

SYMPOSIUM:
EARLY MAHĀYĀNA

Mediums and Messages: Reflections
on the Production of Mahāyāna Sūtras

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1. Introduction

IN its discussion of the seventh *bhūmi* or stage on the path leading to the full awakening of a Buddha, the *Mahāvastu* glorifies the manifold qualities of bodhisattvas, the heroic beings who tread that path. Among their many virtues and achievements, it cites the invention of all the forms of writing known in the world, of which a long list is given.¹ This list includes familiar terms like *brāhmī*, *kharostrī* (i.e., *kharoṣṭhī*), Greek (reading *yonānī* with Edgerton for MSS *yonāri*, against Senart's emendation *yāvanī*) and Chinese, as well as

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¹ See Senart 1882, p. 135; translated in Jones 1949, pp. 107–108. A similar list is to be found in the *Lalitavistara* (Mitra's ed., p. 143.17ff., q.v.). Both lists are, as Senart observes in his extensive note (pp. 484–485), regrettably bedevilled by corruptions and obscurities, and sorting these out would require a complete paper. Note also that Jones mistranslates *mudrāsthānāni* as "forms of writing," when it refers to methods of calculation.

many whose meaning is completely obscure. It is a bold claim. The invention of writing² is of course a major event in the history of civilization, and in attributing it to bodhisattvas this passage can be read as an artless attempt to represent them not only as moral and spiritual paragons, but also as a species of culture hero. At the same time, however, one wonders whether the *Mahāvastu* is drawing upon a distant historical memory or even a contemporary perception of a special connection between adherents of the bodhisattva path and the use of writing, and that when it says, to quote Jones' translation, "all the expedients that exist for the service of men were the inventions of bodhisattvas," it may be referring in an oblique way to the readiness of followers of the Mahāyāna to use this new technology in the service of their religion. Is the claim then a sheer flight of fancy, or is it mixed with even a small amount of historical truth?

The present paper draws material from a book project I am currently working on, which explores the genesis both of a body of literature—Mahāyāna sūtras—and of the movement (or movements) which produced it. I approach this research with two objectives in mind. The first objective is, when reading Mahāyāna sūtras, to understand them not just as texts—although the usual philological operations are an essential preliminary—but to see past them to the lives of the people who produced them, to ask what impact those lives had on the texts, and *vice versa*. That may sound straightforward, but is far from being so, for danger lies on two sides, when studying literature like this, of either imposing one's own framework upon the material or of being sucked helplessly into its discourse. In Buddhist Studies, for some reason, it seems that the second of these two dangers, the loss of critical grip, is the more insidious. Perhaps this stems from the richness of the discourse itself, its own seductive persuasiveness and complexity, but in any case it often seems as if the effort to understand what the texts say exhausts our ability to work out what they mean, in terms of their articulation with the lives and experiences of flesh-and-blood men and women. Determining what Mahāyāna sūtras mean in this sense, however, is not easy, because we have so little else to go on. Indeed, one of the great problems with the study of Mahāyāna Buddhism is that for the early period we have virtually nothing besides its own texts: before the 5th century there is almost no epigraphical or archaeological evidence for the movement, in India at least.³ And yet from the mid-second cen-

² One assumes that *nīti* does indeed mean "invention" here, and not "acquisition" or "deployment," but this would not alter the implications of the passage to any significant degree.

³ Or perhaps we should say, almost no clear evidence. The existence of large numbers of

tury onwards, we have a huge amount of literature being translated into Chinese—literature which some would say is of scant use for historical purposes, not just because it is thoroughly partisan, or shorn of context, but also because there is so much of it. Indeed, it resembles a forest, or perhaps better a jungle, a rank and rampant growth, impenetrably thick, seemingly endless. Every way one turns it looks the same, and before one knows, one is completely lost, and despairs of ever finding the way out again.

My second objective is to resist the temptation to panic at this point, and try instead to turn the problem into its own solution, to regard this forest of texts not as something to find our way out of, not as an obstacle to our understanding, but as its proper object. The forest is what we should be looking at.⁴ If the Mahāyāna is a movement represented almost entirely by its literature for three or more centuries, we need to consider why this might be so. This leaves me, then, with a double agenda: to try to reconstruct the actual experiences of real people (which is undoubtedly difficult), and to proceed on the assumption that in the problem posed by the sources lies the solution to our difficulties. That is to say, the path to understanding leads us deeper into the forest, not out of it. As with the *Mahāvastu*'s claim about the invention of writing, we have to rise to the challenge of taking the texts seriously, as referring in some way to actual historical events and to the real people who were caught up in them, rather than either writing them off as fiction, or taking them literally. Once again, the well-known middle path seems to be the right one to follow.

2. Meditation⁵

It might be thought that this is a preamble to talking about forest eremitism, but in fact I am trying in this project to draw three strands together. Forest-dwelling is one. The other two are meditation and scriptural transmission. These three strands combine under the general rubric of revelation. Revelation,

statues of what appear to be bodhisattvas, especially in Gandhāran art, is of debatable significance. For a useful discussion of this and other problems relating to the study of Mahāyāna Buddhism, see the entry on Mahāyāna by Gregory Schopen in Buswell 2004, pp. II, 492–499.

⁴ The situation is reminiscent of the well-known Middle Eastern story of Mullah Nasrudin, who kept crossing the frontier with donkeys whose loads of straw the guards inspected repeatedly without ever being able to confirm their suspicions that he was smuggling something. Only later did it transpire that he was smuggling donkeys.

⁵ In the interests of brevity this section is presented in summary form. For a fuller treatment of some of the issues raised, see especially Deleanu 1999, to which I am greatly indebted.

I contend, takes place in a particular social context and under certain conditions which determine its operation and its effects. In this case, I would argue that the context is—at least to a significant degree—the forest hermitage, and the conditions have to do with the practices of the Buddhist Order, especially those relating to meditation and to the transmission of scripture.

The Mahāyāna sūtras translated into Chinese from the late 2nd century onwards by Lokakṣema and others show us that Buddhism had already evolved by that date a wealth of new religious ideas and ritual practices, including a diverse repertoire of meditation techniques. These took their place alongside traditional Mainstream Buddhist (or Śrāvakayāna) meditation practices, in which the followers of the new way continued to engage. By these older practices I mean such things as the *smṛtyupasthānas*, the *dhyānas*, the *anusmṛtis*, and the *brahma-vihāras*. All these are mentioned frequently in our sources as basic elements of the Buddhist path for renunciants. They are an obvious part of the extensive Mainstream foundation on which Mahāyāna Buddhism is built.

What is less obvious, though, is how a practical meditative path comprising these techniques underlies many of the apparently philosophical or doctrinal innovations of early Mahāyāna sources; or how the wording of the earlier Āgamas or Nikāyas propounding these techniques provides a basis for these innovations, even if that basis is in some sense subverted.⁶ These two underpinnings are not in fact separate, since in making sense of what is going

⁶ One thinks, for instance, of the dialogue between Subhūti and the Buddha in the opening chapters of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (hereafter *Aṣṭa*), about what can and cannot be observed (*samanupaśy-*) as a dharma. Or of the exposition of the four *smṛtyupasthānas* in the *Bodhisattvapiṭaka* (*Bḍp*), for which see Pagel 1995, pp. 381–389, in which a whole range of Mahāyāna amplifications and variations is hung upon the basic armature of the Mainstream *smṛtyupasthāna* text. Unfortunately Pagel's translation sometimes obscures the point of the text—the partial excerpts in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, some taken from the *Akṣayamatiniṛdeśa* (*Akṣ*) version, provide a better guide—but even so one can easily see that in presenting the *smṛtyupasthānas* (and the other basic categories of Buddhist doctrine and practice), the concern of this text is not simply to rehearse the classical definitions (or instructions), but to explicate everything in terms of its relation to the perfection of insight. For this strategy, the word “skill” (*kauśalya*) provides the key, i.e., it is not simply how a bodhisattva does X, but how he or she does X skillfully or well, with the right meditative attitude. A similarly comprehensive strategy is employed in the *Akṣ*, on which see Braarvig 1993. Both the *Bḍp* and the *Akṣ*—two texts whose relation to each other is a matter of some debate—strive for a reasonably comprehensive coverage of the main elements of the bodhisattva path, so they are particularly good sources for seeing how the strategy works.

on here, we need always to be mindful of the constant interplay between practice and text. When, for example, we consider how the *smṛtyupasthāna* or “foundations of mindfulness” practice is expounded in the texts, we see a very close linkage between meditation, which we regard as the Buddhist practice *par excellence*, and Abhidharma, which we might think of as eminently theoretical, scholastic, textual. The *smṛtyupasthāna* technique indicates that the practical and the theoretical are not so far apart after all, in that its object is not some direct and unmediated experience of reality, as is sometimes claimed, but the perception of experience in terms of a prearranged set of categories and evaluations. For a Buddhist practising the *smṛtyupasthānas*, experience does not come undifferentiated, but in particular “parcels” or categories, four to be precise—form, feelings, thoughts and dharmas, dharmas being the objects of thought or the real and irreducible constituents of our experience. These four categories are to be identified and evaluated as impermanent and so on. Indeed, the last category of dharmas is further subdivided into the five *skandhas*, etc., and thus we end up with a fairly long list of basic elements into which experience can be analysed. Abhidharma is the detailed systematization of this act of analysis. As such it is to be seen not as a purely scholastic, second-order exercise separate from meditative praxis, but as constituting that praxis itself, or at least providing the detailed script for it. This has been persuasively pointed out by Gethin (1992), in his discussion of the Buddhist use of lists (*mātrkā*), which not only performed the more obvious mnemonic function of aiding the memorisation of large quantities of dharma, conceived as text, but also helped one to practise the dharma, to meditate on the constituents of reality. Our modern Western understandings of meditation may obscure the linkage between meditation and text which is at issue here. Once inherently based on text, especially in the West (where the very Latin word *meditatio* meant recitation), it is only now that meditation tends to mean to us something personal, internal, silent, abstract and often unstructured.⁷ We should not be too quick to project this understanding of meditation back onto the Buddhist material, but rather keep in mind the maxim: meditation is text.

