

Buddhist Thought

A complete introduction
to the Indian tradition

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3 The nature and origins of Mahayana Buddhism

I was once asked by an eminent Oxford philosopher ‘What sort of “animal” is Indian philosophy?’. If we try and clarify what sort of ‘animal’ Mahayana Buddhism is we find straight away that contemporary scholarship is beginning to indicate—I think convincingly—that there has in the past been considerable misunderstanding concerning the sort of religious phenomenon we are talking about. Talk has all too often been one of schism and sect; the model one of clear-cut doctrinal and behavioural difference, rivalry and antagonism, often one feels, on the model of that between Protestant and Roman Catholic Christianity. This model perhaps has been reinforced by the undoubted antagonism found in some Mahayana sutras towards those who fail to heed the message of the text. These people persistently continue to follow what the Mahayana sutras themselves term—using an intentionally polemical and abusive expression—an ‘Inferior Way’, a *Hinayana*. Thus we have texts, the earliest of which might date in something resembling a form we have now from perhaps the second or first century BCE, that see themselves as genuinely being the word of the Buddha (or *a* Buddha) and thus claim a disputed status as sutras. These texts advocate a vision, although not necessarily all the same vision, which they term ‘Mahayana’, the Great Way.¹ In some cases, perhaps increasing as time passed, this Great Way is contrasted with an Inferior Way (*Hinayana*), and sometimes this contrast is marked by the use of rather immoderate

language. Followers of the Inferior Way are, as one Mahayana sutra puts it, 'like jackals' (Williams 1989:21).

Yet notwithstanding the harshness of some Mahayana sutras (all of which were considered apocryphal by non-Mahayanists), we now know that a picture of schism and sect, with attendant and widespread rivalry and antagonism, would be very misleading. We know from later Chinese sources, for example, that Chinese pilgrims to India found so-called non-Mahayana and Mahayana monks in the same monasteries. The only obvious and manifest differences between these two groups was that the Mahayana monks showed particular reverence towards, 'worshipped', figures of bodhisattvas, compassionate beings on the path to full Buddhahood, while the non-Mahayana monks chose not to.²

The student should be extremely careful not to extrapolate uncritically from the antagonism of some of the Mahayana sutras to an actual, practical, antagonism 'on the ground'. He or she should also be careful not to extrapolate from the sheer size of the Mahayana sutra literature to the extent or indeed the nature of Mahayana identity in Classical India. There is evidence that monks and nuns who did not adopt the Mahayana vision viewed it with some scorn, seeing it as an absurd fabrication based simply on the so-called Mahayana sutras claiming a quite unjustified authenticity and consequential authority. Many Mahayana scholars such as Nagarjuna (in e.g. the *Ratnavali*) or Santideva (in the *Bodhicaryavatara*) produced defences of the Mahayana, defending the authenticity of the Mahayana sutras. But to the best of my knowledge there is no detailed, systematic refutation of Mahayana in *any* non-Mahayana Indian Buddhist source yet discovered.³ Modern scholars are frequently left digging and probing for what are claimed to be occasional and non-systematic references to Mahayana in non-Mahayana sources such as Vasubandhu's enormous *Abhidharmakosa*. Given the many centuries of Buddhism in India, and the size of the Mahayana literature, this is absolutely astonishing if we extrapolate from the size of the Mahayana canon to the supposed extent of Mahayana in India. But we cannot make such an inference, and one is tempted to suggest that the only explanation for near-silence is that Mahayana in

Classical India was not a threat, and/or was not taken seriously. This could be because in spite of the size of the literature there were throughout much of the period of Buddhism in India very few monks who actually adopted the Mahayana vision, and those monks were just thought by their brethren to be a bit weird—but harmless. Alternatively it could be because in terms of what is to count as a threat among those who have come together to live a simple and cenobitic lifestyle the Mahayana was not a rival. I suspect it may be a combination of both of these factors.⁴

Thanks to the work of Heinz Bechert (1982) we now have a clearer idea of what is to count as generating schism in Buddhist monasticism. For Buddhists ‘schism’ is nothing to do with doctrinal disagreements as such, but is the result of divergence in monastic rule.⁵ This makes sense. The whole purpose of Buddhist monasticism is for groups of people to live together a simple life with optimum facilities for inner development. What produces major disagreement in such contexts—and can lead to schism, ‘splitting the Sangha’ (*samghabheda*) —are what for non-monastics would appear to be fairly minor matters of behavioural disagreement. Thus if a monk holds that it is permissible to eat after midday, while all his brethren have to finish their meal before midday, this could cause great problems for the peaceful running of the monastery. Further difficulties could arise for the crucial issue of the harmonious relationship between the monastery and the local lay community. Imagine the response of the lay supporters to their farming day being disrupted by *two* groups of monks from the local monastery on the alms-round at different times. One could see that under such circumstances it might be better for all concerned that the divergent monk (and those who agree) ‘split’. Suppose on the other hand that a monk holds the final goal of all should be not nirvana but perfect Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings. Or he believes that in meditation he is receiving personal tuition from a Buddha called Amitayus unknown to other monks. This might be thought by many of his brethren to be pretty peculiar. But providing it does not lead to intolerable levels of disruptive behaviour—and why should it? —our monk’s Mahayana views need not lead to a ‘schism’.

