The Mahāyāna and the Middle Period in Indian Buddhism: Through a Chinese Looking-glass*

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IN spite of the fact that according to most periodizations, and in most current handbooks, the Middle Period of Indian Buddhism—the period from the beginning of the Common Era to the 5th/6th centuries—is presented as the period of the Mahāyāna, it is becoming increasingly obvious that there is little evidence to support this. Certainly this period saw the production of a substantial body of Mahāyāna sūtras, but this production can no longer be viewed in isolation—the Middle Period in India saw a very great deal more as well, and the bulk of this has no demonstrable connection with the Mahāyāna. In looking for the reasons that this other material has been ignored or marginalized, and in trying to explain how the Mahāyāna may have been assigned a place in the history of Indian Buddhism that it does not deserve, at least one thing is becoming clearer: the history of the Mahāyāna in China may well have been the single most powerful determining force in how the history of the Mahāyāna in India was perceived and reconstructed.

Seen from almost any point of view, things Chinese have played a surprisingly large part in the study of Indian Buddhism. Chinese translations of Buddhist texts have, for example, often been used—rightly or wrongly—to

* This paper has had already a rather long life. A first version was presented at a conference at Hsi Lai University in Los Angeles in 1993. Yet another version was presented as a public lecture at Otani University in Kyoto in 1997. I would here especially like to thank the authorities of Otani for their invitation, which allowed me to spend several weeks over a period of two years at their University, and very especially I would like to warmly thank Professor Nobuchiyo Odani who made my stays productive, pleasant and fun.

establish chronological relationships between Indian texts, and the date of a translation, when determinable, at least allows us to know that some version of the Indian text had already been in existence for some indeterminable amount of time. There are, of course, important cases where the information so derived appears to be of little consequence, and one thinks here above all else of the various *vinayas*: all but one of the *vinayas* preserved in Chinese were translated in the early 5th century, but most scholars have wanted to say that the Indian 'originals' had been composed centuries before. If these scholars are correct, it is not at all clear what the dates of the Chinese translations really tell us. Instances of this sort should give us pause for thought.

Chinese translations have also been used—less successfully I think—to try to track what have been seen as developments within a given Indian text. The nature and number of assumptions and methodological problems involved in such a use have not, however, always or ever been fully faced, and it is not impossible that some—if not a great deal—of what has been said on the basis of Chinese translations about the history of an Indian text has more to do with the history of Chinese translation techniques and Chinese religious or cultural predilections than with the history of the Indian text itself.

The role of Chinese translations in the histories of Indian Buddhist literature is, of course, well known. Less well known perhaps is the impact of Chinese sources on other aspects of the study of Buddhism in India: the study of the historical geography of India and the archeology of Buddhist India were both virtually founded on the basis of Chinese sources. Without Fa-Hsien and Hsüan-Tsang it is hard to imagine where either of these disciplines would be today. Without access to the Chinese 'travel' literature, Alexander Cunningham, who put both disciplines on their first footing, would surely not have accomplished what he did, and many major Buddhist sites would almost certainly have remained unidentified. Fa-Hsien and Hsüan-Tsang provided him with the basic maps.[1]

In these and other ways Chinese sources have made foundational, and largely positive contributions to the study of Indian Buddhism. But there are

[1] See S. Roy, "Indian Archaeology from Jones to Marshall (1784–1902)," *Ancient India* 9 (1953) 4–28, esp. 10ff; A. Imam, *Sir Alexander Cunningham and the Beginnings of Indian Archaeology* (Dacca, 1966) esp. 51–52; D. K. Chakrabarti, *A History of Indian Archeology. From the Beginning to 1947* (New Delhi, 1988) 48–119—That this dependence on Chinese sources (in translations!) has also resulted in some serious distortions is clear enough in general terms but badly needs to be carefully studied.

other cases where they have proved less useful, where knowledge of things Chinese may have been more of an obstacle than an aid to understanding the historical situation in India. It is, for example, virtually certain that early and repeated assertions that an emphasis on filial piety was peculiar to Chinese Buddhism—that it was, in fact, one of the "transformations" of Buddhism in China—seriously retarded the recognition of the importance of filial piety in Buddhist India.[2] It is almost equally certain that the documented importance of Amitābha and Sukhāvatī in China has led to a good deal of fruitless effort directed towards finding an organized "Pureland" Buddhism in India.[3]

But beyond specifics of this sort lurk some far broader and perhaps even more general concerns. It has often been unthinkingly assumed that developments in China kept pace with and—with some lead time—chronologically paralleled developments in India; that the two somehow developed in tandem. There were at least two effects of this kind of assumption: 1) very little attention has been paid to chronologically disarticulated developments in the two spheres; and 2) there has been little willingness to concede even the possibility that certain developments in Buddhist forms and institutions may have occurred first in China, perhaps centuries before something like it occurred in India. Let me first cite an example which might illustrate something of both.

There seems to be little doubt that the Perfection of Wisdom literature, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-Prajñāpāramitā*, the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā*, etc., were in China, as Professor Zürcher says, "of paramount importance" in the late 3rd and early 4th century when Buddhism "began to penetrate into the life and thought of the cultured upper classes."[4] An Indianist must be struck by several things here. The first, of course, is that there is virtually no evidence that this literature, and particularly the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, ever penetrated "into the life and thought of the cultured upper classes" in India, let alone that it did so in the 3rd and 4th century. The cultured upper classes in India, in fact, seem to have seen Buddhist monks and nuns largely as buffoons, their stock

[2] See G. Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu, 1997) 56–71.

[3] See now G. Fussman, "La place des *Sukhāvatī-vyūha* dans le bouddhisme indien," *Journal asiatique* (1999) 523–86; and note 21 below.

[4] E. Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China* (Leiden, 1959) 33–36; 50; 53–54; 61 (where he says that "early Chinese Buddhist scholars, however, considered the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* an extract" or a "condensed version made from a more comprehensive original text"); 65.

character in classical Indian literature and drama.[5] Moreover, the rare Buddhist authors who could write classical Kāvya or poetry—Aśvaghoṣa, Āryaśūra—show little awareness and no particular influence of texts like the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*. Even in Indian *śāstric* works, where one might expect it, Perfection of Wisdom texts are rarely cited. Candrakīrti in his *Prasannapadā*, for example, cites the *Aṣṭa* only four times, but the *Samādhirāja* more than twenty; in his *Śikṣāsamuccaya* Śāntideva cites the *Aṣṭa* only twice, but the *Samādhirāja*, again, almost twenty times. The insignificance of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* and related texts in India until rather late may also be reflected in the Central Asian manuscript collections. Although Perfection of Wisdom texts are not themselves overly common in these collections, when they do occur they are overwhelmingly—if not all—fragments from the so-called 'Larger' Perfection of Wisdom—that in 18,000, 25,000, or 100,000 lines. The same holds true for the Gilgit manuscripts.[6]

This is not to say that there is no evidence for the 'popularity' of the Perfection of Wisdom and the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* in India. There is such evidence, but it does not come from the 3rd or 4th century, but rather from the Pāla Period and predominantly from the Late Pāla Period, that is to say, from the 11th and 12th centuries. Then, and only then, do we have any evidence that this literature was even known outside a tiny circle of Buddhist scholastics. At Sārnāth, for example, we have an 11th century inscription which records the fact that a "most excellent lay-sister who was a follower of the Mahāyāna" had had the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* copied and had made a gift to ensure "the recitation of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñā* for as long a time as the moon, the sun and the earth will endure."[7] At Nālandā too there is an 11th century inscription that records the religious activity of a prominent monk, probably an "Abbot." This monk's teacher is described as having "in his heart . . . 'the

[5] See M. Bloomfield, "On False Ascetics and Nuns in Hindu Fiction," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 44 (1924) 202–42; C.V. Kher, "Buddhism and the Non-Philosophical Brahmanical Literature," *Studies in Pali and Buddhism: A Memorial Volume in Honor of Bhikkhu Jagdish Kashyap*, ed. A. K. Narain (Delhi, 1979) 207–16; L. Siegal, *Laughing Matters: Comic Tradition in India* (Chicago/London: 1987) 209–25.

