

# The Beginnings of Buddhist Tenet Classification in China

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## *The Emerging Awareness of the Philosophical Diversity of Buddhism*

The early part of the fifth century AD—that is to say, from the closing years of the Later Ch'in (384–417) and Eastern Tsin (317–420) dynasties, to the early years of the Sung dynasty (420–479) of the Northern and Southern dynasties period—was a transitional age which marked the beginnings of the academically sound study of Buddhism in China. One indication of this was the development of the tenet classification (*chiao-hsiang pan-shih* 教相判釈).<sup>1</sup> This was an academic undertaking which sought to classify and systematically organize the vast array of philosophies found in the immense number of texts in the Buddhist canon. Its aim was to harmonize the varied and seemingly inconsistent expositions of the Buddha by reflecting upon the Buddha's ultimate aim of "ferrying over" sentient beings. Because it was linked to efforts to determine the fundamental spirit of Buddhism, tenet classification later came to occupy an important position in the academic study of Buddhism in China and Japan.

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<sup>1</sup> Tenet classification (abbrev. *pan-chiao* or *chiao-pan*) is unique to Chinese Buddhism and reaches its mature form in the T'ien-t'ai school's "Five Periods and Eight Teachings" classification. In this article, the author analyzes the historical conditions leading to the development of tenet classification and discusses some of its earliest forms.

What, then, were the circumstances at the beginning of the fifth century, which led to the rise of tenet classification? I would like to start by considering the background and conditions from which it arose, before proceeding to a discussion of the features characteristic of the archaic forms of tenet classification.

To begin with, it was necessary for people to become aware of the philosophical diversity existing within Buddhism before the need arose to systematize Buddhism by means of tenet classification. How did such awareness come about? This point must be first considered in detail before we can turn to the study of tenet classification. The earliest translators of Buddhist texts into Chinese were An Shih-kao<sup>2</sup> and Lokakṣema<sup>3</sup> of the Later Han period (25–220). They both translated numerous works, but each translated texts of different branches of Buddhism: the former the Hinayana, and the latter the Mahayana. Under these circumstances, an awareness of the diverse positions within Buddhism was not likely to arise. Since Buddhist texts were not widely disseminated during this age, it would have been no easy task to obtain sutras of both kinds for comparison. But even supposing it were possible, the low level of scholarship at that time would have prevented anyone from deducing the difference between the fundamental positions of the sutras translated. In other words, it is impossible to understand the distinction between Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism merely by studying either one or another group of sutras; the difference between these two positions can only be understood by studying under the guidance of learned Indian and Central Asian monks. Where the doctrinal points of difference between them are concerned, though, even with the instruction of such learned men, it would have been no easy matter to ascertain a universally valid standard of distinction between Mahayana and Hinayana, since the points of distinction would not necessarily have been in agreement in every age and among all schools.

How, then, did the awareness of the diverse positions within Buddhism actually emerge in China? An answer to this question can be found when

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<sup>2</sup> An Shih-kao (n.d.), the earliest known translator of Buddhist texts, arrived in Lo-yang around 148 and over the next ten years translated thirty, primarily Hinayana, texts, including Āgamas, Abhidharma works, and meditation manuals.

<sup>3</sup> Lokakṣema (n.d.) arrived in Lo-yang between 168–188, and translated mainly Mahayana works.

the following two points are considered: the interest in translations, and the study of the Buddhist teachings by Chinese monks. First, concerning the interest in translations, I would like to consider this from two aspects: one is the growing interest in translations fostered among Chinese monks who directly participated in the translation of the different kinds of sutras and treatises; the other is the deepening awareness of the importance of repeatedly-translated sutras resulting from the compilation of sutra catalogues.

During the Wei (220–265) and Tsin (266–317) dynasties, the translation of sutras was haphazard, and in general was carried out unsystematically by different translators in different localities. For this reason, if one maintained contact only with one translator, it usually meant one could gain acquaintance with only one kind of sutra. Even if that translator produced several translations, it is unlikely that any difference in their main ideas would have been noticed. However, if one were to come into contact with a number of translators and to participate in the translation of many different kinds of sutras and treatises, one would have been able to grasp that there were differences inherent in their basic orientations, even if one did not become particularly conversant in the contents of those sutras.

Such a situation presented itself during the sutra translations carried out in Chang-an in the closing years of the Former Ch'in dynasty (351–394). During a period of a mere five or six years, there arrived such teachers as Sanghabhadra (Kashmir),<sup>4</sup> Dharmanandi (Tukhara),<sup>5</sup> Saṅghadeva (Kashmir),<sup>6</sup> Dharmapriya (Kashmir),<sup>7</sup> Dharmadhī (Central Asia),<sup>8</sup> and Kumārabuddhi (Turfan),<sup>9</sup> each of whom translated a particular class of sutra or treatise. Thanks to their efforts people were able to become acquainted, in addition to the Prajñāpāramitā literature<sup>10</sup> already available at that time, with the works of the voluminous Āgama section such as the *Ekottara-āgama* and the *Madhyama-āgama*, the detailed Abhidharmas such as the *Jñānaprasthāna* and the *Abhidharma-vibhāṣa-*

<sup>4</sup> Translated the *Abhidharma-vibhāṣā-śāstra* in 383.

<sup>5</sup> Translated the *Madhyama-āgama* and *Ekottara-āgama* between 384–91.

<sup>6</sup> Translated the *Jñānaprasthāna* in 383, and the *Abhidharma-hṛdya-śāstra* in 391.

<sup>7</sup> Translated the introductory chapter of the *Jñānaprasthāna*.

<sup>8</sup> Translated the Vinaya text *Sarvāstivāda-bhikṣuṇi-prātimokṣa-sūtra* in 379.

<sup>9</sup> Exact dates unknown.

<sup>10</sup> The first *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* was translated in 180, and several versions of the *Larger* and *Smaller Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* were translated thereafter.

*śāstra*, as well as such Vinaya works as the *Bhikṣu-* and *Bhikṣuṇī-prātimokṣa*, and the *Pi-na-yeh* (*Vinaya*). It is easy to imagine the amazement of those who beheld this vast, limitless expanse of Buddha Dharma suddenly spreading out before them. They were no doubt bewildered when they were confronted with the question of where to take refuge. This state of affairs naturally caused them to turn to the problem of unity and diversity within Buddhism.