Buddhism is thus an orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy. What is important is harmony of behaviour, not harmony of doctrines. The role played by doctrinal disagreements in Christian history does not apply in the case of Buddhism. Of course, where there is a genuine schism related to the monastic rule there could also take place subsequently doctrinal variation. But doctrinal difference as such cannot be a matter for schism. Thus since Mahayana is, as I shall argue, a matter of vision and motivation which does not (or need not) in itself entail behaviour confrontational to the monastic rule, it could not have resulted from schism. It is not that sort of thing. It is not that sort of 'animal'. Once this is appreciated it can be seen that the opposition between Mahayana and non-Mahayana could not in any way parallel that of, say, Roman Catholicism polarised against Protestantism, where identity is very, very much a matter of doctrinal allegiance, of rival beliefs. Schism in Christian history is precisely the result of doctrinal disagreement. Identity in Buddhism is supplied by adherence to the monastic code, the Vinaya. Identity is a monastic matter. As time passed, after the death of the Buddha, there were indeed schisms, and there remain a number of Vinayas. The traditional Theravada account of the Second Council at Vaisali in north India (c. 40–100 years after the death of the Buddha) describe how it was called to settle issues related to divergent behaviour among certain 'wicked monks'.⁶ There is some question about how far we can follow the Theravada account of this Council, but it is understandable that a Council may have been called over such central issues. The suggestion that the 'wicked monks' were defeated but remained stubborn and broke away is indeed an account of *samghabheda*, schism. This account could not be used as it often is, however, in any simple way to explain the origins of the Mahayana, since the Mahayana as such could not have resulted from schism.

Traditional Theravada accounts associate the defeated monks with the origin of the Mahasamghikas, a rival Vinaya and doctrinal tradition. In the past there has been a tendency to trace the origins of the Mahayana to doctrinal tendencies within

the Mahasamghika tradition. On both counts there are however problems. Suffice to say that it is looking very unlikely that the 'wicked monks of Vaisali were the origins of the Mahasamghikas, and few contemporary scholars would identify Mahayana in a straightforward way with any particular Vinaya tradition (or non-Mahayana 'school'). Inasmuch as we can detect from Mahayana sources the Vinaya or perhaps Abhidharma presuppositions of the compilers of those sources, we can see that Mahayana tendencies cut across the boundaries of the non-Mahayana traditions. For example, there is a clear association between the *Ta-chih-tu Lun* (*Mahaprajñāparamita Sastra*), the enormous compendium of Mahayana attributed to Nagarjuna and translated into Chinese by Kumarajiva in the early fifth century CE, and monks from the Sarvastivada/Vaibhasika tradition of Kashmir. But the Mahayana *Lokanuvartana Sutra* on the other hand shows a strong tendency towards the idea that the Buddha is in some sense always supramundane, and the teaching of emptiness, which are both associated with the Mahasamghikas (see pp. 128–30).

The Theravada Vinaya is one particular Vinaya, and indeed a monk can be defined as a Theravadin (a follower of Theravada) precisely inasmuch as he has been ordained and lives according to the Theravada Vinaya. In India in classical times, however, it seems likely that one of the most important Vinayas was that of the Mulasarvastivada, the Vinaya which also to the present day guides the monastic vision of Tibetans. In China, and traditions influenced by China, among others the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya was popular. All these Vinayas are Vinayas which evolved over the centuries, but—and this is crucially important—they have absolutely nothing to do with issues of Mahayana versus non-Mahayana. *There is no such thing as a Mahayana Vinaya.*⁷ Thus Mahayana cannot have originated as such in a schism. Moreover in a very real sense *there cannot have been any Mahayana monks in India*, since identity as a monk is a Vinaya matter, although of course there can certainly have been monks who held a Mahayana vision and motivation. Once we understand that Mahayana identity is not a matter of the Vinaya and therefore not a matter of publicly

significant behaviour in a monastic context, then it becomes perfectly understandable that visitors to India would have seen Mahayana and non-Mahayana monks in the same monasteries. Why should we expect otherwise? If that still seems strange, then one has still not appreciated the inappropriateness of the schism-model, or that supplied by Christian parallels. Moreover the different Vinayas, although containing what were no doubt significant differences in the context of monastic concerns and precision, are all fairly close to each other. The radical doctrinal differences sometimes found between Mahayana and non-Mahayana are not matched in what was in public terms what actually counted for Buddhists in Ancient India—monastic behaviour.

