

Searching for the Origins of the Mahāyāna: What Are We Looking For?

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WHEN ASKED BY my hosts at Ōtani University to speak on the origins of the Mahāyāna with special reference to methodology, I was at first filled with misgiving, since it would appear that a law of diminishing returns operates in this area: the more one considers the methodological problems involved, the less one can say about the origins of the Mahāyāna. This rather pessimistic observation could in fact be the principal point of this address, but it would, of course, be impolite and unhelpful not to go beyond it. I will try, therefore, to say something about the origins of the Mahāyāna as I see them at present, and about the search for those origins itself. For this reason the title of this address is deliberately ambiguous: “What are we looking for?” can mean both “Why are we looking?” and “What is it that we wish or expect to find?”

Let me start with the first of these two questions. It is perhaps the more difficult to answer, since it raises all sorts of issues to do with the

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complex interplay between Asian and Western academic styles of discourse and the widely varying degrees of personal involvement which Buddhist scholars have with the object of their studies. Why indeed are we so interested in the origins of the Mahāyāna? Well, the fascination with origins, beginnings or sources does appear to be a kind of scholarly universal. Part of this—and this much is clear enough—is the idea that if we can understand the beginnings of something, we are better placed to understand the whole thing, as if its essential character were somehow fixed and readable in the genetic encoding of its conception. There is no doubt that such a view is problematic, i.e., it may *not* be the case that understanding the beginnings of the Mahāyāna (or even the beginnings of Buddhism as a whole) will give us privileged access to the mysteries of the later tradition, but I think the idea is still sufficiently compelling to result in a kind of methodological cliché. However, this way of explaining our interest in this subject is rather intellectual, abstract and impersonal. The search for origins is also bound up with our own identity, especially for those of us who are Buddhists. We all like to know where we come from, what our ancestry and lineage is, and, as happens when we leaf through an album of old family photographs, we take pleasure in discerning our own features in the portraits of our ancestors, and their features in our faces. Establishing such connections can be important to our sense of who we are. This is a more personal agenda, although it too has a social aspect, in that such a search is bound to reflect wider social concerns and values, wider cultural preoccupations. I shall have occasion to touch on this later. There is a third reason which combines intellectual and personal factors, and that has to do with the very nature of the challenge of scholarship and why we are moved to take it up. Why do we study Buddhism? Why do we spend our whole lives investigating the intricacies of, say, the Vinaya, or Buddhist logic, or Yogācāra doctrine? What is it that drives us to expend so much energy on such details? There are many answers to this question, as many as there are Buddhist scholars, but one answer that I would give has to do with the politics of academia and the prevailing styles of academic discourse. Whether we like to acknowledge it or not, we in the humanities are engaged in a rather strange form of cultural activity, in which reputations are made or broken, status is gained or lost, professorial chairs are won or fail to be won on the basis of our ability to solve problems which we ourselves de-

termine. We are not, of course, entirely free agents in this, choosing as we please, because academic fields are socially constructed, their development and direction conditioned by all sorts of external forces. But within these confines, those who select the most difficult problems and then solve them are often the most successful. That is the more social and political side of the question, but there is a more personal side to it as well, which has to do with the sheer intellectual satisfaction that comes from solving puzzles. Few human activities would appear to be more pointless than solving jigsaw or crossword puzzles, yet many people find them irresistible. The harder the puzzle, the greater the satisfaction derived when it is cracked. I think the same law applies to the puzzles of scholarship, which can obsess us out of all proportion to their objective importance, if one can even speak of such a thing.

As I see it, then, our fascination with the origins and early development of the Mahāyāna can be explained in terms of all these factors. That is to say, understanding this topic successfully will indeed help us to understand Buddhism better; it will help us grasp the lineage of East Asian Buddhism, and our own personal religious ancestry, if we happen to follow an East Asian Buddhist tradition; it will no doubt be productive of academic "merit"; and it will yield considerable intellectual satisfaction. Yet these factors do not exhaust the question; there is always something left, some seductive magic that the subject holds for us as individuals. It is hard to explain what that is, and usually we don't have to: our specialized interests, no matter how obscure, are normally taken for granted, as an accepted part of the academic territory. Speaking personally now, I have never been able to get excited about Buddhist logic, and the more technical aspects of Buddhist philosophy, the architectonic complexities of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra thought, for example, I am happy to leave to tougher, sharper minds than my own. Of course I recognise the importance of these relatively well-cultivated fields of study, and occasionally I might even venture into them to have a look around, but I take care to keep to the path and stay close to the gate. However, the field of Mahāyāna *sūtra* literature (arguably our best point of access to the early history of the Mahāyāna) fascinates me, and I am happy to wander across its broad expanses. I do not think it is easy country, indeed it teems with all sorts of problems, but its appeal lies precisely in its fertile exuberance, its luxuriant