[6] See, for example, L. Sander, "The Earliest Manuscripts from Central Asia and the Sarvāstivāda Mission," in *Corolla Iranica: Papers in Honour of Prof. Dr. David Neil Mackenzie on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, ed. R.E. Emmerick and D. Weber (Frankfurt am Main, 1991) 133–50; esp. 136. The *Vajracchedikā* is something of an exception to this pattern.

[7] V.V. Mirashi, *Inscriptions of the Kalachuri-Chedi Era* (Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum 4) (Ootacamund, 1955) 275–78.

Mother of the Buddhas' in eight thousand (verses)," and the monk himself is said to have made what appears to have been a revolving bookcase "by means of which the Mother of the Buddhas revolved continually in the great temple of the Holy Khasarppaṇa (Avalokiteśvara)."[8] To these epigraphical records testifying to the importance of the Perfection of Wisdom in Pāla Period North-east India can be added the colophons of more than a dozen palm-leaf manuscripts which prove that the act of the "excellent lay sister" at Sārnāth was by no means an isolated instance. These manuscripts were copied at several major monasteries in Bengal and Bihar—at Nālandā certainly, at Vikramaśīla, and possibly at Kurkihar. These manuscripts were the "religious gifts" (*deyadharma*) of a significant number of Mahāyāna laysisters and brothers, and some Mahāyāna monks.[9] They were copied—exactly as the content of the text would suggest—as an act of merit, and the resulting merit was assigned or "transferred" with exactly the same donative formulae used in the earliest Mahāyāna inscriptions which date to the 5th century. Many of these manuscripts, moreover, had functioned as objects of worship: their covering boards or first leaves were often heavily stained and encrusted from continuous daubing with unguents and aromatic powders.[10]

All of this, in short, testifies to the kind of book-cult which, for example, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* itself describes, and which one might therefore have expected near the time of its composition at, perhaps, the beginning of the Common Era. But this evidence is almost a thousand years later than it should be, and, apart from other texts, there is no actual evidence for what it describes before this.

There appear to be at least two points here worth pondering. First it would appear that the date of composition of a text need not have any direct connection with the period, or periods, of its religious or cultural significance:

[8] N.G. Majumdar, "Nalanda Inscription of Vipulasrimitra," *Epigraphia Indica* 21 (1931–32) 97–101—Majumdar has not recognized what appears in the inscription to be a reference to some kind of revolving bookcase or a mechanical device something like, perhaps, a larger, stationary Tibetan "prayer-wheel".—There is also reference to the *Prajñāpāramitā* in a Pāla record assigned to the 9th century: A.C. Sastri, "Jagajjivanpur Copper-Plate of Mahendrapāla," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 72/73 (1993) 205–214, esp. 212, line 18.

[9] For a sampling of such colophons see R.D. Banerji, *The Palas of Bengal* (Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal 5.3) (Calcutta, 1915) 25; 34–35; 53; 70;71; R. Sāṅkṛityāyana, "Sanskrit Palm-Leaf Mss. In Tibet," *The Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society* 21 (1935) 27 (no. 1, note 1); 32 (no. 59, note 8); 43 (no. 184, note 1); etc.

[10] Banerji, *The Palas of Bengal*, 71.

ideas and practices in a text may only have been actualized centuries after that text was composed. Second, the apparent periods of popularity of the Perfection of Wisdom in India and China are radically unaligned and its popularity in each is of a very different kind: the Indian situation, it would appear, need not have any predictive value for the Chinese, nor the Chinese for the Indian.

This example of the Perfection of Wisdom may appear extreme, but the case of the *vinayas* already cited may be very like it. If, again, the *vinayas* are as old as most scholars would have them be, then fully ordered monasticism in India and China are separated once more by almost a thousand years. There is as well other material concerning the Perfection of Wisdom that points to a significant—if not quite so radical—non-alignment between situations in India and China.

If we want to look more synchronically at the situation of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* or the Perfection of Wisdom "school" in 3rd century China and in 3rd century India the first thing that becomes obvious is that our sources are, to be sure, more than a little uneven. For China we may refer again to the material so carefully studied by Professor Zürcher and repeat his remarks about the "paramount importance" of the *Aṣṭa* and the Perfection of Wisdom in what he calls, "not without hesitation", the "gentry Buddhism" of the period in China. For India we have, of course, nothing like the richness of his sources, but we do have an important historical source probably from this same period which has been oddly overlooked, a source which while not directly linkable to the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, appears to have been authored by the major scholastic that Buddhist traditions want to associate with Perfection of Wisdom literature.

Probably most of the scholars who are supposed to know about such things agree that the *Ratnāvalī* is an authentic work of Nāgārjuna, and that Nāgārjuna probably lived in the 2nd or 3rd century C.E.[11] If both things are true, the *Ratnāvalī* is of interest not just to students of Buddhist philosophy,

[11] On the question of authenticity see D.S. Ruegg, *The Literature of the Madhyamaka School of Philosophy in India* (A History of Indian Literature VII. 1)(Wiesbaden, 1981) 23ff; Chr. Lindtner, *Nagarjuniana: Studies in the Writings and Philosophy of Nāgārjuna* (Copenhagen, 1982) 163–69; T. Vetter, "On the Authenticity of the Ratnāvalī," *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques* 46.1 (1992) 492–506.—On the life of Nāgārjuna, see most recently I. Mabbett, "The Problem of the Historical Nāgārjuna Revisted," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118 (1998) 332–46, which indicates, if nothing else, how little progress has been made.

but is an important document for the historian of the Mahāyāna since it presents what it explicitly labels as a "contemporary" characterization of the movement. Chapter IV in fact devotes a good deal of space to the Mahāyāna and in several verses describes what appears to have been the general response to it. In one verse, however, the author uses a small but significant word which may chronologically anchor the entire account. The word is *adya*—"now," "today." Again, if Nāgārjuna is the author of the *Ratnāvalī*, and if he lived in the 2nd or 3rd century, then the "now" obviously refers to this same period. So, although we still cannot geographically situate the account, and although we still do not know if it refers to the Mahāyāna as a whole or only to the Mahāyāna in a certain area, we can for now at least locate it in time: it refers to the Mahāyāna in the 2nd or 3rd century, or to the Mahāyāna at least one century—and perhaps more—after the first Mahāyāna sūtras were written.

Although the *Ratnāvalī* is describing the Mahāyāna after it had had a century or more to develop and take shape, there is no indication in the text that this Mahāyāna had even yet successfully effected anything like what Stcherbatsky called the "radical revolution" which "had transformed the Buddhist Church."[12] In fact the Mahāyāna as it emerges in the *Ratnāvalī*—a text presumably written by a strong proponent of the movement—appears above all as an object of ridicule, scorn, and abuse (*nindati*, *durbhāṣita*, etc.).[13] Even in the hands of one of its most clever advocates it does not appear as an independent, self-confident movement sweeping all before it as, again, Stcherbatsky's influential scenario might suggest. But rather—and as late as the 2nd or 3rd century—it appears as an embattled movement struggling for acceptance. It appears to have found itself in an awkward spot on several issues. Nāgārjuna, for example, wants the Mahāyāna to be "the word of the Buddha":

> "The benefit of others and oneself, and the goal of release, are in brief the teaching of the Buddha (*buddha-śāsana*). They are at the heart of the six perfections. Therefore this is the word of the Buddha." (*te ṣaṭpāramitāgarbhās /tasmād bauddham idaṃ vacaḥ* /IV 82)

[12] Th. Stcherbatsky, *The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāṇa* (Leningrad, 1927) 36—This 'vision' of the Mahāyāna was, of course, very common for a very long time.