Now it is commonplace to say that the early Mahāyānists reacted against

⁷ On the original use of the word in the West, at least in Christian contexts, see, e.g., Graham 1987, pp. 133–135. Burton-Christie (1993, p. 122ff.) also makes it clear that meditation on (or, following Graham, of) the scriptures entailed oral recitation that could be heard and seen by others (inasmuch as the lips moved) and could be engaged in without any understanding of the actual meaning of the text.

and rejected the supposed excesses of the Ābhidharmikas, but my own reading suggests that they were building on and pushing further earlier meditation traditions, like the *smṛtyupasthānas*, which incorporated an Abhidharmic approach. They took up the same practice, but instead of simply following the existing script, they also modified and subverted it in a creative fashion, and one sees this not only in their expositions of the *smṛtyupasthānas* proper, but in many other contexts as well.⁸

There can be no doubt, then, that more traditional forms of Buddhist meditation play a part in Mahāyāna sources in various ways, but there are also innovations. The two most striking innovations, again both building on the Mainstream matrix, are the development of the concept of *samādhi*, and the practice of visualisation.

The question of *samādhi* (literally, “concentration”) is too complex for me to do it justice here,⁹ so I propose to say only a few words about visualisation. For our purposes, the most important technique in this area is the *pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthita-samādhi* (*PraS*), the Concentration of Direct Encounter with the Buddhas of the Present, from the sūtra of the same name (see esp. Harrison 1990). An extended form of the earlier Mainstream practice of *buddhānusmṛti*, or commemoration of the Buddha, the *pratyutpanna-samādhi* requires prolonged visualisation of one of the Buddhas of the Present in his Buddha-field (Amitābha in Sukhāvātī being the paradigm case). Through constructing a mental image of the Buddha and reflecting on him according to a set formula, the practitioner is assured of a vision of that Buddha, either in the waking state or in a dream, and will also be transported to his world, either in this life or after death. The principal fruit of this encounter is the hearing of the dharma preached by the Buddha, which the practitioner is urged to remember and preach to others after emerging from the *samādhi*.

Naturally, this practice presupposes a particular cosmology, in which Buddhas currently occupy world-systems other than ours, acting as living sources of teaching during the interregnum in this world between the passing of Śākyamuni and the advent of Maitreya. These other worlds are also to be visualised along with the Buddhas who reign over them. They are described

⁸ Examples can be found in the *Akṣ* and *Bdp*, as mentioned above in n. 6, as well as in the *Aṣṭa*, the *Kāśyapaparivarta*, and the *Ajātaśatrukaukṛtyavinodanā*, to name just a few of the relevant sources, but a full treatment of them is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁹ See, e.g., Deleau 1999 and the interesting new hypothesis advanced in Skilton 2002.

in texts like the *Larger Sukhāvativyūha*, the *Akṣobhavyūha*, and so on, texts which may strike contemporary readers as strangely inaccessible. The *Larger Sukhāvativyūha* (*LSukh*) for example, which we generally approach through the Sanskrit version or the later Chinese translations, seems interminably tedious to modern sensibilities, with its endless descriptions of the physical features of Sukhāvātī, its flora, its climatic conditions, and the lifestyle of its inhabitants. The two oldest Chinese translations of this sūtra, however, reflect an Early Recension of the text,¹⁰ which is even more long-winded. While struggling with this fact, I became aware that the problem here might lie with us, and the way we read this text. We read it as a book of the sort we are used to, as straight description, and it seems impossibly prolix.

What, then, if we try to read it differently, not as describing a world, but as constituting it, that is, as prescription? Let's take a specific example, from what is no doubt the most tedious part of the text for modern readers, the description of the forests of Sukhāvātī, where the Buddha tells Ānanda how there are trees made entirely of gold, silver, beryl, etc., there are trees made of combinations of these precious substances, some with flowers, leaves, branches, limbs, trunks and roots made only of gold, but fruits made of silver, some with flowers, leaves, branches, limbs, trunks and roots made only of silver, but fruits made of beryl, and so on and so forth, until all possible combinations have been exhausted (see, e.g., Gómez 1996, pp. 84–85). At first sight this is hardly riveting material. What I find intriguing, however, is that this passage, which is long enough in the later versions like the Sanskrit and Tibetan, is even more detailed in the early Chinese translations, where it follows a much more systematic pattern. My analysis of it goes like this. One is first, as it were, asked to imagine a tree, occurring first in one precious substance, then the next, cycling through all seven: silver, gold, crystal, beryl, coral, amber, agate—each substance presumably with a different colour, but the tree is visualised in only one of them at a time. Having got all the colours clear, one moves to trees made out of two substances, and gets the separate parts of the tree clear: roots, trunk, bough, branch, leaf, flower, and fruit. Seven parts of the tree, seven colours in which to paint them. Moving from the monochrome image at the start, say of a pure silver or pure gold tree, the meditator progresses step by step to reach the point where the trees are

¹⁰ For a preliminary discussion, see Harrison 1998. Since then my ideas about the *LSukh* and its history have undergone considerable development, but the results of this research have not yet appeared in print.

composed of seven colours, one for each part, and one can almost imagine those colours in motion, because each tree in the series starts with a different colour, working from the roots up, but the sequence of colours is maintained, and thus each colour has to be shifted up one position at a time. Given that we are talking about precious stones here, the effect is presumably brilliant and kaleidoscopic.

Seen in this way, the passage passes from being static to being kinetic, since now we are ourselves creating and manipulating the images, setting them in motion. This gives us a new way of reading the text, as a template for visualisation, the sheer detail of which now begins to make sense. What we are left with on the printed page resembles the wiring diagram for a television set, of interest only to electricians, baffling and tediously complex to anyone else. But when we “do” the text rather than read it, when we perform its operations ourselves, it suddenly becomes a little more interesting. Tedium, like beauty, turns out to be in the eye of the beholder . . .¹¹

Thus we get quite different results if we read the *LSukh*, and other texts like it, not as descriptions of something already existing, but as blueprints for something which is to be constructed in the mind, and then engaged with, just like the Buddha visualised in the *pratyutpanna-samādhi*. Whether a single Buddha figure or an entire world, in both cases a reality is made present to the practitioner which can be experienced in this life.¹² Thus texts like this are not to be read, in our usual modern fashion, but performed, as Gethin has pointed out with reference to the *mātikās* (1992, p. 166); in this light it might be better if we saw them as more like the scripts for plays, or scores for pieces of music.

All this is a far cry from simple mindfulness of breathing and other such techniques of the Mainstream Buddhist tradition, but like them, Mahāyāna visualisation practices also rely on scripts of a kind. However, now the scripts—or scriptures—are more extensive and detailed than ever before. Is there then any connection between the development of such elaborate texts and the rise of the Mahāyāna as a whole?

¹¹ . . . but possibly not in the ear of the listener: part of “performing” the text in the way intended almost certainly entails reciting it out loud, rather than scanning it quickly and silently for information.

¹² This is explicit in the *PraS*, which says that practitioners can journey to Sukhāvātī (or any other Buddha-field) in this very body, before they die.

3. Texts and Their Transmission

To answer this question we ought first to consider the oral nature of the early Mainstream Buddhist canonical literature, transmitted, according to most scholars, by word of mouth for some 200 or 300 years before being committed to writing for the first time in the 1st century B.C.E. (in the case of the Pāli Canon, according to tradition) or soon thereafter, possibly in the first century C.E., in the case of other *nikāyas* or schools. The oral nature of this literature has recently received exceptionally detailed attention from Mark Allon (1997a & 1997b), who provides a convenient and comprehensive review of the not inconsiderable previous scholarship in this field, much of it inspired by the well-known work on oral narrative epic verse traditions by Milman Parry, Albert Lord and others. Allon, however, goes further in also attempting a quantitative analysis. Among other things, he takes one text, the *Udumbarikasīhanāda-sutta*, and analyses it to show that almost 87% of it is repetition in one form or another. We should note that this figure relates to repetition internal to the text. Much of the remaining 13% is in fact also repetition, of material found elsewhere in the *Nikāyas* (see Allon 1997a, p. 53), and thus the percentage of material not found anywhere else at all is extremely low. Now, repetition has an obvious mnemonic function. To this dominant characteristic are to be added such devices as the use of stock formulas (or clichés), the employment of parallel structures (which are a kind of repetition), the piling up of synonymous nouns, adjectives and verbs (arranged according to the Waxing Syllable Principle), and, most obvious of all, constant recourse to numerical categories and lists. All these formal devices combine to produce a literature easier to commit to memory but rather foreign to modern, literate tastes when it appears on the printed page.

This canonical literature not only has all the hallmarks of something orally transmitted, but explicitly represents itself as such. It contains accounts of how the *sūtras* and *Vinaya* were recited from memory by particular disciples at the first council (*saṅgīti*), as well as guidelines for authenticating scriptures in cases of doubt, and these show that the *Saṅgha* was concerned about matters of proper transmission and authenticity. It was into this formalised tradition, then, that the *Mahāyāna* had to insert itself, and since its followers wanted to claim that their new revelations were also genuine *buddhavacana*, they obviously had a problem convincing other Buddhists about this. One way of dealing with this problem reflects Goebbels' dictum, which is if one repeats

a false assertion often enough people will eventually come to accept it as true. Of greater interest to us, however, is how certain more creative spirits tried to go beyond mere repeated assertion, and actually explain the appearance of their new teachings in the world. Here, we turn again to the *PraS*, which in fact contains two such explanations.

