) accounts complete and conclusive in this regard? There may here exist the risk of trying to explain the unknown by the equally (or more) unknown: obscurum per obscurius.

It is on the other hand quite appropriate to speak of a ‘Common Buddhism’, one shared by Mahāyānists and Śrāvakayānists (see below, pp. 29, 38-39).

**Types of sources for the history of the earlier Indian Mahāyāna**

For the history of Mahāyāna the evidence from inscriptions is of major significance. Its value lies first in the pieces of information which inscriptions yield directly, on their own account, and secondly in the means of comparison and control which they provide for what is found in Sūtras and Śāstras. Here it is necessary to take account of two main types of evidence. On the one side there are written textual sources, both literary and epigraphical, the literary ones being usually subdivided into canonical scripture (Sūtra) and non-canonical scholastic comment (Śāstra). On the other side there are so-called material remains, many of which provide only indirect, inferential, evidence; such remains are monumental (architectural, archaeological, etc.) and iconographical (sculpture, painting, etc.); coins and artefacts also merit consideration.

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Starting mainly, but not solely, from about the fifth century CE, i.e. from the Gupta period, a considerable number of Indian inscriptions bear witness to the existence of the Mahāyāna. The expression mahāyānānu-yāyin ‘following the Mahāyāna’ (and, occasionally, mahāyānīka) appears — in conjunction with the expressions sākyabhikṣu and paramopāsaka — in inscriptions dating from the sixth century. Also, beginning for the most part with the Gupta period, the idea that all sentient beings may attain the anuttara(buddha)jñāna ‘supreme Gnosis (of a buddha)’ — a concept that is entirely in harmony with the Mahāyāna in general and, in particular, with the tathāgatagarbha doctrine — is found in inscriptions. This idea is, however, already attested in an earlier Brāhmī inscription from Govindnagar (Mathura) dating from the reign of the Kuśa ruler Huviśka / Huveśka.17 Similarly, the attainment by all sentient beings (sarvasattva)

17 The Govindnagar (Mathurā) Brāhmī inscription from the time of Huveśka / Huviśka (the successor of Kaniska I) — dated in the year 26, i.e. the year 104 CE according to G. Fussmann, ‘La place des Sukhāvatī-vyūha dans le bouddhisme indien’, JA 1999, p. 541 — has:…. imena k(u)šalam(ālena sar(va)(sat)[v]ā anut(t)ara(ñ) bud(dh)aśrājñānam prā(prva)ṃ(tu) … Concerning this inscription see further below; it was discussed by G. Schopen in JABS 10 [1987], p. 101. (Kuśāna chronology has recently been examined by J. Cribb, ‘The early Kushan kings’, in: M. Alram and D. Klimburg-Salter, Coins, art, and chronology [Vienna, 1999], pp. 177-206; id., ‘Early Indian history’, in: M. Willis, Buddhist reliquaries [London, 2000], p. 46 ff.; and H. Falk, ‘The yuga of Sphujiddhvaja and the era of the Kuśāna’, Silk Road art and archaeology 7 [2001], pp. 121-36, who opts for 127 CE as the date of accession of Kaniska.) Regarding Huviśka, see below. — For …sarvasatvānām anuttarajñānāvāptaye in the Toramāṇa Śāhī inscription from Kurā (Panjab), dated to the early sixth century, see G. Schopen, EB 32 (2000), p. 15. — Further references in Brāhmī inscriptions to the attainment by all beings of supreme Gnosis associated with a sākyabhikṣu or sākyabhikṣuṇī as donor — but with no explicit mention of the mahāyāna —, are found among the epigraphs dated to the Gupta period published by H. Lüders, Mathurā inscriptions (Göttingen, 1961) §§ 8, 67, 186 (cf. 185). In this corpus, however, there appears to exist no fixed and regular correlation between the dedication of a Bodhisattva (image) and either the Mahāyāna or the sākyabhikṣu. In connection with the dedication of a Bodhisattva (image), the ‘Samitiyas’ are mentioned in § 80 of Lüders, and the Dharmaguptakas in § 150; and in the very fragmentary § 134 and § 157, the Mahāśāṃghikas may perhaps be found. Regarding the anuttarajñāna formula in inscriptions, see also D. Seyfort Ruegg. La théorie du tathāgatagarbha et du gotra, p. 31 n. 2.

Concerning the general question of evidence for early Mahāyāna in Indian inscriptions, this line of research has been pursued — following notably on M. Shizutani (‘Mahāyāna inscriptions in the Gupta period’, IBK 10 [1962], p. 358 ff; cf. Indō bukkyō hime i mokuroku [Kyōto, 1979]), and Ajay Mitra Shastri, An outline of early Buddhism (A historical survey of Buddhology, Buddhist schools and Sanghas mainly based on the study of pre-Gupta...
of nirvāṇa has been alluded to in a Kuśāna inscription from Hidda; this idea is again in keeping with the soteriological universalism of the doctrine in Buddhism.

inscriptions [Vāraṇāṣṭa, 1965]) — by G. Schopen; see his ‘Mahāyāna in Indian inscriptions’ IIJ 21 (1979), pp. 1-19; ‘Two problems in the history of Indian Buddhism’, Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik 10 (1985), p. 38 ff.; ‘The inscription on the Kuśāna image of Amitābha and the character of the early Mahāyāna in India’, JIABS 10 (1987), pp. 99-137; and ‘The Mahāyāna in the Middle Period in Indian Buddhism’, EB 32 (2000), pp. 13 f. (concluding, p. 15: ‘In India, it appears more and more certain that the Mahāyāna was not institutionally, culturally or art historically significant until after the 5th century, and not until then did the Mahāyāna doctrine have any significant visible impact on the intentions of Buddhist donors’); and R. Salomon and G. Schopen, ‘On an alleged reference to Amitābha in a Kharoṣṭhī inscription on a Gandhāran relief’, JIABS 25 [2002], pp. 3-31 (this inscription is very unfortunately quite fragmentary). See also R. Salomon, Indian epigraphy (New York, 1998), pp. 241-42 (on the significance for Buddhist studies of the inscriptions evidence in general); id., ‘A fragment of a collection of Buddhist legends’, in: J. Braarvig, Buddhist manuscripts (Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection III, Oslo, 2002), Vol. ii, p. 256 (for a palm-leaf manuscript fragment dated to the fourth century in which King Huveska / Huviśka — presumably the Kuśāna king — is described as [mahā]yā[ṇ]a[ṃ]prasthita); id., ‘A stone inscription in Central Asian Gândhārī from Endere (Xinjiang)’, Bulletin of the Asia Institute 13 (2002) (for an inscription dated to the middle of the third century where a ruler of Kroraina / Shan-shan is described as mahayanasamprastīda- and sacadharme stīda-). For the epithet mahāyāṇa-samprastita, see also the Niya document no. 390 in: A.M. Boyer et al., Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions discovered by Sir Aurel Stein in Chinese Turkestan (Oxford, 1920), Pt. i, p. 140.

Regarding the expressions sākyabhikṣu and paramopāsaka, their exact external reference in Indian inscriptions is not entirely clear, although (as already mentioned above in this note) the association with the Mahāyānist idea of the attainment of supreme Buddha-Gnosis by all beings is frequent. Subsequently, among the Newars of Nepal, the two highest ‘priestly’ classes are the sākyabhikṣu (now connected with a conventual bāhī) and the vajrācāryas (now connected with a bāhā), the first name having a long and complex history in Nepal. On the terms sākyabhikṣu and paramopāsaka, see recently L. Cousins, ‘Sākiyabhikṣhu / sakyabhikṣu / sākyabhikṣa: A mistaken link to the Mahāyāna?’; Nagoya Studies in Indian culture and Buddhism 23 (2003), pp. 1-28.

Mahāyāna. Moreover, a pratimā or image of the bhagavant and buddha established in honour of ‘all the buddhas (sarvabuddha)’ has been mentioned in the Govindnagar inscription just cited.19

It is no doubt not entirely certain just what inferences are to be drawn from the use of such formulae in regard to religion. At all events, with the very important exception of a few epigraphs from the Kuśāna period mentioned above — the Govindnagar inscription alluding to the attainment of the anuttara jñāna by all sattvas, the Hidda inscription mentioning the attainment of nirvāṇa by all beings, and an inscription in Central Asian Gandhāri from Endere (Xinjiang) referring to one who is mahāyānasamprasthita — it is noteworthy that the available insessional evidence for the Mahāyāna post-dates by far our earliest evidence for the existence of important literary texts of the Mahāyāna. The precise significance of the absence of more abundant early epigraphic evidence for the Mahāyāna is, however, not easy to assess. It might perhaps be interpreted as indicating that, in the earlier period, the Mahāyāna was only a minority movement relatively to so-called ‘mainstream’ (see above, pp. 11-12) Buddhism, or maybe even that it was some kind of hidden or esoteric movement. But we must ask ourselves just what sort of testimony inscriptions can, in principle, be expected to provide in matters of religion and philosophy. The above-mentioned reference to one who is mahāyānasamprasthita provides one such piece of evidence. And the reference to the attainment by all sentient beings of anuttarajñāna20

18 This Kharoṣṭhī inscription from Hidda near Jalalabad on a jar containing a bodhisattva-relic is dated to the year 28 of the Kuśāna era; it refers to the requisites for the nirvāṇa of all beings as the purpose of the deposit. See S. Konow, Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions (CII, 1929), p. 158.


20 See D. Seyfort Ruegg, La théorie du tathāgatagarbha et du gotra, p. 31 n. 2. Compare, however, G. Schopen, IJ 21 (1979), pp. 7-8.
as well as the reference to the attainment of nirvāṇa by all beings yield very significant further pieces of early evidence. This might hold even for the mention of ‘all buddhas’ (sarvabuddha) in the Govindnagar inscription, as well as in other epigraphs (although in inscriptions connected with, e.g., the Mahāsāṃghika and ‘Samitiya’ schools of the Śrāvakayāna this idea is perhaps rather a proto-Mahāyānist feature). (It seems that no mention has been made in inscriptions of a bodhisattvayāna.)

Now, early Mahāyāna would appear neither to have been generally established as an organized institutional entity nor to have constituted a socio-religious order separate and apart from the Nikāyas of the Śrāvakayāna, which are better attested epigraphically at this early time. Accordingly, the absence from many a donative inscription of mention of either the Mahāyāna or the Mahāyānist is perhaps just what might be expected in the circumstances. Even if they were Mahāyānists, should dedicators of icons and foundations necessarily have mentioned this circumstance explicitly in their public donative epigraphs? It has been emphasized by Gregory Schopen that the Mahāyāna and Mahāyānists are only rarely mentioned as such in earlier donative inscriptions. But an argument from silence can have force only if there exists a cogent reason for expecting a given document to refer to some thing had it in fact been in existence at the time of the writing of the document. Otherwise, the argumentum e silentio is at best an inconclusive one. (Mention of the Mahāyāna in a votive inscription, and in a longer descriptive or narrative inscription attached, e.g., to an image or wall-painting, would perhaps be more expected.) In sum, concerning the frequency and distribution of Indian epigraphical evidence for the Mahāyāna, it is no simple matter to evaluate just how much can conclusively be deduced, statistically, geographically and demographically, from the failure of more inscriptions to refer to it explicitly at an early date.\footnote{Lamotte’s observation that ‘[c]e mouvement, plus insinuant que révolutionnaire, prit le nom de Mahāyāna. […] Il ne consisitait pas une secte nouvelle, […] mais il se développa au sein même des communautés religieuses’ (Le traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse, iii [Louvain, 1970], p. xiii), remains valid (except perhaps for his use of the word ‘secte’).}

For the use by Mahāyānists of the Vinaya of a Śrāvakayānist Nikāya see below. On Mahāyāna at Ajañṭa, see recently G. Schopen, ‘The Mahāyāna and the Middle Period in Indian Buddhism’, \textit{EB} 32 (2000), pp. 17-18, who also refers (p. 16) to a couple of donative inscriptions — one from Gunaighar (Bengal, dated to the Gupta year 188) and the other
To the present writer it would appear that we have here a problem, methodological as well as epistemological, that has still to be resolved.\(^{22}\)

The meticulous studies and analyses by Gregory Schopen of proto- and early Mahāyānīst materials contained in the epigraphical evidence and his confrontation of it with other forms of literary evidence have been both refreshing and fruitful; and they have contributed appreciably to a better awareness among historians of Buddhism about the fundamental question as to what we know (and/or think we know). Nevertheless, the present writer would hesitate to go as far as Schopen has done in at least some of his publications in contrasting literary texts with inscriptions: the latter are after all themselves texts, and presumably no less subject to their own conventions and constraints than are religious and philosophical writings. It would seem problematic to set this fact aside and to treat texts inscribed on stone, clay, metal, etc., as somehow more privileged, reliable and historically significant than other kinds of texts written on palm leaf, birch bark, paper, etc. (The religious content of the two kinds of textual documentation — that coming from inscriptions and that provided in manuscripts — have on occasion converged, without of course becoming totally indistinguishable, as may be seen from parallels existing between certain epigraphs and some manuscript colophons.)

The problem under discussion also shows up through the gap appearing to exist between the image of the earlier Mahāyāna as a minority movement that is seemingly provided by earlier inscriptions on the one side, and on the other side the picture of the Mahāyāna as a powerful and dynamic movement that is found already in earlier Mahāyānīst Sūtras (and Śāstras) available either in an Indian language or in the older Chinese translations (notwithstanding the fact that this movement has occasionally presented itself in its literature as a contested or embattled one).\(^{23}\)

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\(^{22}\) In *JIABS* 10 (1987), p. 125, G. Schopen observed, somewhat cryptically, that, ‘if we are to make progress in our understanding we may have to finally realize that the history of the Mahāyāna literature and the history of the religious movement that bears the same name are not necessarily the same’. He then adds: ‘This, I would think, should raise some interesting questions’. What these questions are, and what the answers might be, he did not then say.