I have referred to Mahayana as a vision, a vision of what Buddhism is finally all about, rather than a sect, a school, or the result of schism. This picture of Mahayana corresponds I suggest with what scholarly research is beginning to indicate both about the nature of Mahayana and, more particularly, about what Mahayana is not. It also corresponds rather nicely with one of my favourite pictures of what Mahayana is really all about, a self-definition admittedly late (but enormously influential in Tibetan Buddhism) found in the *Bodhipathapradipa* of the eleventh century Indian Buddhist scholar and missionary to Tibet, Atisa. Based on earlier Buddhist precedents, Atisa suggests a division of religious practitioners into three hierarchical classes according to their *motivations*. Hierarchical division of persons is a very Indian strategy (cf. caste and class), while division by motivation is quintessentially Buddhist where, as we have seen, from early days it has been the intention behind an act which is the main contributory factor in creating morally significant *karman*. Thus those of the lowest type perform (religious) actions motivated by samsara—unenlightenment—worldly actions with the intention of some material gain either in this life or in another life. Those of the middle type are motivated by the wish for freedom from all suffering and rebirth, in other words the freedom that is nirvana, enlightenment. Note that those who attain such a goal are in fact the group called *arhats*, and within

this hierarchical framework they have followed an Inferior Path (a Hinayana). But those superior people whose motivation is the very highest take as their goal freedom from suffering for all, that is, perfect Buddhahood, motivated by the wish to attain the greatest possibility to benefit others. These are followers of the Great, the Supreme, Path—the Mahayana. In fact those of lowest motivation attain samsara. Those of middle motivation attain nirvana, while those with the highest motivation of all reach what Mahayana scholars came to refer to as a ‘non-abiding’ nirvana (*apratisthitanirvana*). This nirvana is beyond such dualities. It is not samsara but it is also not a resting in any nirvana that would abandon sentient beings who are still suffering. Thus in the final analysis what makes a follower of Mahayana is not robes, rules, or philosophy. It is motivation, intention. The Mahayana as a whole is a particular vision of what the final motivation and goal of serious practitioners should be. Atisa’s self-definition of Mahayana is particularly useful for us because again it conforms to the picture of Mahayanists and non-Mahayanists in the same monastery, and it conforms to the archaeological and early textual evidence that there was no radical break between Mahayana and non-Mahayana, and no ‘Mahayana schism’. It reaffirms the centrality of intention in Buddhism, and explains why we find Mahayana cutting across the boundaries of non-Mahayana traditions. *Mahayana is not as such an institutional identity. Rather, it is an inner motivation and vision, and this inner vision can be found in anyone regardless of their institutional position.* Thus, of course, there could in theory be Theravada Mahayanists. If that sounds strange it does nothing more than indicate how conditioned we have become to think of the Buddhist world as divided into two schools (or sects) on the model of Roman Catholic and Protestant, resulting from some supposed doctrinal schism.

I suspect it might indeed have been quite possible to visit India in earlier Classical times and as a casual visitor not see Mahayana Buddhism as such at all. I am sure that a great Mahayana thinker like Nagarjuna or Santideva would not have appeared any different from their non-Mahayana brethren. Their public behaviour would

not have been different. Perhaps even their public utterances would not have been very different. But if one came to know them well or visited them in their rooms or cells perhaps one could have detected a different vision and intention, a different idea of what, ultimately, it all meant, a different idea of what it was really all about. Nagarjuna, moreover, was an Indian monk. To meet Nagarjuna would not have been like meeting a Tibetan yogin, a magic-wielding wonderworker, or a Zen Master. I do not think also that it would have been like meeting the Dalai Lama. In actual fact in appearance and behaviour meeting Nagarjuna might have been rather more like meeting a Theravada monk.

So far we have seen that Mahayana Buddhism is nothing to do with Vinaya differences, and is not the result of schism. It is a phenomenon that cuts across the boundaries of different Vinaya traditions, and was also capable of cutting across the boundaries of doctrinal (such as Abhidharma) schools without generating an identifiable further school.⁸ Mahayana is very diverse. It is united perhaps solely by a vision of the ultimate goal of attaining full Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings (the 'bodhisattva ideal') and also (or eventually) a belief that Buddhas are still around and can be contacted (hence the possibility of an ongoing revelation). To this extent the expression 'Mahayana' is used simply for practical purposes. It is used as a 'family term' covering a range of not necessarily identical or even compatible practices and teachings. Thus Mahayana could not itself form a school of Buddhism. It lacked that sort of unity, it is not that sort of 'animal' either. It is possible to detect in some Mahayana sutras criticism of those who do not accept Mahayana, and particularly criticism of those who do not accept the particular sutra concerned (Schopen 1975). There is also criticism sometimes of or comments on other sutras and their advocates (Harrison 1978; Pagel 1995:36 ff.). According to Gregory Schopen (1975), it is quite possible that in origins Mahayana was centred on a number of 'sutra cults', involving the promulgation as well as the worship of particular sutras which were perhaps in mutual rivalry. These sutras were held to contain a particular new revelation from the Buddha (or a Buddha).

