

Reconsidering the Methodologies for the Study of Mahāyāna Sūtras

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Introduction

Thanks to the publication of a new series that covers nearly the whole range of Mahāyāna Buddhist Studies in Japan, with contributions by more than seventy scholars (*Shīrīzu Daijō Bukkyō* [Mahāyāna Buddhism Series], published in ten volumes from 2011 to 2013), the academic community in Japan now has an opportunity to reignite the discussion on “the origin(s)” of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

In contrast to the wealthy discussions about “the origin(s)” of “Mahāyāna sūtras” over 20 years to date, as shown in Shimoda (2009) or Harrison (2018), an important topic has been missing, that is, the examination of the methodology of Buddhist studies scholars have adopted in their research. One of the most distinct things is the lack of discernment of two different histories. One is the internal history of a text concerned with the elucidation of the content of discourses within the text and the other is the external history referring to the milieu in which the given text emerged. Scholars have been dealing with these two histories, considerably different in terms of aim of research and the manner of approach, placing in the identical context for the simple reason that the same term “history” is applicable to both cases.

Although scholars have been, in most cases, involved in the elucidation of the internal history of a particular Mahāyāna sūtra, not a few scholars have shown strong propensities to regard their results as also referring to the external history of a given text. This confusion has been in some cases a fatal obstacle to the critical evaluation of their attainments and to the proper reconstruction of the history of Buddhism in India. I would like to review briefly some of the recent research on Mahāyāna sūtras, especially the issue of making an essential distinction between these two types of histories.

1. Overview of Recent Research on Mahāyāna Sūtras and the Lack of Awareness of the Significance of the “Linguistic Turn”

Let us start by looking at a few examples among recent works. Sasaki (2002), for instance, mostly on the basis of texts in the Vinaya-piṭaka and Sri Lankan chronicles, suggested that the existence of a difference in opinion developed within the saṅgha monastery when the definition of the destruction of the community was changed from *cakrabhedā* (schism due to doctrinal dispute) to *karmabhedā* (schism due to dispute about ritual). However, while this may explain the general background of this difference in opinion in the monastery, it does not provide an adequate account of how Mahāyāna developed its own scriptures with a unique philosophy and teachings. Aside from the questionable nature of Sasaki’s arguments for the historical transition from *cakrabhedā* to *karmabhedā* in Buddhist communities in general, it is dubious that the change in merely a single provision of their monastic code would have been a sufficient background cause for the diversity of the existing Mahāyāna scriptures.

On the one hand, in research that focuses on scrutinizing the content of the Mahāyāna sūtras (e.g., Silk [1994], Karashima [2001], Nattier [2003], Boucher [2008]), in which the method is limited to tracing and analyzing the discourses within a text, the findings cannot necessarily serve to reconstruct the institutional history of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which is external to the confines of these discourses. If one wants to regard a certain textual discourse as a reflection of an actual external social situation, then one should be able to verify the account as belonging to the same region and era. To confirm this assumption, the identification of a textual discourse in terms of time and space needs to be done precisely by means of a third witness standing outside of the text—for example, archeological findings. In this respect, I agree with Franco (2009) when he writes,

Mahāyāna sūtras are obviously not historical narratives or reports in the sense that they provide information on the historical situation in which their teachings came into being ... The mode of presentation has more to do with religious topology and literary environments than with an actual historical situation. (Franco [2009: 112]; cf. Schmithausen [2014: 601])

On the other hand, it is true that Schopen (1989, 2004, 2005) was successful in clarifying an institutional aspect of Mahāyāna Buddhism based on the investigations of inscriptions, materials that one would reasonably regard as reflecting the institutional reality of the branch at the time given inscriptions were made. However, we must still recognize the significant fact that the “Mahāyāna sūtras” existed long before such inscriptions appeared. Nor

does Schopen's result touch on the uniqueness of the content of these texts. Just as it is difficult to explain the background of a given social setting by analyzing the content of the Mahāyāna sutras, so are inscription-related documents unable to elucidate the content of the discourses of a given sutra.