\(^{23}\) Concerning the important matter of a difference between the situation of the

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from Jayarampur (Orissa) — where *mahāyānikas* are mentioned, along with the name Avalokiteśvara.
This is of course not to contest in the slightest the fact that historically — by reason precisely of the very often more mundane contents of inscriptions as well as of their brevity and very nature not to speak of their more lasting material supports (stone, metal, etc.) — epigraphic evidence has been, in more than one civilization, different in kind from the sort of evidence provided by literary texts in the narrower sense. Concerning the archaeological, art historical, numismatic, and iconographic evidence, it is not possible to go into it here except to recall once more its very great importance for the history of Buddhism.

Some factors involved in the composition and transmission of Mahāyāna Sūtras

Among the factors favouring the composition (oral or written) of certain Mahāyana Sūtras we meet with the concepts of the anugraha ‘kind Mahāyāna as reflected in earlier Indian sources and the picture gained through Chinese sources — that is, on what he has termed the ‘non-alignment’ of these two pictures — see the valuable remarks made by G. Schopen, ‘The Mahāyāna and the Middle Period in Indian Buddhism: Through a Chinese looking-glass’, EB 32 (2000), pp. 1-25. Schopen was right to call attention to such ‘non-alignment’, and perhaps even to speculate that ‘the history of the Mahāyāna in China may well have been the single most powerful determining force in how the history of the Mahāyāna in India was perceived and reconstructed’ (ibid., p. 1). But then to conclude from such observations that ‘the Mahāyāna may have been assigned a place in the history of Indian Buddhism that it does not deserve’ (ibid., p. 1) is something of a leap, aligning quantitative evaluation with historical and religio-philosophical study and analysis (which is in large part qualitative). To observe that Mahāyānists were not demographically dominant in a given period in India tells us little about what their qualitative religious and philosophical, and also historical, significance may have been. And the fact that (Buddhist) monks have not infrequently been the object of mirth or ridicule in certain circles of Indian society (see ibid., pp. 3-4) tells us very little about the place of the Prajñāpāramitā, and of the Mahāyāna, in the thought of the ‘cultured Indian upper classes’. Monachism and monasticism — indeed sometimes even saṃyāsa ‘renunciation’ (sometimes included among the kalivarjya) — have in fact been delicate and controversial matters in classical Indian society. The issue has no doubt to do also with questions as to the degree to which the Mahāyāna was a ‘mainstream’ or a minority movement (see above, pp. 11-12). Regarding Schopen’s discussion, on the basis of the Ratnāvali, of the Mahāyāna as the object of scorn and attack at the time of Nāgārjuna (ibid., p. 7 ff.), it should be kept in mind that in one form or another the topos of a mahāyāna under threat is a familiar one in Mahāyānist literature — both earlier, when the Mahāyāna was presumably still a minority movement within Buddhism, and later, when quantitatively it was (at least nominally) predominant in a given area —, and that this topos can concern not only menace and attack from outsiders but also internal pressures and decay among its nominal followers.
assistance’, the anubhāva / prabhāva ‘might’, and the adhiṣṭhāna ‘sustaining force’ which the Buddha / Tathāgata deploys for the sake of his disciples as deliverers of Sūtras. Alongside these factors may be mentioned this promulgator’s pratibhāna ‘inspired intelligence, (expository) presence of mind’; this is the fourth of the analytical powers (pratisam-vid) with which disciples are endowed, and which allows them to penetrate and give expression to the deepest ‘thought’ of the Buddha. Meditative visualization of the Buddha — a continuation of traditional buddhānusmṛti ‘rememoration of the Buddha’ rendering him immediately present — has also played a highly significant role, for instance in the Pratyutpannabuddhhasamkāsatosthitasamādhisūtra. These factors require further detailed study and monographic treatment, for so many of the Sūtras of the Mahāyāna, whether delivered by the Buddha himself or not, can be described as inspirational or visionary, or both together.

Prefix to different texts of the Prajñāpāramitāsūtra we have a highly renowned Prajñāpāramitastotra, a devotional hymn to Prajñāpāramitā ascribed to Rāhulabhadra, and to the Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra there is attached a praise of the Mahāyāna entitled Saddharmapuṇḍarīkastava also ascribed to Rāhulabhadra. And preceding the Candrapradīpa / Samādhirājasūtra there is found a hymn to the Mahāyāna that mentions both Candraprabha, the Bodhisattva kumārabhūta interlocutor of the Buddha, and the Candrapradīpa itself.

That there has, moreover, existed in the Mahāyāna a ‘cult’ of the book — or of the Sūtra as the ‘body / icon of the Buddha’ (jinavigraha) — is a well-known fact.25

Compare the materials assembled by G. Schopen, ibid., pp. 19-21. See n. 70 below.

24 Rather than just ‘eloquence’ (as pratibhāna has so often been rendered), eloquence being rather the outcome of pratibhāna. For an example of the corresponding verb pratibhā-, see for instance the Śrīmālādevīśīṁhanādasūtra referred to below, n. 35.


In his article ‘How the Mahāyāna began’, The Buddhist Forum 1 (1990), pp. 21, R. Gombrich has written: ‘[…] the rise of the Mahāyāna is due to the use of writing. To put it more accurately: the early Mahāyāna texts owe their survival to the fact that they were writ-
It has been suggested (as seen in the preceding note) that the rise of the Mahāyāna was inseparably bound up with the use of writing. Writing and scripts (lipi) have indeed been mentioned in Sūtras. And it may be taken for granted that the use of writing very significantly facilitated its development and spread: the Mahāyāna could hardly have assumed the form we now know, and which it has had for very many centuries, had it not been for the use of writing for recording its literature. But it seems that the further supposition that writing was a necessary precondition for the rise of the Mahāyāna would require considerably more supporting evidence than has hitherto been adduced. (Indeed, by a number of scholars it has been assumed that Mahāyāna Sūtras were originally composed and transmitted orally, in some cases perhaps in Middle Indo-Aryan.)

On versions and recensions of Mahāyāna Sūtras

Certain Mahāyāna Sūtras have been transmitted in two (or more) distinct recensions which cannot, it appears, be regarded as deriving from mere (scribal or aural) variants or revisions of either a single unified oral composition (perhaps in Middle Indo-Aryan) or from a single written text (be it in Middle Indo-Aryan or in [Buddhist] Sanskrit).

This is the case for example for the Saddharmapūṇḍarīka, of which different recensions have been identified. We are seemingly confronted ten down; and any earlier texts which deviated from or criticized the canonical norms (by which I mean approximately the contents of the Vinaya Khanda and Suttavibhaṅga and the Four Niκāyas) could not survive because they were not included among the texts which the Saṅgha preserved orally. Here the separate matters of the rise and the survival of the Mahāyāna have been telescoped together. There are of course indications that some Mahāyāna Sūtras were not set down in a single written redaction, and hence that they may have sometimes been transmitted orally.

References — not all of Mahāyānist origin — to scripts are found, e.g., in the Mahāvastu (I, p. 135) and in the Lipiśālāśaṃdarśana-pravarta of the Lalitavistara. — On the use of writing by Buddhists, see O. von Hinüber, Der Beginn der Schrift und frühe Schriftlichkeit in Indien (AWL, Mainz, 1989) (Stuttgart 1990). Cf. H. Falk, Schrift im alten Indien (Tübingen, 1993) §14.

See the (fragments of) a Central Asian recension of this Sūtra published by H. Bechert, Über die “Marburger Fragmente” des Saddharmapūṇḍarīka (NAWG, Göttingen, 1972), from the so-called ‘Kashgar Manuscript’ (actually from Khādaliq) various leaves of which are kept in different libraries. See further H. Bechert, ‘Remarks on the textual history of the Saddharmapūṇḍarīka’, in: Studies in Indo-Asian Art and Culture 2 (Raghu Vira Commemoration Vol., New Delhi, 1973), pp. 21-27; id., ‘Foreword’ to Lokesh Chandra (ed.),
here with a remarkable and highly important phenomenon in the history of religio-philosophical literature that has still to be fully addressed by

Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-Sūtra: Kashgar Manuscript (Tōkyō, 1977). Bechert's conclusion there (p. 6) is that the Central Asian manuscripts represent not 'just another recension of the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka, but an earlier stage of textual development', whilst 'the Nepalese-Kashmiri recension is the result of the work done by an individual scholar who has carefully remodeled the text of the Sūtra. His work shows the impact of Sanskrit renaissance on the development of Mahāyāna literature.' See recently G. Fussman, 'Les Saddharmapuṇḍarīka indiens', Annuaire du Collège de France 1995-6, pp. 779-86; Annuaire 1996-7, pp. 749-763. — Romanized texts of parts of the manuscript recensions of the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka have been published by (amongst others) S. Watanabe, Jiang Zhongxin, and H. Toda, who has also published a Note on the Kashgar manuscript of the Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra (Tōkyō, 1977) and studies on the manuscripts. See also K. Wille, Fragments of a Manuscript of the Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra from Khādāliaq (Tōkyō, 2000); id., 'Weitere kleine Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra-Fragmente aus der Sammlung Hoemle', in: P. Harrison et al. (ed.), Stūryacandrāya (A. Yuyama Festschrift, Swisttal-Ödendorf, 1998), pp. 241-56. A new synoptic edition of the Sanskrit texts of the Sūtra (chap. 13) together with the Tibetan and Chinese translations in parallel is published by S. Karashima in 'A trilingual edition of the Lotus Sutra', ARIRIAB 6 (2003), pp. 85-182. — The Saddharmapuṇḍarīka indeed offers an advanced example of a Sanskrit Sūtra work the distinct recensions of which have often employed different wordings to express (approximately) the same basic content, but which it is hardly possible to trace back to a single Urtext, to one unique archetype. (Cases where the Chinese versions of a Sūtra differ significantly, and suggest the existence of distinct Indian recensions, are of course well known.)

Concerning the Kāśyapaparivarta, see J.W. de Jong, 'Sanskrit fragments of the Kāśyapa-parivarta', in: Beiträge zur Indienforschung (Festschrift E. Waldschmidt, Berlin, 1977), pp. 247-55, who concluded (p. 255): 'The Kāśyapaparivarta, in which the verse parts are later than the prose parts, offers an interesting example of a text in which the verses, written in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, are definitely later than the prose parts, the language of which is much closer to standard Sanskrit'. For this work see recently M. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya in collaboration with S. Karashima and N. Kudo, The Kāśyapaparivarta: Romanized text and facsimiles (Tōkyō, 2002). Concerning the Kāraṇḍavyūha, see A. Mette, Die Gilgitfragmente des Kāraṇḍavyūha (Swisttal-Ödendorf, 1997). Regarding the Samādhirāja, see A. Skilton, 'Four recensions of the Samādhirājaśūtra', IIJ 42 (1999), pp. 335-56. As for the Sarvabuddhavisayavatārā-Jānālokālāṃkārastūra (~ Tathāgatagunajñānācintyavisayavatāramideśa?), quotations from it cited in the commentary to the Ratnagotravibhāga-Mahāyānottaratantraśāstra (ed. Johnston) differ on occasion from the text found in the manuscript recently published by T. Kimura et al. (Tōkyō, 2004): whether in the commentary we simply have quotations from memory or whether there existed (at least) two distinct recensions of the Sūtra is not yet clear.


Finally, it may be recalled that recensonal variation in the wording of related formu-
modern scholarship, namely a Sūtra extant in recensions closely related in their contents but not necessarily in their verbal expression. (This textual state of affairs is in fact what would differentiate a recension in the specific meaning under discussion here from variant versions of a Sūtra belonging to a reconstructible line of textual transmission derived from a single Urtext, as well as from a version of an Urtext that has been deliberately revised editorially.)