[13] All citations from and references to the *Ratnāvalī* refer to M. Hahn, *Nāgārjuna's Ratnāvalī* (Indica et Tibetica I) (Bonn, 1982). Since I refer only to Ch. IV, I frequently only give the verse numbers.

But a few verses later he is forced to admit that "the goal of being established in the practice which leads to awakening is not declared in the sūtra" (*bodhicaryāpratiṣṭhārthaṃ na sūtre bhāṣitaṃ vacaḥ* / IV 93).

To judge again by Nāgārjuna's "defense," the Mahāyāna had troubles not just in regard to its authenticity, or not just in regard to its doctrine of emptiness. Its conception of the Buddha—what, significantly, Nāgārjuna several times calls its *Buddha-māhātmya*—also appears to have been far from having carried the day in the 2nd or 3rd century. At least Nāgārjuna was still arguing for its acceptance:

> "From the inconceivability of his merit, like the sky, the Jina is declared to have inconceivable good qualities. As a consequence the conception of the Buddha (*buddhamāhātmya*) in the Mahāyāna must be accepted!" (IV 84)

But immediately following this verse asserting that the Mahāyāna conception of the Buddha must be accepted, comes another which seems to tacitly admit that it was not:

> "Even in morality alone he [the Buddha] was beyond the range of even Śāriputra. Why then is the conception of the Buddha as inconceivable not accepted?" (*yasmāt tad buddhamāhātmyam acintyaṃ kim na mṛṣyate* / IV 85)

The tacit admission here of the rejection of the Mahāyāna is perhaps the one unifying theme of the entire discussion in chapter IV of the *Ratnāvalī*, and although Nāgārjuna—or whoever wrote the text—does occasionally actually muster arguments in response to the perceived rejection, the response is most commonly characterized not by the skill of the dialectician, but rather by the heavy-handed rhetoric typical of marginalized sectarian preachers. Typically the Mahāyāna is extolled without argument, and then some very unkind things are said about those who are not convinced. Verse 79 is a good example of such rhetoric:

> "Because of its extreme generosity and profound depth the Mahāyāna is now (*adya*) ridiculed by the low-spirited and unprepared. From stupidity (it is ridiculed) by those hostile to both themselves and others." (IV 79)

Again this sort of rhetoric runs like a refrain throughout the discussion. Not only are those who ridicule the Mahāyāna stupid and ill-prepared, they

are "deluded" and "hostile" (vs.67), they have no understanding of good qualities or actually despise them (vss. 68, 69); they have no sense (vs.78), and they are "ignorant and blind" (vs. 83). This sort of rhetoric and name-calling is generally not associated with a strong, self-assured, established movement with broad support and wide acceptance. But we need not rely on general considerations of this kind to conclude that the Mahāyāna was, in the 2nd or 3rd century, a long way from having achieved any significant acceptance in Nāgārjuna's India. Our author—again, himself a proponent of the system or movement he is characterizing—repeatedly and explicitly declares that there is "opposition", "aversion", or "resistance" (*pratigha*) to the Mahāyāna (vs. 97): it is the object of "ridicule" or "scorn" (vss. 67,68, 69,78,79); it is despised (vss. 70, 89), verbally abused (vs. 80); not tolerated (vs. 85); and not accepted (vss. 85, 87). Its position would seem to be clear.

In addition to those which we have already seen, Nāgārjuna also makes use of other rhetorical devices from the tool-chest of the embattled sectarian preacher: One who despises the Mahāyāna is warned that he "is thereby destroyed" (vs. 70); while one who has faith in the Mahāyāna (*mahāyānaprasādena*), and who practices it, is promised the eventual attainment of awakening (*anuttarā bodhiḥ*), "and—in the meantime—all comforts or happiness" (*sarvasaukhya* vs. 98). There are as well—as there are in Mahāyāna Sūtra literature—several exhortations to have faith in the Mahāyāna (e.g. *prasādaś cādhikaḥ kāryaḥ* vs. 97). But the real weakness of the position of the Mahāyāna is perhaps most strikingly evident, in a series of verses where our author gives up any attempt to argue for the *acceptance* of the Mahāyāna, and—playing off the old Buddhist ideal of *upekṣa*—argues instead that it should at least be *tolerated*:

> "Since it is indeed not easy to understand what is declared with intention by the Tathāgata, when one vehicle and three vehicles are declared, one should be careful by remaining impartial (*ātmā rakṣya upekṣayā*).
> There is indeed no demerit through remaining impartial *(upekṣayā hi nāpuṇyaṃ*). But from despising there is evil—how could that be good. As a consequence, for those who value themselves despising the Mahāyāna is inappropriate." (vss. 88–89)

This has the smell of a retreat. There are, of course, some problems here. Sectarian rhetoric—especially in isolation—is difficult to assess. What the observer sees as rhetoric the insider may see as self-evident and hold as con-

viction. But the fact probably remains that calling those who do not share your conviction "stupid" occurs largely in the face of a rejection which itself threatens that conviction and reflects a certain desperation. More self-confident movements are by definition more assured of their means of persuasion and do not commonly indulge in this sort of thing.

Sociologists, however, who have studied sectarian groups in a variety of contexts have shown that this sort of characterization is typical of small, embattled groups on the fringes or margins of dominant, established parent groups.[14] Moreover, the kind of rhetoric we find in the *Ratnāvalī* is by no means unique—Mahāyāna literature is saturated with it. There, those who do not accept the Mahāyāna are not only said to be "stupid" but defective, of bad karma and evil, or even possessed by Māra.[15] Further, while we cannot be sure that those who did not accept the Mahāyāna were "stupid," we can be reasonably sure that such people existed at the time of our author, and in large numbers. Even the logic of the rhetoric would suggest that it would be self-defeating—if not itself "stupid"—for a proponent of a movement to repeatedly claim that that movement was an object of ridicule if it were not true: it would get him nowhere and in fact undercut any argument he might make on that basis. The statements in the *Ratnāvalī*, indeed, presuppose that it was widely known by its intended audience—almost certainly literate and learned monks and perhaps the king it was supposedly addressed to—that the Mahāyāna was not taken seriously and was in general an object of scorn. Again, the force of our author's arguments would seem to rest on this being fact.

There is also the problem of our author. Scholarly consensus, as we have noted, ascribes the *Ratnāvalī* to the Nāgārjuna who also authored the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikās*, and places this Nāgārjuna in the 2nd or 3rd century C.E. This—again as we have noted—would also place the Mahāyāna described in the *Ratnāvalī* in the 2nd or 3rd century, and would mean that the Mahāyāna at least one and probably two centuries after it was supposed

[14] For the sake of convenience of reference see S. Kent, "A Sectarian Interpretation of the Rise of the Mahāyāna," *Religion* 12 (1982) 311–32. Although Kent's knowledge of things Buddhist is thin and uneven, and although significant parts of what he says will not stand up to great scrutiny, still his paper is a remarkable example of the kinds of things that an 'outsider'—he describes his specialty as the social sciences and his area of interest as the early English Quakers—can see when he looks at otherwise unfamiliar materials, things which 'insiders' often do not even notice.