While the above-mentioned studies are undoubtedly useful, they pay no attention to the methodological confusion in their application of the results of textual readings to the reconstruction of institutional and social settings outside of the text, and vice versa. Here the significance of the issue raised by the "linguistic turn" in all fields of humanities needs attention. The study of history has been placed thereby under the influence of certain ingrained aftereffects. The following account given by Stedman Jones, a leading historian on this topic, will serve as a proper introduction to the understanding of the gist of this new approach to history:

What was distinctive about the new approach was its insistence upon language as a self-contained system of signs the meanings of which were determined by their relationship with each other rather than to some primordial or transcendental extra-linguistic terrain. What was attractive in this new approach was firstly that by its refusal to derive language—or more properly discourse—from an external pre-linguistic reference point, it bypassed the idea of language as a reflection of reality. Potentially this represented a serious challenge to the core assumption of historical materialism and all the different versions of Marxist history—the determination of thought by social beings. Secondly, as a distinctive method of enquiry, it offered new ways of connecting social and intellectual history free from the problems embodied in the Marxian notion of ideology, whose effect was always to turn thought into a derivative second-order entity, the product of a set of practices belonging to a "superstructure" whose meaning was ultimately deciphered by the reference to the ("material" or "economic") "base." (Stedman Jones [2005: 63])

Two points attract our immediate attention. First, the position taken by Buddhist scholars who are interested in reconstructing the institutional history of Mahāyāna Buddhism is quite similar to that of Marxist historians in terms of their tendency to reduce the meaning of a sutra containing a variety of thoughts to the material, economic or social milieus. In Japan, except for research by Tomomatsu Entai (as discussed in Silk [2002]), this attitude began to be apparent after the emergence of Hirakawa's hypothesis (1968). This is characteristic of humanistic studies in postwar Japan, which have

been strongly influenced by the social sciences. The second point is more relevant to the gist of this paper. It is evident that Buddhist scholars have been taking an approach to Mahāyāna sutras that is opposite to the “insistence upon language as a self-contained system of signs the meanings of which were determined by their relationship with each other rather than to some primordial or transcendental extra-linguistic terrain.”

In reading a Mahāyāna sutra, a scholar as a reader will experience a variety of representations emerging and developing, transforming and disappearing, successively in his or her mind. Despite the fact that this process is operating between the discourses of the sutra and the consciousness of the reader, scholars tend to hold a notion that these representations emerged based on an object or an event that had actually existed outside the text at the time the sutra was compiled. They are most inclined to have this idea when the representations seem most realistic to them. This assumption, widespread throughout the humanities, originates in the persistent desire, as Derrida (1967a, 1967b, 1967c) points out, to make an absolute distinction between “a linguistic sign inside the text,” which consists of a bilateral connection between “signifier (*signifiant*)” made up of phonemes and “signified (*signifié*)” created by the linguistic sign’s sense content, and “its referent (*réfèrent*) outside the text.” The recurring arguments in the movement of the linguistic turn have made this distinction subject to radical criticism.

Especially noteworthy is, as semiologists in this field corroborate, that the characteristic of language as a self-contained system of signs is far more evident in written texts than in oral texts. In written texts, a linguistic sign inside the text consisting of a connection between the signifier and the signified forms linguistic space overwhelmingly independent of the referent outside the texts. This feature may be attested in oral texts as well but only in a very weak, subtle, vague manner. Ruegg (2004: 18-24), dealing with this issue, fails to be aware of this point.

It is true that Gombrich (1988) first took up the significance of the introduction of writing technology into the transmission of Buddhist knowledge as a prime candidate for the origin of Mahāyāna sutras, but his arguments are too limited to elucidate the rich complexity of these scriptures. It is true as well that many studies have shed light on the significance of the veneration of a sutra through copying, memorizing, preserving, ornamenting and the like. However, the studies have looked almost exclusively at the ritual aspects, which are irrelevant to the peculiar nature of the content of the narrative discourses. Thus, they failed to confront the question of what mechanism operates within the narratives of “early Mahāyāna sutras” that makes these texts distinctly different from sutras of “Mainstream Buddhism.”