Were it true that writing was being employed from the beginning for composing and transmitting a Sūtra, then, evidently, this did not necessarily result in its text being definitively fixed in one single, ‘original’, redaction with only textual (scribal or aural) variants supervening in the course of its subsequent transmission. But (as noted above) it is in fact far from clear that, from the start, writing was being regularly used when Mahāyāna Sūtras were being composed and first transmitted. And to postulate some Urtext from which distinct recensions derive, in the manner of a stemma codicum, would here appear to constitute a misapplication of otherwise sound philological method. What we seem to have before us in such cases is, instead, records of a set of teachings / ideas / narratives in

lae, strings and pericopes are to be found not only in Mahāyāna Sūtras but also in versions of the old Āgamas. Cf., e.g., G. von Simson, ‘Zur Phrase yena … tenopajagâmã/upetya und ihren Varianten im buddhistischen Sanskrit’, in: H. Härtel (ed.), Beiträge zur Indienforschung (Festschrift E. Waldschmidt, Berlin, 1977), pp. 479-88; O. von Hinüber, Untersuchungen zur Mündlichkeit früher mittelindischer Texte der Buddhisten (AWLM, Abh. der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftl. Kl., Nr. 5, Mainz, 1994) (on variation between an uddāna and its canonical reference text, see id., in JAOS 123 [2003], pp. 222-3); M. Allon, Style and function (Tōkyō, 1997) (with bibliography, to which might be added P. Tuxen, ‘Einige Bemerkungen über die Konstruktion der Pālitexte’, Festschrift H. Jacobi (Bonn, 1926), pp. 98-102). Attempts have been made to explain these recensional variations, regarding them, e.g., as reflecting variations in improvisatory oral recitation, differences in redactional usages between Buddhist schools/orders (nikāya), processes of Sanskrit or Pali linguistic standardization, etc. In the case of the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka mentioned at the beginning of this note, the processes underlying recensional variation do not however seem to have yet been sufficiently clarified. Should one perhaps look, inter alia, in the direction of variant redactions/recensions resulting from varying oral traditions? (On orality in relation to the Buddhist canons, see the previous section.) Orality per se may not, however, supply a full explanation of what is to be observed (for instance in the case of the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka). And in oral performance (as distinct from the oral and then written transmission of a text fixed verbatim), it is to be asked what role may have been played by the inspirational processes of anubhāva, prabhāva, adhiṣṭhāna and pratibhāna (cf. n. 24 above and n. 35 below). A stage of oral recitation marked by inspirational processes giving rise to redactional/recensional differences could lie behind certain variations, which were then fixed in
parallel wordings, oral or written, that are all somehow linked with a more or less compact — but nevertheless not univocally expressed — Sūtra tradition that came to be expressed in distinct recensions.28

It has also to be kept in mind that a shorter, or simpler, version of a text is not necessarily and invariably older than a longer, or more elaborate, version. Fragments of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā kept in the Schøyen collection in Oslo, which have been dated to Kuśāna times, present a text that is evidently closer to that of the later Nepalese manuscript tradition than to the chronologically closer text of the Indo-Scythian (Yüeh-chih) Lokakṣema’s Chinese translation dating to the the second century of the Common Era.29 This sort of evidence should incite us to writing in differing recensions. All this requires further study.

28 The problems of multiple textual transmission and of so-called ‘anonymous literature’ in India have been addressed notably by Paul Hacker (for the Purāṇas, following on W. Kürfel) and by Madeleine Biardeau (for the Mahābhūrata, who postulates, however, for this text a [probably] single authorship). See also O. von Hinüber, ‘Remarks on the problem of textual criticism in editing anonymous Sanskrit literature’, in: Proceedings of the First Symposium of Nepali and German Sanskritists 1971 (Kathmandu, Inst. of Sanskrit Studies, Tribhuvan Univ., 1980), pp. 28-40; and J. Silk, The Heart Sūtra in Tibetan (Vienna, 1994), pp. 6-17. Comparison may be made with the editing procedure adopted for a complex text — as distinct from manuscript — tradition by F. Edgerton, The Pañcatantra reconstructed (New Haven, 1924), where an ‘original’ Pañcatantra text, of unknown authorship, has been constructed on the basis of various extant recensions and of parallel versions (including the Hitopadēśa).

This matter of multiple transmission and of the Indian anonymous literature differs from cases of multiple transmission, perhaps contaminated, of a text of single authorship as studied in western philology, notably since G. Pasquali’s Storia della tradizione e critica del testo (Florence, 1952). Pasquali pertinently posed the question as to whether there has always existed an archetype. More recently, the question of ‘open recension’, which does not allow the construction of an archetype and where manuscripts cannot be assigned to a stemma, have been discussed by M.L. West, Textual criticism and editorial technique (Stuttgart, 1973), p. 37 ff.

exercise caution, and to develop a methodology of textual criticism that is adequate to the very considerable complexities of the traditions and their (written or oral) transmission in ‘floating’ texts, with a view to avoiding over-simplified stratifications of texts and analyses of their doctrines.30 An exclusively linear and stratigraphical model of the development in time of texts and their doctrines may not always be appropriate.

Versions of other Mahāyāna Sūtras, such as the Mahāparinirvāṇa, the Suvarṇa(pra)hāsottama, the Sukhāvatīvyūha, etc., have by now received considerable attention from scholars. But much work remains to be done in this very important area of Mahāyāna studies.

The matter of laymen (grhin, grhapati, grhastha) and of stūpas

The hypothesis that the Mahāyāna was either mainly or in essence a development owing its origin to laymen is surely excessive.31 In any case, in the history of Buddhism the simple and neat opposition layman or householder as against monk or monastic tends to break down.

Buddhism’, *EB* 32 [2000], p. 3 ff.; Schopen avers, p. 4, that evidence for the ‘popularity’ of this work comes ‘predominantly from the Late Pāla Period, that is, the 11th and 12th centuries’, without mentioning that Haribhadra wrote his great comment on it c. 800.) — On Lokakṣema see P. Harrison, ‘The earliest Chinese translations of Mahāyāna Sūtras: Some notes on the works of Lokakṣema, *BSR* 10 (1993), pp. 135-77.


In Buddhist society there has existed the category of gomin (rendered in Tibetan by btsun pa, a word which is, however, the regular equivalent of bhadanta). Only rarely mentioned, this type was apparently in status both a religious and a layman (i.e. not a pravrajita, being neither a novice śrāmaṇera nor a fully ordained bhikṣu), as exemplified in the person of Candragomin. The celibate and abstinent gomin observing brahmacarya ‘chastity’ has also been defined as one wearing the religious robe, the outer distinctive mark of the monk.32 In terms of morphology and taxonomy, this category was apparently a somewhat anomalous and rather exceptional one because of its ambivalence. For in some way its membership partook simultaneously of the state of monk and layman; and it was, therefore, not readily definable in terms of the standard classifications of Vinaya and Śāstra Buddhism (e.g. Abhidharma), where one is either a pravrajita religious or one is not. (In Tibet, in particular among ṛNi ma pas, an ambivalent category of householder-religious has survived in connexion with the Vajrayāna and the vow of the Vajrācārya in particular.)33

32 On Candragomin as a go mi dge bsñen, see Tāranātha, rGya gar chos ’byun (ed. Schiefner), p. 117. According to the Tshig mdzod chen mo, the go mi dge bsñen observes so long as he lives the fundamental and ancillary precepts of the upāsaka, and he also wears the robe of the religious (btsun pa’i cha lugs). The principal observance for him was, then, the fivefold śikṣāpada or pañcaśīla.

For the two types of upāsaka, mentioned for example in Haribhadra’s Abhisamayālaṃkārakāloka II.21-23 (ed. Wogihara, p. 331) — i.e. (1) the type defined by his simply having taken the threefold refuge and (2) the one defined additionally by observing the five śikṣāpadas —, see the references in E. Lamotte, Traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse, p. 829 n. 3. — Concerning the further category of Bodhisattva-Upāsaka, see P. Kieffer-Pülz, ‘Die buddhistische Gemeinde’, in: H. Bechert (ed.), Der Buddhismus, i (Stuttgart, 2000), pp. 370-1.

33 The gomin is not to be confused with what is in Tibetan called a ser khyim pa ‘householder dressed in monastic garb’, sometimes a term of reproach directed against laymen who inappropriately dressed as monks and wrongly claimed the latters’ status. Tibetan tradition has been doubtful about one described as a reverend (bhadanta) who is neither layman nor monk (jo btsun skya min ser min). Nor does the gomin appear to correspond precisely to the sākyabhikṣu of the Newars, for there seems to exist no evidence that the gomin is first ordained as a bhikṣu and then sets aside this state in order to revert to the status of upāsaka (as does this category of Newar society through the ceremony of pravrajyavisarjana [or vratamokṣaṇa]). Cf. S. Lienhard, Diamantmeister und Hausväter (Vienna, 1999), p. 97 ff.

For Tibetan understandings of the three vows — the sdom pa = saṃvara of the Bhikṣu (i.e. the prātimokṣa), the Bodhisattva, and the Vajrayānīst Mantrin — see J. Sobisch, Three-
In terms of the Brahmanical system of the four stages of life (āśrama), whilst the Buddhist bhikṣu largely corresponds to the saṃnyāsin in the fourth āśrama, the (chaste) upāsaka (Tib. dge bsñen; fem. upāsikā, Tib. dge bsñen ma) observing the (five) śikṣāpadas could probably best be seen as corresponding in some respects, if only roughly, to the Brahmanical category of the (chaste) vānaprastha in the fourth āśrama, rather than to the grhastra or lay householder in the second āśrama begetting children. In Buddhist society it was, then, the grhaapati (Tib. khyim bdag) ‘householder’ — also referred to as gṛhin (Tib. khyim pa) or grhastra (Tib. khyim na gnas pa) — who can most appositely be described as the layman par excellence. At all events, the class of upāsaka is narrower than that of grhaapati; for not all grhaapatis — not even those who might act as dānapatis or almsgivers to the Buddhist Saṃgha — were properly speaking committed upāsakas observing the śikṣāpadas.34

Concerning the Buddhist class of monks — i.e., the category of the pravrajita (Tib. rab tu byuṅ ba) or person who has left home and entered into the religious life (pravrajyā) —, it can be defined as made up of the ‘novice’, male (śramaṇa[ka], Tib. dge tshul) and female (śramaṇerikā, Tib. dge tshul ma), as well as the monk (bhikṣu, Tib. dge sloṅ) and nun (bhikṣunī, Tib. dge sloṅ ma); but it is only the latter two who have received upāsampadā (Tib. bsñen rdzogs) or full ordination. As for the Buddhist Community (saṃgha), it is conventionally divided into four assemblies (pariṣad), namely bhikṣus, bhikṣunīs, upāsakas, and upāsikās. The universal Noble Community described as being ‘of the four directions’ (cātur-diśa-āryasaṃgha) is stated to be composed of bhikṣus; and it may be divided into the eight types of Noble Persons (āryapudgala, later subdivided into twenty types). The āryasaṃgha could also include Bodhisattvas. Distinguishable from this is the bodhisattvasaṃgha or Community of Bodhisattvas (who are either monks or not as the case may be). The Buddhist religious has in addition been regularly referred to as a śramaṇa (Tib. dge sbyoṅ), a term that is however applicable also to non-Buddhists. (The categories of religious just named were of course represented among Mahāyānists, although in Tibet the group of fully ordained dge sloṅ mas, as distinct from dge tshul mas or ‘novice’ nuns, died out only to be revived recently.)

vow theories in Tibetan Buddhism (Wiesbaden, 2002).

34 In his article ‘Sur la formation du Mahāyāna’, p. 378, Lamotte has described the upā-
A major Mahāyānist figure like the householder-religious and Bodhisattva Vimalakīrti could be considered as a sort of ideal model or exemplar for a certain religiously and philosophically — and perhaps also ‘mystically’ — inclined spirituality described in the renowned Vimalakīrtinirdesā. The layman Bodhisattva Vimalakīrti would seem to fit the above-mentioned category of gomin, who was clearly a religious though not a pravrajita or monk in the strict sense of one having full upasampadā.

A major Sūtra, the Śrīmālādeviśīmhanāda, is represented as being expounded with inspired intelligence and presence of mind (pratibhāna = spobs pa) by Queen Śrīmālā in virtue of the Buddha’s kind assistance and sustaining force.\(^\text{35}\)

As for the supposed link between the cult of the stūpa and the Mahāyāna — and also between the stūpa and the tathāgataagarbha teaching —, it has no doubt existed. But it was scarcely a peculiar characteristic and defining feature specific to the Mahāyāna alone, nor above all was it evidently a practice in the first place of laymen.\(^\text{36}\)

\(^\text{35}\) For the Sanskrit, see the fragment of the Śrīmālādeviśīmhanādaśūtra edited by K. Matsuda in J. Braarvig (ed.), Buddhist manuscripts (Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection I), Vol. i, p. 68: anyo ‘pi me ‘tra bhagavan bahūpakāro ‘rhanirdeśaḥ tathāgatāmugrahena pratibhāyat/ pratibhāya śubhe deviṭi bhagavatā[nu]jñātāḥ! For anugraha in the Skt. manuscript, rather than rjes su ’dzin pa ‘kind assistance’ the Tibetan translation has mthu ( = prabhāva) ‘might’.


Concerning the tathāgatagarbha and the (tathāgata)dhātugarbha / dāgāba, viz. stūpa (a theme that requires further investigation), see D. Seyfort Ruegg, La théorie du tathāgataagarbha et du gotra, pp. 505 n. 4, 515-16; and id., ‘The gotra, ekayāna and tathāgata-
The relation between Mahāyāna and Śrāvakayāna / Hīnayāna: opposition and complementarity

In Buddhist history, the Mahāyāna / Hīnayāna contrast or opposition has sometimes been used polemically — indeed even quite militantly — by both Mahāyānists and Śrāvakayānists. The two being held to be opposed or antithetical, the Mahāyāna was on the one hand thought by some of its enthusiastic advocates to supersede the Hīnayāna. On the other hand it was, on the contrary, considered by ‘conservative’ detractors to be inauthentic — that is, not genuine buddhavacana — and so to be rejected by the true follower of the Buddha. Still, long ago, André Bareau called attention to how little critical discussion of anything that can be regarded as necessarily and solely ‘Mahāyāna’ is in fact to be found in major Śrāvakayānist treatises.

From another viewpoint, the term mahāyāna may instead belong to a classificatory or taxonomic, and also a doxographic, differentiation.


For a critique of authenticity of the Mahāyāna, with references to the kṣetrapadeśa and śuklapadeśa (p. 197). — Vasubandhu’s Vyākhyaṭyukti engages in a defence of the Mahāyāna against criticisms coming from ‘conservatives’; see J. Cabezón, ‘Vasubandhu’s Vyākhyaṭyukti on the authenticity of the Mahāyāna Sūtras’, in: J.R. Timm (ed.), Texts in...
Buddhist doxographical (i.e. Siddhānta / Grub mtha’-type) texts from Tibet in fact have interesting things to say about what mahāyāna means. These still remain to be fully explored.