Next, the compilation of sutra catalogues in which were recorded the sutra titles and their translators also pressed the Chinese Buddhists to reflect on the existence of various different philosophies within Buddhism. The first earnest attempt at the compilation of such a catalogue was that of Tao-an (312–385)<sup>11</sup> of the Former Ch'in dynasty, who treated Buddhism not as a mere gentry or intellectual pastime, but sought in it a way of life for himself. His efforts to catalogue the Buddhist sutras culminated in the *Catalogue Arranging the Sutras* (*Tsung-li chung-ching mu-lu* 綜理衆經目錄).<sup>12</sup> In this catalogue, Tao-an not only paid much attention to the skill and motivation of the translator, but he also tried to determine what works were variant translations of an identical original text. This is not something one can easily do, and it requires specialized knowledge to determine whether different texts are actually translations of one and the same work. Once the fact is confirmed, though, this has great repercussions within the Buddhist community, because if a particular sutra was brought to China and retranslated on different occasions by people sometimes of quite different origins, this attests to the universality and importance of the work. In such a way there arose deep interest in the retranslated sutras during the early period of Chinese Buddhism.

The existence of different translations of one sutra also comes in quite useful, since the task of determining accurately their philosophical contents is greatly simplified when different versions can be compared.

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<sup>11</sup> A highly respected Buddhist monk who laid the foundations for Buddhism in China, he made comparative studies of the sutras, and compiled the first sutra catalogue. He also encouraged translation and other scholarly activities. As we see later, he is one of the first monks to stress the need to understand Buddhism on its own terms. For a biography of Tao-an, see Zurcher, pp. 184ff; also, the author's "Tao-an on Translation," *Eastern Buddhist Old Series*, VIII, 4 (August 1958).

<sup>12</sup> Completed in 374, the catalogue (no longer extant) is said to have contained over 600 titles. Tao-an attempted to distinguish between genuine and apocryphal sutras, and also to establish the translator, when unknown, by stylistic criteria.

Although the predominance of the *Prajñāpāramitā* and *Vimalakīrti Sūtras* has been attributed to the similarity between the Buddhist emptiness (*śūnyatā*) expounded in them and the Taoist nothingness (*wu*), it may also have been due to the repeated appearance of different translated versions of these sūtras, which helped to reinforce their message on the Chinese mind. The *Prajñāpāramitā*, *Vimalakīrti*, *Avataṃsaka*, *Lotus*, and *Nirvāṇa Sūtras*, all of which hold extremely important positions in the history of Chinese Buddhism, were translated time and again. It is likely that people of that time quite naively regarded such sūtras to be important works. When a number of such sūtras came into existence, it was only natural that studies of the similarities and differences existing between these major sūtras would be undertaken.

Second, in regard to how the need for tenet classification was realized through the study of Buddhist philosophy, this can again be considered from two aspects. One is the fostering of the ability to distinguish between fundamental doctrines common to all of Buddhism and the specific ideas advocated by a particular sūtra; the other is the aspiration of an individual to study the different kinds of sūtras and treatises.

Due to the many technical terms they contain, it is difficult to study Buddhist texts without adequate preparatory knowledge. As one can easily imagine, though, a particular sūtra will strongly put forth a thesis of its own, all the while standing on doctrines common to all of Buddhism. The student of Buddhism must first develop the acumen to distinguish between what is basic Buddhist doctrine and what is the particular thesis of the sūtra. It was certainly no simple task for Chinese Buddhists to reach this level of sophistication without the guidance of learned foreign monks. For this reason, in their initial attempts to understand Buddhism, Chinese Buddhists spent long years struggling with philological analyses, or working with the method of "matching of meanings" (*ko-i* 格義). When a wide range of sūtras became available around the time of the Eastern Tsin, the general direction in which to pursue the study of Buddhism finally became clear. Chih-tun (314–366)<sup>13</sup> of the Eastern Tsin advocated the need to grasp the essence of Buddhism, and Tao-an sought to free Buddhism from the method of matching of meanings. No doubt the desire to "grasp the essence of Buddhism" was, in particular, intimately related to

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<sup>13</sup> An eminent monk of the Eastern Tsin, he was much influenced by the Dark Learning of such neo-Taoists as Wang-pi and Kuo-hsiang; see Zürcher, pp. 116–30.

the growing awareness of the inconsistencies in the teachings of the various Buddhist sutras.

Next, it is extremely important for an individual to appear who has the desire to study the different kinds of sutras and treatises. Once he has that desire, he is compelled to determine the nature of the teaching of each particular sutra. The Buddhist community of the Eastern Tsin concentrated on the study of the *Prajñāpāramitā Sutra* to the exclusion of everything else. Yet even if people of that age had concerned themselves with other sutras, it was unlikely that they would have been able to realize the differences inherent in the various sutras. By the time of the Former Ch'in, however, the Buddhist community led by Tao-an was intensively engaged in the study of Hinayana meditation and Mahayana *Prajñāpāramitā* thought. But before they could arrive at any definite conclusions in regard to how the differences inherent to the two branches of Buddhism could be harmonized, they ran into a wall of newly-translated Abhidharma and Vinaya materials. And having yet to resolve the questions concerning the relationship between these works which held his utmost concern, Tao-an passed away in a period of widespread political disturbance. Without his intellectual leadership, how was the Buddhist community to make headway in their investigation of the unifying principle underlying the diverse Buddhist teachings—the *Prajñāpāramitā*, Āgama, Abhidharma, Vinaya, and meditation texts—which it had come to inherit? Charged with this mission, the Buddhist community of the Later Ch'in approached the fifth century.

To recapitulate, although conditions had matured to the point where the whole intellectual community, both monk and lay, were seeking for a way to reconcile the diverse philosophies of Buddhism, a clear-cut solution was not forthcoming as of yet. This was the state of affairs at the end of the fourth century.



*Kumārajīva's Concept of Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism*

It was during such a time that Kumārajīva (350–409)<sup>14</sup> arrived at the Buddhist community in Chang-an. A rare scholar, Kumārajīva possessed vast knowledge of both Hinayana and Mahayana teaching, and was extremely well-versed in the Vinaya, Abhidharma, and meditation texts. His proficiency in Chinese was sufficient to give lucid explanations of complex Buddhist concepts—a fact which must have occasioned great joy among the Chinese who up to then had to study Buddhism through translated works only. Furthermore, since he retranslated many sutras which were already familiar to the Chinese, such as the *Prajñāpāramitā*, *Vimalakīrti* and *Lotus Sutras*, it was only natural that people would turn to Kumārajīva in their search for a systematic understanding of Buddhist philosophy.