[15] See below, p. 20 and n. 37.

to have appeared, had still not achieved any significant acceptance and was still an object of ridicule and scorn among learned and literate monks. But scholarly consensus, of course, has often had to be revised, and in this case too that may occur. However, it seems very, very unlikely that, should the *Ratnāvalī* be shown not to be by the author of the *Kārikās*, it will then be shown to have been composed by an author that preceded him. In other words, while it is not impossible that the *Ratnāvalī* might eventually be shown not to belong to the 2nd or 3rd century, it is extremely unlikely that it will ever be assigned to a period earlier than that. Any revision of its chronological position will almost certainly be upward, and that in turn means that the Mahāyāna it is describing too will have to be placed even after the 3rd century.[16]

The contrast between the situation of the Mahāyāna and the Perfection of Wisdom "school" in China in the 3rd century which Professor Zürcher has reconstructed, and the situation of the Mahāyāna in 3rd century India which is inadvertently described in the *Ratnāvalī*, could hardly be greater. In China in the 3rd century the Mahāyāna was of "paramount importance," well situ-

[16] The defensive posture and shrill 'sectarian' rhetoric do not, in any case, stop with the *Ratnāvalī*, see R. M. Davidson, "Sāramati's *Entering into the Great Vehicle*," in *Buddhism in Practice*, ed., D.S. Lopez (Princeton, 1995) 402–411. Davidson describes this text as "a primer from the late fourth or very early fifth century C.E." Here, still, people are said to 'slander', 'denigrate', and 'deprecate' the Mahāyāna, to "maintain the Great Vehicle to be the word of Māra", and to "believe that to call the Great Vehicle the word of the Buddha is like a worm in the body of the Teacher that still feeds on his corpse ..." In an equally interesting paper, J.I. Cabezón noted that "Indeed, for more than six hundred years we find Mahāyāna scholars engaged in what they considered to be a refutation of the arguments of their opponents..." in regard to the authenticity of the Mahāyāna sūtras. He refers to Nāgārjuna in the 2nd century, Vasubandhu in the 4th, Bhāvaviveka in the 6th, and Śāntideva in the 8th (J.I. Cabezón, "Vasubandhu's *Vyākhyāyukti* on the Authenticity of the Mahāyāna *Sūtras*," in *Texts in Context: Traditional Hermeneutics in South Asia,* ed., J.R. Timm (Albany, 1992) 221–243, esp. 223, 224). Cabezón also makes a good argument throughout the paper for his position that Vasubandhu repudiates "historical . . . criteria as determinants of authenticity," and that "from Vasubandhu's viewpoint, neither history nor philology can serve as the basis for the criterion of authenticity or canonicity." He concludes that "the Mahāyāna scholastic rejection of history . . . in favor of a doctrinal or philosophical principle . . . as the ultimate criterion of authenticity is far from being an instance of hermeneutical naiveté. It is, in fact, the result of considerable critical reflection." To this I would only add that "the Mahāyāna scholastic rejection of history" is perhaps, at least in part, a function of the Mahāyāna's actual historical situation—it rejected 'history' because it was not winning, and probably could not win, the historical argument.

ated among the ecclesiastical and social elite, well on its way—if not already—mainstream. In India it is, during the same period, embattled, ridiculed, scorned by learned monks and the social elite—bear in mind that the *Ratnāvalī* was supposed to have been addressed to a king—and at best marginal. These are historical situations which surely are not significantly parallel; they are almost the inverse of one another. Moreover, evidence that would suggest that the *Ratnāvalī* presents something like an accurate picture of the historical situation of the early Mahāyāna in India has been around for a long time, but it has been all but assiduously avoided. One reason for this, indeed one ironical obstacle to admitting this material into the discussion, has probably been the uncomfortable implications that it carries for two concerned groups. Recognition of the possibility, if not the fact, that developments in China were independent of, and unrelated to, developments in India—the motherland and supposed source of all that is authoritative and buddhistically good—would have created problems for any Chinese—and by extension Japanese—Buddhist tradition: it would have deprived them of "historical" sanction. But a recognition that what was important in China may not have been important in India, and vice versa, would also have rendered problematic the enormous labors of modern scholars who worked primarily on Chinese sources: they would have to ask some uncomfortable questions about the significance of the documents they were mining. It is here, I think, that sets of complicated, textured and entangled interests regarding Chinese sources may have been most mischievous and most misleading in our attempts to understand the historical situation of the early Mahāyāna in India. What appears to be a reluctance, or full failure, to consider even the possibility that what in India was marginal was in China mainstream has, moreover, affected our understanding not just of the early Mahāyāna in India, but has very likely obscured our understanding of Buddhism in India throughout what I would call the Middle Period, the period from the beginning of the Common Era to the 5th/6th century.

It seems fairly certain that in China from the 3rd century on the Mahāyāna became not less, but more and more mainstream. The Mahāyāna in India, however, appears to have continued very much on the margins. Again in striking contrast to its situation in China, the Mahāyāna in India was—until the 5th century—institutionally and publicly all but invisible. Here, of course, I can only quickly summarize several large bodies of data.

Throughout the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th centuries there are in India scores of references in inscriptions to the mainstream monastic orders as recipients of

gifts of land, monasteries, endowments of money, slaves, villages, deposits of relics and images, but not a single reference to gifts or patronage extended to an explicitly named Mahāyāna or Mahāyāna groups until the end of the 5th and beginning of the 6th century.[17] Though there are hundreds of inscriptions from the 2nd to the 5th century which record the intentions, goals, and aspirations of a wide range of monastic and lay donors, there is not a single reference—with one partial exception—to what Louis de la Vallée Poussin has flagged as the goal that defines, above all else, the Mahāyāna: "Le Mahāyāna, par définition, est," he says, "l'aspiration à la qualite de Bouddha;" the early Mahāyāna he again says, was "distinqué du Petit Véhicule en ceci seulement, ou en ceci surtout, qu'il invite les hommes pieux à prendre la résolution de deviner des Bouddhas."[18] But apart from a single partial exception that proves the rule, this *idea* is nowhere found in any of the hundreds of donative inscriptions until the 5th century. The one exception—an isolated 2nd or 3rd century inscription from Mathurā—is itself, moreover, not fully Mahāyāna, but only groping towards it.[19] Apart, again, from this single, isolated and partial exception, it is clear that the sin-

[17] For an approximate—but only that—idea of the number and sorts of inscriptions that record donations to the named mainstream monastic orders between the beginning of the Common Era and the 5th Century see Ét. Lamotte, *Histoire du bouddhisme indien: Des origines à l'ère Śaka* (Louvain, 1958) 578–81; and M. Shizutani, *Indo bukkyō himei mokuroku* (Kyoto, 1979); both, however, are badly in need of revision. Many new inscriptions—especially referring to the Dharmaguptika and Sarvāstivādins—have since been published (see, for example, R. Salomon, *Ancient Buddhist Scrolls from Gandhāra: The British Library Kharoṣṭhī Fragments* (Seattle, 1999) 175–78; 183–247; G. Fussman, "Documents épigraphiques kouchans (V). Buddha et bodhisattva dans l'art de Mathura: deux bodhisattvas inscrits de l'an 4 et l'an 8," *Bulletin de l'école française d'extrême-orient* 77 (1988) 6–7), and some of those cited by Lamotte do not refer to 'schools' or 'orders' at all (see, for examples, Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*, 167ff; G. Schopen, "The Lay Ownership of Monasteries and the Role of the Monk in Mūlasarvāstivādin Monasticism," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 19.1 (1996) 93 note 31.

[18] L. de la Vallée Poussin, *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi: La Siddhi de Hiuan-Tsang* (Paris, 1929) T. II, 767; de la Vallée Poussin, "Opinions sur les relations des deux Véhicules au point de vue du Vinaya," *Académie royale de belgique: Bulletin de la classe des lettres et des sciences morales et politiques*, 5^{e} série, T. XVI (1930) 20–39. For more recent assertions to much the same effect see P. Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (London/New York, 1989) 25; P. Harrison, "Some Reflections on the Personality of the Buddha," *Otani gakuho* 74.4 (1995) 18, 20.

[19] G. Schopen, "The Inscription on the Kuṣān Image of Amitābha and the Character of the Early Mahāyāna in India," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 10.2 (1987) 99–134.

gle most important and characteristically Mahāyāna *idea* had no visible impact on Indian donors, whether monk—and a very large number of the donors were monks—or goldsmith or merchant or king, until the 5th century.