To sum up very briefly the gist of a couple of these analyses, it is recognized that a given Sūtra may present both Mahāyānist and non-Mahāyānist teachings ‘in common’ (cf. theg pa che chuṅ gi grub mtha’i thun moṅ du ’dod pa’i mdo sde du ma’i dgoṅs pa). Also, there exist persons whose spiritual ‘lineage’ / ‘gene’ (gotra = rigs) is indeterminate or indefinite (i.e. still ‘unexpressed’) (aniyata = maṅes pa), rather than definitively ‘expressed’ as either Mahāyānist or Śrāvakayānist, so that they require a common, undifferentiated teaching. (As noted above, p. 6, there is a close correlation between aspects of yāna-theory and gotra-theory.)

In particular, a very significant distinction has been established between a person who is spiritually a Hinayānist (theg dman gyi gaṅ zag) and one who just advocates Hinayānist doctrines (theg dman grub mtha’ smra ba) (e.g. the Sarvāstivāda / Vaibhāṣika or Sautrāntika). And a parallel distinction applies between one who is spiritually a Mahāyānist — that is, one who duly practises the Bodhisattva’s way founded in both discriminative understanding (prajñā) and conduct (caryā, or salvific method, upāya), as well as in the bodhicitta and in compassion (karuṇā) — and one who simply advocates doctrines of the Mahāyāna (viz. the Cittamātra = Vijñānavāda or Madhyamaka). Such analytical distinctions are of course highly important for the historian of Buddhist religion and philosophy, for they relate to the distinction between spiritual practice and philosophical position as understood in Buddhism. This distinction between mahāyāna as a set of teachings or texts and mahāyāna as spiritual practice and intellectual penetration appears to echo in part two established uses of the term dharma, namely (i) a verbalized teaching (deśanādharma = bstan pa’i chos) and (ii) ethical practice and intellectual understanding (i.e. adhigamadharma = rtogs pa’i chos, rig par bya ba’i chos).


39 See ‘Jam dbyaṅ bzung pa, Grub mtha’ chen mo, ga, f. 4a2.
40 Ibid, ga, f. 5a5.
41 See ICan skya Rol pa’i rdo rje, Dag yig mkhas pa’i ’byuṅ gnas, ja (Grub mtha’),
The three spiritual categories of person (skyes bu gsum) — the worldly person, the follower of the Lower Vehicle and the follower of the Mahāyāna — is the subject of many texts such as Atiśa’s Bodhipathapradīpa and Tson kha pa’s Lam rim texts and their commentaries. The triad of hīna, madhya and śreṣṭha is already found in a quotation in Vasubandhu’s Abhidharmakośabhāṣya (iii.94, p. 182, even though in this work on Śrāvakayānist scholasticism Vasubandhu does not treat of the Mahāyāna as such).42

Co-existence of Mahāyāna and Śrāvakayāna

It is furthermore to be observed that, whilst the contents of the major part of the Tibetan Sūtra and Śāstra collections — the bKa’ ’gyur and bsTan ’gyur — are indeed Mahāyānist, it would still be quite inaccurate to state that Tibetan Buddhism is solely Mahāyānist to the exclusion of all that may properly be considered Śrāvakayānist. Thus, within Tibetan Buddhism, the monachal code or Vinaya binding on all monks — that belonging to the order (nikāya) of the Mūlasārvasūtrakāraśāstra (iii.94, p. 182, even though in this work on Śrāvakayānist scholasticism Vasubandhu does not treat of the Mahāyāna as such)42.

In his great Summa of Mahāyānist thought and practice, the Lam rim chen mo, Tson kha pa has included much material from the Śrāvakabhaṭṭī (see below, p. 39). Moreover, in the curriculum of the Tibetan seminar-ies (grva tshaṅ), the Vinaya as well as Vasubandhu’s Abhidharmakośa — connected with the Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika schools — and its commentaries are the subject of regular and systematic study in the final classes (’dzin grva). As for logic and epistemology (ṭshad ma = pramāṇa) — which cannot be classified specifically and per se as either Mahāyānist

42 In Abhidharmakośabhāṣya vii.34 there is found only a passing reference to the yāna-traya, in which a Buddha is said to establish disciples. The Bodhisattva is mentioned a number of times in the Kośa. (For their part, the Abhidharmadīpa and Vibhāṣāprabhāvṛtti do
or Śrāvakayānist — they are studied towards the start of the Tibetan scholastic curriculum. In Tibet, *tshad ma* has in effect been considered to be either ancillary to or convergent with Mahāyānist philosophy (witness, for instance, the dual compound *dbu tshad* ‘Madhyamaka and Pramāṇa’).

The preceding examples have mostly been drawn from a more recent period in the long history of the Mahāyāna. It will be necessary to try to establish the extent to which patterns found in later times may also apply to an earlier period in the development of the Mahāyāna. That Mahāyānists both lived in the same monastic communities as Śrāvakayānists and followed the Vinaya of an old Nikāya is known for instance from Hsüan-tsang (602-664), who also refers to what is known as ‘Mahāyāna-Sthaviras’ (see n. 81 below).

**Buddhism and the ambient Indian religions, and the problem of the relationship between Mahāyāna and Brahmanism / Hinduism**

It is necessary to situate Mahāyāna not only within the overall framework of Buddhism as a whole but also in the context of non-Buddhist Indian religions and civilization. This undertaking confronts us with the question of the relation between the Mahāyāna and the ambient religions and culture(s) of India.

To take one significant example, certain areas of Mahāyāna have shared features of the *bhakti* movement with other Indian religions: this movement is not confined exclusively to one or two traditions and appears almost pan-Indian, a fact overlooked in many publications on the subject (see also below, p. 49).

The question of what may be more or less pan-Indian is a complex and rather vexed one, both historically and theoretically. That the Mahāyāna, together with Buddhism as a whole, was a product of Indian civilization is self-evident: they have, in very large part at least, a shared cultural matrix as well as geographical milieu. And in history many Buddhists have been brahmans by family background and personal education. But questions still arise as to how this interrelationship was to develop and express itself over time, and on how we can model this interrelationship. If it is true that Buddhism has much in common with Brahmanism / Hinduism, it appears that the latter has on occasion also borrowed from
the former. And that Buddhism formed part of the so-called ancient Indian ‘Śramana’ culture is no less clear. Yet a precise general determination of Buddhism’s relation to Brahmanism / Hinduism, and to Jainism, is not always an easy one to make and continues to pose many a problem.\footnote{See D. Seyfort Ruegg, ‘Sur les rapports entre le bouddhisme et le “substrat religieux” indien et tibétain’, JA 1964, pp. 77-95; and ‘A note on the relationship between Buddhist and “Hindu” divinities in Buddhist literature and iconology, the laukika / lokottara contrast and the notion of an Indian “religious substratum”’, in C. Cicuzza et al. (ed.), Le parole e i marmi (R. Gnoli Felicitation Volume, Rome, 2001), pp. 735-42 (with a selected bibliography). Cf. F. Sferra, ‘Some considerations on the relationship between Hindu and Buddhist Tantras’, in: G. Verardi and S. Vita (ed.), Buddhist Asia 1 (Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”, Centro di Studi sul Buddhismo, Kyōto, 2003), pp. 57-84.}

That there have existed identifiable historical borrowings between Buddhism and other Indian religious traditions appears incontrovertible, as just noted. But the generalization of a Borrowing Model / Paradigm alone to account for resemblances between Buddhism and Brahmanism / Hinduism is at the very least problematic, as is probably also the universalization of a Syncretism Model: it would seem necessary to reckon in addition with a Substratum Model / Paradigm. The Substratum Model does not, of course, automatically and of itself rule out individual historical instances of borrowing.

It might be that the use here of the term \textit{substratum} is problematic. But suitably employed and defined it seems serviceable; at all events, whatever its shortcomings might be, no convenient alternative has been found which is less problematic.\footnote{See D. Seyfort Ruegg, ‘Sur les rapports entre le bouddhisme et le “substrat religieux” indien et tibétain’, JA 1964, pp. 77-95; and ‘A note on the relationship between Buddhist and “Hindu” divinities in Buddhist literature and iconology, the laukika / lokottara contrast and the notion of an Indian “religious substratum”’, in C. Cicuzza et al. (ed.), Le parole e i marmi (R. Gnoli Felicitation Volume, Rome, 2001), pp. 735-42 (with a selected bibliography). Cf. F. Sferra, ‘Some considerations on the relationship between Hindu and Buddhist Tantras’, in: G. Verardi and S. Vita (ed.), Buddhist Asia 1 (Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”, Centro di Studi sul Buddhismo, Kyōto, 2003), pp. 57-84.} It should be noted that the expression substratum is not being used here in the sense it has in linguistics. Rather, it is being employed with reference to the characteristic idea found in Buddhism of the \textit{laukika} ‘mundane, worldly’ as a level that is systemically and structurally contrasted / opposed to the \textit{lokottara} ‘transmundane, supramundane’, but which has nonetheless been acknowledged, and integrated, by Buddhists within their religious world. In Buddhist thought, this structural contrast \textit{laukika} / \textit{lokottara} constitutes a highly important ‘emic’ distinction. Whilst \textit{laukika} (Pali \textit{lokiya}) refers to the worldly or mundane level, which Buddhists share with other Indians, \textit{lokottara} regularly denotes what is specific to Buddhism in the view of its followers. It may well be that the clarification of ‘emic’ usage is a prerequisite for
our being able usefully and effectively to pursue ‘etic’ analyses and comparisons.

As indicated above, the Substratum Model does not automatically rule out specific, historically identifiable, instances of syncretism; but the concept of syncretism can present serious difficulties if it is taken as a universally generalizable key or paradigm.45

Alongside the Substratum Model, the idea of religious and cultural *symbiosis* also has a useful and important part to play. All this requires further detailed study.

A further possible way of defining the relationship between Mahāyāna and Brahmanism / Hinduism is in terms of the concept of *docetism* whereby a Buddha or Bodhisattva is deemed to deploy soteriologically appropriate expedient means (*upāya*) in order to effect the benefit of sentient beings in general (*sarvasattva*), or of a given set of trainees (*vineya, vaineya*) in particular, these expedients being suited to disciples who may not yet be able to absorb anything but ‘mundane’ (*laukika*) notions. Yet docetism does not, of course, relate solely — or perhaps even mainly — to interreligious phenomena. In Buddhism it is a feature characteristic of, for example, the fundamental Mahāyānist doctrine of the Buddha’s three Bodies (*trikāya*) which includes the *nirmānakāya* or ectypal ‘phantom Body’. In other words, it is a concept that may be invoked not only with reference to what is external to Buddhism properly speaking but also with reference to different levels of teaching and understanding within Buddhism itself.

*The geographical milieu*

The geographical spread of early Mahāyāna would appear to have been characterized by polycentric diffusion. In India, after the demise of the Buddha, earlier Buddhism indeed possessed no institutionalized ecclesiastical authority; for the purposes of the Vinaya it was organized into local *sīmās* ‘parishes’.

From the start, an important part in the spread of Mahāyāna was no doubt played both by the Northwest of the Indian subcontinent and by the

44 See the second article cited in n. 43 above.
Andhra country in south-central India, but presumably neither was the sole place of its origin. Bihar, Bengal and Nepal too were important centres of Mahāyāna. Sri Lanka also was involved in the history of the Mahāyāna, for the so-called Vetullakas were known there (see n. 10) and the great Mādhyamika thinker Ārya-Deva, the disciple of Nāgārjuna, is reported to have been born there.46

For the Mahāyāna, then, multiple geographical origins — even a sort of plurigenesis in several geographically distant Śrāvakayānist orders / schools (nikāya) — seems to be much more likely than geographical monogenesis. A definitive clarification of this question is probably little nearer today than when Lamotte and Bareau addressed the problem of Mahāyāna origins in the 1950s.47

Significant developments in the Mahāyāna then took place in Central Asia also. Because of the importance in a large sector of Mahāyānist thought of the arapacana syllabary (in the Avatāmsaka, Prajñāpāramitā, etc.) — with its ligature ysa, the sound [za] common in Iranian languages and in ‘Tocharian’ — which constitutes the dhāraṇī or ‘mnemonic’ of the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, the question has arisen of possible Central Asian and Serindian influence (through the Śakas / Scythians and Kuśānas) in the history of the Mahāyāna in the early part of the first millennium. Without it being necessary to go so far as to postulate a Serindian origin for Mañjuśrī,48 there seem to exist interesting avenues of investigation to be followed up here.

45 See the first two articles cited in n. 43 above.
47 See E. Lamotte, ‘Sur la formation du Mahāyāna’ (using data derived inter alia from Fa-hsien’s and Hsüan-tsang’s records and including Central Asia); and A. Bareau, Les sectes bouddhiques du Petit Véhicule, p. 297 ff (calling attention to the importance of Sri Lanka for the Vajrayāna).

Moreover, at the end of the first millennium of the common era, clear references to Islam and the Middle East are found in the literature of the Kālacakra.

The geographical horizon of the Mahāyāna thus came to cover an area extending from the Near East to Japan, and from Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia and Indonesia to Serindia and on to Siberia.

**Two problems in comparativism: Gnosticism and Manichaeism**

At least since the time of I.J. Schmidt’s *Über die Verwandschaft der gnostisch-theosophischen Lehren mit den Religionssystemen des Orients, vorzüglich dem Buddhismus* (Leipzig, 1828), consideration has from time to time been accorded to the hypothesis that Gnosticism and Manichaeism are somehow related to Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism (and even to Buddhism generally). It seems unlikely that Mahāyāna Buddhism is to any great degree directly dependent on either of these religions: systemically, it appears very different indeed. An essential difference appears to lie in the fact that Mahāyānist (and Vajrayānist) thought is usually not dualist but grounded in the principle of non-duality (*advaya*), Still, given the fact that Buddhism has spread in areas where these movements were established, and the possibility that certain of its component elements might even have developed there, it may be useful to study parallels between them in case at least certain currents in later Buddhism should turn out to share a common background with these two movements.49

and O. von Hinüber, *Das ältere Mittelindisch im Überblick* §193.