The first is the idea that this text, and other Mahāyāna sūtras as well, are the residue of visionary experiences in *samādhi*. As we have seen, this reflects one of the primary purposes of practising the *pratyutpanna-samādhi*. Through their access to visions of the Buddha, practitioners are assured of the constant possibility of hearing the dharma, and thus authentic *buddhavacana* may be brought into the world at any time. However, the *PraS* also gives us a second explanation. According to this, the Buddha preached the text to an inner circle of devotees, who 40 years after his death hid it in caves under the ground, in rocks, mountains and *stūpas*, or put it into the hands of supernatural beings, where it remained concealed until the time was ripe for it to reappear in the world, some 500 years later (see *PraS* 13B, 13Kvv8–11). This idea immediately brings to mind the famous *gter ma* tradition of Tibet, which it may well have played a part in inspiring, as Robert Mayer (1996, pp. 64–90 and 1997) and Janet Gyatso (1998, pp. 149–150) have observed.

We have here then two channels of revelation, to which the Tibetans were much later to apply the terms “Pure Vision” (*dag snang*) and “Treasure” (*gter ma*).¹³ However fanciful these two scenarios may strike us in the *PraS*, both of them are conceivably based on historical fact. After all, we are still finding Buddhist manuscripts in mountain caves and the ruins of *stūpas* (e.g., the Gilgit, British Library and Schøyen finds), so there is no reason why people could not have done so in the first centuries of the Common Era, the date of our oldest Buddhist MSS. But even texts hidden and rediscovered in this way needed first to be written, and here the possible role of meditation or visionary experience in the process is far more intriguing. However, we should also note that in many other Mahāyāna sources a third explanation is suggested, and this is the notion of *pratibhāna*, literally “illumination,” but meaning something more like “inspiration” or “inspired eloquence,” the ability to give voice to the truth on the spur of the moment, often in public. This too is defended as a source of authentic dharma, both in Buddhism (see Braarvig 1985 and MacQueen 1981/82) and in Hinduism, as Gonda has shown in his study of the Vedic poets (Gonda 1963).

¹³ For an explicit application of these categories to the *PraS*, see Mayer 1997, p. 139.

These three channels of revelation are neatly summed up in a passage quoted by the 8th-century author Śāntideva in the *Śikṣāsāmuuccaya* (Compendium of Training) in Chap. 10, which defines the perfection of energy (*vīrya-pāramitā*) primarily in terms of the pursuit of learning (*śruta*, literally “hearing”). Quoting what he calls the *Nārāyaṇa-paripṛcchā*, Śāntideva has the following to say:

For, Vimalatejas, the Buddhas and Lords resident in other world-systems show their faces to reverent and respectful bodhisattvas and mahāsattvas wanting the dharma, and they cause them to hear the dharma. Vimalatejas, treasures of the dharma are deposited in the interiors of mountains, caves and trees for bodhisattvas and mahāsattvas wanting the dharma, and endless dharma-teachings in book-form come into their hands. Vimalatejas, deities who have seen former Buddhas provide bodhisattvas and mahāsattvas wanting the dharma with the inspired eloquence of Buddhas.¹⁴

This paragraph has till now been rather overlooked, in part because Bendall & Rouse’s rendition of the Sanskrit is seriously faulty, in part because nobody could track down the *Nārāyaṇa-paripṛcchā*—it is in fact the *Sarvapuṇya-samuccayasamādhi-sūtra* (*Spss*), which survives only in Chinese (T. 381 & 382) and Tibetan translation.¹⁵ That is unfortunate, since we have here an important statement of the essentials of a system of revelation, a typology which is precisely formulated. It consists of three sentences. The first refers to the sort of visionary experience which the *pratyutpanna-samādhi* is designed to induce, of access to Buddhas preaching in other worlds. The second invokes the concept of *dharmānidhāna*, “treasures of the dharma” or “dharma-deposits,” which recalls the Tibetan *gter ma* (or *chos gter*),¹⁶ and since these are objects that can be hidden in the interiors of mountains, caves and trees, they must surely be the teachings in the form of books (*pustakagata*)

¹⁴ For Sanskrit text, see Bendall (1897–1902, p. 189):

dharmakāmānām hi vimalatejaḥ bodhisatvānām mahāsatvānām sagauravānām sapratīśānām (sic) *anyalokadhātusthitā api buddhā bhagavanto mukham upadarśayanti dharmam cānuśrāvayanti | dharmakāmānām vimalatejaḥ bodhisatvānām mahāsatvānām parvatakandaravṛkṣamadhyeṣu dharmānidhānāni niḥṣiptāni | dharmamukhāny anantāni pustakagatāni karatalagatāni bhavanti | dharmakāmānām vimalatejaḥ bodhisatvānām pūrvabuddhadarśinyo devatā buddhapatibhānam upasaṃharanti ||*

¹⁵ I am indebted to Jens-Uwe Hartmann for assistance with this identification.

¹⁶ In fact, the Tibetan translation renders it as *chos kyi gter* (see Stog Na 122a5).

mentioned in the next clause.¹⁷ This scenario too, as we have seen, is also found in the *PraS*. The last sentence describes deities with direct experience of former Buddhas somehow inducing in practitioners the *pratibhāna* or inspiration to give voice to the teachings (by some form of possession, as it were). This suggests a third scenario for unorthodox transmission of scripture, one also found, for example, in a description of the life of forest-dwelling bodhisattvas in the *Ratnarāṣi-sūtra*.¹⁸ It resembles the *pratyutpanna-samādhi* in relying on “supernatural” agencies to put the practitioner in touch with the dharma, but differs in that the agencies in question are not Buddhas but deities.

Buddhists of all persuasions seem to have accepted that supernatural beings may preach the dharma. Examples abound in the “Forest Suttas” section of the *Samyutta-nikāya* (S.I.197–206), where forest-dwelling practitioners are “admonished” by deities, frequently tree-spirits. Indeed, Book 1 of the *Samyutta-nikāya* teems with teachings delivered by people apart from the Buddha, 6 of its 11 sections being explicitly devoted to supernatural agents. That these deities generally approach the Buddha or his disciples just before dawn is not without significance, in light of what we will later have to say about dreams. It is clear, then, that even the Mainstream canons contained teachings believed to have been preached by deities, but nevertheless accepted as *buddhavacana*. This suggests that from the earliest times some Buddhist practitioners experienced visions in which divinities appeared to them and conferred revelations on them (often in the hours just before dawn), and that these revelations were accepted positively by the tradition. What worked for Mainstream Buddhists could clearly work for Mahāyānists as well, and thus we find it attested in many Mahāyāna sources.¹⁹ Therefore, the third channel

¹⁷ Cf. Bendall & Rouse (1922, p. 184): “Countless pictures of the Law are in books and the palm of the hand,” which hardly conveys anything of the original Sanskrit. The precise significance of the term *dharmamukha* is not entirely clear (cf. *BHSD*, s.v.), but it need not detain us here: the general sense is plain enough. Note that both T. 382 and the Tib. say “endless *dhāraṇīs* and dharma-teachings” (*gzungs dang chos kyi sgo mtha' yas pa*). As for *nidhi* or *nidhāna*—the two words are synonymous—see the useful discussion in Mayer 1996, pp. 82–90, and 1997, pp. 144–146, based on material provided by Alexis Sanderson. Mayer was unable to locate any Indian Tantric reference to the use of the word *nidhi* to mean a text, but this passage surely counts as one (although it is not Tantric).

¹⁸ In both texts (*Sarvapūnyasamuccaya* and *Ratnarāṣi*) there are some problems of interpretation, but I shall refrain from going into the details here.

¹⁹ See, e.g., *Saddharmapūṇḍarīka* (*SP*) Chap. 13, Kern’s translation (Kern 1884), p. 274, on the subject of supernaturals approaching the bodhisattva to ask questions about the dharma,

of inspiration described in this interesting passage from the *Spss* is in effect no historical novelty. The historical departure lies especially in the second scenario, which involves the “dharma treasure.” For Mainstream Buddhism, the source of dharma is always embodied: it is spoken by a living being, human or supernatural. For the Mahāyāna, dharma may also lie in an object, a book: this is new, and suggests the impact of writing, as we shall see.

That suggestion of the impact (and the importance) of writing is in fact reinforced if we actually look more closely into the *Spss* itself, at the section preceding the piece cited by Śāntideva.²⁰ In introducing the citation, Śāntideva refers in passing to the life story or *avadāna* of the *ṛṣi* Uttara, and that turns out to be illuminating. Uttara is a forest-dwelling sage of considerable accomplishments—a master of the five *abhijñās*, abiding in *maitrī* and *karuṇā*—who nevertheless finds that he is not able to help other living beings and has not yet attained the right view of the Noble Ones (*āryasamyagdr̥ṣṭi*).²¹ Realising that he needs learning (*śruta*) to attain this, he leaves the forest and goes in search of a *dharmabhāṇaka* in villages and towns, but unfortunately encounters a deity from the entourage of Māra. This deity promises to teach him a *gāthā* spoken by the Buddha, on condition that he writes it down with materials taken from his own body, i.e., using his own skin dried in the sun

also pp. 278–279, vv. 60–68, on visionary transmission of the dharma, this time in dreams. Our discussion also raises the general question of the role of supernatural or non-human beings in the life of the Buddhist practitioner, especially the forest-dweller, for whom they were often a source of great danger as well as inspiration. One thinks especially of the appearances of Māra in such texts as the *Therīgāthā* and so on, or of the part played by female deities in the sexual dreams of the saints, which were the subject of some controversy. The appearance of Māra and his daughters to Gautama on the eve of his enlightenment comes to mind as a paradigm example of what must have been experienced by many unknown practitioners. For more recent evidence see particularly Tiyanich 1997, esp. Chap. 3 (although the focus here is more on the dangers and challenges posed to forest-dwellers by tigers, elephants, and so on). The role of supernatural beings of various kinds in the visionary life and *imaginaire* of the Buddhist forest-dweller and/or meditator may thus merit some attention.