In contrast to the approaches used in earlier research, what Cole (2005) and Shimoda (2011, 2013a, 2013b) focus on is the fact that “early Mahāyāna sutras” succeeded in creating an internal space of vocabulary that is highly independent of the external environments of the texts. Within this text-internal space, a new cognition of the legitimacy of the Buddha’s teaching emerged and evolved. The emergence of discourse on self-legislation independent of institutional settings is of significance in considering the “origin” of the characteristics of the narratives of “Mahāyāna sutras.”

Archaeological remains available to us show no essential division between Mahāyāna Buddhism and Nikāya Buddhism (Fussman [2004], von Hinüber [2012]). In addition, no substantial institutional evidence is available for the “early Mahāyāna sutras.” Furthermore, as Williams (1989) has pointed out, Mahāyāna Buddhism “is all but identical with the evolution of a new and distinctive canonical literature, the Mahāyāna sutras.” Given these facts, it is high time for us to consider more seriously the textual characteristics of the “Mahāyāna sutras” rather than the institutional environments outside their discourses. Before stepping into this issue, it would be helpful to look over recent findings in the field of archaeology.

2. New Landscapes Provided by Recent Archaeological Surveys

In considering the origin and rise of “early Mahāyāna Buddhism,” Indian archeology over the past two decades has provided valuable new insights. New findings and discussions in Indian archeology have considerably changed our picture of ancient Indian Buddhism. As Hawkes and Shimada (2009) point out in their collection of rich discoveries, as far as historical documentation goes, from the third century BCE, when we find the oldest records confirming the existence of Buddhism, stupas and monasteries are verified to have been almost always arranged according to one and the same plan.

During that time, India was experiencing rapid urbanization, with stupas and monasteries acting as network hubs, constructing and promoting interactions among various religions, industries and cultures. Seen at a macroscopic level, it is evident that many of the stupas and monasteries stood on the sacred sites of indigenous religions. This indicates that the religions that existed before Buddhism were likely to merge into this newly appearing worldview. As important points of connection between urbanized regions that had been separate, these places functioned to promote various kinds of industries represented by agriculture (Hawkes [2009: 147]).

On the other hand, seen at a microscopic level, the stupas and monasteries were geographically located outside city walls and near city gates, i.e.,

where the inside and outside of a walled city intersected. Inside the walls, according to the *Arthaśāstra*, the regulations of the *jāti-varṇa* system and the influence of Vedic rituals were in place. Outside the walls, although the city powers held authority, was outside of the *varṇa* system and Vedic rituals. The geographical situation of Buddhist monasteries and stupas would have given Buddhism a distinctive nature religiously, socially and culturally, uncommon to any other religion. Besides the stupas and the monasteries, this territory accommodated shrines, holy sites or the forests of tutelary deities that fell outside of Vedic tradition, as well as residences of people who were deemed to be outside of the *varṇa* system, such as foreign merchants, artisans, untouchables and traveling caravans (Shimada [2009: 216–234]).

It is worth noting that in this area the marketplace and burial grounds overlapped. In one form or another, Buddhists were most likely to have been involved in both burial rites and trade. It goes without saying that Brahmins were repelled by death as the most unholy of things. Additionally, for those who applied *varṇa*'s concept of discrimination between pure and impure, the act of trading—exchanging objects presumably touched by many unknown people—was ritually dangerous. If any religious person could justify this act, it would be the monks, who could remove the taboo of the *varṇa* system and transcend the notion of discrimination between purity and impurity.

The construction of stupas and monasteries on the peripheries of cities signifies the transcendence of social dichotomies between life and death, inside and outside, purity and impurity. Once a place penetrated by this sort of indiscriminative power appeared, it would have functioned to promote the exchange of technological skills and knowledge theretofore confined to different social and ethnic groups and thereby making the existing stable values more fluid. This would have become a rejuvenating force in society (Shimada [2009]).

3. Questioning the Methodology of Reconstructing the History of Buddhism Based on Textual Research

When set against the backdrop of revelations gained from archaeological surveys of ancient India, most of the assumptions of scholars about “Mahāyāna sutras” based on their reading of a specific sutra should be subject to reconsideration. If a certain textual discourse is to be taken as a reflection of the reality of an external social situation, the account should be verified as belonging to the same region and era. This is necessary in order to make a positive identification in terms of time and space of a textual discourse with a text-external event (using archeological findings, for instance). However, no scholar who is familiar with the contents of the Mahāyāna sutras would

be confident in making these associations, because the Mahāyāna sutras have almost no historical traces left within their discourses.