By far the most important and suggestive work on the nature and origins of the Mahayana in India has come from Gregory Schopen, with significant additional contributions by Paul Harrison. Schopen has drawn attention to the importance of archaeological data, such as inscriptional evidence, for the picture it can give us of what was actually happening in India, in opposition to the inferences we might be tempted to draw from written texts.⁹ I have argued already that the sheer size of the Mahayana literary corpus might suggest that Mahayana was a widespread tendency in Ancient India, although this need not follow. After all, one person or one group of teachers could write a very great deal (note the repetitive nature of much of the *Prajñāparamita* literature). Schopen's study (1979) of the evidence for Mahayana in Indian inscriptions has led to some interesting conclusions which appear to contradict the picture some might be tempted to draw from the literary remains.¹⁰ First, the evidence for Mahayana in Indian inscriptions (such as the inscriptions of those donating a statue to a monastery, for example) is actually relatively scarce. What evidence there is shows that with one exception the earliest use of the term 'Mahayana' in inscriptions dates from the fifth or sixth centuries CE, although there is the use of certain terms identifiable as having a Mahayana reference from the fourth century CE. Therefore we find that inscriptional evidence for Mahayana lags many centuries behind the earliest literary evidence (c. second/first century BCE), and it is arguable that the use of the term 'Mahayana' to give self-identity to a particular group of people took even longer. Thus, Schopen wants to conclude, 'we are able to assume that what we now call the Mahayana did not begin to emerge as a separate and independent group until the fourth century' (Schopen 1979:15). It seems that for perhaps five centuries—the centuries which saw the production of a great deal of the Mahayana sutra literature, and many of the greatest thinkers of the Mahayana—Mahayana was not seen 'on the ground' as an identifiable 'institution' involving inscriptional allegiance. The one exception is contained in an inscription dating from the second century CE discovered in 1977, which also refers to the Mahayana Buddha Amitabha. But, as Schopen points out (1987b), the

amazing point about this inscription and its reference to Amitabha is that it is the only one for many centuries, in spite of the fact that we know Mahayana literature and texts treating Amitabha (or Amitayus) had been in existence for some time. Along with the absence of clear self-identity for the followers of Mahayana, we seem to find evidence of their scarcity—or at least, no evidence for their frequency, let alone the prevalence of a ‘cult of Amitabha’ in North India at that time, as some scholars have claimed. Schopen’s conclusions merit quoting at some length:

even after its initial appearance in the public domain in the 2nd century [Mahayana] appears to have remained an extremely limited minority movement—if it remained at all—that attracted absolutely no *documented* public or popular support for at least two more centuries. It is again a demonstrable fact that anything even approaching popular support for the Mahayana cannot be documented until the 4th/5th century AD, and even then the support is overwhelmingly by monastic, not lay, donors...although there was—as we know from Chinese translations—a large and early Mahayana literature, there was no early, organized, independent, publically supported movement that it could have belonged to.

(Schopen 1987b:124–5; italics original)

Note also that as far as he is concerned Schopen has failed to find any support for the widespread association of the laity with the origins or growth of Mahayana. This is important, for it contradicts a prevalent view that the Mahayana represents primarily a move by the laity and those sympathetic to their aspirations, against certain rather remote and elitist monks.¹¹ It is possible to point to material in the *Pratyutpanna Sutra*, studied by Paul Harrison (1978, 1990) which gives incidental evidence to support the view that the origins of that particular relatively early sutra had nothing to do with the laity. It seems to me that the idea that the Mahayana in origin was indeed associated with the laity results at least in part from an over-literal and perhaps wishful

reading of certain sutras. These sutras employ the rhetorical device of lay speakers (such as the rich merchant Vimalakirti or the young princess Asokadatta) in order to criticise non-Mahayana (in fact definitely Hinayana) views associated with rival monks.¹² Mahayana was not however the result of a lay movement or lay aspirations, perhaps inspired by the rich mercantile classes, anymore than it was the result of an aristocratic Girl Guide-like movement of precocious juvenile princesses.¹³ It seems obvious that in the context of Ancient India enduring religious innovation was made by religiously and institutionally significant groups of people who had the time to do so. This means, among educated laypeople, primarily brahmin teachers working within the caste and class based structures of orthodox householder life. It means as well renunciates, drop-outs, who also taught and survived on alms. It is unlikely that major changes in *Buddhist* ideology occurred inspired and preserved by householder brahmins, but entirely understandable that such changes occurred among Buddhist renunciates, i.e. monks.

Richard Gombrich (1990a) has argued that it seems unlikely that Mahayana as we know it could have originated without writing. This seems clear given the association of Mahayana in origins with the creation of the Mahayana sutra literature, and also Schopen's (1975) mention of references in early Mahayana to worshipping the sutras themselves in the form of books. This is on the model of the existing cult of *stupas*, relic-shrines of the Buddha and his eminent disciples. The writing down of the Buddhist canon took place initially in the first century BCE. Thus Mahayana as such is unlikely to have occurred—would not have survived—much prior to the use of writing for scriptural texts. Against this, Vetter (1994) has suggested that there is some evidence that early Mahayana material was transmitted orally. Even so, Mahayana would not have survived without occurring within an enduring respected Buddhist organisation which was prepared to preserve it, and it is difficult to see in the case of Buddhism what that organisation could be if not members of the regular organisation which preserves Buddhist texts, the Sangha. One cannot imagine, on the other hand, the Sangha or indeed any

significant Sangha member preserving radical innovative texts that originated in a lay movement against the Sangha itself.