On this point, Kumārajīva was particularly important as the translator of the 100-chūan *Great Perfection of Wisdom Treatise (Ta-chih-tu-lun 大智度論)*<sup>15</sup> in which appears the titles of not only Abhidharma works, but also Āgamas and Mahayana sutras, such as the *Lotus*, *Vimalakīrti*, and the *Daśabhūmika*, the latter group of sutras of which, having been retranslated by Kumārajīva, strongly impressed the Chinese scholar-monks. Being a commentary on the *Larger Prajñāpāramitā Sutra*, it provided Chinese Buddhists with a sophisticated model of sutra exegesis. It was this treatise which prompted Kumārajīva to adopt Mahayana Buddhism as his article of faith, and retort that “the Abhidharma is nothing more than the exposition of Kātyāyanīputra’s disciples.” The *Treatise* was to pro-

<sup>14</sup> The most important translator of Buddhist texts in China. He first studied the Abhidharma which he later renounced for the Mahayana. He arrived in Chang-an in 401, and embarked upon his translation activities, producing the authoritative versions of many important Mahayana sutras. For a biography, see Tsukamoto Zenryū, “Bukkyō shisō ni okeru Jōron no igi,” *Jōron kenkyū* [Study of the *Chao-lun*] (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1955), pp. 130–46. See also Richard Robinson, *Early Mādhyamika in India and China* (Wisconsin, 1967), pp. 71–95.

<sup>15</sup> T25, pp. 57–756. An encyclopedic work on Buddhism, which much influenced the later development of Chinese Buddhism. For a French translation of the first thirty-one chūans, see Étienne Lamotte, *Le Traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse*, 5 vols. (Institut Orientaliste, 1947, 1970, 1976, 1980).

vide, in the form of the Mahayana, an absolute position upon which Kumārajīva's disciples could survey the diverse teachings of Buddhism. These are the reasons why, upon Kumārajīva's arrival in Chang-an, the Buddhist community vigorously applied itself to the long-standing problem of the relationship between the various Mahayana sutras, each of which represented one facet of the many different teachings of Buddhism. For these reasons, we must first clarify the position of the *Great Perfection of Wisdom Treatise*, before we can discuss the archaic forms of tenet classification.

According to the *Treatise*, the Buddha Dharma is divided in two: one is the Way of the Śrāvaka, and the other is the Way of the Bodhisattva (T25, p. 85a). The former is called the Hinayana, or the śrāvaka vehicle; the latter, the Mahayana, or the Buddha vehicle. The Hinayana teaching differs from the Mahayana teaching; if they did not, then there would be no distinction between the Mahayana and the Hinayana (T25, p. 341a). The *Treatise* spares no effort to elucidate the distinction between the two. It emphasizes that since the Abhidharma is not an exposition of the Mahayana, the two should not be confused or spoken of without careful discrimination; it argues that the Abhidharma should not be used to criticize the Mahayana (T25, p. 643b). As to their relationship, it maintains that while the Mahayana can accommodate the Hinayana, the Hinayana cannot accommodate the Mahayana (T25, pp. 416a, 650c). The *Treatise* thus takes the position that the Mahayana embraces all the Buddha Dharma within itself.

The Mahayana works most often quoted in the *Treatise* are the *Lotus*, the *Sutra of Inconceivable Liberation* ("Entrance into the Dharma Realm" chapter of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*), the *Daśabhūmika Sutra* ("Ten Bodhisattva Stages" chapter of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*), the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*, the *Śūraṅgama Sutra*, and the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi Sutra*. While on the one hand, it upholds the paramount position of the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*, it also states this sutra is not the "secret dharma." However, the *Lotus* is the "secret treasury" of the Dharma, for in it it is taught that arhats can receive predictions of Buddhahood and attain supreme enlightenment, and only the great bodhisattvas are capable of upholding it. This shows that the *Lotus* is particularly esteemed by the *Treatise*.

What, then, were Kumārajīva's views on the *Prajñāpāramitā* and the *Lotus Sūtras*, both of which he translated? Contemporary with Kumārajīva, there lived on Mt. Lu the eminent monk Hui-yuan (334—

416),<sup>16</sup> a central figure in learned circles, who was the intellectual and spiritual pillar of the Buddhist community of his day. A good indication of the academic level of Chinese Buddhists of the time, as represented by Hui-yüan, and the doctrinal position of Kumārajīva, as the new spokesman for the religion, may be gleaned from the *Great Meaning of the Mahayana* (*Ta-ch'eng ta-i chang* 大乘大義章),<sup>17</sup> a collection of the exchange of letters between Hui-yüan and Kumārajīva discussing certain points of Buddhist doctrine.

In these letters, Hui-yüan takes the position that the Abhidharma and Mahayana teachings should be ascribed equal status. He sought a comprehensive interpretation of Buddhism to reconcile their differences. Kumārajīva, in his replies, finds it necessary to establish the clear distinction between the Mahayana and the Hinayana. He explains that the distinction between the two teachings arose during the second 500 year period after the Buddha's passing, when Buddhist followers became attached to the understanding of certain teachers. He emphasizes that the teachings of the Abhidharma and Mahayana Dharma are different (*EK*, p. 8), and that these two in particular should not be confused with one another. He strongly backs his conviction by statements such as, "The division of the created dharmas into the four aspects [birth, abiding, decay, disintegration] is a concept created by the disciples of Kātyāyanīputra, and is not the teaching of the Buddha" (*EK*, p. 37) or

The thirty-four minds, the nine unobstructed paths, and the nine liberations are not the Buddha's teachings. Why do I say so? It is because such teachings do not exist in the four *Āgamas*, the *Vinayas*, and the Mahayana; only the Abhidarmists distinguish them in such ways. If the Buddha had made such statements, we should seek to understand them fully. Although, in your letter, your accusation is based on this point, I find your argument untenable. [*EK*, p. 26]

As to the distinction between the Hinayana and Mahayana sutras,

<sup>16</sup> The most brilliant of Tao-an's disciples, and undisputed leader of Chinese Buddhism of his age.

<sup>17</sup> T45, pp. 122-43. The best critical edition of this work is Kimura Eiichi, *Eon kenkyū: Ibum hen* [Studies in Hui-yüan] (Tokyo: Sōbun-sha, 1960), pp. 5-57; hereafter referred to as *EK*. See also Robinson, pp. 181-95 for a translation of four of the letters.

after having clarified the difference between them, Kumārajīva states that he will advance his arguments based upon the Mahayana, since it is the teaching in which he believes. In the same way he requests Hui-yūan to develop his argument from the Mahayana standpoint.