It is true that for manuscripts of Mahāyāna sutras discovered in Gandhāra, Central Asia, Nepal and other places the date of production can be determined with physicochemical analysis. In some fortunate cases, information given in the colophon indicates the date of completion. However, this information simply confirms the date of the texts in terms of their physicality or materiality, but it does not position the content of their discourses at a specific time. This stands as one of the fatal obstacles for those who study these texts; Mahāyāna sutras, lacking this sort of information, cannot be easily used to reconstruct Indian history, in the strict sense of the word.

With that said, one case—and perhaps the *only* one so far—deserves special mention due to the successful employment of this approach. Walters (1997) investigated the essential relationships among the sacred biographies of the Buddha—that is, the *Apadāna*, the *Buddhavaṃsa* and the *Cariyāpiṭaka* (which he calls the ABCs)—and the structure of the stupas in Bhārhut, Sāñchī and Amaravati. He eventually reached the conclusion that one can reasonably regard these three sacred biographies of the Buddha and the stupas as having been produced between the Aśokan and post-Aśokan periods.

Noteworthy in Walter's argument is that the gradual extension of the construction of these stupas and the gradual development of this trilogical text show remarkable agreement with each other. This is verified by the fact that the successive changes in the type of donated gifts mentioned in each text is in astonishing accord with the changes in the motifs of donations reflected in the gradual extension of these stupas. He points out that this is a rare case where external events and internal textual discourses show exceptional congruity. Although this assertion requires further investigation to illustrate the argument, we can reasonably consider it an advance in terms of the methodological scrupulousness and richness of the conclusion.

Walters first acknowledges that the sacred biographies of the Buddha by themselves are unable to elucidate history in the strict sense of the word. He states, “[T]hey are poems about inconceivably ancient periods of time, not scientific histories.” However, this crucial point “is not always grasped in Buddhology” and there is a “tendency in Buddhological studies to weave history directly out of literary remains, as though the authors of sacred texts were trying to describe objectively the times and places in which they lived” (Walters [1997: 161]).

He warns scholars to be careful about anachronistic mistakes when they deal with the issue of stupas. They freely make use of discourses in texts such as the *Divyāvadāna*, *Lalitavistara*, *Mahāvastu*, *Jātakamālā* and

Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā, presumably belonging to the periods between the first century BCE and fifth century CE, in order to explain images engraved in the third to second centuries BCE. Behind this fallacious methodology, he argues, there is either an unproven presumption that those texts precisely record discourses from oral traditions or a baseless assumption that the texts that give sumptuous details, even if constructed later, are acceptable as historical witnesses. Apart from these problematic presumptions, according to Walters, an argument for the agreement in motif between an image in a carving and the stories in the text hardly goes beyond impressionistic assumptions. If there had been direct connections between the engravings and the stories appearing years later, the engravings of the previous era would have influenced the creation of the stories that came afterward, not the other way around. This criticism by Walters of the anachronism that researchers have fallen into when dealing with the study of stupas is applicable to any studies that attempt to reconstruct the historical reality of a religious setting based on a study of textual discourses.

4. Biographies of the Buddha and their Relationship to Stupas as pre-Mahāyāna Prerequisites

There is no space to go into further detail about Walter's arguments, but the conclusion he reached is worth attention in reconsidering the relationship between the stupas and the sacred biographies of the Buddha. First, the sacred biographies are not only the life stories of the Buddha but also the stories of a community of people who lived with the Buddha. Those who serve the bodhisattva are destined to be reborn in the same world to walk the same path toward the ultimate goal together, and when the bodhisattva has completed that path and reached the supreme awakening, all those who have walked the path with him will attain salvation. In the sacred biographies, in this manner, the Buddha and those who encounter him are destined to live in the same worlds.