The idea we get from Schopen's work on archaeological sources is also supported by Paul Harrison's concern with some of the earliest extant Mahayana literature, the translations into Chinese of Mahayana sutras by Lokaksema in the late second century CE (1987). Harrison has shown that the picture of early Mahayana involvement from these sources is overwhelmingly one of monks, although as well as nuns laity (including lay women) were also addressed in the sutras. Note that women, however, are far from being treated on a basis of equality with men. We also do not find in these sutras any antagonism towards monasticism, the Sangha, as such. Central to early Mahayana represented by these texts is an aspiration to perfect Buddhahood, that is, taking upon oneself the vow of the bodhisattva, while bodhisattvas as semi-divine beings, the so-called 'celestial bodhisattvas' of later petitionary worship, are at this stage conspicuous by their absence. Early Mahayana is also characterised by a fairly antagonistic attitude towards those who follow the 'inferior' path to liberation from merely one's own personal suffering, the state of the arhat, rather than full Buddhahood for the benefit of all living beings.¹⁴ In his recent work Harrison argues that

some of the impetus for the early development of the Mahayana came from forest-dwelling monks. Far from being the products of an urban, lay, devotional movement, many Mahayana sutras give evidence of a hard-core ascetic attempt to return to the original inspiration of Buddhism, the search for Buddhahood or awakened cognition.

(Harrison 1995:65)

Thus Mahayana may in part represent a rather austere, almost ascetic, 'revivalist movement'. This picture is supported in a recent paper by Schopen (1999). He has shown quite convincingly in the case of an obscure Mahayana sutra, the *Maitreyamahāsīmhanada Sutra* (the 'Lion's Roar of Maitreya') that this sutra can be dated to the Kusana period (c. first century CE) and originated in

Northwest India. This would make it one of the earliest datable Mahayana sutras. The sutra advocates a highly *conservative* monastic vision of Buddhism, centred on the inferiority of the laity, austere practice in the forest as the ideal, and condemns less austere monks for their involvement in such inferior practices as stupa worship. Schopen concludes that

if there is any 'relationship' of the polemic found in the *Maitreyasimhanada-sutra* to the 'rise of mahayana Buddhism' that relationship remains a mystery. This early 'mahayana' polemic does not seem to be connected to the 'rise' of anything, but rather to the continuity and persistence of a narrow set of conservative Buddhist ideas on cult and monastic practice. That is all.

(Schopen 1999:313)¹⁵

It is possible that particularly significant in the origins of some of the Mahayana literature was a belief that the Buddha (or Buddhas) could still be contacted, and is really still teaching out of his immense compassion. There is some evidence that early Buddhism felt it to be a genuine problem why the compassionate Sakyamuni Buddha had died at the age of 80 when there was a widespread view that at the time of the Buddha the average lifespan was actually 100 years. Lifespan is supposed to be the result of merit, and we have a suggestion in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* that a Buddha can live until the end of an aeon if he so wishes. We also have some grounds for thinking that in the early centuries the inability to see and benefit any more from the actual physical presence of the Buddha was felt by some very acutely. For this reason there was a real doctrinal problem as to why the Buddha actually died when he did die. One strategy was to blame the Buddha's attendant Ananda for not petitioning the Buddha correctly to remain until the end of the aeon. Such an approach, however, could scarcely harmonise with the image of the Compassionate One, and perhaps one of the few defining dimensions of Mahayana Buddhism is a vision and understanding of the Buddha as *not really dead but still around*. When stated and

accepted this understanding entailed that Buddhism itself had the potential to change in the light of a continuing revelation.

It is indeed possible that the suggestion that the Buddha is still around may have been (in part) a response to particular visions in meditation, perhaps associated with meditation practices involving visualising the Buddha and known as *buddhanusmrti* ('recollection of the Buddha'). We know that such practices were popular from a very early period, and that one of the results of these practices is that the meditator feels as if in the presence of the Buddha himself (Williams 1989:30, 217–20; Harrison 1978). In the *Pratyutpanna Sutra*, translated into Chinese by Lokaksema and studied by Paul Harrison, we find details of a visualisation practice in which the meditator visualises Buddha Amitayus in his 'Pure Land' (Buddha Field; q.v.) in the West, for twenty-four hours a day, for a whole week. After that, the sutra says, the meditator may have a vision of Amitayus, and receive new teachings not before heard. Moreover these new teachings the meditator is exhorted to transmit and expound to mankind.