He does not reject the Hinayana position entirely, however, and says that the distinction between Mahayana and Hinayana is one that arose out of the Buddha's adapting his teachings to the capacities of sentient beings. From the Buddha's standpoint, then, there is no essential difference between the two. This is made clear in the following statement:

In this way, all the wise sages are in accordance with the One Way, and possess no differences or mistaken views. However, in the names "large" or "small" (i.e., Mahayana or Hinayana), there are differences from beginning to end. This is because sentient beings' capacities will be either keen or dull, their views profound or shallow, their enlightenment easy or difficult to obtain. But it is not that there is truly a distinction between them. [EK, p. 47]

How, then, does Kumārajīva view the relationship between the various Mahayana sutras? Kumārajīva sets forth a comprehensive interpretation of Mahayana doctrine which, in general, is based on the same set of sutras quoted in the *Great Perfection of Wisdom Treatise*. It was the *Lotus Sutra* which especially drew his attention, however, and the reason for this lies in the fact that the *Lotus* teaches the arhat's attainment of Buddhahood—a position diametrically opposed to those of other sutras which maintain that arhats enter nirvana without reaching supreme enlightenment (*anuttarā-samyak-sambodhi*) and attaining Buddhahood. So, while on the one hand, the *Prajñāpāramitā Sutra* regards *prajñā* and *upāya* as the two "wings" of bodhisattva practice, and compassion as his basic characteristic, on the other, the *Lotus Sutra* says that the śrāvakas and arhats who lack such qualities become bodhisattvas and attain Buddhahood. In the face of such contradictions, it is only natural that questions should arise as to which of these sutras represents the true teaching of Buddhism.

As long as these principal points of these two sutras go unnoticed, such questions do not arise. However, because this is an essential problem related to the central concern of the two sutras, once it becomes apparent, the need is felt for an explanation which convincingly recon-

ciles the differences. Although this is not to slight the efforts of such Chinese Buddhists as Hui-yūan, the fact that interest in Buddhism attained such levels of sophistication must be credited to the guidance which Kumārajīva gave his Chinese disciples, based on his broad knowledge of Buddhism.

In any case, Kumārajīva's resolution to this problem is extremely profound and penetrates to the innermost meaning of the sutra. In essence, his exposition is as follows. Once the arhat has gained the enlightenment proper to arhats, he no longer seeks to go beyond what he has gained to seek the complete attainment of Buddhahood. The reason why the *Prajñāpāramitā Sutra* explains that arhats do not attain Buddhahood is to point out the disparity between the bodhisattva who seeks to attain Buddhahood, and the arhat (or śrāvaka) who does not.<sup>18</sup> This was done with the view in mind of clarifying what is proper and meritorious in the practice of Buddhism and what is not. In other words, to emphasize that the practice of the bodhisattva is the proper method of Buddhist practice, it was necessary to refute the mistaken path of the arhat. In the Buddha's original intention, however, there is not a single person who remains as an arhat without attaining Buddhahood. Such original intention cannot be readily disclosed, but it is nonetheless significant because of it. If this intention were taught on various occasions, then it would not be possible to encourage seekers to progress along the proper path of the bodhisattva. This is the reason why the two sutras have different expositions. The answer given by Kumārajīva is certainly an insightful one. In his own words, it is as follows:

Arhats and pratyekabuddhas, once they have gained the Dharmakāya [i.e., destroyed their defilements], are not born into the triple realm<sup>19</sup> again. Because the Buddha distinguished the Three Vehicles (for the purpose of teaching sentient beings according to their inclinations in the *Prajñāpāramitā Sutra*), he did not teach of the existence of the Dharma [of the One Vehicle to which all beings] progress. Only the *Lotus Sutra* teaches this.

<sup>18</sup> Arhats are seen as lacking in compassion for, once rid of their defilements, they immediately enter nirvana, rather than helping others attain the same nirvana.

<sup>19</sup> The realms of desire, form, and no-form; refers to the realm of birth-and-death. Arhats and pratyekabuddhas have destroyed the delusions which bind them to further transmigration in the triple realm.

If this Dharma were taught here and there, the *Lotus* could not be referred to as the "treasury of the hidden essence," and it would have been impossible to bring people to practice the way of nirvana and to have them rid themselves completely of defilements. [EK, p. 15]

According to this explanation, the common goal of both the *Prajñāpāramitā* and the *Lotus Sutra* is to bring people to enter the Buddha way. While the *Prajñāpāramitā* expounds the great teaching of the bodhisattva way, the *Lotus* discloses that the Buddha's intention is to suit his teachings to the capacities of those with lesser potentials, first providing them with lesser Dharmas before bringing them around to the great Dharma. Both sutras, therefore, are the true teachings indispensable to Buddhism, and one is not to be regarded as superior to the other.

However, in Kumārajīva's view, the *Prajñāpāramitā Sutra* was preached by the Buddha before the *Lotus*. Since the *Prajñāpāramitā*, which teaches that bodhisattvas attain the Buddha way only by actualizing *prajñā* and *upāya*, was taught first, the danger that those practitioners whose inclinations would make them progress directly to the Buddha way, might mistakenly fall into the Hinayana path was averted. But because of this, the question arises whether those who have fallen into the Hinayana path are ultimately saved or not. At this point, it became necessary to explain that such people are not actually abandoned, and the Buddha revealed, during his final days before he entered parinirvana, a way of salvation for such people. The sutra in which this way of salvation was revealed was the *Lotus Sutra*. How can arhats who have fallen into the Hinayana path gain the Buddha Way? To begin with, the reason why they cannot gain the Buddha Way is because they try to attain nirvana by means of the Hinayana śrāvaka teachings. They become arrogant about their attainments which they mistakenly believe to be enlightenment, but which in reality are defiled states of meditation preliminary to nirvana. If they practice meditation and wisdom according to the Buddha's teaching, they can perfect the *prajñā* and *upāya* needed to attain nirvana, since meditation is considered as *upāya* and undefiled wisdom is considered *prajñā*. Moreover, even those unable to attain the Buddha's way on their own are finally successful in gaining it because the Buddha reaches out and helps them with his inconceivable powers.