Exactly the same pattern holds in regard to what we see in art historical sources and, again with one exception, so too does what Étienne Lamotte said a long time ago: "L'école du Gandhāra ne traduit encore que les conceptions hīnayānistes concernant le panthéon bouddhique . . . La même constatation a été faite à Mathurā et vaudrait également pour Amarāvatī et Nāgārjunakoṇḍa. On n'y a trouvé aucune trace des grands sauveurs du Mahāyāna, Avalokiteśvara et Mañjuśrī; ils ne figurent pas au répertoire de ces écoles . . ."[20] until after the 5th century. The one exception here is the same exception referred to above: the Proto-Mahāyāna inscription from 2nd or 3rd century Mathurā occurs on the base of what was once an image of Amitābha. Apart from it, and although there have been attempts to identify a *small* number of other representations as Mahāyāna figures, there is not a single *certain* or *incontestable* representation anywhere in India of any of the characteristic Mahāyāna Buddhas or Bodhisattvas until the 5th century, and—like references to the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*—they probably do not become really common until the Pāla period, although even then their numbers and significance may have been exaggerated.[21]

What emerges from a study of the inscriptional and art historical sources has, finally, been confirmed by the recent careful re-reading of Fa-Hsien by Professor André Bareau. Professor Bareau has noted that "with very rare exceptions, Fa-Hsien noted in India almost no specifically Mahāyānist elements," that "if we are to accept his account, the personages to whom the devotions of Indian Buddhists were addressed at the beginning of the 5th

[20] Ét. Lamotte, "Mañjuśrī," *T'oung Pao* 48 (1960) 3–4.

[21] G. Fussman has—it seems to me—used exactly the right sort of language in recently summarizing the attempts to find Mahāyāna elements, and particularly "Pureland" elements, in the art of Gandhāra and Mathurā, for example. He first notes in regard to the reliefs in question "que la date de ces reliefs n'étant pas déterminable à trois siècles près (II^e-V^e) .." and then says: "On a quelques raisons, mais pas contraignantes, d'attribuer à ce même culte [of Amitābha] une dizaine de panneaux sculptés qu' on peut considérer, sans scandale mais sans preuve, comme représentant la Sukhāvatī. C'est bien peu par rapport aux milliers de sculptures gandhariennes conservées. C'est bien peu par rapport aux centaines de statues de culte du *buddha* Śākyamuni dit historique . . . C'est dire combien le culte d'Amitābha est minoritaire au Gandhāra. Statistiquement, il n'y est pas mieux représenté qu'à Mathurā . . ."; "La place des *Sukhāvatī-vyūha*," 550–51.

century were almost exclusively Buddhas known from the early canonical texts . . . ;" and, finally, that "throughout the account of Fa-Hsien's travels Indian Buddhism at the beginning of the 5th century appears to us, therefore, as exclusively Hīnayānist . . ."[22]

The cumulative weight of the different evidences is heavy and makes it clear that regardless of what was occurring in China, and although Mahāyāna Sūtras were being written at the time, it is virtually impossible to characterize Indian Buddhism in the Middle Period—the period from the 1st to the 5th century—as in any meaningful sense Mahāyāna. In India it appears more and more certain that the Mahāyāna was not institutionally, culturally or art historically significant until after the 5th century, and not until then did Mahāyāna doctrine have any significant visible impact on the intentions of Buddhist donors.

We do not, of course, know for certain where the Mahāyāna was in the meantime. We do know where it first became visible, and texts tell us where it might have been. Here too I can only summarize a large body of data.

It is ironic—and perhaps significant—that what may have been one of the earliest inscriptional references to Mahāyāna teachers (*ācāryas*) in India proper may have been intentionally erased. The inscription in question comes from the Salt Range in the Punjab and dates to the 5th/6th century. It contains a version of the classical Mahāyāna donative formula which declares that the anticipated merit is "for the attainment of the unexcelled knowledge [i.e. Buddhahood] by all living beings," and records the donation of a monastery. The name of the intended recipients has been reconstructed as "the Mahīśāsaka Teachers," but this name has been written over an intentional erasure, and since the formula nowhere else occurs in association with a named mainstream monastic order, but always with the Mahāyāna, it is likely that the record originally read not Mahīśāsaka, but Mahāyāna.[23] The earliest certain references in India proper to the Mahāyāna by name, however, though they both date to the same period—the late 5th/early 6th centu-

[22] A. Bareau, "Etude du bouddhisme. 1. Aspects du bouddhisme indien décrits par les pèlerins chinois," *Annuaire du collège de france 1984–1985. Résumé des cours et travaux* (Paris, 1985) 649–53; esp. 649, 653.

[23] G. Bühler, "The New Inscription of Toramana Shaha," *Epigraphia Indica* 1 (1892) 238–241; esp, 240 note 7.; also in D.C. Sircar, *Select Inscriptions Bearing on Indian History and Civilization*, 2nd ed. (Calcutta, 1965) Vol.I, 422–24.—For the Mahāyāna donative formula see G. Schopen, "Mahāyāna in Indian Inscriptions," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 21 (1979) 1–19, and G. Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*, 39–41.

ry—come all the way from the other side of India. The first of these comes from Gunaighar in Bengal and records the donation of several parcels of land "to the community of monks who are followers of the Mahāyāna and irreversible."[24] The second comes from Jayarampur in Orissa and records the gift of a village "to the Mahāyāna community of monks."[25] Both these records also refer to Avalokiteśvara by name and are among the very earliest inscriptions to do so.[26] There is yet another record from this same period, or perhaps slightly later, from Nepal which records an endowment presented to "the community of noble nuns who practice the Mahāyāna from the four directions."[27] And, although it does not actually contain the name Mahāyāna, there is still another record which probably comes from the 5th century from Devni-Mori in Gujarat, near the border with Rajasthan, which appears to refer to the religious activities and donations of two Mahāyāna monks: the monks are called *Śākyabhikṣus*, but it is virtually certain that *Śākyabhikṣu* is the title monks who used the Mahāyāna donative formula preferred to use to describe themselves, and already at Gunaighar *mahāyānika* qualifies and occurs in compound with *śākyabhikṣu*.[28]

Anyone with a knowledge of Indian geography will have already realized that all these places have one thing in common: they are, and more certainly

[24] *māhāyānika(?)vaivarttika-bhikṣusaghanām parigrahe,* L.5; also *māhāyānikaśākya-bhikṣvācāryya-śāntidevam uddiśya*, LL, 3–4 of D.C. Bhattacharyya, "A Newly Discovered Copperplate From Tippera," *Indian Historical Quarterly* 6 (1930) 45–60; also in Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, i. 340–45.

[25] *mahāyānikebhyo bhikṣusaṅghāya pratipāditaḥ*, 531, L.17 of Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, 530–531; also P.R. Srinivasan, "Jayarampur Plate of Gopachandra," *Epigraphia Indica* 39 (1972 but 1985) 141–148, esp. 147 LL.29-30.

[26] See G. Schopen, "The Kuṣān Image of Amitābha," 119 and references cited in note 65 there.

[27] *mahāyāna-pratipannāryya-bhikṣuṇī-saṅgha-paribhogāyākṣayanīvī*, from D.R. Regmi, *Inscriptions of Ancient and Early Medieval Nepal* (New Delhi, 1983) Vol. I, 88, no. XC; cf. T. Riccardi, "Buddhism in Ancient and Early Medieval Nepal," *Studies in History of Buddhism* ed. A.K. Narain (Delhi, 1980) 265–81; esp. 274, but the translation given there has gone awry and *mahāyāna-pratipanna-* has been omitted.