²⁰ For the relevant passage see T. 381, 979a1–980a29 (Dharmarakṣa’s translation); T. 382, 995bc7–996c15 (Kumārajīva); *Derge mDo Na* 92b5–96a7; *Stog Palace mDo Na* 116a4–122a1. In passing, I note that reading around the citations provided by Śāntideva might add considerable depth to our understanding of his anthology.

²¹ Confirmation, again, of the importance of text to meditation which we noted above: no amount of meditation will save you if you are not working from the right script. This is the point of Uttara’s story.

for paper,²² his blood for ink, and a piece of his own shattered bone as a pen. Uttara complies with this grisly request, prepares the materials, and is poised to take dictation when the deity disappears. Undaunted by this mean trick, Uttara uses an act of truth to summon a Buddha called Vimalakīrtirāja from another world-system, who appears surrounded by an entourage of 500 bodhisattvas to preach the dharma to the pious sage, restored now to his former self. This preaching includes the *sarvapuṇyasamuccaya-samādhi* itself, as well as 8 *vajrapadas*, 8 *dharmamukhapadas*, and 8 *bijapadas*, armed with which Uttara embarks on a preaching career of his own, with conversion rates of astronomical proportions. Uttara is identified at the end as a former incarnation of Śākyamuni himself. After all this, we find the sentence that explains why the citation in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* opens with the word “for” (*hi*): “You should know in this way that for bodhisattvas and mahāsattvas wanting the dharma the Tathāgata never passes into parinirvāṇa and the True Dharma never disappears” (see Stog Na 122a2–3; cf. T. 382, 996c15–16). In other words, the channel of revelation remains forever open—rather like a high-speed Internet connection!

As with much else in Mahāyāna sūtra literature, this story seems exaggerated and fantastic, but I think it is always important to consider what realities it may reflect, however distortedly. In this obvious *mélange* of the themes of forest asceticism and scriptural revelation, one intriguing feature is the use of writing. Of course, we may regard the use of one’s own body as the means to do this as highly improbable, but as a recent article by John Kieschnick (2000) makes abundantly clear, the use of one’s own blood to copy scriptures is amply attested as a historical fact in Chinese Buddhism, whence it passed into the Buddhism of Japan. For example, some of the colophons of Buddhist manuscripts in the British Library brought back by Stein and others announce that they were written in blood, which generally seems to mean that small amounts of blood, sometimes produced by pricking the finger, were mixed with the ink.²³ The Indian antecedents of this practice are unclear, although Kieschnick cites a number of Indian Buddhist texts where it is described (but not the *Spss*,

²² So apparently both the Tibetan version (*śog bu*) and Kumārajīva’s Chinese translation: *zhi* 紙 (Dharmarakṣa’s text does not commit itself). One wonders what the Indic text read at this point, and when the first mention was made in Indic texts of paper as such, as opposed to palm leaf and birch-bark (*bhūrja*). It is possible that Tib. *śog bu* denotes any material used for writing, including parchment, but the *Tibetan-Sanskrit Dictionary* provides no examples. Investigation of other Indic texts relating to blood-writing practices may illuminate the vocabulary used here.

²³ See Kieschnick 2000.

which can now be added to his list of sources). It is quite possible, therefore, that the Chinese borrowed the practice, as well as the idea, from India. It would be interesting in this light to subject manuscripts like those in the British Library and Schøyen Collections to chemical analysis to determine whether there are traces of human blood in the ink. Although there are Buddhist texts in the Schøyen Collection written on leather (a very un-Buddhist writing material!), this is not, as far as I am aware, human skin, and the use of fragments of one's own bones as pens seems even less likely, but one should never underestimate the extent to which asceticism and self-mortification might be taken. After all, as we well know, religion and extremism are no strangers to each other. Be that as it may, the story of Uttara certainly testifies to belief in an ideal, that ideal being openness to receive new revelations, combined with a willingness to record them in writing. That is a combination we need to consider.

4. The Forest

But before we turn to the question of writing, let us briefly consider the location of these revelation scenarios. As is suggested by the caves, mountains and trees of the *Spss* passage, for at least one of them it is likely to have been the wild. Recent work on the history of Buddhism has produced a new hypothesis that the Mahāyāna, far from being a revolt by the urban laity against monastic privilege and self-absorption in an attempt to bring salvation to the masses, was the work of hard-core ascetics, members of the forest-dwelling (*araṇyavāsin*) wing of the Buddhist Order. This “forest hypothesis,” if we can call it that, is developed in Reginald Ray’s *Buddhist Saints in India* (1994), but is also advanced in work by Paul Williams, Richard Gombrich, Gregory Schopen, Jonathan Silk, Sasaki Shizuka and myself. I have no intention of going into the hypothesis itself here, except to say that it explains a great deal about the content of Mahāyāna texts, such as their emphasis on meditation, on magical powers, and on the extraordinary ascetic practices (Skt. *dhūtaguṇas*) which are supposed to foster them. Of course forest-dwelling was also important for Mainstream Buddhism, as Ray has shown with reference to such allegedly early texts as the *Suttanipāta* (Ray 1994, pp. 62–64)²⁴ and the *Thera-* and *Therī-gāthā*. But, as Ray would have it, it was always in

²⁴ However, some of Ray’s readings of specific sections of the *SN* require rethinking, and in my view we ought to reject his suggestion (p. 64) that terms like *bhikkhu* and *pāṭimokkha* found in the *SN* applied to the forest way of life are somehow problematic since they are “later

tension with the settled monasticism of the villages, towns and cities, and the latter tended to prevail over time. This well-known division of the Saṅgha into forest-dwellers (*aranyavāsins*) and village- or town-dwellers (*grāhavāsins*)²⁵ tended to become associated, rightly or wrongly, with another distinction between two types of Saṅgha member, the meditators (*vipaśyanadhuras*) and the scholars or text-transmitters (*granthadhuras*),²⁶ since the solitude of the forest was seen to be conducive to meditation, life in the urban monastery inimical to it. The pursuit of the extraordinary ascetic practices—one of which is in fact dwelling in the forest—was held to facilitate the contemplative life even more.²⁷ It is people engaged in this sort of activity whom we now tend to see, for various reasons, as instrumental in the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism. If this is so, it follows that the same people produced its scriptures, and it is possible that they did so using the channels of revelation I have sketched above.²⁸

Here a problem arises. The usual tendency to assimilate the forest-

particularly indicative of settled monasticism.” See also p. 82, n. 11, p. 86, n. 20, p. 106, n. 12, p. 304, p. 419, n. 50. Ray’s tendency to see the Vinaya as an aspect of settled monasticism is a crucial part of his overall programme, and causes him to obscure the fact that the Vinaya (*prātimokṣa*, etc.) is just as important to forest-dwelling members of the Saṅgha, who are as much *bhikṣus* in good standing as their town-dwelling counterparts. The relevance of the *prātimokṣa* code for forest-dwellers is something that needs to be investigated properly, but a recent paper by Sasaki (2002) makes a good start on the issue and exposes the faults in Ray’s position. The work on the modern situation by, e.g., Tambiah and Tiyanich also makes it clear that forest-dwellers are pre-eminent in the observance of the Vinaya, as Ray himself notes (p. 445), but he is clearly unwilling to see this as part of the classical tradition too.

²⁵ We adopt the translation “town-dweller” here as covering all possibilities, on the assumption that “village” (*grāma*) stands for any concentration of population, and so includes towns and cities. But see Olivelle 1992 on this.

²⁶ On this distinction—described as divisive, mutually exclusive and potentially antagonistic—see Schopen 1999, p. 287, n. 32. Schopen’s paper discusses here the notion, found commonly in Mūlasarvāstivādin sources, that there are two proper occupations for a monk, meditation (*dhyāna*) and recitation (*adhyayana*), which he suggests “has no apparent connection” to the forest-dweller/town-dweller distinction.

²⁷ Interestingly for our purposes, one of the alleged advantages of the *dhūtagamas* of dwelling in the forest or dwelling at the foot of trees is that “one will gain the assistance of the gods in the form of admonitions” or will dwell with the gods (Ray 1994, p. 301). Once again, many of these gods turn out to be tree-spirits.

²⁸ See more recently Karashima 2001, who presents a different thesis concerning the composers of the *SP*. Karashima’s article gathers together a great deal of valuable material on this issue, but I think its argumentation is problematic in key places. Further, his new category of “village-oriented monks” is somewhat confusing. In fact, I suspect that his material is really pointing to the *aranyaka bhikṣus* on teaching missions to towns and villages who appear later in this paper (see below).

dweller/town-dweller distinction to the meditator/scholar distinction implies that specialist meditators dwelling in the forest have nothing to do with the business of preserving, transmitting and studying scripture, an enterprise they are happy to leave to the town-dwellers. But this is implausible. First, it is unlikely that Buddhist meditators could ever pursue their calling without recourse to texts of some kind, given the programmatic nature of Buddhist meditation to which we have already drawn attention. Second, historical and anthropological accounts of forest-dwellers indicate that they did have recourse to texts and devoted themselves to scholarship. One is struck, for example, by the high literary productivity of the forest-dwelling monks of Sri Lanka in the 20th century, but Tambiah has noted how throughout that country's history, forest hermitages have produced scholars of great distinction (Tambiah 1984, pp. 56–57, etc.). Indeed, Tambiah's work provides ample evidence that forest-dwelling monks in S. and S.E. Asia have been important guardians of Buddhist textual traditions.