It seems certain that a text like the *Pratyutpanna Sutra* (and perhaps other early Mahayana texts associated with Pure Lands and *buddhanusmrti*) describes practices which can lead to revelatory visions, and the *Pratyutpanna Sutra* itself advocates the promulgation of the teachings thus received. But while visions can occur in meditation, the occurrence of visions—messages apparently from a Buddha—does not explain why someone would take those messages seriously. Indeed the Buddhist tradition in general has tended to be very cautious, even dismissive, concerning visions seen in meditation. Of course, if it is correct that for many centuries there were very few followers of Mahayana in classical India, then the problem becomes less acute. But certainly some people took these revelations seriously, and those who took them seriously were sometimes great scholars. It is often said that the standard view of early Buddhism is that after the death of a Buddha he is beyond reference or recall, significantly and religiously dead. From such a perspective the idea of seeing a living Buddha in meditation is problematic. One way round this would be to claim that the Buddha visualised is

simply a Buddha who has for one reason or another not yet died. That would be to adopt a strategy of doctrinal reconciliation. As we shall see, this is indeed a strategy commonly adopted in Mahayana sources. But recent work by Gregory Schopen suggests that the atmosphere in Buddhist circles in Ancient India may have been at least emotionally more receptive to the idea that a dead Buddha is still around than was previously realised. Schopen has argued on archaeological and inscriptional grounds that the Buddha's relics, preserved after his death in stupas, were felt to be the Buddha himself. The Buddha was thought in some sense to be still present in his relics and even in spots associated with his life (Schopen 1987a, 1990, 1994). Through his relics the Buddha was also treated as if present in the monastery, and was treated legally by the monastery and apparently by the wider community as a person with inalienable property rights.¹⁶ Schopen has shown that in day to day life the Buddha was felt very much to be present among the monks, if invisible.

Perhaps it was little wonder, then, that certain monks, inspired by the common meditation practice of 'recollection of the Buddha', *buddhanusmṛti*, felt the genuineness of their visions of him and what had been revealed to them. Thus they arrived at the possibility of a continuing revelation and of course new sutras.¹⁷ Little wonder too, then, that eventually we find in some circles forms of religiosity developed centred on the supremacy of Buddhahood above all alternative goals. This religiosity focused too on the great compassion of one who remains present, transcending even death, helping sentient beings. It encouraged the need to attain a palpable immortality through becoming oneself a Buddha. In becoming a Buddha Sakyamuni, after all, is said to have triumphed over the Evil One, the 'Devil', Mara. The etymology of this name shows him to be the personification of death. Little wonder then that we also find in the meantime participation in 'Pure Land' cults, a need to see the Buddha if not in this life in meditation, then after death through rebirth in his presence in the Pure Land where he still dwells.¹⁸

Thus it seems clear from early Mahayana texts that through meditation it was felt to be possible by some Buddhist

practitioners to meet with a still-living Buddha and receive new teachings, receive perhaps the Mahayana sutras themselves. That some people actually took this possibility seriously may well have been prompted by a feeling on the one hand of sadness that the age of the living presence of the Buddha as a physical being had passed. But it was also prompted by an awareness of his continuing if rather invisible presence in the monastery, as relics imbued with the qualities of Buddhahood, the *dharmakaya*. These are themes that we shall meet again.

reification' occurs when the reification is brought about or associated with the application of the concept. Thus because we have a single concept 'growth', we may reify growth into a fixed singular *thing*, instead of seeing it as a process. Or we may treat a forest as a singular thing, again through application of the unitary concept 'forest'.

- 51 Handy discussions of dharmas can be found in Lamotte (1988:593 ff.) and Hirakawa (1990:139 ff.).
- 52 These two are the second and third of the five aggregates. Consciousness, in the Abhidhamma list, is the fifth aggregate. Physical, or material, form, the first aggregate, as we can see, divides into a number of dhammas. So also does the aggregate of formations, which as a class has by far the most dhammas.
- 53 There also remains texts of another Abhidharma system (although not a Pitaka) connected with Yogacara, a school usually thought of as associated with the Mahayana perspective. The Yogacara Abhidharma has 100 dharmas.
- 54 One can see here that for Vaibhasika Abhidharma the sense in which a dharma has 'own-existence', a *svabhava*, and is therefore not causally dependent is one of not being dependent upon conceptual reification in the way that, say, a forest is. In spite of Madhyamaka (as we shall see), this is certainly not the same as maintaining that a dharma with a *svabhava* is not the result of causes and conditions at all. All conditioned dharmas, i.e. most dharmas, are the results of causes and conditions. They are radically impermanent. But likewise all dharmas have a *svabhava*. That is, they are simples and not conceptually reified out of pluralities.