Stupas are nothing other than architecture that concretizes the texts of the sacred biographies of the Buddha associated with his followers. The stupas construct a grand story comprised of the many past lives of sentient beings and the Buddha as a bodhisattva. What is noteworthy here is that most of the inscribed names of donors were not individual agents but rather representatives of families, relatives, guilds, villages and communities. The construction of a stupa was initiated by a complex agency, and the activities surrounding stupas were also supported by communities of complex agencies. Those who entered the festive space of the stupa, through their active

participation, became part of the biography of the Buddha and lived out the story in the actual world outside the text.

In fact, as pertinently demonstrated by Shaw (2007, 2009), the gigantic stupas in India were not built all at once. Rather, they were gradually enlarged with new parts added over a long time. Each gift donated in each period reflects countless donors coming from different eras, regions, occupations and classes; all participated in the co-creation and unfolding of the biography of the Buddha embodied in the stupa. This performance is not something that ended at one point in the past; it is something that is evolving even today and will continue to evolve into the future. Stupas here are, as they were, living extensions of the Buddha himself and the continuing construction of stupas is nothing other than the continuation of the sacred biographies. Walters concludes that in this festive space Buddhists at the time likely recited the great verses of the three sacred biographies aloud as new Indian epic poems.

Given the examples from recent achievements in the field of archeology, it is evident that it is highly problematic to reconstruct a history of Indian Buddhism based solely on literary texts. Buddhist scholars, with some exceptions like Schopen, have actually taken it for granted that they can reconstruct a Buddhist history by analyzing textual resources, without confirming whether the textual content agrees with archaeological evidence. In addition, the textual resources used have been, in not a few cases, books of disciplinary rules that are taken by scholars to reflect monastic activities. Furthermore, in almost all cases, these texts belong to a particular tradition of the Sri Lankan Mahāvihāra School. Even though Bareau (1962) made a meticulous effort to decipher the Vinaya-piṭaka of all schools and describe the detailed functions of the stupa in the monastery, scholars have obliterated the significance of the stupa from the landscape of Indian Buddhism. Without any serious discussion, scholars have regarded stupas as later additions resulting from popularization over time or as something outside “legitimate” and “pure” monastic Buddhism.

In contrast to this presumption, archaeological surveys, as shown above, portray a different image of ancient Indian Buddhism. They show from the earliest historical documents that the stupas provided an extensive platform for both monasteries and scriptures. Stupas continued to revive as one of the nodes of the dynamic system of living Buddhism, and they occupied the center of a complex network of religion, industry and various cultural activities, as though they were a living incarnation of the Buddha himself. The reconstruction of this vast horizon of the history of ancient Indian Buddhism cannot be accomplished through the investigation of texts alone, not to speak of relying only on the Pāli canon, which has no description of stupas at all.

5. Transition from Oral to Written Media and the Emergence of Mahāyāna Sutras

It is evident that the “early Mahāyāna sutras,” such as the *Prajñāpāramitā Sutra*, *Lotus Sutra*, *Avatamsaka Sutra* and so forth, emerged against the backdrop of both the stupas and the sacred biographies of the Buddha. It is also apparent that they contain past, present and future buddhas associated with sentient beings who are on the path of the bodhisattva along with a buddha progressing toward supreme awakening. Furthermore, there are three kinds of paths to enlightenment: for those who listen to the teachings of the Buddha (*śrāvaka*); for those who proceed alone (*pratyekabuddha*); for those who are on the path of the bodhisattva. Scholars have long dealt with these characteristics as features specific to the Mahāyāna, but in fact, as we discussed above in fair detail, they are evident in the complex of the stupas and in the context of the sacred biographies of the Buddha. These characteristics are not at all of Mahāyāna origin. Recent research by Hiraoka (2012) on the constituent elements of the *Lotus Sutra* points in the same direction.

We should not overlook a very important feature of “early Mahāyāna sutras” that was first noted by Hirakawa and later stressed by Schopen: the repudiation of stupa worship. It is true that the early Mahāyāna sutras postulate the existence of the biographies of the Buddha and the cult of stupa worship, but the nature of these accounts primarily points to surpassing the values of those sacred biographies and stupas by the value of the scriptures.