Third, Mahāyāna literature itself provides interesting testimony. Śāntideva's *Śikṣāsamuccaya* is again most instructive. At the end of Chap. 10 Śāntideva says that after one has acquired scriptural learning (*śruta*), one should then resort to the forest to purify the mind, to meditate.²⁹ This is in line with our thesis that meditation is based on scripture, and requires its prior memorisation. Śāntideva's next chapter (11), in praise of the forest life, lays down that the forest-dweller must also recite three times daily and three times nightly what he has previously read (*pūrvapathitam*) in a voice which is neither too loud nor too soft, while holding in the mind or reflecting upon the text (*grantha*). This passage—and there are others like it—makes it clear that at least some forest-dwellers were supposed to deal with scripture, and indeed to devote considerable time to it. Śāntideva goes on to describe (in passages taken from the *Ugra[datta]pariprechā-sūtra*) the eventual descent of the forest-dwelling bodhisattva into villages and towns to preach and recite the dharma or to hear it from others (see Bendall 1897–1902, pp. 199–200, Bendall & Rouse 1922, pp. 193–194).³⁰ The preaching part is mysteriously overlooked by Ray in his discussions of this passage, and one can only conclude that this is because it runs counter to his general argument that forest-dwellers have little or nothing to do with dharma transmission (see pp. 254, 437). Thus,

²⁹ Bendall (1897–1902, p. 192): *evam śrutavatā cittam śodhayitum aranyam āśrayaṇīyam.*

³⁰ For these passages, see now Natier 2003, pp. 306–308, and for a general discussion of the place of forest-dwelling in the *Ugra* *ibid.*, pp. 130–135.

just as he tends to downplay, redefine or confine to footnotes mention in the texts of the role of the *Prātimokṣa* or Vinaya in the life of forest-dwellers, so too mentions of the learning (or preaching) of texts, when they do occur, are presented as somehow atypical or exceptional intrusions of the values of settled monasticism (see, e.g., pp. 125–126, p. 181, n. 15, pp. 262–263, p. 361, n. 14).³¹

Several definitional issues present themselves here, one of which is the question of whether the “forest-dweller” *aranyavāsin* really is a solitary figure, a hermit type wandering the wilds as lonely and singular as the horn on an Indian rhinoceros. My own suspicion is that such figures were, if not completely mythical like unicorns, at least rather rare, and that *aranyavāsins* tended, as they do today, to congregate in groups. Furthermore, it is perhaps too easy to overestimate the distinction between *aranya* and *grāma* in Indian Buddhism, by an excessively literal reading of the former term.³² After all, the Tibetan equivalent for *aranya*, *dgon pa*, literally “solitary place,” “desert,” is used for monastic establishments inhabited by hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of religious practitioners. One wonders to what extent this usage, like so much else in Tibetan religious life, has Indian antecedents. Further, even translating *aranya* as “forest” or “jungle” or “wilderness” may lend it excessively vivid associations: the *grāma/aranya* distinction is probably as colourless as the “town/country” distinction in English, and may not carry any implications of remote solitude in the wilderness. This does appear to be the case when one looks at the definitions of forest, village and village precinct provided by Buddhaghosa in the *Visuddhimagga* (II.47–55) with its quaint measurements in terms of stones thrown (either by men of medium stature, able-bodied young men exercising their arms, or scarers of crows) from between the gateposts of the village wall if there is one, or (if there isn’t one) by where water might splash to when emptied out by a woman standing in the doorway of the outermost house. That gives you village and village precinct, and when one starts calculating 500 bow-lengths between that point and the monastery wall, it is clear that “forest” doesn’t quite mean what we might expect, especially not when the measurements are taken at the other end from the outer wall of the monastery, or its refectory, or its meeting hall,

³¹ For further evidence in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* on the importance of *śrūta* and on devotion to learning and study for the bodhisattva, and on the teaching mission of the forest-dwelling bodhisattva, see, e.g., Bendall 1897–1902, p. 12 (Bendall & Rouse 1922, p. 13), pp. 15–16 (trans., pp. 17–18), pp. 46–50 (trans., pp. 47–50), pp. 113–114 (trans., pp. 112–113).

³² For general discussions of this important distinction, see Olivelle 1992, p. 44ff; Sprockhoff 1981.

and so on. “Forest” then begins to sound as architecturally dense and complex as an Oxford college. It is certainly true also that Buddhist texts often emphasise the *arāṇya* as a state of mind rather than a situation of physical isolation. Perhaps like the desert in early Christianity, the *arāṇya* became symbolic for Buddhists of the renunciant orientation, but did not necessarily entail actual solitude, except when individual practitioners retired to their cell, cave or tree. For the rest they lived in a community, a community whose life, like the desert communities of 4th-century Egypt, was likely to have been saturated with scripture, scripture primarily in the form of sound.³³

No doubt more work needs to be done in this area, to clarify what these key terms actually mean, but we can see that despite what Ray says, there is enough evidence in Mainstream sources and from anthropological accounts that forest-dwellers may also shoulder the burden of scripture. Further, the testimony of Mahāyāna sources is even clearer as to the importance of dharma transmission in the life of the forest ascetic, who may thus also be a *granthadhura*, one whose burden is texts. But are these texts orally transmitted, or books in written form? In other words, is the burden carried in the head, or on the back?

5. Mediums and Messages

In 1990, Richard Gombrich published a paper entitled “How the Mahāyāna Began,” in which he tried to explain the rise of the Mahāyāna in terms of the advent of writing. Despite its provocative title, the paper’s thesis is rather modest, and bears rather on the logistics of preservation. It does not explain how the Mahāyāna began, but how its texts survived. Although one could take issue with a number of points put forward by Gombrich, his paper still made the signal contribution of raising the question of some kind of linkage between Mahāyāna and writing, and it is this which I wish to address here, given that the Mahāyāna arose about the same time the Mainstream canons began to be committed to writing. Was this purely a coincidence?³⁴

Actually, it was reading Walter Ong’s *Orality and Literacy* (1982) which

³³ On this aspect of Christian monasticism, see, e.g., Graham 1987, Chap. 11, “God’s Word in the Desert,” and, for a more extensive treatment, Burton-Christie 1993.

³⁴ Both Don Lopez (1995) and David McMahan (1998 & 2002) have also explored the connection between Mahāyāna Buddhism and the advent of writing. Their treatments emphasise different aspects of the problem from those taken up in this paper (Lopez focuses on issues of authority, McMahan on modalities of perception and experience). McMahan’s work in particular raises a number of problems, which I will not go into here.

first prompted me to pursue this question further.³⁵ Ong's thesis is that the advent of the technology of writing not only gives human beings a means of writing down their thoughts, it also enables them to think in entirely different ways, transforming human consciousness (p. 78). Orally transmitted "literature," since it relies on memory to carry it forward from one generation to the next, has certain characteristics: it tends to be (using Ong's terms) formulaic, aggregative rather than analytic, redundant, conservative, concrete rather than abstract, and so on—all features found in Mainstream Buddhist scriptures. However, when people commit things to writing, according to Ong, the situation changes: discourse becomes autonomous, generated by the individual working in isolation, distanced from the real world, more abstract, more analytically precise, more introspective, more complexly organised.

Now, it is true that Ong's thesis tends to be somewhat totalistic and reductionistic, as if all the developments in human consciousness have somehow been determined by one technological innovation, and even he admits that other factors have also played their part.³⁶ Yet it has sufficient force to make us rethink the development of Buddhism from the primarily oral tradition that we see in the Pāli Nikāyas and Sanskrit Āgamas of Mainstream Buddhism to the new and predominantly literate tradition that Mahāyāna Buddhism is, a tradition involving a kind of transformation of consciousness. This is not to say that many elements of the primary oral tradition are not preserved in the sūtras of the Mahāyāna, since they clearly are: these works are packed full of the clichés and formulas of Mainstream scriptures, the parallel structures, repetitions, numerical lists and so on, but these components are used to express new ideas, like building materials pillaged from an old structure to erect a new one. Although we can hardly prove that these texts too were not produced orally, the frequent references in them to the act of copying the sūtras, or to enshrining and venerating them in book-form strongly suggest that they began life in written form. Many of them certainly have features which we tend to associate more with literacy than orality, such as structural complexity and length, for example. It is perhaps not for nothing that the Mahāyāna is referred

³⁵ As far as I know, nobody has yet applied Ong's work systematically to Buddhist literature, although both Lopez and McMahan make good use of it in the publications cited above.

³⁶ His statements about Buddhism are occasionally wrong as well. Lopez 1995 presents a useful summary of Ong and an equally useful discussion of the shortcomings of Goody's work on Indian oral traditions, which pursues similar themes. For a more wide-ranging critique of the monolithic and deterministic applications of the ideas of Ong and others, see Griffiths 1999 (I am indebted to Deepak Sarma for bringing Griffiths' work to my attention).

to as the Vaipulyavāda (teaching of expansion). Thus it may pay us to investigate the extent to which, to invoke Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase, the medium may have determined the message. This means not only considering whether the ideas we find developed so expansively in Mahāyāna sūtras were second-order reflections on the deposits of an earlier oral tradition, and attempts to go beyond it in conceptualising new ways of seeing the world and of acting within it. It also means considering how the process by which this was done shaped the outcome.

At this point we bring meditation and the forest-dwelling renunciant back into the argument, for I would like to suggest that these new texts may well have been the work of meditators who were also involved in the business of textual transmission, who, in their visions, encountered new revelations which they later committed to writing.