[28] The text of the inscription is most conveniently available in Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, 519. Its date has been much debated and has generated a large bibliography. For what appears to me to be the most convincing evidence—the archaeological evidence—see S. Sankaranarayana, "Devnimori Buddhist Relic Casket Inscription of the Time of Rudrasena, Kathika Year 127," *Journal of the Oriental Institute of Baroda* 15 (1965/66) 66–73—for *śākyabhikṣu* and the *mahāyāna* donative formula see the references at the end of note 23 above.

were then, on both the geographic and cultural periphery. More than that, all these sites were in areas that can probably be fairly characterized in the same way as Imam has characterized Bengal at that time: Bengal, he says, was then "a backwater and hopelessly provincial."[29] Most, if not all of these areas, were at the time in the process of being brought into productive economic use and colonized, had little or no previous politically organized presence, and almost certainly little or no prior Buddhist history. They appear to have been very much on the "frontier." This, then, is one of two kinds of places in India in which the Mahāyāna in the 5th/6th century first and finally emerged into public, institutional view—the cultural fringe. And, as if to prove the whole point here, it now turns out that what may be by far the earliest reference to the Mahāyāna by name in an inscription in an Indian language occurs at the most extreme possible limits of any such fringe, at Endere, well on its way to China, and in a mixed "Indian" and Chinese context.[30]

But in addition to peripheral, "frontier" areas with little or no previous Buddhist history, the Mahāyāna also begins to appear at another kind of site in the 5th/6th centuries. Sites of this second sort had, to be sure, a prior Buddhist history, but appear to have fallen on hard times, and in some cases may actually have been abandoned and only later reoccupied by the Mahāyāna. What may be another of the earliest occurrences of the name Mahāyāna in inscriptions is found, for example, at Ajaṇṭā. The inscription in question *may* record the gift of another individual called both a *Śākyabhikṣu* and a follower of the Mahāyāna, but there are, in any case, more than a dozen other records of gifts of *Śākyabhikṣus* at the site dating to the same period.[31] Records of this sort, are, however, associated with the late "intru-

[29] A. Imam, "Bengal in History," in *India: History and Thought. Essays in Honour of A.L. Basham,* ed., S.N. Mukherjee (Calcutta, 1982) 71–83.

[30] It has been known for a long time that in one of the Niya documents an official, the *cojhbo* Ṣamasena, is described as *mahāyāna-saṃprastita* (see A.M. Boyer, E.J. Rapson & E. Senart, *Kharoṣṭhī Inscriptions Discovered by Sir Aurel Stein in Chinese Turkestan* [Oxford, 1920] Part I, 140, note 390), but R. Salomon is about to publish a fragmentary Kharoṣṭhī inscription from Endere in which the same epithet or title occurs (R. Salomon, "A Stone Inscription in Central Asian Gāndhārī from Endere (Xinjiang)," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 12 [2000] forthcoming)—for the early remains at Endere and in "the Shan-Shan Kingdom" see M.M. Rhie, *Early Buddhist Art of China & Central Asia* (Leiden, 1999) 323ff.

[31] The reference here is to a fragmentary painted inscription in Cave XXII, and the readings are far from certain. I follow the suggestions of N.P. Chakrabarti in G. Yazdani, *Ajanta,*

sive" images which have been seen as violating and disturbing earlier well planned and organized decorative schemes, and the arbitrary, if not chaotic, placement of these images has been taken to suggest that order and control at the site was breaking down. It has been suggested that all of the references to *Śākyabhikṣus* seem to occur at the time when the site was rapidly declining or, perhaps, even after it had otherwise been abandoned.[32] Similar evidence for a late Mahāyāna occupation or reoccupation after a period of what Deshpande calls "fairly long desertion" occurs in fact at a significant number of the Western caves.[33] Rosenfield too has noted the same pattern at Sārnāth, and it seems to hold for Kusinagara as well. At these two traditionally important sites the first references to Mahāyāna monks come—as they do in the Western caves—in the 5th/ 6th century, and occur in connection with the renovation of what were probably inactive and run-down, if not entirely derelict, Buddhist complexes.[34]

It would appear, then, that when the Mahāyāna ideal was finally expressed in donative records, and when the Mahāyāna finally emerged in India in the 5th/6th century as a clearly identifiable named group having its

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Part IV: Text (London, 1955) 112 & pl.I, but only tentatively. R.S. Cohen ("Discontented Categories: Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna in Indian Buddhist History," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63 (1995) 1–25) has recently made a very great deal of this record, but is disinclined to distinguish between a reading and a reconstruction. His reconstruction appears in fact to be untenable, if not altogether unconvincing, and there is in any case no evidence to support it, no photograph, or other reproduction.

[32] There are, of course, other ways of reading the evidence. At the very least it would seem to indicate a considerable influx of a new kind of monk at a site where new construction was no longer being undertaken. See W. M. Spink, "The End of Imagery at Ajanta," in *New Trends in Indian Art and Archaeology. S.R. Rao's 70th Birthday Felicitation Volume*, ed., B.U. Nayak & N.C. Ghosh (New Delhi, 1992) Vol. 2, 337–348; and for a recent statement of his views on the chronology and development of the site: W.M. Spink, "The Archaeology of Ajaṇṭā," *Ars Orientalis* 21 (1991) 67–94. These views—especially in regard to the last phases of the site—have also recently been criticized with more than a little xenophobic acrimony by K. Khandalavala, "The History and Dating of the Mahāyāna Caves at Ajanta," *Maharashtra Pathik* 2.1 (1990) 18–21; and somewhat less shrilly in Khandalavala, "Bagh and Ajanta," in *The Golden Age: Gupta Art—Empire, Province and Influence*, ed. K. Khandalavala (Bombay, 1991) 93–102.

[33] M.N. Deshpande, "The Rock-Cut Caves of Pitalkhora in the Deccan," *Ancient India* 12 (1959) 70.

[34] J.M. Rosenfield, "On the Dated Carvings of Sārnāth," *Artibus Asiae* 26.1 (1962) 26; J. Ph. Vogel, "Excavations at Kasiā," *Annual Report of the Archeological Survey of India for 1910–11* (Calcutta, 1914) 73–77.

own monasteries, this seems to have occurred either in peripheral, marginal areas with little or no previous Buddhist presence, or at established Buddhist sites which were declining, if not already abandoned, and at which the old order had broken down. The decline of the old orders is in fact confirmed by yet another parallel: the appearance of the Mahāyāna and *Śākyabhikṣus* in Indian inscriptions coincides all but exactly with the virtual disappearance of inscriptional references to the old monastic orders.[35]

Where the Mahāyāna was before the 5th/6th century, where, in other words, the individuals who composed what we call Mahāyāna Sūtras were socially and institutionally located, can only be inferred from the sūtra literature that has come down to us, and inference is not always a sure bet. But even the literature seems to suggest that the Mahāyāna may have first emerged on the margins because that was where, in India, it had always been. The literature seems, in fact, to suggest two basic marginal locations for the early Mahāyāna in India, and here once again I can only very crudely summarize a large body of rich data.

The rhetoric of the *Ratnāvalī* already suggests that the early Mahāyāna in India was a small, isolated, embattled minority group struggling for recognition within larger dominant groups. The rhetoric of Mahāyāna Sūtras—and there is a very great deal of it—greatly extends that impression. The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* for example—and I must here limit myself to examples from it—explicitly admits the minority position of its version of the Mahāyāna: "in this world of living beings," it says, "few are the Bodhisattvas who have entered on this path of Perfect Wisdom;" "far greater numbers of Bodhisattvas do turn away from unexcelled, correct and complete awakening." "There will be many, a great many Bodhisattvas in the North," the *Aṣṭa* says, "but there will be only a few among them who will listen to this deep Perfection of Wisdom, copy it, take it up, and preserve it." In the *Aṣṭa*

[35] After a reference to a Sarvāstivādin community in an early 5th century inscription from Shorkot (J. Ph. Vogel, "Shorkot Inscription of the Year 83," *Epigraphia Indica* 16 (1921–22) 15–16) references to mainstream monastic orders completely disappear from Indian inscriptions for the next five or six hundred years. Not until the 9th or 10th century does such a reference again occur, and even then I know of only two examples: a 9th or 10th century record from Nālandā which refers again to the Sarvāstivāda (H. Sastri, *Nalanda and its Epigraphic Material* [Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India 66: Delhi, 1942] 103, pl. XI, e), and an 11th century record which refers to the Mūlasarvāstivāda (P.L. Gupta, *Patna Museum Catalogue of Antiquities* [Patna, 1965] 76)—this, to my knowledge, is the only reference to this group anywhere in Indian inscriptions.