What on Earth made possible the unprecedented movement that surmounted the enthusiasm of the Buddhist world, in which stupas played a predominant role as the external biography of the Buddha? No clue for answering this question is available within the archeological evidence. To seek an answer, we need to turn our attention to the content, especially the discourses, of the “early Mahāyāna sutras.” It is widely acknowledged that the devaluing of stupa worship was closely related to the rise of sutra veneration. As might be expected, the sutras that call for the veneration of the sutras have as their prerequisite the act of copying text. What should be noted in this respect is the characteristic feature seen across the “early Mahāyāna sutras” of an ardent interest in questioning the legitimacy of previous traditions, in later times by labeling them as the teaching of a *śrāvaka* (“voice-hearer”) with the intention of claiming their own tradition as the only authentic teaching of the Buddha.

As Gombrich (1988) points out, the legitimacy of these traditions could not be questioned during the phase of oral transmission, in which the text and a person who transmits the text are essentially inseparable. The act of refuting the legitimacy of the content of a sutra that is being recited by a

teacher based on his or her own memories is nothing more than a denial of the existence of the teacher in the presence of his or her disciples. This would lead immediately to the interruption of the transmission of the teaching. It is hard to imagine that those who had left home to enter the monkhood due to their reliance on the authenticity of the tradition would have taken action to destroy the very foundation they stood on. However, the “early Mahāyāna sutras” were formulated with this dangerous conception at their very core.

To make this happen, there needed to be a new platform on which Buddhist traditions could remain effective in a manner that allowed oral traditions to manifest in the appearance of a person who could be relativized and even rejected to some extent. Scripture, as written material, would probably have been the only medium that could have served this purpose independent of a human transmitter. In the transition from an oral to written format for transmitting Buddhist knowledge, some Buddhists (presumably very few) would have realized the significance of this medium’s unprecedented ability to preserve and revive knowledge independent of any physical interlocutor. What is important to note here is that the act of writing sutras in the Mahāyāna, unlike copying traditional texts in the Vinayapiṭaka and the Sūtrapiṭaka as an ancillary means to oral transmission, was a fundamental act in establishing the veneration of the sutras.

This argumentation requires a reconsideration of the excessive evaluation of the role of the *dharmabhāṇaka*, conventionally regarded as a priest in early Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is true that the *dharmabhāṇaka* would have played a certain ritual role in the dissemination of the Mahāyāna sutras, as is shown by von Hinüber (2012), but overemphasis on this role is counterproductive to elucidating the significance of the emergence of the Mahāyāna sutras. If we are overly entranced by the existence of a physical priest, then we might fail to see the important logic that the ultimate foundation of the legitimacy of the priest’s teaching is not the priest, but the sutra in the form of scripture. The confirmation of the legitimacy of the priest should not linger on the mere existence of the priest, but it should be traced further back to the source of the authenticity of the scriptural discourses. More than anything, the priests appearing in the sutra do ascribe the legitimacy of the discourses they are uttering to the presence of the sutra in the form of scripture, not vice versa.

This is a crucial point in understanding the slightly complicated logic exercised by the compilers of the Mahāyāna sutras in their assertion of the legitimacy of the sutras. If one is blinded by the presence of the *dharmabhāṇaka*, as has often been the case in the study of the Mahāyāna sutras, one will fail to understand the meticulous structure of the discourses in the “early Mahāyāna

sutras” that differentiate the *dharmabhāṇaka* manifest within the textual discourses and the compiler, who was completely invisible and outside of the discourse.

Things would have happened as follows. With the introduction of a writing system, the words of the Buddha from the oral tradition, which had been heard in the external world, became embodied in a written text. Then the compilers of the Mahāyāna sutras became aware that this silent inner textual world, shut off from the external world, was the genuine place in which the words of the Buddha could best be enshrined. What manifested before them was a new world comprised of subtle consciousness specifically concomitant with written language.

The revolutionary change brought about by the transition from oral to written language in the transmission of knowledge has long been discussed in the fields of humanities and Buddhist Studies and need not be explored here. Instead, let us now briefly examine how this change would have influenced the production of early Mahāyāna Buddhist texts.