The *Lotus Sutra* says that arhats attain Buddhahood, because, by the time of the Buddha's parinirvana, they have come to possess *prajñā* and

*upāya* completely, having long received the Buddha's teaching as members of the pure assembly. The Buddha had not disclosed the message of the *Lotus Sutra* earlier in his career because he first intended to gather as many as could enter the Buddha way through the Hinayana teaching as possible. Kumārajīva's explanation is kind and considerate, and the manner in which it is expounded must be said to be quite reasonable. The *Great Meaning of the Mahayana* explains this as follows:

Again, that arhats do not perish in nirvana but attain Buddhahood— this is the great *upāya*. Again, bodhisattvas who had previously vowed to pursue the Buddha way in order to realize nirvana, fall into the ranks of the śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas if they lack *upāya* and *prajñā*, just like birds without wings. Here, if those arhats who seek to enter nirvana by means of the śrāvaka teachings have, along the way, become arrogant of their attainment of defiled states of meditation, they are like birds without wings who, unable to fly as they wish, fall to the ground. If they could follow the Buddha's teachings and practice in conformity with meditation and wisdom, they would gain entrance into nirvana. This means that, in the way of the arhat, there are [*upāya* and *prajñā*]. Meditation is considered as *upāya* and wisdom undefiled is considered as *prajñā*.

Furthermore, at the time when the Buddha preached the *Prajñāpāramitā*, he had not taught the *Lotus Sutra*. The *Lotus Sutra* is the "secret treasury" which the various Buddhas finally preach in the presence of the pure assembly at the time they are about to enter nirvana. If there are those who previously heard this sutra preached (in a previous incarnation by another Buddha) their minds are free of doubt (as to the fact that there is only the One Vehicle, and they know that arhats ultimately attain Buddhahood). The arhats say that their aspirations are already fulfilled, however, and the Buddha also teaches that the arhats are in their final reincarnation and will soon enter extinction. When the bodhisattvas hear this, they grow fearful of the way of the arhat.

Now, I shall in brief give two reasons why the Buddha explains it in this way. First, by concealing the meaning of the *Lotus*, he effectively makes sentient beings seek the Hinayana dharma and attain liberation. Second, he desires to make bodhisattvas

proceed directly along the Buddha way, without making detour. As to the reason why this is so, although the arhats quickly realize the unconditioned dharma, rid themselves completely of all defilements, and reach an end to suffering, when they later seek to enter the bodhisattva way, they find their faculties are not acute enough, and they encounter difficulty in practicing the great Way. This is because they scarcely possess the merits which can aid them in their pursuits. Without giving due consideration to these two reasons, you should not criticize the idea that arhats ultimately attain Buddhahood. [EK, pp. 33-4]

The reason why Kumārajīva says that the Buddha, nearing the time of his parinirvana, preaches the *Lotus Sutra* after the *Prajñāpāramitā*, can be found in the following passage from the “Parable of the Conjured City” chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*:<sup>20</sup>

When the Tathāgata knows that the time for his nirvana has arrived, and when he knows that the assembly is pure, their convictions firm, and that, having arrived at an understanding of the dharma of emptiness, they have profoundly entered into the state of meditation, he then assembles the bodhisattvas and the multitudes of śrāvakas, and for their sakes preaches this sutra, proclaiming thus: There are not two vehicles in the world by which one can gain extinction; there is only one Buddha vehicle by which extinction is gained, and that is all.

[Hurvitz, p. 148; adapted]

Other passages which indicate that the *Lotus* was taught just prior to the Buddha's parinirvana can be seen in the “Welling Up of Bodhisattvas Out of the Earth” and “Apparition of the Jeweled Stupa” chapters (see Hurvitz, pp. 184 and 234, respectively).

Kumārajīva's argument that the *Lotus Sutra* is the “secret treasury” of the Buddhas is found in such statements as, “Know that this wonderful Law is the secret essence of the various Buddhas” (“Expedient Means” chapter), “This sutra is the treasury of the secret essence of the various Buddhas” (“Preachers of the Dharma” chapter), and “This *Lotus Sutra*

<sup>20</sup> The *Lotus Sutra* translation referred to throughout this article is Leon Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* (New York, 1976); portions have been adapted. Hereafter referred to as Hurvitz.

is the secret treasury of the various Buddhas and Tathāgatas” (“Comfortable Conduct” chapter; see Hurvitz, pp. 46, 178, and 219, respectively). The *Great Perfection of Wisdom Treatise* also recognizes this sutra to be the secret dharma (T25, p. 754b). As for the reason why the Buddha refrained from teaching the secret dharma earlier in his career, the *Lotus* states “[The Buddha] remained silent on the essence and did not attempt to teach it quickly” (“Parable of the Medicinal Herbs” chapter; see Hurvitz, 103–4). Kumārajīva may have gained the hint for his idea that there were two reasons why the Buddha kept the *Lotus*’ teaching secret by the following passage from the “Welling Up of Bodhisattvas Out of the Earth” chapter:

These sentient beings, in various former lives, have been receiving constant instruction from me, and, in the presence of past Buddhas, who they humbly honor and hold in solemn esteem, they have planted wholesome roots. No sooner than these sentient beings first saw me and heard my preachings, they accepted me with faith and realized the Buddha wisdom. Excepted from this were those who were previously devoted to the practice of the Hinayana. Such persons as these I now enable to hear this scripture as well, and thus to realize the Buddha wisdom.

[Hurvitz, p. 227; adapted]

Although, in this light, a scriptural basis can be found for each of Kumārajīva’s points, the fact that he systematized the relationship between the *Lotus* and the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*, and expressed it in such an insightful way, is ultimately due to his profound understanding of Buddhism.

*Three Early Tenet Classifications*

Kumārajīva presented his lucid exposition of Buddhism at a time when there was a growing need for a comprehensive explanation that would harmonize the conflicting positions within Buddhism. What forms, then, did it take when it was adopted by the Chinese people and expressed in their own words? I think the three following forms can be discerned in the early tenet classification.

**SĒNG-JUI** The first of the archaic forms of tenet classification is Sēng-jui's (352–436)<sup>21</sup> thesis. He first analyzed the relationship between the *Lotus* and the *Prajñāpāramitā*, works which had already attracted considerable attention in China as important Buddhist sutras. After the translation of the *Mahāparinirvāna Sutra* (the six-chūan version by Fa-hsien), he tried to discover the continuity between the three sutras. He begins his *Postscript to the Lotus Sutra*: "The *Lotus Sutra* is the secret treasury of all the Buddhas; it is the true substance of all sutras" (T55, p. 57b). He stresses that the use of the word "lotus" (*pundarika*) in the title indicates that this sutra is "supreme and fundamental." Thus, while the *Prajñāpāramitā Sutra* is profound and there is nothing it does not fully expound, its role is that of an excellent expedient means for teaching sentient beings; and as far as illuminating the true substance of the Buddha's teachings, it does not match up to the *Lotus*. He goes on to praise the *Lotus*, the splendor of which greatly illuminates the principle of enlightenment, and encompasses both the past and present.