wildness. Perhaps the jungle metaphor is tendentious, in a way which will later become apparent, but it is certainly the case that Mahāyāna *sūtras* burst their bounds, that they range all over the place, unsystematic, exaggerated and larger than life. In short, they possess a kind of organic roughness and wholeness and vitality that is descriptive and constitutive of a total world, a world which obeys different laws from the one we normally inhabit, but into which we can enter.¹ Now obviously one could claim that by being this way these texts reflect more fully the religion which produced them, compared with, say, a Buddhist treatise on logic, which reflects narrower or more focussed intellectual concerns, and that therefore Mahāyāna *sūtras* will tell us more about Buddhism than a work by Dignāga would. But for me this is an *ex post facto* justification, I must admit, my primary motivation for interest in Mahāyāna *sūtras* being more indefinably personal and aesthetic, having perhaps not a little to do with my being a child of the sixties. For others, of course, the interest may spring from entirely different sources. Indeed, I would imagine that it always has a uniquely personal quality, so that the answer to "What are we looking for?" in the sense of "Why are we looking?" will be different for every individual.

Before we now consider what it is we might find, we ought to pause for a moment's reflection on our methods. Mahāyāna *sūtras* obviously image a world, which we may well enjoy visiting for aesthetic or other reasons, but what is the status of that world, and how does it relate to the "real world," the world of Buddhist history? I pose this question because it appears too often to be assumed that these texts are somehow *directly* reflective of the context in which they were produced, and certain historical inferences are drawn from them on that basis which may be unjustified. As a case in point I would like to cite certain aspects of the prodigious and path-breaking scholarship of Professor Hira-

¹ If I were asked to come up with an analogous phenomenon, it would have to be the Hindi movie, in the Bombay style. Many of the same features are there: the cast of thousands, the complicated plot with its multiple improbabilities, the supernatural interventions and miracles, the frequent bursts of song, the speechifying and moralising, the bright colours, and the extreme length. Mahāyāna *sūtras* are also informed by this aesthetic of exaggeration, and, like Hindi movies, they are best appreciated as wholes, as a kind of total experience, since individual features, once abstracted, may become meaningless or even ridiculous.

kawa Akira. Professor Hira-kawa's contributions to Buddhist Studies are legion, but I should like in this paper to focus on his theories about the origins of the Mahāyāna in predominantly lay communities of *stūpa*-worshippers. These theories, which are developed in some detail, were first published in English in 1963 in an article entitled "The Rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism and Its Relationship to the Worship of Stupas."² They were repeated in Hira-kawa's *Shoki daijō bukkyō no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1968) and in Vol. I of his *Indo Bukkyōshi* (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1974), which has more recently been translated into English by Paul Groner as *A History of Indian Buddhism from Śākyamuni to Early Mahāyāna* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990). I assume therefore—I hope not unfairly—that Professor Hira-kawa's views on this topic have not changed significantly in recent years, but even if they have, the original ideas still merit critical inspection, since they continue to be very influential in Japan, and overseas as well. For example, many of them are repeated by Professor Nakamura Hajime in his article on Mahāyāna Buddhism in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), a reference source which will exert a strong influence for decades to come. The Groner translation is bound to give them a new lease on life as well.³

Now, first of all I agree with Professor Hira-kawa about the importance of the earliest Chinese translations of Mahāyāna *sūtras*. Indeed, that is the foundation-stone of my own research. In a field in which chronology and geography are so uncertain, where we have so much difficulty finding reference points in time and space, I think it is essential that we be able to draw some firm historical inferences on the basis of the oldest Chinese translations. This underlies my so-called Lokakṣema Project.⁴ We know for certain that the small body of texts trans-

² In the *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko*, No. 22 (1963), pp. 57–106.

³ Similar considerations apply to the ideas of that other great pioneer in this area, the Belgian scholar Étienne Lamotte, but these are not addressed specifically in this paper.

⁴ For a brief description of this project and its rationale see my "The Earliest Chinese Translations of Mahāyāna Sūtras: Some Notes on the Works of Lokakṣema," *Buddhist Studies Review*, 10, 2 (1993), pp. 135–177.