Śakra is made to say: "How can it be that those men of India . . . do not know that the Blessed One has taught that the cult of the Perfection of Wisdom is greatly profitable . . . But they do not know this! They are not aware of this! They have no faith in it!" The text also sometimes makes more explicit who it is that it is struggling with: "Just here there will be deluded men, persons who have left the world for the well-taught Dharma and Vinaya, who will decide to defame, to reject, to oppose this deep Perfection of Wisdom."[36] The opponents of the Perfection of Wisdom are, then, monks who have entered "the well-taught Dharma and Vinaya," monks, presumably, of the established monastic orders among which the Mahāyāna apparently wants desperately to gain a foothold. This is perhaps most graphically expressed in the numerous passages in which Māra tries to tempt individuals away from the Perfection of Wisdom—when he does so he frequently comes "in the guise of a monk."[37]

To judge, then, by at least one strand that runs through early Mahāyāna Sūtra literature, at least one strand of the early Mahāyāna in India was institutionally located within the larger, dominant, established monastic orders as a marginal element struggling for recognition and acceptance. But another location—even more marginal—is suggested as well by another strand found in Mahāyāna Sūtra literature.

Although until recently rarely recognized, there is a strong strand of radical asceticism in early Mahāyāna Sūtra literature. This strand involves both the strident criticism of what are presented as the "abuses" associated with sedentary, permanently housed and institutionalized monasticism, and an equally vociferous espousal of the forest life. The most violent expression of the criticism of the "abuses" of sedentary monasticism is found, perhaps, in the *Rāṣṭrapālaparipṛcchā*. The *Rāṣṭrapāla*—like the *Kāśyapaparivarta*, the *Ratnarāśi*, the *Maitreyasiṃhanāda*, and similar texts—is constantly critical

[36] For the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* I refer to R. Mitra, *Ashtasāhasrikā* (Bibliotheca Indica 110) (Calcutta, 1888)—Since Conze inserts the page numbers of Mitra in square brackets into the text of his translation the corresponding passages can be easily found in the various reprints of Conze's rendering. I have for convenience usually followed Conze's translation or paraphrase, occasionally making minor changes, and I have used the version found in E. Conze, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines & Its Verse Summary* (San Francisco, 1983)—For the passages cited here see *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* 429.11; 226.13; 59.6–60.20 (see also 178.4–181.2; 202.4–203.1; 209.7–210.10; 233.14–240.14 etc., for hostility towards the Perfection of Wisdom and the "limited intelligence" of those who manifest it); 183.11.

[37] *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* 331.15; 389.3; cf. 328.12; 249.16.

of monks who are "intent on acquisitions and honors,"[38] but it also criticizes monks for owning cattle, horses, and slaves, and monks who are "intent on ploughing and practices of trade," have wives, sons and daughters, and assert proprietary rights to monasteries and monastic goods—significantly a number of these practices are also referred to in the mainstream *Vinayas*, and regulations are there promulgated to deal with them, but most are never subject to any specific criticism and many in fact are explicitly or implicitly condoned or even required.[39]

The sort of criticism found in the *Rāṣṭrapāla* and such other texts is, however, almost always joined with calls to return to "the forest" and to radical

[38] L. Finot, *Rāṣṭrapālaparipṛcchā: Sūtra du mahāyāna* (Bibliotheca Buddhica 2) (St.-Petersburg, 1901) 16.8; 17.4, .10; 18.4, .9; 19.14; 29.13; 30.4; 31.16, .19; 33.2; 34.4, .11, .12; 35.2, .11, .13, .17; 36.3; A. von Staël-Holstein, *The Kāçyapaparivarta: A Mahāyānasūtra of the Ratnakūṭa Class* (Shanghai, 1926) §§ 2, 5, 6, 13, 15, 22, 112, 121, 124, 125, 126, 131; *Ratnarāśi* I.2, 67; I.4, 6–7, I.4,13–16; II.6, 3; II.13, 1; II.21; II.22; III.1, III.11; III.15; IV.1 etc. (references are to the Tibetan text in J.A. Silk, *The Origins and Early History of the Mahāratnakūṭa Tradition of Mahāyāna Buddhism with a Study of the Ratnarāśisūtra and Related Materials*, Ph.D. Diss. University of Michigan, 1994); *Maitreyamahāsiṃhanāda*, Tog dkon brtsegs Ca 153a.4; 153b.6; 154b.4; 155a.7; 156a.6; 157b.7; 158a.7; 164a.3; 164b.3; etc.

[39] *Rāṣṭrapālaparipṛcchā* (Finot ed.) 28.17–36.14; a similar though much less extended passage also occurs, for example at *Ratnarāśi* (Silk ed.) VII.19—This passage in the *Rāṣṭrapāla* has achieved a certain amount of notoriety. In the introduction to his edition of the text Finot calls it "un tableau satirique des moeurs relâchées du clergé buddhique", and says it "reflète sans doute des faits réels". This was repeated by L. de la Vallée Poussin ("Bouddhisme: Notes et Bibliographie," in *Le muséon*, n.s. 4 [1903] 307), M. Winternitz (*A History of Indian Literature*, trans, S. Ketkar & H. Kohn [Calcutta, 1927] Vol. II, 331, who pointed out similar passages in the Pāli *Theragāthā*), and finally by Lamotte ("Sur la formation du mahāyāna," *Asiatica. Festschrift Friedrich Weller* [Leipzig, 1954], 379). The latter seems to want to see in it evidence for the importance of the laity in the Mahāyāna and classifies it with a number of other unnamed Mahāyāna *sūtras* which he says "ne sont autre chose que des pamphlets anti-cléricaux, où le clergé bouddique est sévèrement pris à partie." Although passages of this sort need to be much more carefully studied, it seems very likely that Lamotte's interpretation will prove to be untenable. These passages seem to reflect the criticism of one group of monks by another group of monks, and what is being criticized could easily be called a process of laicization of the community—ironically, a figure like Vimalakīrti could easily have been the target. For some of the *vinaya* material see G. Schopen, "The Monastic Ownership of Servants or Slaves: Local and Legal Factors in the Redactional History of Two *Vinayas*," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 17.2 (1994) 145–73; Schopen, "The Good Monk and his Money in a Buddhist Monasticism of 'The Mahāyāna Period'," *The Eastern Buddhist* n.s. 32-1 (2000) 85–105.

ascetic practices. It is clear that by the time of the final composition of the mainstream *Vinayas* the *dhutaguṇas* or ascetic practices were—for their compilers—all but a dead-letter, at best what Carrithers calls "emblematic."[40] It is, however, equally clear that some strands of early Mahāyāna Sūtra literature were attempting to reinvent, revitalize or resurrect these extreme ascetic practices. Such attempts are clearly visible in texts like the *Rāṣṭrapāla*, the *Maitreyasiṃhanāda-sūtra*, the *Ratnarāśi*, and even in a text like the *Samādhirāja*. Moreover, almost an entire chapter in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* is taken up with what appears to have been a serious debate and dispute concerning the centrality of the *dhutaguṇas* in the early Mahāyāna, with the *Aṣṭa* itself apparently trying to soften the current, if not established position.[41]

But in addition to the revalorization of the *dhutaguṇas* in some texts there are in these same texts straightforward exhortations to return to the forest. Striking in this regard are again the *Rāṣṭrapāla* and the *Kāśyapaparivarta*. Both texts constantly refer to seeking physical separation or seclusion, to "delighting in living in the forest," to "living zealously in the forest uninterested in all worldly diversions,"[42] to living alone "like a rhinoceros, never forsaking forest dwelling," "living in an empty place," or "in mountains and ravines," etc.[43] Both the *Rāṣṭrapāla* and the *Maitreyasiṃhanāda* say that all former Buddhas "abided in the domain of the forest" and exhorted their hearers to imitate them; in fact both imply that it was through abiding in the forest that they achieved enlightenment.[44] The *Samādhirāja*—like the *Rāṣṭrapāla*—returns to the old ideal of living alone "like a rhinoceros," and says there never was, nor will be, nor is now a Buddha who, when residing in a house, achieved enlightenment, and adds "one should dwell in the forest seeking seclusion."[45] The *Ugradatta* says: "a Bodhisattva who has gone

[40] M. Carrithers, *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka: An Anthropological and Historical Study* (Delhi, 1983) esp. 59–66.