Later, when the *Smaller Prajñāpāramitā Sutra* was translated, Sēng-jui wrote the *Preface to the Smaller Prajñāpāramitā*, in which he says: "The *Lotus* mirrors the substance and consummates wisdom; the *Prajñāpāramitā* merges with phenomena and brings together what is far apart" (T55, p. 54c). He sees the *Prajñāpāramitā* with its expedient teaching (*upāya*) and the *Lotus* with its true teaching as necessarily complementing one another to manifest the full meaning of the Buddha's teaching. There can be no doubt that his understanding is heavily influenced by Kumārajīva's thinking. Sēng-jui further writes:

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<sup>21</sup> After studying under Tao-an, he became a highly-respected disciple of Kumārajīva, and was entrusted with the composition of a number of prefaces to the translations.

Bringing together (the Three Vehicles which) are far apart, and establishing their course of practice, is the Way of the bodhisattva; consummating wisdom and mirroring their substance (i.e., the fundamental unity of the Three Vehicles in the One Vehicle) is its goal. Once the goal is reached, if the (different paths to that goal) do not vanish, then the way (of practice) is various and the traces of the Three Vehicles remain; if the Buddha's expedient teachings are not levelled (and the true teaching manifested), then all will be in confusion, like a tangled ball of thread, and incorrect ways of practice appear. Thus, the *Lotus* and the *Prajñāpāramitā* hand in hand pursue the goal; expedient means and the truth, merged into one, reach their culmination.

[T55, p. 54c]

If the proper Bodhisattva way were not revealed by the *Prajñāpāramitā*, one would be lost as to the direction in which one should endeavor, and if the *Lotus* did not reveal that the Three Vehicles ultimately culminate in the One Way, then the oneness of the Ultimate Truth would not be revealed. For this reason, it can be said that Sēng-jui's conclusion that the two sutras go hand in hand to pursue the goal shows he well grasped the core of Kumārajīva's thought.

The preceding, of course, is limited to a discussion of the *Lotus* and the *Prajñāpāramitā* and does not yet encompass all of Buddhism. Upon reading the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sutra* brought to China by the famous pilgrim Fa-hsien (ca. 400), Sēng-jui came to reflect upon the relationship between the Tripitaka (i.e., the Hinayana Dharma), and the *Nirvāṇa Sutra* in conjunction with the *Lotus* and the *Prajñāpāramitā Sutra*s. According to his exposition, since the *Nirvāṇa Sutra*'s thesis that all sentient beings have Buddha-nature is, in essence, identical with the *Lotus Sutra*'s opening of the Buddha wisdom,<sup>22</sup> there is no difference between these two sutras.

<sup>22</sup> A reference to the famous passage from the *Lotus Sutra* in which Śākyamuni discloses the reason for the Buddha's appearance in the world: "The various Buddhas and Tathāgatas appear in the world only because of one great cause. . . . They wish to cause sentient beings to open their Buddha knowledge and insight and gain purity; they appear in the world because they desire to indicate to sentient beings the Buddha's knowledge and insight; they appear in the world because they wish to cause sentient beings to become enlightened to the Buddha wisdom and insight; they appear in the world to cause sentient beings to enter the Way of the Buddha wisdom and light" (Hurvitz, p. 30).

Since originally the Buddha taught the Three Vehicles following the inclinations of his listeners to encourage them along in their search for enlightenment, the Tripitaka, which maintains the distinction between the Three Vehicles, teaches the common people to rid themselves of defilements, that is, worldly attachments. The *Prajñāpāramitā* which likewise upholds the distinction of the Three Vehicles, removes the illusions of the common people and promotes the proper way of the bodhisattva. Furthermore, Buddhism is consummated with the *Lotus* opening the one ultimate reality, and the *Nirvāṇa* revealing the true teaching. In the *Clarifying Doubts* (*Yu-i 喩疑*),<sup>23</sup> Sēng-jui writes:

Now, the present world is called "mixed" (*sahā*). Thus it is known that the people of this world are originally trivial by nature. Because they are originally trivial by nature, they readily fall into a state of unease. Falling into a state of unease, they cannot attain steadfastness of mind; not being profound, they easily become trivial. Because they cannot attain steadfastness of mind and are trivial, the Great Sage proceeds by adapting himself to the needs of his listeners. In proceeding, he did not follow any single way, and the "mixed teachings" of the Three Vehicles arose due to this. The Tripitaka sweeps away their defilements, the *Prajñāpāramitā* removes their illusions, the *Lotus* reveals the one ultimate teaching, and the *Nirvāṇa* clarifies the true teaching. These three ferries open up and illuminate (the Buddha's teachings), and there is nothing which this illumination excludes.

[T55, p. 41b-c]

The three ferries may be understood as the *Prajñāpāramitā*, *Lotus* and *Nirvāṇa Sūtras*. On the other hand, if we consider the *Lotus* and *Nirvāṇa* to be identical, it may refer to this pair, plus the Tripitaka and the *Prajñāpāramitā*. As the *Clarifying Doubts* later declares the *Prajñāpāramitā*, *Lotus*, and *Nirvāṇa Sūtras* are the "three gates of the Great Dharma," the three ferries may refer to them. I, too, had been of this opinion, but now I am inclined to think that the three ferries are the Tripitaka, the *Prajñāpāramitā*, and the *Lotus-Nirvāṇa*.

Next, on the matter of the relative superiority of the three ferries,

<sup>23</sup> The author of *Clarifying Doubts* is said to be Hui-jui, but Professor Ōchō regards Sēng-jui and Hui-jui to refer to the same person. See his "Sōei to Eei wa dōjin nari," *Chūgoku bukkyō no kenkyū* II, pp. 119-44.

Sêng-jui, in a statement immediately following the above quotation, says, "The superiority or inferiority [of the three ferries] exists only with the person, and their depth or shallowness resides with his enlightenment. When one practices in accordance to one's lot, it should not be judged as good or bad" (T55, p. 41c). It is sufficient if only each teaching is practiced in the spirit of the Dharma. The teachings in themselves are neither superior or inferior, and it is upon how we are enlightened that the relative depth depends.

Elsewhere in the same work, Sêng-jui writes, "Kumārajīva said, 'In the fifty or so years that the great teaching arose in the world, there was not one statement [made by the Buddha] which was not true. If they are true, it is impossible that they do not benefit sentient beings' " (T55, p. 41b). It is clear that much of Sêng-jui's way of thinking in both the above exposition on the relationship between the *Lotus* and the *Prajñāpāramitā*, and the present discussion on the relative superiority of dharmas, derives from Kumārajīva.