In their visions, and also, I would say, in their dreams. Here, once again, I am attempting to read through to the actual experiences involved. One can well imagine that practitioners devoting a lot of their waking time to rehearsing texts (three times each, day and night, according to the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*) would also dream of doing so, in the process reforming the texts in more creative ways, by dint of free association, condensation, recombination etc., to the extent that they would be apprehended as new texts. But imagining this is not enough: is there in fact any evidence of it? Answering that question set me off in search of a clear Indian forerunner to the later Tibetan practice of dream yoga, one of the set of six practices known commonly as the "Six Yogas of Naropa" (*naro chos drug*). At first this seemed an unpromising quest. In her recent book on dreams and Buddhism, Serinity Young (1999) implies that dream yoga is a later innovation, arising in later Indian Tantrism at the time of the *mahāsiddhas* and in Tibet, roughly around the end of the 1st millennium. Certainly, when we look at the Theravādin sources dreams are not very important, and appear to be of interest only as indexes of moral purity or as omens of things to come. Thus, Carrithers (1982, p. 27) could assert that: ". . . there are no specifically Buddhist texts of dream interpretation, nor is there a highly elaborated theory of dream origins and significance." There is virtually no evidence in the Mainstream canons of any tradition of dream practice. But when we turn to Mahāyāna sūtras, including those reaching China in the 2nd century C.E., we see a different picture. Not only is there far more material on dreaming in these texts, but the focus is shifting. Much of it, of course, continues to reflect the belief that dreams can be predictive of things to come. Yet in the Mahāyāna sources, there is also a strong concern with the

diagnostic as well as the divinatory utility of the dream—as a guide to the present as well as to the future. Furthermore, we find a much more frankly spiritual or religious approach to dreaming, and this is distinctive. That is to say, the dream contents become more religious in character.

This trend achieves its purest and fullest expression in the Mahāyāna text known as the *Āryasvapnanirdeśa*, compiled before the second half of the third century, now extant only in Chinese and Tibetan.³⁷ Pace Carrithers, this is a specifically Buddhist text of dream interpretation, with a highly elaborated theory of dream origins and significance. It also turns out to be quite pertinent to our present concerns. Not surprisingly, among the 108 dream signs (*lakṣaṇa*) which it lists and interprets, there are some which turn up regularly in other Indian dream manuals, such as dreaming of being covered with excrement (usually an auspicious sign!), or digging up jewels, or flying, or falling into an abyss. But these more mundane dreams are far outnumbered by dreams of religious figures and religious activities proper to a Buddhist practitioner. Among them, we find listed dreams of hearing the dharma being taught (No. 22³⁸), meeting hitherto unknown monks who preach the dharma (*dharmabhāṇaka-bhikṣu*) (24), seeing the Buddha teaching the dharma (29), receiving a book (56), hearing the name of a *dhāraṇī* (57), hearing the name of a *samādhi* (58), hearing the name of a *vaipulyasūtra* (59), hearing the name of *dharmabhāṇaka-bhikṣu* so-and-so (60), hearing the name of a dharma treasure (63), hearing the name of a Tathāgata in another world (64), and hearing the name of a Bodhisattva so-and-so in another world (65). In addition to these dreams in which one is the passive recipient of teachings, one can also have dreams in which one perceives oneself enthroned on the dharma-seat and

³⁷ Preserved as part of the *Ratnakūṭa-sūtra* (*RK*), this text is extant in a Chinese translation (T. 310.4) by Dharmarakṣa, thus dating to the second half of the third century, and in a Tibetan translation of the early 9th century by Prajñāvarman, Ye shes sde and others. See *Tog Palace Manuscript of the Tibetan Kanjur*, mDo Ka 308b4–363a7 (or Vol. 35, pp. 616–725), in which the Skt. title is given (if we regularise the spelling) as *Āryasvapnanirdeśa-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra*. The Chinese and Tibetan texts are generally similar, although there appear to be certain gaps in the Chinese text, and it sometimes carries a slightly different sense. Generally, however, the two can be read side by side. Our references to the text are to the Stog Palace edition.

In his discussion of the bodhisattva ideal in the *RK*, Pagel (1995, pp. 101–102) gives the impression that this text is devoted to a systematic exposition of the ten-*bhūmi* path scheme, with “close adherence to the successive training phases,” and that this may account for its inclusion in the *RK*. Its purpose, however, is not to map out the path, but to analyse dream experiences in terms of the dreamers’ putative positions in the ten-*bhūmi* scheme.

³⁸ Here we follow the order of signs given in the Tibetan translation.

teaching the dharma (25), gaining the inspiration (*pratibhāna*) to produce *gāthās* (61), gaining the inspiration to produce *sūtras* (62), or teaching the dharma to a large crowd of people (95). Although the text contains no specific instructions for dream incubation, and is primarily concerned with the diagnostic significance of dreams (with regard to one's spiritual status as a bodhisattva), it is likely to have exercised a prescriptive influence on those exposed to it. Indeed, we find very similar kinds of dream experiences described in the Perfection of Wisdom texts and elsewhere,³⁹ suggesting the existence of a common stock of dream lore among Mahāyāna practitioners, according to which dreams were accepted as a natural medium for dharma transmission and dharma practice, and for explicitly religious visions. It is also the case that on the basis of the dream sign experienced, the *Svapnanirdeśa* prescribes religious practice for the waking hours, which usually turns out to be text-recitation. Thus, for example, at various places it enjoins recitation of the *Triskandhaka-sūtra* or *-dharmaparyāya* (*phung po gsum pa 'i mdo sde/chos kyi rnam grangs*)⁴⁰ for those who see the Tathāgata wearing soiled robes (22) or see themselves climbing a mountain (69), since these dreams are held to be indicative of serious karmic obstructions. Worse, presumably, is seeing oneself smeared in filth (89), which entails three years of Triskandhaka recitation, or seeing oneself seated on a mountain (41), which must be especially inauspicious, in that it entails seven years of recitation, again, three times a day and three times a night. Given the kinds of practices prescribed, this text can hardly have been intended for the laity (or for people who were not serious practitioners).

Especially interesting in the *Svapnanirdeśa* is sign No. 75, dreaming of performing an act of truth (*satyādhiṣṭhāna*). Such an act performed in a dream would of course be much more likely to be successful. Again, we seem to find something similar described in the larger Perfection of Wisdom texts, at least if we follow Conze's translation (see Conze 1979, pp. 432–433). After making the claim that “. . . the state of dreaming and the state of being awake, all

³⁹ As, e.g., in the *SP*. See above, n. 19.

⁴⁰ See *BHSD*, s.v. *skandha* (4), and Nattier 2003, pp. 117–121. According to the *Śikṣā-samuccaya* (290.2) the three skandhas (“articles”?) are confession of sin (*pāpadeśanā*), rejoicing at merit (*puṇyānumodanā*), and requesting instruction from a Buddha (*buddhādhyesanā*), to be done three times a day and three times a night. Here Śāntideva follows the *Ugradattapari-prcchā*'s exposition, with reference also to the *Upālipari-prcchā*. These passages and others merit careful study, in order to ascertain whether the liturgical practices they describe share a common core.

that is (dharmically) not two nor divided,”⁴¹ the *Larger Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* presents a somewhat problematical passage concerning the “act of truth” (*satyakriyā*, *satyādhiṣṭhāna*, etc.) performed when a dreaming bodhisattva sees a great conflagration. It is not absolutely clear from the text whether the conflagration is burning in the dream or is a real one seen only when the bodhisattva wakes from it, one possible explanation being that it takes place within the dream, and that the bodhisattva goes back to sleep to deal with it. However, the equivalent passage in the *Aṣṭa* is somewhat clearer in this regard (see Vaidya ed., p. 178, cf. T. 224, 459c8–23): the blaze is a real one, and on waking the bodhisattva attempts to extinguish it with an act of truth, invoking the veracity of the signs of non-regressing status he has previously experienced in his dreams.⁴² If the blaze dies down then the bodhisattva knows he is truly *avinivartaniya*. If it fails to be extinguished and spreads ever more vigorously then he is not, and some karma related to previous rejection of the dharma is implicated.

Here the connection between the act of truth and the dream turns out to be something different from what we find in the *Svapnanirdeśa*, and a careful reading of the version of the passage in the *Aṣṭa* does not after all support Young’s tentative suggestion of dream control practice.⁴³ But that is not to say that the *Aṣṭa* provides no evidence at all for deliberate practice within the dream state. Indeed, a definite foreshadowing of Tantric dream yoga is implicit in the following exchange in Chap. 19 of the *Aṣṭa* between Śāriputra and Subhūti:

Then the Venerable Śāriputra said this to the Venerable Subhūti: “Venerable Subhūti, is there growth in the perfection of insight of a bodhisattva and mahāsattva who in his dreams [or, in his sleep] cultivates the three doors to liberation of emptiness, signlessness and aimlessness?”

Subhūti said: “If, Venerable Śāriputra, there is growth through his cultivation during the day, then there is similar growth when he is dreaming too. Why is that? Because the Lord has said, Venerable

⁴¹ See Conze 1979, pp. 432–433.

⁴² Many of these are strongly reminiscent of the signs described in the *Svapnanirdeśa*. See *Aṣṭa*, Vaidya ed., pp. 177–178. A close examination of the textual correspondences is required.

⁴³ See Young 1999, p. 63: “The text also contains a passage that seems to be advocating the practice of Dream Yoga when it suggests changing the imagery while dreaming. If successful, this predicts the bodhisattva will win supreme enlightenment.”

Śāriputra, that there is no distinction between dream and day [waking]. If, Venerable Śāriputra, the bodhisattva and mahāsattva in possession of the perfection of insight practises the perfection of insight every day, then on account of that repeated study (*abhyāsa*) of the perfection of insight there is likely to be an expansion of the perfection of insight for the bodhisattva and mahāsattva when he is dreaming too.⁴⁴

One notes the usual ambiguity of the key term *prajñāpāramitā* here, which implies both state of mind (or consciousness) and sūtra text, hence presumably the use of the word *abhyāsa* (originally misconstrued by Conze as the alternative spelling of *abhyāśa*, “proximity,” but see p. 328 for his later correction), which can refer to the repetition of a text. A little further on, after considering the karmic consequences of actions performed in dreams,⁴⁵ Śāriputra raises the question of how, when a bodhisattva gives a gift in his dreams and dedicates the gift to supreme and perfect awakening, that gift can really be described as something “dedicated.”⁴⁶ Unfortunately this question is never given an explicit answer, but presumably the point remains that the karmic efficacy of dream actions depends on the state of mind they engender in the actor. It is clear in any case that religious activity in dreams is something that can be expected of bodhisattvas.⁴⁷

These passages in the *Aṣṭa*, all of them attested in the earliest Chinese translation of that text, bear witness to precisely the kind of situation envisaged in the Six Yogas, of dharma practice continuing day and night, by being performed in one’s dreams as well—a situation no doubt facilitated by the extraordinary ascetic practice (*dhūtaguṇa*) of sleeping in the seated position. There is thus evidence of some interest among followers of the Mahāyāna in dream

⁴⁴ See Vaidya ed., pp. 176–177; cf. translation in Conze 1975, p. 215. The passage occurs already in Lokakṣema’s translation of the *Aṣṭa*, T. 224, 457b14–20. For the same passage in the longer versions of the *Prajñāpāramitā*, see Conze 1979, p. 415.