Periodization

A problem soon confronting us in the study of the Mahāyāna is its periodization. This concept is normally understood in terms of temporal sequence and chronological stratification; and this use of the concept is of course pertinent and useful.

No less important is what might be called systematic periodization, which in essence is not automatically equatable with chronological and temporally sequential stratification.50 In Tibetan hermeneutical systems that relate to the Buddha’s three ‘turnings’ of the Wheel of Dharma (dharmacakrapravartana), the first Cycle (corresponding roughly to the Āgamas and Vinaya) is not simply cancelled or superseded by the Sūtras of the last two Cycles (i.e. the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras, and then certain Sūtras linked with the teaching of either the Vijñānavāda or the Buddha-nature / tathāgatagarbha); nor does the third Cycle of the buddhavacana necessarily (according, e.g., to Tibetan Mādhyamikas) replace or supersede the second Cycle of the Prajñāpāramitasūtras, which is deemed to retain its full force.

The Tibetan hermeneutical systems based on three Cycles of buddhavacana do not appear to operate in precisely the same way as Chinese p’an-chiao systems.51 (In the East Asian tradition, the metaphor of the five

50 See above, p. 24, and the end of the present article.

51 See, e.g., D. Lopez (ed.), Buddhist hermeneutics (Hawaii, 1988), Index s. v. p’an-
‘milky tastes’ seems to presuppose a chronological succession in the Buddha’s teaching. Of considerable interest is the fact that the Tibetan hermeneutical systems, though of course referring back to Sūtras, are often derived from Śāstra sources, whereas Chinese Buddhist hermeneutical systems seem usually to be rooted in Sūtras alone.

Hermeneutics in Mahāyāna

In terms of the distinction between Sūtras of provisional, ‘surface-level’, meaning (neyārtha) and those that are of definitive, ‘deep-level’, meaning (nītārtha), in Tibet it is sometimes the second Cycle and sometimes the third Cycle (‘khor lo = cakra) of the Buddha’s teaching that is held to be of definitive meaning, the other two Cycles being then very often (though not invariably; see below) considered to be of provisional meaning given the Akṣayatīrdeṣaśūtra’s definition of the nītārtha as being concerned with the ultimate sense (śūnyatā, etc.). It should also be noted that, contrary to a current rendering, neyārtha properly means not ‘interpretable’ — all meaningful utterances, including accordingly the whole of the buddhavacana, are after all interpretable in a standard and appropriate sense of this word —, but ‘requiring interpretation in a further (and different) sense’. Nor is neyārtha necessarily coterminous with ‘non-literal’ (na yathārūta, sgra ji bzin ma yin pa) and nītārtha with ‘literal’ (yathārūta = sgra ji bzin pa); for the criterion accepted for instance by the Mādhyamikas following the Akṣayatīrdeṣaśūtra depends not on the verbal expression in a Sūtra — describable as either literal or not literal — but on its intended purport. Some Tibetan hermeneuts have developed a system of interpretation according to which the Tathāgatagarbha Sūtras — which are attached to the Third Cycle of the buddhavacana — are to be understood in conformity with the Buddha’s teaching.


52 See also Hōbōgirin, s. v. Daigo.
53 For the Akṣayatīrdeṣa, see D. Seyfort Ruegg, Two prolegomena to Madhyamaka...
with the nītārtha Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras belonging to the Second Cycle. And in this case they too are deemed to be nītārtha.54

It is to be observed that in Sūtra-hermeneutics a statement contained in buddhavacana is held to be either provisional, and of ‘surface-level’ (neyārtha) meaning, or definitive, and of ‘deep-level’ (nītārtha) meaning, within the frame of the exegetical system of a single school. In the Vajrayānist hermeneutics of the Tantric śākotī, however, the situation is more complex; for there the same statement might be interpreted by one interpreter, according to circumstances, as neyārtha or nītārtha.

The problem of the classification of Sūtras as Mahāyānist, and the referential extension of the expression ‘mahāyāna’

A problem sometimes arises with the traditional classification of a Sūtra as Mahāyānist or otherwise. For instance, in its title the Śālistambasūtra is described as a Mahāyānasūtra; but there is in fact very little in its content that would seem to be specifically, much less exclusively, Mahāyānist (apart perhaps from the fact that it is the Bodhisattva Maitreya who teaches it to Śāriputra).56 The Lalitavistara, a biography of the Buddha, is also described in its title as a Mahāyānasūtra; but very much of the work is far from being specifically Mahāyānist.57

It is to be recalled, furthermore, that major works of the Mahāyāna are not exclusively Mahāyānist in their contents. Thus the Yogācārabhūmi ascribed to Asaṅga — under the inspiration of Maitreya(nātha) — contains, alongside the properly Mahāyānist Bodhisattvabhūmi, a Śrāvakabhūmi, and much further material besides that could be described as

philosophy, pp. 81, 257 ff.

55 The śākotī = mtha’ drug (or śākotika vyākhyāna), namely nītārtha = ņes don, neyārtha = draṅ don, samdhīyā bhāṣīta- = dgoṅs bḥad / dgoṅs pa can, na samdhīyā bhāṣīta- = dgoṅs min, yathāruta = sgra’ ji bţin, and na yathāruta = sgra’ ji bţin ma yin pa.
56 On Maitreya outside the Mahāyāna see, e.g., P. Jaini, ‘Stages in the career of the Tathāgata Maitreya’ in his Collected papers on Buddhist studies (Delhi, 2001), pp. 451-500.

Dharmarakṣa’s Chinese translation of this Sūtra contains the Arapacana formula sacred to the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī; see J. Brough, ‘The Arapacana syllabary in the old Lalita-
common to Buddhism as a whole. It is furthermore to be observed that, in his great Summa of Mahāyānist thought and practice, the Lam rim chen mo, Tsoṅ kha pa has made extensive use of the Śrāvakabhūmi, notably in his detailed treatment of Tranquillity (ṣi gnas = śamatha).

It thus appears that no hard and fast line, no rigid and impassable barrier, has been erected by such authorities between Mahāyāna and other strands in Buddhism even when they maintained its distinctiveness.

A doctrinal and philosophical criterion for the Mahāyāna

The doctrine of the non-substantiality of phenomena (dharmanairātmya / dharmaniḥsvabhāvatā, i.e. svabhāva-śūnyatā ‘Emptiness of self-existence’) has very often been regarded as criterial, indeed diagnostic, for identifying a teaching or work as Mahāyānist. For this there may of course be a justification. But it has nevertheless to be recalled that by the authorities of the Madhyamaka school of Mahāyānist philosophy, it is regularly argued that not only the Mahāyānist but even the Śrāvakayānist Arhat must of necessity have an an understanding (if only a somewhat limited one) of dharmanairātmya. This very remarkable feature of Buddhist philosophical thinking has often been overlooked by historians of the Mahāyāna.

A few other characteristically Mahāyānist ideas have been briefly touched on above (pp. 6-7, 13-16).

The doctrinal classification of individual Mahāyānasūtras

The doctrinal and philosophical classification, or categorization, of many Mahāyāna Sūtras according to their contents may pose interesting problems.

For example, although the Daśabhūmikasūtra refers to cittamātra, i.e. ‘mind only’ (in chap. vi), this text is nonetheless an important source for
Mādhyamikas; and this reference is accordingly not understood by Madhyamaka commentators as referring specifically to the Cittamātra (sem tsam) = Vijñānavāda.  

A comparable problem arises for the Laṅkāvatārasūtra, which is cited by Mādhyamikas as well as by Vijñānavādins. Besides, this work (chap. iii) presents a special form of the tathāgatagarbha as already endowed with the thirty-two distinctive marks (laksāna) of a buddha, which it then compares with the ātmavāda of the heterodox (tīrthakara, i.e. the Brahmans / Hindus). The tathāgatagarbha doctrine is accordingly described in the Sūtra as having been intended by the Teacher to remove for inexperienced disciples their innate fear of non-substantiality (nairātmyasaṃtrāsa), that is, in effect as being an ‘intentional’ (abhiprāyika, i.e. neyārtha) teaching.

The doctrinal classification of the tathāgatagarbha teaching

The question has then arisen whether the Sūtras teaching the tathāgatagarbha are Vijñānavāda or Madhyamaka in their philosophical position. Although several scholars have taken these Sūtras to be linked with the Vijñānavāda, many Tibetan interpreters connect them rather with the Madhyamaka (even though, as mentioned above, they attach them to the third Cycle of the Buddha’s teaching). Concerning the commentary on the Ratnagotravibhāga ascribed in the Tibetan tradition to Asaṅga (but in the Chinese to a certain śārmatī), this master’s true intent (abhiprāya = dgoñs pa) is held to have been in accord with the Madhyamaka (and therefore to be definitive rather than provisional in meaning). However unexpected this type of exegetical classification and hermeneutics might appear to us today, the historian of Mahāyāna is obliged to take account of it.

It is to be noted that no form of the tathāgatagarbha doctrine has been taught in the Ta-chih-tu-lun ascribed to Nāgārjuna. But references to it are found in the Sūtrasamuccaya also attributed to him.

pp. 100, 227 ff., 245, 247.

60 See D. Seyfort Ruegg, Two prolegomena to Madhyamaka philosophy, pp. 203-04.
61 See the works cited in n. 54 above.
62 P. 172 ff. (ed. Pāśādika, in citations from the Laṅkāvatārasūtra), rather than from more ‘standard’ Sūtras expounding the tathāgatagarbha. On the Sūtrasamuccaya see below,
Scripture (Sūtra) and commentary (Śāstra) in Mahāyāna

A further interesting question in the history of the Mahāyāna is the diachronic relationship holding between a basic Sūtra text (sometimes available in more than one recension) and its commentaries (often very numerous).

An example of this intertextual relation is (1) the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā, (2) the Abhisamayālaṃkāra ascribed to Maitreya(nātha), and (3) the many commentaries on the latter such as those by the two Vimuktisenas (the Ārya and the Bhadanta), Haribhadra (the Abhisamayālaṃkāralokā Prajñāpāramitavyākhyā), and Ratnākaraśānti (the Śaratamā). Such sets of intricately related texts — in this case a three-stage or three-tier set — characterize much of Mahāyāna literature. And this in turn poses the crucial question of the relation between (1) scriptural text (i.e. Sūtra), (2) semi-scriptural comment (i.e. Śāstraic exposition such as the Abhisamayālaṃkāra), and (3) ordinary (sub)commentary (Vyrtti, etc.).

We thus see how complex a historical phenomenon the Mahāyāna is, not only in its canonical Sūtras but also in its Śāstraic stages of elaboration.

Certainly, on the level of their expression, Sūtras and Śāstras differ from each other in so far as the former are very often characterized by tropes and figurative language making use of metaphor or metonymy and illustrating the topic being treated (the upameya) by means of comparisons (upamāna) and more or less elaborate parables. Sūtras are moreover marked quite often by irony, paronomasia, paradox, and antiphrasis. These are not necessarily just word-plays and riddles, rhetorical devices or playful literary conceits; at once conceptual and linguistic, they may be motivated by the perceived difficulty of conveying a deep intended sense — one more or less inexpressible through ordinary linguistic-conceptual means — and be defined by analogical or anagogic processes, which may then be associated with conceptual inversions or reversals (viparyaya, etc.) and, especially in the Vajrayāna, with the occasional feature of transgressive transvaluation of received norms (antinomianism or anomianism). Śāstras on the other hand are generally characterizable by their more technical vocabulary as well as by their scholastic style and contents (even if they too may make use of upamānas).

As already observed (p. 37), on the level of content, the hermeneutical distinction between the provisional (and eventually non-explicit)
neyārtha and the definitive nītārtha (explicit or not as the case may be) basically concerns the buddhavacana — in other words Sūtras (and Tantras) which are regarded as taught by the Buddha, or under his sustaining force — rather than Śastras, which are taken to be not only explicit in their wording but definitive in their contents (in the frame, of course, of the particular system to which they belong).

On two early masters of the Mahāyāna: Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu

The polysemy, and the resulting potential ambivalence, of the term Mahāyāna and the problem of pinning down precisely to what it may refer is reflected in discussions that have taken place as to whether, for example, Nāgārjuna (first/second century) and An Shih-kao (An Shigao, second century) were Mahāyānists. In his fundamental, and criterial, Madhyamakārikās Nāgārjuna has not cited any particular Mahāyānist source, the only explicit reference there being to a Śrāvakayānist one (the Kātyāyanaśāravāda, in xv.7). In the case of An Shih-kao, the Parthian translator of Buddhist texts into Chinese, no translations of specifically Mahāyānist texts are attributed to him in the Chinese canon. But, taken by themselves, these circumstances do not appear to justify (much less to necessitate) the conclusion that neither Nāgārjuna nor An Shih-kao was a Mahāyānist.

The division between Mahāyāna and Hinayāna / Śrāvakayāna has impinged also on modern scholarly discussions concerning the existence of more than a single author named Vasubandhu. Opponents of Erich Frauwallner’s thesis distinguishing between two authors of this name seem to have on occasion overlooked the fact that he supposed both that his Vasubandhu I (the master referred to as the Vṛddhācārya?) was a Mahāyānist and that his Vasubandhu II (the Kośakāra) became a Mahāyānist.