3 The nature and origins of Mahayana Buddhism

- 1 On how early we can date the earliest Mahayana, however, note the comments made by Paul Harrison (1995:55–6). We are dealing with a floating body of ideas that issues in a floating body of literature. That literature eventually comes to take a form identifiable as the one that we have now. This could be due to a series of factors some of which may be historical accidents.
- 2 I am using the expression 'non-Mahayana' here instead of the pejorative 'Hinayana'. I have done the same in Williams (1989), and in the present context of discussing Mahayana historically I think this is possibly the safest neutral expression. 'Theravada' is quite unsatisfactory, since while the Theravada school is the only one remaining of the traditions of Buddhism that originated prior to the rise of Mahayana, historically as we have seen there were many more. In India in classical times the Theravada was far from being the most

important. It is indeed very difficult to show where Mahayana sources knew of, or were reacting against, specifically Theravada doctrines and practices. However clearly 'non-Mahayana' will not do for discussions of Buddhism as a whole. Nowadays I am inclined to favour the expression 'Mainstream Buddhism' for non-Mahayana, as used currently by Paul Harrison but possibly originating with Eric Cheetham (see the latter's series of booklets published by The Buddhist Society, London, 1985 onwards). 'Mainstream Buddhism' indicates rather nicely what appears to me to be the relationship between non-Mahayana and Mahayana, where Mahayana in India is a particular sort of occurrence within (and possibly very much a minority within) Buddhism, i.e. Mainstream Buddhism, non-Mahayana Buddhism.

- 3 The nearest case I know of is a discussion in the *Abhidharmadipa* (Chs 4 and 6). This text dates from possibly the sixth century CE. The point made there is that there is indeed a bodhisattva vehicle to Buddhahood taught in the regular mainstream *Tripitaka*. This *Tripitaka* provides the only authentic Buddhist texts. Thus the so-called 'Mahayana sutras' are inauthentic.
- 4 Perhaps what really needs explaining is why the Mahayana vision has become so dominant in certain parts of the Buddhist world *outside* India. The answer to that question may have something to do with the relative ease of transmission of Mahayana Buddhism to other and eventually non-Indic cultures.
- 5 Cf. however Sasaki (1994), who would want to argue that this non-doctrinal understanding of *samghabheda* emerged only during the time of Asoka (third century BCE). I remain unconvinced, but anyway since Mahayana itself seems to have emerged first during or after the time of Asoka, it would not affect the point as regards Mahayana and schism.
- 6 The First Council is traditionally held to have occurred immediately after the death of the Buddha, when those of his disciples who were enlightened recited and agreed the Buddha's teachings as they had heard them. They thus compiled the canon, the *Tripitaka*.
- 7 I am familiar with the problematic case of Saicho in eighth-ninth century Japan. He certainly *spoke* of establishing a Mahayana Vinaya in opposition to the non-Mahayana monastic Vinayas. Of course, as regards the issue of *samghabheda* and the Vinaya my concern here is with Indian Buddhism.
- 8 See Harrison (1995): 'Mahayana was a pan-Buddhist movement—or better, a loose set of movements—rather like Pentecostalism or Charismatic Christianity, running across sectarian boundaries' (1995:56).
- 9 For Schopen's methodological reflections on what he sees as a 'Protestant' tendency among modern scholars to privilege textual

- resources rather than archaeological evidence see Schopen (1991b).
- 10 Note, incidentally, the extreme paucity of literary remains for Mahayana found on Indian soil. Very little indeed by way of ancient Mahayana texts have been found in 'India proper'.
 - 11 For a short recent statement of the more traditional view, see Yuichi Kajiyama in Yoshinori Takeuchi (1993:142–5). Kajiyama takes as his starting point the oft-stated association of the laity with stupas and the relic cult, relying on the Buddha's purported statement in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* that monks should have nothing to do with the cult of relics. This would be a concern of the laity. Schopen 1991c (see also 1992) has convincingly argued that this is based on a misreading of the sutra (cf. here Schopen with Vetter (1994: esp. 1247 ff.)). The allied association of the rise of Mahayana with cults centred on stupas and relics has been criticised in Schopen (1977). The originator of the widely accepted theory associating the stupa cult, the laity, and the origins of the Mahayana is the Japanese scholar Akira Hirakawa (1963 and 1990, for example). Schopen (1985) shows that from the very earliest donative inscriptions, monks and nuns—often very learned monks and nuns—had been important donors at stupas. The proportion of Sangha members increased as time passed until they were frequently in the overwhelming majority. Moreover it is also monks and nuns who are overwhelmingly associated with inscriptions identifiable as Mahayana, 'the Mahayana was a monk dominated movement' (1985:26). Hirakawa's perspective is also criticised in an excellent paper by Paul Harrison (1995), and has recently begun to be criticised even within Japanese circles (see Sasaki 1994). Vetter (1994) suggests a sympathetic but, I think, unconvincing reappraisal of Hirakawa's argument.
 - 12 Schopen (1992:107) makes the same point about misunderstanding the rhetorical devices of the Mahayana sutras. He contrasts the picture of the non-Mahayana monk as 'self-centered' and 'indolent' given in some (modern) works on Mahayana that rely uncritically on the picture obtained from the Mahayana sutras, with the picture of altruism and social involvement provided by the inscriptional evidence.
 - 13 See Williams (1989:20–6). See also Harrison (1995:57 ff. and especially 68).
 - 14 But cf. Williams (1989:26–8) for a suggestion that this sort of antagonism was not so prevalent in the very earliest Mahayana literature.
 - 15 Perhaps this association of early Mahayana with forest-dwelling meditators could have something to do with a point I note in Williams

(1989:10–11). The period that may have seen the origins of the Mahayana appears to have been characterised by

an awareness of living in the ‘last days’, an era when things are on the decline, or are not what they were, ‘life under siege’,... it is possible that Mahayanists saw their own practices and beliefs in this context as bulwarks against moral and spiritual decline.