⁴⁵ The text asserts that deeds in dreams have no karmic results, but if after waking one responds in particular ways to the dream experience (rejoicing over a misdeed like murder, for example), then the conceptual distinctions (*vikalpa*) arising in that process lead to a build-up of karma.

⁴⁶ See Vaidya ed., p. 177; translation in Conze 1975, p. 216. Cf. T. 224, p. 457c1ff. Cf. also the longer versions of the text (Conze 1979, pp. 415–416), which add all the other perfections to the gift-giving performed in dreams.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., *SP*, Chap. 13, vv. 60–72 (Kern 1884, pp. 278–280), for a further example of the pursuit of Buddhahood in one’s dreams.

experiences and of what can be considered dream practices foreshadowing the dream yoga of the later Tantric tradition.⁴⁸ Indeed, whether they engaged in dreaming deliberately or not, one can well imagine that Buddhist practitioners devoting large amounts of their waking time to rehearsing texts (e.g., three times a day and three times a night, according to the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, see above) would also quite naturally dream of doing so, in the process reforming the texts they already knew in more creative ways, by the use of free association, etc., in such a convincing and circumstantial way that the new texts would be apprehended as genuine revelation from external agencies. Their entire training would have conduced to this end, to say nothing of the cosmology they were steeped in, the iconography they were surrounded by, and so on. And if we look at the specific dream contents, we can see that experiences of revelation, of hearing the dharma produced and taught and producing and teaching it oneself, are far from uncommon. It is noteworthy that the *PraS* claims that the results of the practice of the *pratyutpanna-samādhi* can be experienced in dreams, while the *LSukh* promises the vision of Amitābha and his realm in dreams to certain practitioners. It is therefore entirely plausible to suggest that dream-inspiration may have played a part in the various transmission scenarios sketched above, and that the reports of various sūtras about Buddhas, bodhisattvas and deities visiting practitioners in their dreams to give them teachings may well reflect actual experiences. Sadly, we are unlikely ever to bring to light the sort of detailed and personal evidence for dreaming in religious life in India that we have for the later Chinese and Japanese traditions—one thinks here of the dream-diaries of the Japanese monk Myōe 明惠 (1173–1232) as studied by Tanabe (1992) and Kawai (1992), a fascinating example of the nexus of meditation and scrip-

⁴⁸ As for specifically Buddhist dream incubation practices, I have so far found only one clear and detailed example of them, in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*. In an extended citation from the *Ākāśagarbha-sūtra* (Bendall 1897–1902: pp. 64–65; Bendall & Rouse 1922, pp. 68–69), which was written some time before the beginning of the 5th century, bodhisattvas are instructed in the means of producing a dream encounter with the great bodhisattva Ākāśagarbha, in order to confess their offences to him. The ritual involves getting up in the last watch of the night, facing east, offering incense, and praying to Aruṇa, the sun-god, for assistance. Then the practitioner should go back to sleep again, so as to meet Ākāśagarbha in his dreams as dawn breaks. What is especially interesting about this ritual, which merits further study, is the frequent use of the terms *upāya* and *upāyakaūśalya*. Also of interest are the importance of the last watch of the night, just before dawn, as the period in which one has one's most important dreams (see e.g., Young 1999, pp. 67, 70, 138), and the relevance of confession, a highly significant ritual practice in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

tural transmission. But I am convinced that if we look for it, we will uncover a great deal more material on the use of the dream in Buddhist practice, apart from its deployment in doctrine as a general metaphor for the illusoriness of the world. Hardly surprising, after all, in a religion constructed around the central metaphor of awakening (*bodhi*), whether from sleep or from a dream (both are *svapna* in Sanskrit)!

6. Concluding Remarks

All this may seem a rather strange attempt to re-unite two aspects of Buddhism or wings of the Saṅgha which are normally distinguished from each other, the meditators (*vipaśyanadhuras*) and the scholars or text-transmitters (*grantha-dhuras*). But the disjunction between the two specialisations was perhaps not so sharp: as the Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya points out, recitation and meditation are both the proper tasks of members of the Order, even those who dwell in the forest.⁴⁹ Further, I have tried to show that just as textual transmission may have required meditation, meditation also required textual transmission, and depended upon it. Nor has anybody yet pointed out, to my knowledge, that the 18 ways in which Buddhaghosa says a monastery can be unsuitable for meditation would make it just as unsuitable for the practice of textual study. In fact, an institution in which one is plagued by the constant distractions which Buddhaghosa catalogues so trenchantly strikes one as a place hostile to quiet reflection and serious scholarship alike.⁵⁰ Conversely, the suitability for scholarship of the forest hermitage is indicated by the fact that a good proportion of the books on meditation consulted for this research were written by forest-dwelling monks, including the very translation of the *Visuddhimagga* I have just cited. Clearly, the two occupations of meditation and textual study were often combined in the forest setting, despite the occasional tension between them: Schopen (1999) cites the story of a meditating monk who was annoyed at being disturbed by other monks reciting their texts too loudly and likened their noise to the croaking of frogs; he was subsequently punished by being repeatedly reborn as a frog. However, the tension which this story reflects may also have been quite productive for forest-dwelling members of the Saṅgha pursuing their contemplations among trees

⁴⁹ See Schopen 1999, pp. 285–291, esp. p. 288. It would be interesting to follow this theme up in the other Vinayas.

⁵⁰ For the details of this pessimistic characterization, see Ñānamoli 1999, pp. 118–121, and on its applicability to the modern university, see Deleanu 1999, p. 84 and Harrison 2003, p. 12.

resounding with the recitations of the dharma by their fellow-practitioners, “in voices not too loud and not too soft.” Small wonder if in their visions and dreams the trees continued to resound with the words of truth, just as they do in paradises like Sukhāvātī, which I have elsewhere suggested is the forest hermitage celestial, extended to fill the whole world, and populated in the Early Recension of the *LSukh* entirely by male renunciants—a perfect environment for spiritual practice, with superb climate control and no tigers, snakes or mosquitoes to be seen, a world in which the only human relationship left is the bond between teacher and student.⁵¹

What I am suggesting here, then, is a convergence of meditation and textual transmission in the forest environment, stimulated into a new burst of creativity as a result of a technological development, the advent of writing. Here, the specific circumstances of the real world combine with visions in deep states of meditation or dream to transform received oral tradition into a new kind of Buddhism. The resulting revelations are not completely novel, but deeply conditioned by context and by tradition. Although dismissed as poetic fabrications (Skt. *kavikṛta*) or even demonically inspired nonsense by their opponents—as, e.g., in the *PraS* (see Chap. 6, esp. 6H; see also, e.g., Schopen 2000, p. 11, n. 16)—they are in fact the creative recasting of material already accepted as authentic *buddhavacana* by the wider community.⁵²

Other religious traditions present instructive parallels. One rather close parallel is to be found in the origin of early parts of the Taoist canon, as studied

⁵¹ In this way, as in many others, the fantastic vision of Sukhāvātī is the product of a specific embodied experience and specific social arrangements. The former aspect of it—the experience of hearing the dharma being constantly recited around oneself in the forest environment—is completely consistent with the words of the *Dharmasāṅgīti-sūtra* quoted in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (Bendall 1897–1902, p. 284; Bendall & Rouse 1922, p. 259): *āśayasampannasya punar bhagavan yadi buddhā na bhavanti gaganatalād dharmāśabdo niścarati kuḍmavṛkṣebhyaś ca | āśayaśuddhasya bodhisattvasya svamanojalpād eva sarvāvavādānuśāsanyo niścaranti |*: “For one whose resolve is perfect, Lord, if there are no Buddhas the sound of the dharma emanates from the sky and from the trees in bud. For the bodhisattva whose resolve is pure all instructions and admonitions emanate from his own imagination.” On the terms *avavāda* and *anuśāsani* see *BHSD*, s.vv. We presume that whereas these may come from the bodhisattva’s own imagination (*manojalpa*), the dharma itself must come from an external source.