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64 See Bangwei Wang, ‘Mahāyāna or Hinayāna: A reconsideration of the yāna affiliation...”
in his later career. The fact that Sautrāntika (and hence so-called ‘Hīna-
yānist’) presuppositions are detectable in the Viṃśatikā or Trīṃśikā
(Viṃśaptimātratāsiddhiḥ)\(^{65}\) — works ascribed by Frauwallner to his Vasu-
bandhu II — is inconclusive for the discussion as to whether the differ-
ent works attributed to (a) Vasubandhu were in fact composed by more
than one author bearing this illustrious name when Vasubandhu II was
according to Frauwallner a master of both Mahāyāna and Śrāvakayāna
(and when his Vasubandhu I could have been building on Śrāvakayānist
material). Still, in discussions as to the possible multiplicity of Vasuban-
dhus, the question of the relation between Mahāyāna and pre- or non-
Mahāyāna has crystallized around the person of this great figure. There
seems to exist no conclusive proof that at the time he wrote his Abhidharmakośa
the Kośakāra was — or alternatively was not (yet) — a Mahāyānist;
nor does there even appear to exist a compelling reason for assuming that
the author of this Abhidharma-treatise should have felt obligated to address
in it the Mahāyāna had he already been a Mahāyānist.\(^{66}\) In short, the fact
that Vasubandhu’s treatise on Abhidharma — a subject that was essen-
tially Śrāvakayānist (even though Asaṅga is credited with the Mahāyānist
Abhidharmasamuccaya) — does not bear on the Mahāyāna can per se tell
us little if anything about whether its author was already a Mahāyānist at
the time of its composition.

A problem also arises in relation to the difficult question as to whether
the works ascribed to (a) Nāgārjuna might in fact have been composed
by more than one author having this name. Even if ultimately germane
to the problem of the multiplicity of masters bearing the renowned name
of Nāgārjuna, the observation concerning the absence in Nāgārjuna’s
Madhyamakakārikās of any explicit reference to a Mahāyānist textual source
(see above) should in no way oblige us to conclude that their author was
not (yet) a Mahāyānist.\(^{67}\) In itself, this circumstance is independent of the


\(^{67}\) At all events, the Ratnāvalī also ascribed to Nāgārjuna does know the Mahāyāna. On the Mahāyāna in this text see recently G. Schopen, ‘The Mahāyāna and the Middle Period
question of the multiplicity of authorship of the works ascribed to Nāgārjuna. Discussion concerning these two quite distinct matters of multiplicity of authorship for the works attributed to Nāgārjuna on one side and of Nāgārjuna I’s relation to the Mahāyāna on the other side can thus avoid being vitiated by circularity in argument.

An effort has to be made, if not positively to prove (or disprove) the traditional ascription of a given work to Nāgārjuna I — which in some cases may be practically impossible in the absence of conclusive content-bound diagnostic criteria, as well as of formal (e.g. stylometric) criteria when the relevant text is available only in Chinese or Tibetan translations — then at least to develop criteria that might be able to make an attribution likely — or, alternatively, doubtful — on other than (more or less) impressionistic, subjective, grounds, or on the basis of an argument from silence. As things now stand, with the exception of the Madhyamaka-kārikās — usually taken as a reference point and standard for ascribing any other doctrinal work to Nāgārjuna I — there is scarcely a text attributed to this early master — beginning with the *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa and the Vigrahavyāvartanī, proceeding on to the Ratnāvalī and finishing, e.g., with the *Daśabhūmikavibhāṣā (T. 1521, translated by Kumārajīva) — whose ascription to him has escaped being questioned in recent years. Similar problems arise also for the hymns ascribed to Nāgārjuna.68 For the historian of the Mahāyāna, this is truly a troubling state of affairs.

In the case of the *Akutobhayā, an argument against the attribution to Nāgārjuna I was already adduced in the Tibetan tradition. This is based on the fact that, in one place in chap. xxvii, this commentary quotes a verse found in the Catuṣṭātaka by Nāgārjuna’s pupil Ārya-Devā, and on the assumption that a master will not quote his own disciple.69

The Sūtrasamuccaya, an anthology of scriptural texts of the Mahāyāna ascribed to Nāgārjuna, should in principle be of very special interest for

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69 See The literature of the Madhyamaka school of philosophy in India, p. 48 n. 120. The relation of the Akutobhayā to Buddhāpālita’s commentary on the Madhyamaka-kārikās remains to be fully investigated in published form. Cf. C.W. Huntington, ‘A lost
the discussion of the earlier Mahāyāna. For, if in fact by Nāgārjuna I, this compilation would take us back to a quite early stage in the history of the Mahāyāna, in all probability to the first or second century CE. And it would supply the historian of the Mahāyāna with a very valuable terminus ante quem for (at least parts of) the Sūtras included in it. But historical and textual problems arise. Not only is the Sūtrasamuccaya not available in the original Sanskrit — it is extant solely in two quite late translations, a Tibetan one attributed to Ye śes sde (c. 800) and a Chinese one attributed to Fa-hu (from soon after the year 1000) — but there also exists the real possibility that, in the course of its textual transmission over the centuries, such an anthology might have been open to expansion and interpolation (e.g. in the matter of the extracts in the Sūtrasamuccaya taken from the Laṅkāvatāra relating to the tathāgatagarbha doctrine; see above, p. 40). Still another difficulty arises from the fact that the illustrious name Nāgārjuna has evidently been borne by more than one important Indian Buddhist master and author; and the question has therefore to be investigated whether the Nāgārjuna to whom the compilation of the Sūtrasamuccaya is ascribed was in fact the same person as the author of the Madhyamakakārikās. In this connexion it is noteworthy that the Chinese version of this work is (by Chinese standards) relatively late. But at the same time it may be observed that in his Madhyamakaśāstrasūtra (v. 10) Candrakīrti — who lived in the seventh century, about half a millennium after Nāgārjuna I — counted the Sūtrasamuccaya as one of the latter’s works. Candrakīrti has also referred to it in his Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya (ed. La Vallée Poussin, p. 402) in connexion with the ekayāna doctrine. The Sūtrasamuccaya has also been ascribed to Nāgārjuna by the author of Bodhicaryāvatāra v.106. In sum, therefore, the Sūtrasamuccaya could be of crucial importance for our present purposes if its ascription to Nāgārjuna I is correct. But, as already noted, the dates of the Chinese and Tibetan translations leave open to question its evidential value for describing as early either an idea or a given passage of a Sūtra; for we have always to reckon with the possibility of its expansion / interpolation even if, in its core, this anthology were to be ascribed to Nāgārjuna I.70

Concerning the very important *Ta-chih tu-lun* (*Mahāprajñāpāramitopādesa*, T 1509) also ascribed to Nāgārjuna, and available only in Chinese, further research has no doubt still to be carried out on the question whether this work was actually composed by its (supposed) Chinese ‘translator’, the Kuchean Kumārajīva (344-413 / 350-409?), perhaps on the basis of extensive Indian Madhyamaka materials to which he may have had access during his period of study in Kashmir. At all events, Lamotte’s later hypothesis attributing this treatise to a Sarvāstivādin Deutero-Nāgārjuna does not seem necessary in order to explain the evidence. Still, although most unlikely to have been composed by Nāgārjuna I, and therefore not genuine in the usual sense, this work does possess great significance above (p. 40), the Sūtrasamuccaya quotes the *Laṅkāvatāraśūtra* on the tathāgatagarbha, whereas the *Ta-chih-tu-lun*, also ascribed to Nāgārjuna, does not seem to mention this doctrine.

The *ekayāna* as opposed to the *triyāna* theory has been fleetingly mentioned also in the *Ratnāvali* (iv.88) ascribed to Nāgārjuna. Now, in his recent article ‘The Mahāyāna and the Middle Period in Indian Buddhism’, *EB* 32 (2000), p. 9, G. Schopen has invoked this passage as a piece of evidence in support of his thesis that, at the time of the author of the *Ratnāvali*, the Mahāyāna had not gained wide acceptance, and that this royal counsellor was nevertheless hoping that it would at least be ‘tolerated’. But to the present writer this passage does not appear to have anything to do with (in)tolerance of the Mahāyāna by others. Rather, the allusion in question relates to these two theories within the Mahāyāna, and concerning which the royal recipient of the *Ratnāvali* is asked by its author not to take sides but to maintain an attitude of impartiality (*upekṣā*). It is, after all, not the task of a ruler as such to take sides in such difficult, and controversial, matters of religio-philosophical hermeneutics, any more than it would be for the king to pass judgement on the hermeneutical problems posed by utterances (*abhisaṃdhyāktaṇi*, iv.88) ascribed to the Buddha which have traditionally been regarded as allusive or ‘intentional’. No reason seems therefore to exist for describing this passage as having ‘the smell of a retreat’ by the author of the *Ratnāvali*, and to claim that it is a piece of ‘sectarian rhetoric’ (ibid., p. 9). Quite the reverse, in fact, for this admonition addressed to the ruler by the author of the *Ratnāvali* represents a regular Buddhist procedure. The question here, then, is whether the problematic of the *ekayāna* as opposed to the *triyāna* had already been thematized at the time of Nāgārjuna I, the author of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās*, in connexion with the idea of intentional utterances. — On the *ekayāna*, see D. Seyfort Ruegg, *Théorie du tathāgatagarbha et du gotra*, p. 177 ff.; and on intentional utterances and *abhisaṃdhi* in Buddhist thought, see id., ‘Allusiveness and obliqueness in Buddhist texts’, in: C. Caillat (ed.), *Dialectes dans les littératures indo-aryennes* (Paris, 1989), pp. 295-328. Concerning the relation between the temporal and religious authorities, compare our *Ordre spirituel et ordre temporel dans la pensée bouddhique de l’Inde* (as in n. 17 above).

71 See The literature of the Madhyamaka school of philosophy in India, pp. 32-33. See also P. Demiéville, *L’Inde classique*, ii (1953), §§2079, 2130.

72 See E. Lamotte, *Des Verfasser des Upadesa* (as in n. 2 above).
for the history of the Madhyamaka in North India and Central Asia as well as in East Asia. It may accordingly be said to possess what might be termed true doctrinal authenticity.\textsuperscript{74}

It is clear that the historical and methodological problems attaching both to the figure and to the authorship of Nāgārjuna have not yet been sufficiently probed, much less fully resolved, despite their crucial importance for the history of the early Mahāyāna. Certain proposed solutions seem to have involved unexamined premisses and circularity in argument taking what is only a hypothesis to be already proved.

Some other problems of authorship and authenticity in earlier Mahāyānist literature

The 	extit{Ta-ch’eng ch’i-hsin lun} (\textit{*Mahāyānaśraddhotpādaśāstra}) ascribed to Aśvaghoṣa in the Chinese tradition — T. 1666 [Paramārtha’s [500-569] translation] and T 1667 [Śikṣānanda’s [652-710] translation] — is no doubt not by this old Indian author but, instead, a work produced in China owing to Paramārtha’s teaching activity there in the sixth century. It nevertheless possesses very considerable doctrinal interest; and for Paramārtha’s school of Vijñānavāda it can be said to have true doctrinal authenticity, containing as it does important and genuine philosophical material.\textsuperscript{75} A further problem of authenticity concerns the so-called \textit{*Buddhātā-śāstra} (T. 1610) ascribed to Vasubandhu and supposedly translated by Paramārtha.

Questions concerning sources and the circumstances of composition also arise later for the so-called \textit{*Vijñaptimātratā-siddhi} (T. 1585) compiled and redacted by Hsüan-tsang (602-664), but on the basis of Indian materials going back to the Vijñānavādin Dharmapāla and other Indian commentators on Vasubandhu’s \textit{Triṃśikā} and collected by this Chinese scholar during his long period of study in India in the seventh century.

\textsuperscript{73} cf. \textit{The literature of the Madhyamaka school of philosophy in India}, pp. 32-33.

\textsuperscript{74} On the general question of authenticity, see R. Buswell (ed.), \textit{Chinese Buddhist apocrypha} (Hawai‘i, 1990).

\textsuperscript{75} See P. Demiéville, \textit{L’Inde classique}, ii (1953), §2148; and, more recently, J. Takasaki,
The Bodhi(sattva)caryāvatāra

In the later history of the Madhyamaka, even Śāntideva / Śāntadeva’s Bodhi(sattva)caryāvatāra — ascribed in the Chinese canon to Nāgārjuna himself, and in one Tibetan version (from Dunhuang) to a certain Blo gros m(y)i zad pa (Aksayamati) — poses curious and interesting problems concerning still another important Mahāyāna treatise. This later work is alluded to here since it shows that some of the above-mentioned historical problems in the earlier history of the Mahāyāna are not met with exclusively at the beginning of this tradition. In the history of the Mahāyāna, Śāstra as well as Śūtra will continue to give us much food for thought and discussion. Śāstras — i.e. works not classified as buddhavacana — should not be excluded in principle from the investigation of even the earlier Mahāyāna.

Buddhas and Bodhisattvas

Beside the approaches to the history of Mahāyāna outlined above, a further highly important avenue consists in the study of the figures of the Bodhisattva-Mahāsattvas. There already exist a number of valuable monographs relating to the Bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara (e.g. de Mallmann), Tārā (from G. de Blonay to P. Arènes), Maitreya / Ajita, Mañjuśrī (e.g. Lamotte and de Mallmann), and Vajrapāṇi (e.g. Lamotte).


There is uncertainty in some sources as to the form of the name Śāntideva or Śāntadeva. (The proper name Śāntideva is attested in the Gunaighār (Bengal) copper-plate inscription of Vainya Gupta, but it does not refer to the author of our text.)