6. The Birth of “Scriptures” in the History of Buddhism and their Institutional Settings

As far as the discourses in the “early Mahāyāna sutras” are concerned, it is evident that the sutras, in contrast to the texts of the Buddha’s biography, refuse to be involved in the external festivities of the areas surrounding the stupas. Instead, they concentrate on drawing the reader’s attention solely to the internal discourses that are irrelevant to the environments described by recent archaeological surveys. This attempt constitutes a mission to establish the genuine legitimacy of the world of the Buddha within the relevant texts. If the compilation of the sacred biographies is to be regarded as the sanctification of the external space of the stupas, the creation of the early Mahāyāna sutras may well be considered as the consecration of the internal world of the sutras by shutting out external activities.

Here emerges the awareness that the sutra is none other than the Buddha himself, thereby replacing the significance of the stupas with that of the sutras, transforming the consciousness of the bodhisattva in the biography of the Buddha into the bodhisattva responsible for transmitting sutras given by the Buddha in the discourse of a sutra. This event, unattested in the Vinayaṭīka, Abhidharmapiṭaka or traditional Buddhism’s Sūtrapiṭaka, may well be called the birth of *scripture* in the history of Buddhism. As I have discussed in Shimoda (2015), it is evident that “early Mahāyāna sutras” have surprisingly similar features in common with the sacred scriptures of other religions, as enumerated in Smith (1993).

Scholars have failed to account properly for the origin of the book cult in Mahāyāna Buddhism by falling into a sort of tautology in their argument that the appearance of the cult of a sutra as physical object originated in the appearance of a sutra as a physical object. However, this cannot explain either the missing book cult in the case of the Vinayapiṭaka and Abhidharmapiṭaka or the peculiar motivation for Mahāyānists to overcome the existence of the stupa cult. The origin of the veneration of Mahāyāna scriptures would be the exaltation of the linguistic reasoning expertise enhanced by the appearance of written language to the extent that those who were concerned with transmitting the teaching should have been confident in resurrecting the Buddha in the inner world of the text. Book cults with magical characteristics would have been a secondary phenomenon derived from this change in consciousness.

Early Mahāyāna scriptures that discovered a deep layer of language that had not been apparent during the period of oral tradition had an ardent desire to seek the Buddha who had entered *nirvāṇa* in the scriptural dimension. As Cole (2005) has persuasively argued in dealing with the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and the *Tathāgatagarbha Sutra*, one of the important metaphors found in early Mahāyāna texts is the reunion of the son and the Buddha as his genuine father, from whom he had been torn apart. According to the discourses of these sutras, those who are fortunate enough to obtain the sutra find themselves encountering inside the scripture the Buddha, long after the Buddha entered nirvana. It is worth noting that the encounter here is characterized as a reunion, which is indeed a new and unique experience. However, the newness and uniqueness essentially correspond to the newness and uniqueness of the emotion one experiences when long-lost memories are revived. The Mahāyāna sutras are scriptures equipped with a refined structure of discourse that enables the reader to experience a deeper dimension of consciousness concerning the issues of difference and sameness, and newness and repetition. These characteristics show a remarkable agreement with those elucidated by contemporary semiologists represented by Derrida.

There were, of course, people in ancient India who created such texts. However, as we already discussed in dealing with the disadvantage of over-emphasizing the role of the priest, *dharmabhāṇaka*, there would be almost no point in reconstructing the author(s) of the “early Mahāyāna sutras” that place an extreme emphasis on the significance of discourses concerning the ultimate value of Buddhist religious activities distinct from external environments. Among other things, given the current state of historical documents as discussed above, it is quite difficult to specify the historical characteristics

of the author(s) with any certainty. In contrast, it is quite possible to reconstruct the mechanism by which these new scriptures appeared, to analyze the characteristics of these texts in contrast to traditional ones and to elucidate the way these texts influenced the history of Buddhism.

It is important to scrutinize the details of the textuality of the Mahāyāna sutras, not their authorship. In fact, when looking over the history of studies of traditional sutras, known as Nikāya or Āgama, authorship has never been an issue, and scholarly attention has focused solely on their textuality. In contrast, when it comes to the Mahāyāna scriptures, authorship has been the main issue since the beginning of modern Buddhist Studies in Meiji-era Japan. As might be expected, these two different approaches originate in the obstinate preconception inherent to modern Buddhist scholars that the traditional Buddhist texts were the teachings of the Buddha, while the Mahāyāna sutras were not—a persistent presumption that has never been subject to an attempt at verification.