⁵² We leave aside here a detailed examination of the various ways in which Mahāyāna sūtras “cannibalize” the Āgamas and Nikāyas, by quotation in direct or modified form, allusion, reproduction of formulas, and so on. For illuminating comments on the broader significance and widespread occurrence of this kind of religious reading and composition (to which writing as such is not at all necessary), see Griffiths 1999, esp. pp. 40–59.

by Michel Strickmann, Stephen Bokenkamp and others. Strickmann (1977) provides an excellent general account of the genesis of this body of texts, fundamental among which are the so-called Shangqing 上清 or Supreme Purity scriptures revealed in dreams or “midnight visions” (p. 3) by celestial spirit-beings to one Yang Xi 楊羲 (330–?) and subsequently transcribed by him during the years 364–370. These are the Mao Shan revelations, many of them composed in what Strickmann calls “ecstatic verse” (p. 3), by a person whom he describes as “perhaps the most truly inspired poet of his time” (p. 6). For our present purposes, what is interesting about this material, apart from the manner in which it appeared in the world, is its volume, its syncretic nature—Strickmann notes that much of it was clearly based upon “a variety of older sources, Taoist, Buddhist, learned and popular” (5)⁵³—and the fact that within the short space of 27 years it was being imitated and incorporated into a new series of “revelations,” the Lingbao 靈寶 scriptures, compiled by Ge Chaofu 葛巢甫 in the last years of the 4th century (on which see Bokenkamp 1983).⁵⁴ Then, not long after this, another set of over 50 scriptures was produced by one Wang Lingqi 王靈期 (early 5th century), using both the Shangqing and Lingbao texts as raw materials (see Strickmann 1977, pp. 19–30). Subsequently, these imitations were themselves imitated, producing a literature of considerable extent.⁵⁵ Although we know far more about the events surrounding this series of revelations, and especially their social and economic aspects, than we will ever know about the production of the Mahāyāna sūtras (even down to the “transmission fees” charged by Wang Lingqi), the Chinese case is remarkably suggestive of the kind of dynamics which may have operated in the Indian situation. Also of interest is the way in which the very possession of these Taoist texts was seen as a blessing by those who acquired them, not only because they functioned as talismans, but also because they made their recipients into teachers, each one potentially with his own following (pp. 29–30). Thus, from the simple fact of textual transmission, as Strickmann has shown, there followed major institutional and social consequences for the burgeoning Taoist religion: “from brilliant but

⁵³ Especially interesting is Yang’s reception from the Perfected of a Taoistically recast version of at least half the *Sutra in Forty-two Sections*, a celebrated Buddhist scripture (see Strickmann 1977, p. 10).

⁵⁴ The Lingbao scriptures were especially influenced by Buddhism, on which see Bokenkamp 1983 and Zürcher 1980.

⁵⁵ Cf. Olivelle 1992, p. 8 for brief comments on how the later Upaniṣads were composed on the basis of older sources.

private *pièces de circonstance*, the Mao Shan revelations became the textual authority for solidly-based religious organisations, fulfilling important functions in the life of the community and the state” (p. 39). Most of all, then, this Chinese parallel points up what Schopen (1975) and Gombrich (1990) have tended to underestimate, in emphasising the book as a physical object (of cultic or archival significance respectively): the social networks built around the production and preservation of the texts, and the exaltation of the teacher as custodian of their message.⁵⁶

To return to the Great Vehicle, and to invoke McLuhan again, I think all of the foregoing may not only explain how the texts (or at least some of them) came into existence, or how their existence was justified and legitimated, but also help us to appreciate their contents better. Here I advance an even more speculative hypothesis, that the bodhisattva path was to some extent an exercise in creative visualisation. This, of course, runs counter to the conventional understanding of it as an ideal of compassionate activity in the real world, and instead sees compassion more as a meditative exercise, developed in the solitude of the meditator’s cell—or under his or her tree—both by day and by night. Perhaps this helps to explain the important concept of “skillful means” (*upāyakauśalya*), especially in its more extreme forms, as, e.g., in the *Drumakinnararājaparipṛcchā* (DKP; see, esp. 7M-P⁵⁷) where it is difficult to imagine any real person doing the things which the bodhisattva is urged to do in order to bring the blessings of the teaching to others, as a kind of undercover agent of salvation. For example, at 70 the text explains how bodhisattvas and mahāsattvas

... in order to bring to maturity the many hundred beings with their

⁵⁶ Cf. Strickmann 1977, p. 29:

What is more, the act of textual transmission itself made of each recipient a potential master, according to the classically simple formula, “He who transmits a scripture becomes a Teacher” [傳則成師]. It is evident, then, that this circumstance must increasingly have promoted the formation of independent and autonomous foyers of masters and disciples, versed in the rituals of the Way of the Celestial Master, which all had inherited, but also possessing a considerable margin for development in accordance with local social, economic, and ideological conditions. This nuclear, rather than hierarchical, character of individual Taoist centres appears to be typical of the formative period of the religion, and there are indications that it may have continued to typify much of Taoism as a whole.

It is not hard to see how these observations could be rewritten to fit Buddhism instead of Taoism.

⁵⁷ See Harrison 1992, pp. 139–148.

manifold crooked ways who have been cast into the prison of the king, appear at will as thieves, and having been identified as crooks, they are cast into prison, but once inside by the power of their magic they wash and anoint the bodies of those in chains, clothe them in fine clothes, satisfy them physically with food and drink, release them from those sturdy chains, after which they teach the dharma in such a way that they will be determined for supreme and perfect awakening; in order to bring to maturity those sentient beings who have been led to execution by the king and are in fear of losing their lives and tormented by suffering, bodhisattvas and mahāsattvas magically conjure up others and lead them by magic to the executioner, after which they release those people due to be executed from those chains and teach the dharma to them, reassured, redeemed and relieved as they are, in such a way that they will be determined for supreme and perfect awakening; wherever on account of property, wealth, land, household goods, manservants, maidservants, labourers or guards there are quarrels, disputes, fights or hard words, there bodhisattvas and mahāsattvas take up a position in the middle by means of a creative stratagem, after which they distribute by magic property and wealth and gems, and apply themselves to reconciling those people; and once they see that they are reconciled, they inspire them to supreme and perfect awakening...

These are just a few examples of the many ways in which, according to the *DKP*, *upāyakauśalya* involves getting alongside other people, especially by temporarily assuming a suitable identity, or in most cases the same identity as them, i.e., appearing at will as women, children, criminals, disabled persons, persons blind from birth, mutes, insane and crazy people, other heterodox practitioners, prostitutes, musicians and performing artists, and then, having won the women, children, etc. over, teaching them the dharma. This is a far cry from more prosaic interpretations of *upāyakauśalya* as some sort of teaching skill, or pedagogic flexibility, such as we find in the recent book by John Schroeder (2001). But it may illustrate how the processes of creative visualisation we have alluded to above can be brought to bear not simply on possibilities in other worlds or realms, like Sukhāvātī, but also on one's life in this world. That is to say, returning to the subject of dreams, we should at least consider the proposition that the path of the bodhisattva may itself con-

stitute a kind of dream, a dream deliberately engaged in, of unlimited power, bliss and freedom from the shackles of our ordinary reality, of purity and perfection.⁵⁸ In attempting to assess the religious significance of this kind of activity, it might be helpful to bear in mind that it is unlikely to have been a kind of Walter Mitty-type fantasy, an idle indulgence in daydreams of power and glory. To adopt such a view would be to trivialise this material. To take it seriously demands that we accept it in the terms in which it is often described, as a heroic activity, pursued with relentless discipline and determination, day and night. If we are at all right about these early foreshadowings of dream yoga and its connection with the bodhisattva path, then what we have here is evidence of the most strenuous mental asceticism, of a regime of stringent ritual exercises from which there is little or no rest at any time, even in one's sleep. This is also illuminating, perhaps, for our understanding of the processes of dream and sleep themselves. Here the investigations of Freud and others into the dynamics of dreaming may bear reconsideration. Although Freud introduced the (in his day) ground-breaking concept of "dream work," he tended to emphasise the dream as the playground of the id, where consciousness broke free of the normal controls, and all sorts of impulses normally held in check were given full rein. I doubt that his thinking would have encompassed such a thorough-going attempt to bring the dream under control and subordinate it to religious objectives. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, far from being the playground of the id, the dream becomes the parade ground of the superego, a site where the ego is subjected to relentless drilling.

But even if we set this particular hypothesis (and its Freudian cadenza) to one side, in general terms Walter Ong's comments seem intriguingly pertinent to our attempts to understand the Mahāyāna and its scriptures. Speaking of the development of narrative and the disappearance of the flat character in written culture, he says (1982, p. 153): "Writing and reading . . . are solo activities. . . . They engage the psyche in strenuous, interiorized, individualized thought of a sort inaccessible to oral folk. In the private worlds that they generate, the feeling for the 'round' human character is born—deeply interiorized in motivation, powered mysteriously, but consistently, from within." In the case of Mahāyāna Buddhism, that deeply interiorized motivation powering us mysteriously from within is of course the aspiration to awakening

⁵⁸ And this is certainly the case with the detailed instructions for dream yoga described in Chang 1963, pp. 88–94. The text, "An Introduction to the Six Yogas of Naropa," is attributed to one Drashi Namjhal, and is translated from a Chinese version of his work (see pp. 14–15).

(*bodhicitta*) of the bodhisattva. And since the primary mission of the bodhisattva is to liberate others by teaching the dharma, and since that very dharma is the product of the bodhisattva's own visionary experience and inspiration, the medium and the message are collapsed together in more ways than one. That is to say, the bodhisattvas are themselves mediums, and their message is that one should become a medium. My hypothesis is, then, that the message of the Mahāyāna and its delivery were heavily conditioned by the specific historical circumstances in which it arose; by the social context of the forest-dwelling members of the Buddhist Saṅgha; by the practices of textual transmission and meditation they engaged in; by the dynamics of the world of visions and dreams which they entered; and lastly by the technology of writing which lay newly at their disposal. This broader hypothesis is still under construction, and I freely admit that it is speculative, but it does have the advantage of taking seriously the determinative impact of material culture—in which regard the influence of iconography is no doubt also significant.

Few other religious traditions anywhere have generated the extraordinary amount of scripture that the Buddhists have, a state of affairs which we who study Buddhism scarcely think to interrogate as a historical problem. One cannot avoid noting here the contrast with the Jains, so similar in many other respects, who resisted until much later the urge to write their scriptures down, and also never developed anything like the Mahāyāna. Could it be that once the followers of the Mahāyāna picked up their pens, they never looked back? Well, that is just a manner of speaking. In fact, they did look back, and they certainly looked inwards as well, to recreate their tradition in a way which was quite extraordinary. Amid the hardships of the forest, these Buddhist renunciants produced a new and persuasive vision of the world, shimmering brightly with precious stones and magically transfigured by the altruism of superheroes often pursuing their calling in the most humble disguises and unlikely places.

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