For a recent contribution to the study in a fairly old Śāstra of the problem of Mahāyāna in relation to Hinayāna, see M. D’Amato, The Mahāyāna-Hinayāna distinction in the Mahāyānasūtraśāntānā: A terminological analysis (University of Chicago thesis, 2000).
Study of the Mahāyāna may furthermore focus on its multiplication of Buddhas / Jinas / Tathāgatas in addition to the Buddha Śākyamuni and his (putative) human predecessors. Prominent among the (so-called cosmic) Buddhas are Aksobhya and Amitābha to each of whom is assigned a pure Buddha-field, respectively the Abhirati and the Sukhāvatī. The Vajrayāna was then to push further this process of multiplication of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as tutelaries (Tib. yi dam) with the development of, for instance, Tathāgata-pentads and the corresponding mandalas.

It is in relation to the Buddha and to Bodhisattvas, and also of course to his immediate spiritual master (guru, Tib. rtsa ba’i bla ma),79 that the Mahāyānist displays a strong strand of religious devotion (bhakti, Tib. gus pa, dad pa; also ādara, gaurava, preman, etc.), spiritual inclination or affection (bhāva, Tib. gus pa, bsam pa) and tranquil receptivity or clarity of spirit (prasāda, Tib. dad pa ‘faith’), expressed both earlier and later in an extensive literature of hymns and eulogies (stotra and stava).80 This very noteworthy feature seems to have become prominent in Buddhism at about the same time that bhakti movements were spreading in Hindu India, but in this matter it is no easy thing to establish a direct dependence of Buddhism on Hinduism (or vice versa).

Antecedents and prefigurations of Mahāyānist doctrine in the thought of Śrāvakayānist orders / schools (nikāya)

A further interesting problem arises when an effort is made to trace the antecedents of Mahāyānist doctrines within Buddhism.

In the search for these origins and precursors of Mahāyāna we should not expect to find any single origin and source: moncausality seems in fact to be ruled out by the evidence available. No one Śrāvakayānist order / school (nikāya) of Buddhism can be identified as the single source of the

79 See, e.g., the Gurupañciṣṭikā ascribed to Āśvaghoṣa and the related literature.
80 See D. Seyfort Ruegg, ‘Le Dharmadhātustava de Nāgārjuna’, pp. 454-7; id., The literature of the Madhyamaka school of philosophy in India, pp. 31, 55.
Mahāyāna as a whole, or even as its main source. And in a number of cases, Mahāyānists have cohabited in the same monastic community with Śrāvakayānists of various orders or schools.⁸¹

Whilst the tathāgatagarbha doctrine, for instance, has sometimes been linked with the Mahāsāṃghikas,⁸² its precursors, or at least adumbrations of it, appear to have been multiple and complex.⁸³ Exponents of this doctrine sometimes connect it with the Luminous Mind (prabhāsvarāṃ cittaṃ, Pali pabhassaraṃ cittaṃ) of the old canonical Āgama (including the Pali canon of the Theravādins).⁸⁴ And as a prefiguration it is no doubt possible to point to the idea of a ‘Buddha-Seed’ (buddhabija) — and (to an extent) even to the bija theory — as well as to the (prakṛtistha)gotra, all of which are of course not exclusively Mahāyānist.⁸⁵

On the related, but distinct, religious and spiritual factors of anugraha, prabhava, anubhava and adhiṣṭhāna, see above pp. 18-19.


⁸² It may be (?) that the tathāgatagarbha teaching was linked with the Mahāsāṃghika / Ekavyāhārika school in Bhavya’s Nikāyabheda-vibhāṅgavyākhyaṃ where we read: de bžin gžegs pa thams cad kyi gsuṅ ni sūñ po la mūn par mos pa’o (cf. A. Bareau, JA 1956, p. 173). Concerning possible Mahāsāṃghika links, see Théorie, pp. 47 ff., 412, 441 ff., 474. See also M. Shimoda, ‘The relationship between the Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra and the Mahāsāṃghika’, IBK 42/2 (1994), pp. 22-27.

⁸³ One of the main sources for the tathāgatagarbha doctrine is the (Mahāyānist) Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra, to which M. Shimoda has devoted a major study: Nehangyō no kenkyū (Tōkyō, 1997). For the relation of this Sūtra to the Mahāmeghasūtra see T. Suzuki, ‘The recompilation of the Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra under the influence of the Mahāmeghasūtra’, IBK 49/2 (2001), pp. 1007-03. Another major source, the Tathāgatagarbhasūtra, has been studied by M. Zimmermann; see his ‘The Tathāgatagarbhasūtra, its basic structure and relation to the Lotus Sūtra’, ARIRIAB 2 (1999), pp. 143-68; and id., A Buddha within: The Tathāgatagarbhasūtra (Tōkyō, 2002).

⁸⁴ See D. Seyfort Ruegg, Théorie, p. 411 ff. (where the Mahāsāṃghikas are mentioned as advocates of the theory).

⁸⁵ See the discussion in Théorie, passim; and D. Seyfort Ruegg, ‘La traduction de la
In their respective ways, the (Lokottaravādin-)Mahāsāṃghikas (in relation for instance to the Madhyamaka tradition) and the Sautrāntikas (in relation for example to Vasubandhu and the Vijñānavāda) have played significant parts in the elaboration and development of Mahāyānist thought. But there is no reason to believe that they were alone in this. It has been possible to link the famous Ta-chih-tu-lun (*Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa) ascribed to (a) Nāgārjuna with Sarvāstivāda tradition (and the Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya).

As for Śrāvakayānist antecedents of the ālayavijñāna, in his Mahāyāna-saṃgraha (§ i.11-12) Asaṅga has cited the mūlavijñāna of the Mahāsāṃghikas, the *āsaṃśārikaskandha of the Mahāśāsakas, and the bhavāṅga (Pali bhavaṅga) of the Tāmraśāṭiyas / Tāmraparāṇīyas (i.e. the Staviras, and more specifically, the Therāvādins).

Furthermore, Mahāyānist monks have followed the Discipline-books of a Vinaya-school, the Chinese using the Dhamagupta Vinaya for instance, and the Tibetans the Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya (see pp. 30-31 above).

In sum, no single philosophical doctrine and no single religious practice — not even the Bodhisattva-ideal or the svabhāva-sānyatā- (niḥsvabhāvatā) or dharmanairatmya-doctrine — can of and by itself be claimed to be the main religious or philosophical source of the Mahāyāna as a whole. And it would seem in large part to be a fallacy to attempt to link the origins of the Mahāyāna with any one particular Śrāvakayānist Nikāya.
But it remains perfectly legitimate, and of course very useful, to try to identify in the thought of an earlier Buddhist school/ order antecedents, precursors and prefigurations of — or at least parallels to — a given component element of the Mahāyāna.91

The question of so-called ‘merit-transfer’

An idea that has posed a number of thorny questions and conceptual difficulties for Buddhist thought and the history of the Mahāyāna is that often referred to as ‘transfer of merit’ (puṇyapariniṇāmanā). The process of pariniṇāmanā (Tib. yoṅs su bsīn ba) in fact constitutes a most important feature in Mahāyāna, where it denotes what might perhaps best be termed the dedication of good (puṇya, śubha, kuśala[mūla]; Tib. bsod nams, dge ba'[i rtsa ba]) by an exercitant in view of the attainment by another karmically related person (such as a deceased parent or teacher) of a higher end. Yet such dedication appears, prima facie, to run counter to the karmic principle of the fruition or retribution of deeds (karmavi-pāka). Generally accepted in Buddhism, both Mahāyānist and non-Mahāyānist, this principle stipulates that a karmic fruit or result (karmaphala) is ‘reaped’, i.e. experienced, solely by the person — or more precisely by the conscious series (saµtana) — that has sown the seed of future karmic fruition when deliberately (cetayitvā) accomplishing an action (karman).

The related idea of acquisition / possession (of ‘merit’, Pali patti, Skt. prāpti), of assenting to and rejoicing in it (pattanumodanā), and even of its gift (pattidāna) are known to sections of the Theravāda tradition; and

89 See the discussion in L. Schmithausen, Ālayavijñāna (Tōkyō, 1987).
90 See above, p. 39.
91 Account must be taken of the fact that a given doctrine of a Śrāvakayānist Nikāya, as now available to us, is not automatically and necessarily earlier historically than a comparable idea of the earlier Mahāyāna.

According to certain records, for instance the legend of Mahādeva and the Council of Pātaliputra, the Mahāsāṃghikas were linked from early times with the Mahāyāna and had a Bodhisattvapitaka and a Dhāranīpīṭaka. For the arapacana formula see above, nn. 48 and 57. And on dhāraṇīs, or mnemonic formulae, see T. Vetter, ‘On the origin of Mahāyāna Buddhism’, AS/EA 48 (1994), pp. 1244, 1272-3.

For the Śrāvakayānist Nikāyas — in particular the Mahāsāṃghikas but also the Dhar- maguptakas and Harivarman’s *Satyasiddhāstra — in relation to the Mahāyāna, see A. Bareau, Les sectes bouddhiques du Petit Véhicule, p. 296 ff. Cf. D. Seyfort Ruegg, ‘Über die Nikāyas der Śrāvakas und den Ursprung der philosophischen Schulen des Bud-
this concept — absent in the oldest canonical texts in Pali, but found in later Pali tradition (Petavatthu, Buddhāpadāna) — has been explained by some writers as being due to Mahāyānist influence, and by reference to Nalinaksha Dutt’s category of ‘semi-Mahāyāna’.92

The dedication of good by one sentient being in favour of others has of course to be kept separate from that particular kind of karman, also known in Buddhism, which is held in common (sādhāraṇam karma) by karmically related sentient beings, who then share in the fruition of these actions in one single container-world (bhājanaloka).93

The pariṇāmanā of salutary roots (kuśalamūla) in view of supreme Awakening (anuttarā samyaksambodhi) appears also to violate another important principle, that of the momentariness (kārikatva, kārikatva) of things. For, given this very widely accepted principle, the question arises as to just how there can exist a link (samavadhāna) between the mental event of joyful approval (anumodakaścittam, anumodanam) and the subsequent moment of its dedication.94

Aspects of the concepts expressed by the terms pariṇāmanā and patti have been considered by a number of scholars, and the matter awaits full treatment.95 When speaking of the Mahāyāna, it is essential to remember


93 For some references concerning this kind of karman that does not belong solely to a single conscious stream, see D. Seyfort Ruegg, Two prolegomena to Madhyamaka philosophy, p. 204 (n. 79).

94 This matter has been discussed in detail by Haribhadra in his Abhisamayālaṃkārāloka ii.21-23, in his comments on chapter ii, the Anumodanāparināmanāparivarta, of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā. For kṣanikatva compare Śāntideva, Bodhicaryāvatāra ix.6 f. with Prajñākaramati’s commentary (in this work’s section [iii.6-7] on pariṇāmanā, this problem has not been raised).

that all this takes place against the background, implied or expressed, of
the Emptiness of self-existence (svabhāvaśūnyatā) and the Non-substan-
tiality (nīḥsvabhāvatā, nairātmya) of all things, and of the absence
of objectification (anālambana, etc.).

Mahākaruṇā, or nirālambanā karuṇā, and sarvākāravaroṇetā śūnyatā

There exists in the Mahāyāna the idea of salvific activity, exercised by
the Buddha or by a Bodhisattva, which benefits a collectivity inasmuch
as this activity exercised by them, and marked by their highly expert use
of the appropriate salvific devices (upāya), does not take as its object any
single, individualized beneficiary of compassion. Essential to this kind of
activity appears to be on the one side the ethical and spiritual autonomy
of its numerically unlimited beneficiaries and on the other side the soteri-
ological action of the Buddha and Bodhisattva as agents of this ‘interper-
sonal’ — but none the less universalized and non-objectifying — activity.

Non-objectifying compassion (nirālambanā karuṇā) — in other words
mahākaruṇā ‘Great Compassion — having as it does the quality of being
non-reifying and unhypostatized, is moreover a component feature of that
form of Emptiness which has been described as endowed with all excellent
modes (sarvākāravaroṇetā śūnyatā).96 The realization of this character-
istically Mahāyānistic principle brings into play, and engages in their full-
ness, all the Perfections (pāramitā) under the guidance of the sixth, namely
discriminating understanding (prajñā).

The complexity of the concept of Mahāyāna

Some modern writers have perhaps been inclined to use the terms ‘Mahā-
yāna’ and ‘Hinayāna’ somewhat unreflectively if not carelessly, without

54 D. SEYFORT RUEGG

Buddhism’) and L. Schmithausen (‘Critical response’, in: R.W. Neufeldt [ed.], Karma and
rebirth [Albany, 1986], pp. 203-30). This article by Bechert is a revised version of his
‘Buddha-Feld und Verdienstübertragung: Mahāyāna-Ideen im Theravāda-Buddhismus Cey-
lons’, Bulletin de la Classe des Lettres et des Sciences Morales et Politiques (Académie
Royale de Belgique) 62 (1976), pp. 27-51. — For the idea of merit-transfer in Brahman-
ism/Hinduism, see M. Hara, ‘Transfer of merit’, ALB 31-32 (1967-68), pp. 383-411; id.,
‘Transfer of merit in Hindu literature and religion’, Memoirs of the Toyo Bunko 52 (1994),
pp. 103-35.
having paid due attention to semantic nuance and to important gnoseological and soteriological distinctions. Before such terminology can be securely and meaningfully taken over, a careful ‘emic’ analysis, based on the original Buddhist categories, is required of the synchronic, and systematic, uses made of it by a given text or set of related texts, as well as by the scholastic traditions deriving diachronically from the textual corpus.