Sêng-jui writes, "If one realizes the meaning that the teaching was expounded in accordance to one's need, then there are no words [of the Buddha] which are without profundity. If one clings only to that particular light, then there is no delusion which does not occur" (T55, p. 41b). Without doubt, Sêng-jui's position is closely related to Kumārajīva's understanding as expressed in this passage from the *Great Meaning of the Mahayana*: "If one clings to the *Lotus Sutra* to the exclusion of all other sutras, revering it as the definitive teaching, then the śrāvaka's Tripitaka and the other remaining Mahayana sutras, are abandoned and fall into disuse" (EK, p. 32). Thus it is known that Sêng-jui's thinking was greatly influenced by Kumārajīva. But it is also precisely for this reason that his own contribution to the development of the tenet classification remained meager.

CHU TAO-SHĒNG The second formulation is Chu Tao-shêng's (355-434)<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> A brilliant disciple of Kumārajīva, he was expelled from the *sangha* for asserting that *icchantikas* (beings without Buddha-nature) attain Buddhahood. When the complete *Nirvāna Sutra* proved him correct, however, he was hailed for his insight. He is also noted for his development of his theory of sudden enlightenment. See Walter Liebenthal, "A Biography of Chu Tao-sheng," *Monumenta Nipponica* XI, 3 (1955), pp. 64-96; "The World Conception of Chu Tao-sheng," *MN* XII, 1-2 (1956), pp. 65-103; and "The World Conception of Chu Tao-sheng (texts translated)," *MN* XII, 3-4 (1956), pp. 73-100.

“Four Turnings of the Dharma Wheel” theory which, based on the *Lotus Sutra*, divides the Buddhist teachings into four progressively higher stages. This theory is expounded in his *Commentary on the Lotus Sutra* (Zokuzōkyō 2.1.33.4, pp. 396–412), and, essentially, it is as follows. The reason why the Buddha’s teachings differ from one sutra to another is because the teachings had to be adapted to the different capacities of sentient beings. From his enlightenment until his parinirvana, the Buddha expounded four kinds of Dharma Wheels. The first, the Dharma Wheel of Goodness and Purity, expounded practices, from the “one goodness” to the “four emptinesses,” to cause people to cast aside the defilements of the three evil paths (hell, hungry ghosts, beasts). The second, the Dharma Wheel of Expedient Means, expounds the attainment of the two nirvanas (nirvana with residue, and nirvana without residue) by means of the undefiled conditions conducive to the Way. The third, the True Dharma Wheel, destroys the fallacy of the Three Vehicles and establishes the splendor of the One Vehicle. The fourth, the Dharma Wheel without Residue, teaches the sublime doctrine of the eternal life of the Buddha, and reveals the final destination of Buddhism.

In my opinion, the first, the Dharma Wheel of Goodness and Purity, alludes to something on the order of the teaching found in the verse portion of the “Expedient Means” chapter in the *Lotus Sutra*, in which it is stated that even children who, playing in the sand, create Buddhist stupas, have already attained the Buddha’s enlightenment (see Hurvitz, pp. 38–39). The next two, the Dharma Wheel of Expedient Means and the True Dharma Wheel, are based on the “Expedient Means” chapter which relates that the teaching that the practitioners of the Two Vehicles (i.e., arhats and pratyekabuddhas) enter nirvana is only an expedient exposition; in truth, the distinction between the Three Vehicles does not exist, and there is only the One Vehicle. The fourth and last, the Dharma Wheel without Residue, was so named because Tao-shēng interpreted that the eternity of the Buddhakāya was taught in the “Eternal Life” chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*. Though it is generally accepted that it is the *Nirvāna Sutra* which teaches the eternity of the Buddha, in Tao-shēng’s case, his understanding of it is based on the *Lotus*, and does not rely on the teaching of the *Nirvāna Sutra*.

From the above, it is clear that Tao-shēng’s theory is based wholly on the *Lotus Sutra*. Based on this sutra, he classified the Buddhist teachings into four stages which correspond to the different capacities of sentient

beings. Since Tao-shêng quotes the *Prajñāpāramitā Sutra* in his *Commentary on the Lotus Sutra* and has also written a commentary on the *Nirvāna Sutra*, it is evident that he was familiar with other Mahayana works. Nonetheless, he classifies the Buddhist teachings on the basis of the *Lotus Sutra*, and does not discuss the doctrinal differences which exist among the various sutras which he had come into contact with. Was this because he was aware of the fact that a classification system based on a few major sutras could not possibly deal with the diverse positions found in Buddhism? This is a major point of difference between Tao-shêng and Sêng-jui. At any rate, it must be admitted that Tao-shêng's classification ignores the organic structure of Buddhism, and does not provide a means by which the growing number of sutras being translated into Chinese one after another could be incorporated into its system.

HUI-KUAN Hui-kuan (355–426)<sup>25</sup> tried to systematically organize the Buddhist teachings by determining the differences and logical connections between the representative Mahayana sutras. Hui-kuan, like Sêng-jui and Tao-shêng, studied under Kumārajīva, and was an influential leader of the Sung Buddhist community. His tenet classification is known as the "Sudden-Gradual-Five Periods" thesis. According to the Sui dynasty (581–617) scholar-monk Chi-tsang's (549–623)<sup>26</sup> *Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra* (*Fa-hua hsüan-lun* 法華玄論; T34, p. 382b), Hui-kuan set forth his thesis in his *Preface to the Nirvāna Sutra*. Though this preface is no longer extant, Chi-tsang introduces it in his *Profound Meaning of the Three Treatises* (*San-lun hsüan-i* 三論玄義; T45, p. 5b). According to this work, Hui-kuan divides the Buddhist teachings into the Sudden Teaching and the Gradual Teaching. The Sudden Teaching, which the Buddha taught immediately after his enlightenment, reveals the principle of unadulterated Truth for the bodhisattvas, while the Gradual Teaching refers to the sutras taught one after another during the Buddha's career, from the "first turning of the Dharma Wheel" at the Deer Park to his parinirvana in the Grove of the Twin Sāla Trees.

The Gradual Teaching is divided into five stages or periods, progressing from the shallow to the profound:

<sup>25</sup> Eminent monk, noted for his tenet classification, which became an important model for subsequent systems. He is noted also for advocating gradual enlightenment against Tao-shêng's theory of sudden enlightenment.

<sup>26</sup> Founder of the San-lun sect, and a prolific writer of commentaries on sutras.