Harrison (1995) suggests that the fact that many of the early Mahayanists were forest dwelling ascetic meditators may be the reason why we find so little archaeological evidence for them.

- 16 Note also the reference in e.g. Schopen (1994:47) to relics as ‘infused with morality, infused with concentration, wisdom, release and knowledge and vision’. In other words, relics are infused with the very qualities that make a Buddha a Buddha. But these qualities are also the qualities (*dharmas*) often referred to as the ‘collection of dharmas’ (*dharmakaya*) in certain Buddhist philosophical texts (Williams 1989:171). Thus texts that say that one should take refuge not in the physical body of the Buddha but in his *dharmakaya*, his Buddha-qualities, could be said to be indicating not just the need to become a Buddha through expressing in oneself those qualities constitutive of a Buddha (as previously thought). They could be indicating also the continuing presence of the Buddha, even though dead, his presence as the *dharmakaya* pervading his relics. Transcending death, the Buddha is present in the monastery still. Cf. however Harrison (1995:62) on Mahayana as ‘the work of a predominantly monastic order of meditators engaged in strenuous ascetic practices, people asserting, in short, that the Buddha is to be found in and through the realisation of the dharma, not the worship of relics’.
- 17 Perhaps we can also associate the occurrence of visions and its importance in the origins of at least some strands of Mahayana with the occurrence, or considered occurrence, also of magical power. Harrison (1995:66) suggests that meditation and associated powers (not to mention the miraculous bodhisattvas) would have given Mahayanists an edge in a crucial factor among the religious in ancient India, the competition for limited resources. Essentially this is competition for donations from supporting non-religious (‘laity’) eager for spiritual merit, and often also access to magical power and miraculous results.
- 18 Note the suggestion in Schopen (1987a:212) that dying and being oneself buried in the presence of the Buddha (i.e. in the vicinity of a stupa) was thought to lead to a rebirth in a heaven. The earliest Pure Lands are modelled on heavens. It is not surprising that once the idea

of Pure Lands had developed death associated with being in the presence of the Buddha (a stated result of *buddhanusmṛti*) would lead to rebirth in a Pure Land rather than a heaven.

4 Some schools of mainstream Buddhist thought

- 1 That is, from about the middle of the second century CE. The *Mahāvibhāṣā* is conceived as an elaborate commentary on the *Jñānaprasthāna*, one of the seven books of the Sarvastivādin Abhidharma. It details extensive doctrinal debates both within Sarvastivāda and with others, as well as formulating what became Sarvastivādin orthodoxy.
- 2 What follows is a simplified summary of part of Williams (1981). See also Williams (1977), and Cox (1995) and, briefly, (1998).
- 3 And not, as books often have it, the three *times* (past, present, and future) exist. The issue of the ontological status of time is different.
- 4 For criticisms see in particular the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* 5:25 ff. A summary can be found in Potter (1999:554–7).
- 5 There is a problem with much of this. We have seen already that past dharmas exert causal efficacy as well. Thus ‘doing what it does’ cannot be definitive of a present dharma. In response to such criticisms, later Sarvastivādins like Saṃghabhadra distinguish between the ‘activity’ that is definitive of a present dharma, and any other causal capacity of functioning that the dharma may exert. The present ‘activity’ consists in bringing about the next dharma of the same type in the causal sequence. Thus the present activity of a visual consciousness dharma consists in conditioning the visual consciousness dharma of the next moment. This type of activity always occurs when a dharma is present. Any other causal capacity (such as bringing about a karmic result, or serving as the object of a cognition) may or may not occur. It is not definitive of the *present* occurrence of a dharma.
- 6 There is another interpretation of this type of cause. Here it is said that they are ‘simultaneous causes’ because they co-operate simultaneously in producing the effect (Hirakawa 1990:180). Since the standard Sarvastivāda view is that the simultaneous cause occurs simultaneously with its effect (see Saṃghabhadra, in Potter 1999: 704), this explanation is much less satisfactory.
- 7 The other types of causes are known as the ‘concomitant cause’ (*samprayuktahetu*), the ‘universal cause’ (*sarvatragahetu*), and the ‘cause of fruition’ (*vipakahetu*). The *vipakahetu* is illustrated by a morally good cause producing a *pleasant* effect, and should be contrasted with the *sabhagahetu*. The four conditions are: (i) causal condition (*hetupratyaya*); (ii) the condition that is the (cessation of