In its philosophical thought, ethical practice and religious discipline the Mahāyāna, including also its earlier forms, evidently embraced various currents and strands of theory and practice. Apparently these components were sometimes in tension with each other.

It would seem, for example, that as a whole the Mahāyāna was neither a one-sidedly lay, or ‘popular’, movement nor was it exclusively an ascetic or monachal, and so-called ‘elitist’, one (at least to the extent that these pairs of opposed descriptions are to be considered as defining mutually exclusive and contradictory extreme positions — in other words, in Buddhist parlance, as antas). In the Mahāyāna we find criticized and repudiated certain forms of austerity; and excessive forms of it could even be represented by Māra, being induced by his ‘acts’ (mārakarman), or again by Devadatta. Yet we find also recognized in the Mahāyāna the famous qualities (dhuta-/dhūtaguṇa = sbyaṅs pa’i yon tan ‘factors of purification, austerities’) of the ascetic or pāṃśukūlika. Such an opposition between contrasting forms of religious life and discipline is in part congruent with the well-known distinction between wilderness-dwelling eremetic monks and town-dwelling coenobitic monks (āryāyaka / grāmāntika, araṇāvāśi / gāmantavihārī, who may be identified as Dharmabhāṇakas). It was no doubt not asceticism as such that was repudiated in the

96 This last concept has historical links with the concept of the Empty of the heterogeneous (gţan ston), as distinct from the raṅ stoṅ, i.e svabhāvaśūnyatā ‘Emptiness of self-existence’.

97 See, e.g., Asṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā, Chapter xxi, p. 391 ff.


Mahāyāna, but those forms of it that were not governed by the Perfections, and in particular by the foundational Perfection of liberality (dānapāramitā) and the key central Perfection of discriminative understanding (prajñāpāramitā). As already observed above (p. 27), the ‘householder’ Bodhisattva Vimalakīrti might possibly be seen as emblematic of a combined lay-religious current within Mahāyāna.101 It may also be recalled that, in Buddhist tradition continued by both the Prajñāpāramitā and the Abhidharma, the category of Pratyekabuddha is subdivided into two, the khaḍgavisāṇakalpa (bse ru lta bu), who lives as a solitary ascetic (ekavihārin), and the vargacārin (tshogsspyod), who is linked with a Śrāvaka (śrāvakapūrvin) and the Śrāvakakāśa.

Indeed, as is so often the case in the study of Indian religion and thought, for the history of the Mahāyāna we shall no doubt need to adopt in many a case a ‘both… and’ view which is ‘emically’ based, renouncing the spacious clarity and simplicity of some stark ‘either… or’ dichotomy couched in terms of ‘etic’ categories. We shall surely have to eschew any generalizing reductionism that transforms the whole of the Mahāyāna into some one-sided dogma or praxis (even if, at some times and places, we do indeed find extreme and unilateralist positions expressed in our sources).

By way of conclusion

In scholarly research, the tracing of both continuities and discontinuities is one of the first tasks the historian will set himself. In many of its aspects, the Mahāyāna appears not so much as a radical break in the course of Buddhist thought — one that is markedly discontinuous with


A diplomatic edition of the Sanskrit text of a manuscript of the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa was
the rest of the ‘Buddha-Word’ (buddhavacana) or the Buddha’s teaching (dharma, sāsana) — but rather as continuing elucidation and persistent elaboration. It reveals itself as a development of much of what was said in other sections of the Buddha’s teaching, of which the Mahāyāna scriptures are indeed deemed by its followers to form part and parcel. In other words, the Mahāyāna may often be regarded as representing changes in emphasis or perspective, destined perhaps for a particular spiritual type or category (gotra, etc.) of persons as defined by their mental aptitudes and predispositions and by their spiritual aspiration (āśaya, etc.). And topics merely foreshadowed earlier, or only roughly sketched out previously, are there thematized and developed. A good number of the fundamental ideas of the Mahāyāna in fact turn out to have antecedents, precursors or prefigurations in the old canonical scriptures (Āgamas / Nikāyas) and their commentaries.

In its historical stages, what we know as Mahāyāna would appear to have been a complex and many-layered, as well as a geographically widely diffused and polycentric, set of teachings and practices that relate to a mentality, ideal and movement having multiple religious and philosophical expressions as well as social and geographical origins. It presents itself as an aspiration toward a spiritual goal: immediately the practice or path of a Bodhisattva (bodhisattvacaryā, bodhipatha, etc.) and ultimately the state of a Buddha (buddhatā, etc.).

Concerning the description as ‘mysticism’ that has not infrequently been attached to one or the other feature of Mahāyānist thought, given that in its usage this expression seems to bear so many heterogeneous meanings, its applicability and usefulness here are problematical. As a whole, the Mahāyāna seems to have little to do with a via unitiva or unio mystica; rather, in Mahāyānist thought, a key idea is advaya ‘non-duality’ (which is something different even from Vedāntic advaita or monism). It is true that in Mahāyāna, the ineffable — that is, the conceptually and speculatively unthinkable (acintya, atarkya, etc.) and verbally inexpressible (anabhipāpya, etc.) ultimate reality of the (aparyāya)paramārtha — is a very prominent theme. And throughout Buddhist thought the avyākyātavastus ‘unexplicated points’ and Āryan Silence (ārya-tūṣṇībhāva)
occupy a conspicuous place. But inexpressibility and indeterminability do not seem to be equatable for instance with the arrheta ‘unspeakable’, much less with the aporrheta ‘forbidden’, as found in the secrecy of the Greek mysteries. With reference to bodhi ‘Awakening’, it may of course be understood as a sort of illuminatio — one not induced from without (aparapratyaya; cf. pratyātmavedya, etc.) —, with the Bodhisattva’s path then constituting a sort of via illuminativa. But since — rather like ‘shamanism’ — ‘mysticism’ seems to mean quite different things to different people, and since it therefore has only a limited heuristic value because it begs many a question and probably raises more problems than it actually clarifies, it had perhaps best be used sparingly (after being defined for a specific context) if not avoided altogether. Concerning the matter of experience, mystical or otherwise, it may be recalled that Candrakīrti has provided an interesting, if brief, critique of anubhava. As for ecstasy, it seems correct to say that in its outlook and techniques the Mahāyāna has been more enstatic than ecstatic.

If, then, it is to be invoked at all in connexion with the Mahāyāna, the description as mysticism will be either general and unspecific, and hence fairly vague, or, on the contrary, restricted to what relates to insight and inner understanding of the paramārtha (cf. pratyātmavedya, etc.), or again on Buddhist Sanskrit Literature at the Institute for Comprehensive Studies of Buddhism of Taishō University.

102 Although it may of course so appear in certain of its sources.
103 cf. D. Seyfort Ruegg, La théorie du tathāgatagarbha et du gotra, p. 105 n. (on the difference from avaktavya, avācyā), and Chap. v (with id., ‘On the knowability and expressibility of absolute reality in Buddhism’, IBK 20 [1971], pp. 495-489); id. Three studies in the history of Indian and Tibetan Madhyamaka philosophy, Section II.
105 The ancient Greek ‘mysteria’ — a word etymologically connected with ‘mysticism’ and derived from Gk. μυό ‘to initiate’ — have been surveyed by W. Burkert, Ancient mystery cults (Cambridge, MA, 1987), p. 7 ff. He comes up with the following description (p. 11): ‘mysteries were initiation rituals of a voluntary, personal and secret character that aimed at a change of mind through experience of the sacred’. Almost all of Burkert’s description would be problematical for ‘mystery’ to the extent that this notion is applicable in the Mahāyāna (and perhaps even in the Vajrayāna). On mysticism in Asia, compare, e.g., F. Staal, Exploring mysticism (Berkeley, 1975); S. Weightman, Mysticism and the metaphor of energies (SOAS, London, 2000).
106 Prasannapadā i.1, p. 58.
107 On an aspect of this issue and of shamanism (in regard to a Buddhist work that
to what might be called visionary insight (as in the case of, e.g., the Sarva-
buddhavisayāvatāra-Jñānālokaṃkārasūtra).

The Mahāyāna is not an entirely uniform and monolithic movement. Nor does it even pretend to be such in so far as it insists that it was taught by the Buddha and his followers for the benefit of types of persons having different mental aptitudes and spiritual predispositions. And in its historical origins it was not totally homogeneous. Rather than monogenesis, and unilinearity, plurigenesis and polycentricity have marked both its origins and subsequent development. This fact will, however, hardly justify speaking in relation to it of ‘Buddhisms’ or of ‘Mahāyānas’ (in the plural): this procedure would appear to possess little heuristic and explanatory value, and it seems merely to displace the problems resulting from the complex nature of the Mahāyāna without providing us with a new and fruitful avenue for research and clarification. As for the masters and schools of Mahāyāna in both its Sūtra (Prajñāpāramitā, Samdhinirmocana, Tathāgatagarbha, etc.) and Śāstra (Madhyamaka, Vijnānavāda, etc.) forms, they were of course very much aware of the variety of ideas and doctrines that have been subsumed under the name of Mahāyāna.

The Mahāyāna appears, then, less as a monothetic entity than as a polythetic structure with so to say ‘family resemblances’ connecting various components. The multiple aspects and facets of the Mahāyāna locate themselves, in a quasi-historical narrative, within a religio-philosophical view and frame where the Buddha figures as Teacher, Buddha-Word (buddhavacana) is its verbal expression, and buddhahood (buddhatā, etc.) is its ultimate end. For its followers, within the very considerable diversity of its teachings and practices, there have of course existed overarching principles and themes, many of them newly found and elaborated. It is these, together with the stages of development through which the Mahāyāna has passed, that need also to be identified and explored in detail in our research.

Still another of the facets of the Mahāyāna (and of Buddhism in general) deserving mention is its link with medicine and healing, Bodhisattvas as well as the Buddha himself being thought of, metaphorically and literally, as physicians and healers.108

is not Mahāyānist), see D. Seyfort Ruegg, ‘On a Yoga treatise in Sanskrit from Qizīl’,

ASPECTS OF THE STUDY OF THE (EARLIER) INDIAN MAHĀYĀNA 59
The critical exploration of the Mahāyāna towards which we strive as scholars will, needless to say, be historical, philological, archaeological, art historical, inscriptive (with the caveat entered above, pp. 15-18), sociological, religious, and philosophical. When appropriate, other disciplines, for instance numismatics, may also have to be called upon. The study of the recensions of Mahāyāna Sūtras, based on the Indian originals and their Chinese, Tibetan and other old versions, still remains to be carried further (see pp. 20-23 above). All this is clearly a very time-consuming task requiring a large force of experienced scholars. We of course already have available a number of valuable articles and books concerned with the Mahāyāna in and/or outside India. Because of the obstacles and difficulties outlined above, however, there has so far appeared no comprehensive and continuous narrative treatment of the history of the Mahāyāna, or even of its more ancient Indian periods, to complement Lamotte’s masterly volume of 1958 devoted to the earlier history of Indian Buddhism. Such an undertaking would require the concerted and sustained efforts of a large group of scholars. In the circumstances of today, the number of qualified researchers available to undertake these tasks remains, however, relatively small, and it is scarcely adequate for the many tasks before us.

A matter of considerable importance for our quest, relating as it does to the epistemology as well as the data of Mahāyāna studies, seems to be the following consideration. Employing the standard and well-tested methods of the philological and historical sciences — and in a very legitimate search for origins, core data and textual or doctrinal strata through employing a more or less chronological and stratigraphical kind of analysis —, we sometimes find that the object of our enquiry so to say breaks up and becomes fragmented and impalpable, somewhat like the proverbial onion when being peeled. What are then additionally required are approaches to the subject that are thematic and hermeneutical, exploring religio-philosophical topics and structures (topoi, philosoumena, etc.) in their various contexts, and seeking to lay bare the systematic significance of the constituent parts. Rather than limiting itself exclusively to bringing to light vertical, chronological-stratigraphical, layers, our study will sometimes need to be more comparable to tomography, where the image may reveal cross-linkages in a horizontal, synchronic, slice. It may also be appro-
priate to bring together materials from the geographically far-flung traditions of Buddhism. In such work the comparative method too will have a very important part to play. It will, however, still be possible for the enquiry to be diachronic whenever this appears to be appropriate and desirable, for we shall no doubt continue to wish to work forwards and backwards in time. And our study will thus not cease to be historical in the narrower, and modern, sense of this word. Yet at the same time it will need to bring to bear descriptions and analyses that are not exclusively stratigraphical and hence relatable in their procedures either to the evolutionary models of palaeontology proper to natural science, or to the methods of archaeological excavation. Therefore, far from being either ahistorical or antihistorical by seeking to overthrow the necessary techniques of philology and history, this study will prove to be historical also in the wider, and original, meaning of this word. In this way our quest can also be historia in the sense of enquiry and of its product, an account of this enquiry.

Finally, when we approach the study of early Mahāyāna, non-scriptural texts — those not classifiable as Sūtras — are not automatically to be excluded from our attention. It is of course only good philological and historical practice to turn to the old Sūtra works that constitute the acknowledged foundations of the Mahāyāna. But given the very nature of Mahāyānist sources — and in the light of the fact that the precise dating of many a Mahāyāna Sūtra is in any case problematical and may in some cases place it in the same period as a Śāstra — basic exegetical works originating in the older period, such as those of Nāgārjuna, also need to be taken carefully into account. Indeed, Śāstra literature can yield invaluable avenues of approach even to the earlier Mahāyāna.
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