However, scholars should have questioned the authorship of the traditional Buddhist sutras rather than that of the Mahāyāna sutras. The nature of the authors of the Mahāyāna sutras, whose historical circumstances are considerably obscure, could have been made clear in such a manner as to be put in contrast to or in comparison with the authors of the traditional scriptures, which are embedded in slightly more favorable environments in terms of historical testimony.

One of the answers to this question, which has hardly ever come up in Buddhist Studies, is presented as circumstantial evidence with notable content. According to a precious account given in the Vinayaṭīka concerning the use and preservation of sutras, it is the job of the lay devotees, the *upāsaka* and/or the *upāsika*, to memorize, inscribe, preserve and manage the scriptures in order to encourage the monks to study them (Vinayaṭīka I 140–141; T. 1435: 174b–c; T. 1445: 1042c–1043a, etc.). This shows remarkable agreement with Faxian's records of the management and preservation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sutra* in Mahāyāna (T. 2145: 60b2–7). As clearly shown by this corroboration, the texts of the traditional Buddhist scriptures and of the Mahāyāna scriptures were transmitted in identical ways.

It is also important to remember the clarification made by Schopen regarding the property rights of monasteries. He argues that monasteries were not owned by monks. Rather, monasteries belonged to influential lay devotees who donated the property, and these people had influence over the ceremonial activities conducted by the monasteries. It would be reasonable to assume that the knowledge produced by and preserved in monasteries, probably except for that in the Vinayaṭīka covering the code of conduct of individual

monks and the management of rituals by the organization, was considered to be shared with the lay devotees. Some texts in the Sūtrapīṭaka must have been a primary example of such expectations.

7. To be Continued

The discussions I have raised here, placed against the backdrop of the vast landscape of Buddhism in ancient India drawn by recent archeological surveys, identifies what served as an influential milieu for the emergence of Mahāyāna sutras and links it with several features in the linguistic sphere brought about by the change from an oral to a written medium. This seems to provide answers to some of the questions that have arisen in research on Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Firstly, it solves with no difficulty the longstanding mystery of why Mahāyāna Buddhism, while having a host of scriptures, leaves no recognizable institutional entity from its early stage. Whereas Mahāyāna Buddhism appears for the first time in an inscription from the fifth to sixth centuries CE, Mahāyāna scriptures, as shown by the age of manuscript remains in India and records in China, were already in existence in the first century CE.

As has been reported many times, the criterion for what constitutes Mahāyāna Buddhism, according to the records of Faxian and Xuanzang, was whether the monks recited Mahāyāna sutras. There is no need to place special emphasis on the fact that Mahāyāna Buddhism does not have its own Vinayapīṭaka, documents inevitable to Buddhism as an institutional entity.

Secondly, this theory explains the continuity between early Mahāyāna Buddhism and early Buddhist traditions by suggesting that the Mahāyāna sutras were most likely composed in environments in which they were able to utilize knowledge of early Buddhist traditions or the sacred biographies of the Buddha—namely, traditional monasteries donated by lay devotees.

This at the same time tells us the discontinuity between these two lines of Buddhism is found at the level of textual interest shown by the intention of the Mahāyāna scriptures to surpass the notion of the traditional legitimacy of Buddhism. They viewed scriptures as the Buddha himself and continued to pour their wisdom into deepening and refining the words of the Buddha and his teachings in the scripture. As a result, a host of scriptures eventually emerged that had established within the text an inner history of Buddhism concerned primarily with the legitimacy of Buddhist teachings. This discourse needed to be constantly reverbalized to fit the ever-changing historical situation.

Lastly, I would like to reiterate the point I mentioned at the outset, namely, the importance of the discernment of the two different histories, that

is, the internal history of a text concerned with the elucidation of the content of discourses inside the text and the external history of it referring to the environments in which the text was produced. This discrimination will make the rich research on Mahāyāna sutras that has been done in the past and that will be done in the future more critically sustainable. This topic will be made much clearer when considered in a full manner in the context given by Jacques Derrida and others.

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