1. The Separate Teaching of the Three Vehicles
2. The Common Teaching of the Three Vehicles
3. The Restraining and Praising Teaching
4. The Identical Goal Teaching
5. The Eternal Teaching

The Separate Teaching is so called because its practitioners gain different attainments by means of different causes distinctive to each of the Three Vehicles. Although the source from which this view is derived is not clearly stated, it obviously refers to the Hinayana Āgamas. Second, the Common Teaching of the Three Vehicles refers to the *Prajñāpāramitā Sutra*. As with the Separate Teaching, different attainments are gained by each of the Three Vehicles. However, here they all practice the identical *prajñāpāramitā* (perfection of wisdom) and the difference in their attainments is attributed to the skill with which it is practiced. This is the reason why it is called the Common Teaching of the Three Vehicles.

The Restraining and Praising Teaching is so named because the śrāvaka doctrine is restrained and the bodhisattva doctrine is praised. It refers to such works as the *Viśeṣacintabrahma* and the *Vimalakīrti Sūtras*. Next, the Identical Goal Teaching refers to the *Lotus Sūtra* which merges the Three Vehicles into the ultimate "one goal" of the One Vehicle, and finally the Eternal Teaching refers to the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, which teaches the eternal life of the Tathāgata.

Hui-kuan was well-versed in the *Prajñāpāramitā*, *Vimalakīrti*, *Viśeṣacintabrahma*, and *Lotus Sūtras*, all of which were translated by Kumārajīva. Furthermore, the *Avataṃsaka* had been translated in 418 at the Tao-ch'ang Temple where Hui-kuan lived. He also took part in the compilation of the "southern edition" of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, which he and Hui-yen (363–442) re-edited from the "northern edition" translated by Dharmakṣema. In view of these circumstances, it is no wonder that he had such a sophisticated understanding of these sutras. Thus, considering the material available to him, it was only natural that he should create his classification of the Buddhist teachings based upon these sutras.

Let us examine the factor which gave rise to his scheme. First, at its basis lies Hui-kuan's understanding that Buddhism is not consummated by one teaching or by one period in the Buddha's career. It is brought to a completion only at the end of the Buddha's lifelong efforts to benefit people according to their various capacities. It can be seen from the

*Clarifying Doubts* that this agrees with the traditional views of Kumārajīva and Sēng-jui. In Kumārajīva's case, however, the emphasis was on the relationship between the *Lotus* and the *Prajñāpāramitā*, and in Sēng-jui's case it was between the Tripitaka, the *Prajñāpāramitā*, and the *Lotus-Nirvāna*. Hui-kuan's classification differs from theirs in his addition of the *Vimalakīrti* after the *Prajñāpāramitā*, and his division of the "identical taste" of the *Lotus* and the *Nirvāna Sūtras* into two separate periods.

Second, in ordering the various teaching periods, Hui-kuan's decision is based at times on internal evidence of the sūtras themselves, and at times on the position taken by the sūtras in regard to the Three Vehicles. The *Avatamsaka* is considered the Sudden Teaching, because this sūtra explains that it was taught during the second week following Śākyamuni's enlightenment. The *Lotus Sūtra* is in the fourth period of the Gradual Teaching, because the sūtra states it was taught forty or so years after the Buddha's enlightenment. The *Nirvāna Sūtra* is in the fifth period of the Gradual Teaching, because it states it was taught just before the Buddha's parinirvana. The *Prajñāpāramitā* and the *Vimalakīrti*, which do not clearly indicate the time of their teaching, are placed by Hui-kuan in the second and third periods of the Gradual Teaching on the basis of their positions regarding the Three Vehicles and the One Vehicle. Although Hui-kuan's interpretation has points in common with Sēng-jui's system, it is also close to Tao-shēng's attempt in its use of the theory that the Three Vehicles was taught before the One Vehicle as the criterion to determine the period to which a sūtra belongs.

Third, the reason why Hui-kuan made the *Avatamsaka* the Sudden Teaching, was because he attempted to resolve the inconsistency between this sūtra, which claims to take the standpoint of the pristine Mahayana teaching, and the *Lotus Sūtra*, which says that the "first turning of the Dharma Wheel" consisted of the teaching of the Three Vehicles. This was the greatest contribution Hui-kuan made to the development of the tenet classification systems. Later scholars, bedeviled by the problem of where to place the *Śrīmālā-devī Sūtra* which also taught the One Vehicle, but belonged neither to the early or late period of the Buddha's career, were forced to create the category of Indeterminate Teaching in order to preserve the categories of the Sudden and Gradual Teachings.

Fourth, although various statements in the sūtras can be alluded to in support for his placing the *Lotus* and the *Nirvāna Sūtras* into separate periods, it was no easy matter for Hui-kuan to back his assertion in terms

of the teachings found in the sutras themselves. Sêng-jui considered the two sutras to have no doctrinal differences, and Tao-shêng regarded the *Nirvāṇa Sutra's* tenet of the eternal life of the Buddha to have been already expounded in the *Lotus Sutra's* chapter on the "Life of the Tathāgata." This being so, there seems to be no need to formulate distinct categories for these sutras. Thus, Hui-kuan asserted that their essentials are different because the *Lotus* teaches the identity of the Three Vehicles, while the *Nirvāṇa Sutra* teaches the eternal life of the Buddha. On this basis, he concluded that the *Nirvāṇa Sutra* is the supreme teaching which reveals the goal of the Buddha's preaching, and the *Lotus* does not measure up to it. He propounded the new theory that the "long life" of the Buddha, lasting "incalculable, limitless hundreds of thousands of myriads of nayutas of kalpas" (Hurvitz, p. 237), expounded in the "Life of the Tathagata" chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, does not yet fully reveal that the eternity of the Buddha's life, and that as far as the length of the Buddhakāya's life is concerned, the *Nirvāṇa Sutra* is the complete teaching, while the *Lotus* is incomplete. Thus, in a way identical to that of the Three Vehicles and One Vehicle, there was systematized a tenet classification which divided the teachings concerning the length of the Buddha's life into the Gradual Teaching of the Five Periods, progressing from the shallow (short, or mortal, life) to the profound (eternal life). Such developments eventually led to the formation of the Nirvana Sect, which regarded the *Nirvāṇa Sutra* as the supreme, complete teaching. A discussion of the growth of this sect falls beyond the scope of the present paper, but we can easily see why the study of the *Nirvāṇa Sutra*, along with that of the *Lotus Sutra* and *Śrīmālā-devī Sutra*, became the focus of intense interest in the Buddhist community of the Northern and Southern dynasties period.

TRANSLATED BY ROBERT F. RHODES