[41] For the *Maitreyasiṃhanāda* see G. Schopen, "The Bones of a Buddha and the Business of a Monk: Conservative Monastic Values in an Early Mahāyāna Polemical Tract," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 27 (1999) 279–324, esp. 298–301; for the *Ratnarāśi* Ch. V (on *āranyaka*), Ch. VI (on *piṇḍapātika*) and Ch. VII (on *pāṃśukūlika*); for the *Samādhirāja*, P.L. Vaidya, *Samādhirājasūtra* (Buddhist Sanskrit Texts 2) (Darbhanga, 1961) 168.1–169.6; 169.7–170.5; 170.5–.29; also 124.9–.20; 134.15ff. for the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* 386.11–395.19.

[42] *Kāśyapaparivarta* §§ 15; 17; 19; 25; cf. 27; 142

[43] *Rāṣṭrapālaparipṛcchā* 13.7; 16.17; 13.17; 14.5; 16.2; also 22.1; 26.1; etc.

[44] *Rāṣṭrapālaparipṛcchā* 39.3–39.4 and 45.16; for the *Maitreyasiṃhanāda* see Schopen, "The Bones of a Buddha and the Business of a Monk," 299.

[45] *Samādhirāja* 134.19; 138.3; 179.11; 25.3; see also *Ratnarāśi* I.2,61.

forth, having understood that 'dwelling in the forest was ordered by the Buddha,' should live in the forest."[46]

Such exhortations to live in the forest—though, again, until recently largely overlooked[47]—appear to be very common in a surprisingly large number of early Mahāyāna Sūtras. Such exhortations are, for example, characteristic of most of the texts now found in the *Ratnakūṭa*, and it has long been recognized that many of these texts are very early. For the moment, though, several points need to be noted here. First, this strong strand of radical asceticism may be yet another element in early Mahāyāna literature which has not been clearly recognized, or given its due, precisely because it is so much at odds with Chinese understandings of the Mahāyāna, and so much opposed to the directions of the developments that the early Mahāyāna underwent in China. Secondly, if this radical asceticism and the exhortations to forest life found in the literature were actually implemented, then we might have found a second location for the early Mahāyāna in India. If some early Mahāyāna groups were marginalized, embattled segments still institutionally embedded in the dominant mainstream monastic orders, other Mahāyāna groups may have been marginal in yet another way: they may have been small, isolated groups living in the forest at odds with and not necessarily welcomed by the mainstream monastic orders, having limited access to both patronage and established Buddhist monasteries and sacred sites.[48] Such a location would account too for the absence of inscriptional records of gifts and support for the Mahāyāna at established Buddhist sites—the only kinds of sites known and so far studied—from the 1st to the 5th centuries, and account too for the attempted redefinition of Buddhist sacred sites found in so many Mahāyāna Sūtras.[49]

[46] Quoted in C. Bendall, *Çikshāsamuccaya: A Compendium of Buddhistic Teaching* (Bibliotheca Buddhica I) (St. Petersburg, 1897–1902) 199.12.

[47] See now, for example, R.A. Ray, *Buddhist Saints in India: A Study in Buddhist Values and Orientations* (New York/Oxford, 1994) esp. Ch. 8; P. Harrison, "Searching for the Origins of the Mahāyāna: What are We Looking For ?" *The Eastern Buddhist*, n.s. 28 (1995) 48–69, esp, 65; etc.

[48] One might imagine—but only that—that the relationship between these Mahāyāna monks and the members of the mainstream orders in the established monasteries might well have been like the uncomfortable relationship that seems to have held between wandering "forest" monks and "Bangkok" monks at the beginning of the 20th century—see K. Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth-Century Thailand* (Honolulu, 1997); and cf. J. Bunnag, *Buddhist Monk, Buddhist Laymen: A Study of Urban Monastic Organization in Central Thailand* (Cambridge, 1973), esp. Ch. 2.

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All of our evidence, then, the *Ratnāvalī*, the absence of Mahāyāna ideas and references to the Mahāyāna in inscriptional records, the absence of clear Mahāyāna elements in Buddhist art, the testimony of Fa-Hsien, the location of the first identifiable Mahāyāna monasteries and the first explicit references to the Mahāyāna as a distinct group, the rhetoric characteristic of embattled minority groups found in Mahāyāna Sūtra literature, the strident criticism of some of the bureaucratic values and practices of institutionalized monasticism in these same texts, and their continuous exhortations to live and locate in the forest—all this would seem to suggest that however mainstream the early Mahāyāna was in China, it was in India constituted of a number of differentially marginalized minority groups.

If these suggestions are even approximately correct it would appear that we may have badly misunderstood the nature and character of the early Mahāyāna in India; we may, as well, have completely overlooked the dominant form of Indian Buddhism in the Middle Period, may, ironically, have completely missed the mainstream and radically undervalued the religious and social significance of the established monasticism of what used to be called the Hīnayāna monastic orders. These orders, it is beginning to appear, may well have developed as very successful institutions, well-suited—through a series of interlocking and mutual religious, economic, and social obligations—to the needs of their local communities.[50] Their success, in fact, may have created a situation where there was no felt need for what the Mahāyāna thought it had to offer. The mainstream monk, in short, may have been completely misunderstood because in large part he has been too often viewed through the lens of Mahāyāna polemic.

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late the place where the Perfection of Wisdom is taken up, preserved, recited, etc., to the *bodhimaṇḍa* or seat of enlightenment; or the passages in the *Śūraṃgamasamādhi* where it is said that all the places where this text is taught, recited or written "sont absolument identiques (*sama*, *nirviśeṣa*) à ce Siège de diament"; Ét. Lamotte, *La concentration de la marche héroïque* (Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques, 13) (Bruxelles, 1965) 221.

[50] On some of these elements see Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*, 72–85; Schopen, "Doing Business for the Lord: Lending On Interest and Written Loan Contracts in the Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 114 (1994) 472–97; Schopen, "The Lay Ownership of Monasteries and the Role of the Monk in Mūlasarvāstivādin Monasticism," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 19.1 (1996) 81–126; Schopen, "Marking Time in Buddhist Monasteries. On Calendars, Clocks, and Some Liturgical Practices," in *Sūryacandrāya. Essays in Honour of Akira Yuyama on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday* (Indica et Tibetica 35), ed. P. Harrison & G. Schopen (Swisttal-Odendorf, 1998) 157–79.

If, again, these suggestions are even approximately correct we may, as well, have uncovered a major motive for the movement of the Mahāyāna outside India. Established groups securely set in their social environment have little motive to move. It is the marginalized, those having little or limited access to economic resources, social prestige, and political power that have strong incentives to leave—the unsuccessful. Such considerations may account for the migration of the Mahāyāna; they may account as well for the migration of the Theravāda: it may be that neither did very well at home. The final irony, of course, is that we might know most about those Buddhist groups that—from an Indian point-of-view—were the least significant and the least successful. That at least is a distinct possibility.