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lated by this Indo-Scythian missionary and his followers existed in a certain time and a certain place, i.e., Luoyang, late 2nd century.⁵ Therefore, if we study them carefully, we will at the very least be able to say that by this date and—with somewhat less force—in this place certain doctrines and practices were in existence. In other words, we will have a base line for future research. My method is therefore synchronic and localised, and it has a fairly modest objective, i.e., to describe Lokakṣema's Mahāyāna. More is not possible. With our kind of work, the temptation to generalize is overwhelming. Even to talk about Buddhism is to generalize, since there are so many different varieties and styles of the religion which pass under that name. Buddhism is an abstraction, a convention, a kind of *saṃvṛti-satya*, and so is Mahāyāna Buddhism. So we have to be careful about elaborating general theories about the Mahāyāna on the basis of this evidence.

With that caveat, the approach I take to the translations of Lokakṣema, the method I use to study them, if I were asked to describe it, is basically what is called “close reading,” but it is close reading which attempts to appropriate the texts in their totality, to read them as wholes, alert to all their meanings and all their silences. To do this I find it extremely helpful to utilize the insights of Buddhist anthropology, the work of students of Buddhist culture on the ground, as it were, especially in South East Asia. In this regard I have profited greatly from the researches of Stanley Tambiah, Melford Spiro, Richard Gombrich, Gananath Obeyesekere, Sherry Ortner, Geoffrey Samuel and various others, because they give me clues as to what I should look for in my own sources, what I should take care not to miss. I don't always expect to find the same things, but I often do. And naturally the work of interpretive reading must be preceded and accompanied by the careful comparative philological operations which have become the hallmark of our discipline. If one were to sum up this approach, then,

⁵ The nine texts in question are the *Aṣṭa-sāhasrikā-prajñā-pāramitā-sūtra* (AsPP), *Pratyutpanna-buddha-saṃmukhāvasthita-samādhi-sūtra* (PraS), *Druma-kinnara-rāja-paripṛcchā-sūtra* (DKP), *Ajātaśatru-kaukrīya-vinodanā-sūtra* (AjKV), part of the *Avatamsaka* (DSJ), *Lokānuvartanā-sūtra* (LAn), *Wenshushili wen pusa-shu jing* (WWP), *Kāśyapa-parivarta* (KP), and the *Akṣobhya-tathāgatasya-vyūha* (AkTV). Citations in this paper will be to my own translations or editions. For full bibliographical details see my article “The Earliest Chinese Translations.”

one could call it a kind of “textual anthropology,” if that were not a contradiction in terms.⁶

The principal point at issue here is that anthropology by its nature is forced to take a wider view of its subject, because, however narrow the theoretical agendas of its practitioners might be, they have to deal with real, whole people. Melford Spiro is a good example: although his Freudian analysis of the Burmese is at times irritating and constricting, and his own knowledge of the classical Buddhist tradition is occasionally rather limited, his work is nonetheless highly illuminating.⁷ Textual scholars, by contrast, can take a narrow approach and get away with imposing it on their subjects. They can focus on narrow doctrinal or philosophical issues and somehow imagine that they have done justice to their texts. But they have not. In this respect, I think, the fact that so many Buddhist scholars now work in Religious Studies departments means that they are becoming increasingly sensitized to the importance of the cultic, ritual, iconographical and other such dimensions of Buddhism, in short, to the importance of Buddhist practice. Indeed, every year I tell my students that, contrary to appearances, in Buddhism practice often comes first, theory afterwards. This is surely true of early Mainstream Buddhism, and I suspect it is also true of the Mahāyāna.

What is it, after all, to understand a religion, or a religious movement? Religions do not succeed or flourish because their doctrines are intellectually compelling, or their ideals are morally noble, but because they—or rather their practitioners—capture people’s imaginations in a certain way, they arouse their faith and convince them that they provide an exclusive or unique access to whatever power is held to underlie or pervade the world, to the numinous, to the transcendent, call it what you will. To understand a religion, therefore, it is necessary to ask the question: how did this religion lay claim to power? I shall return to this theme later, but I should note at this point that I am using the word power in a very broad sense and would wish to avoid any sort of reduc-

⁶ I owe this methodological ideal of philological rigour on the one hand and anthropological awareness on the other to a number of mentors, but have been inspired chiefly by Professors Jan Willem de Jong and Lambert Schmithausen in regard to the first desideratum and by Professor Gregory Schopen in regard to the second.

⁷ I am referring of course to his *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes* (2nd ed., Berkeley: University of California, 1982).

tionism. A religion's power—in the broad sense—lies in its symbols, and those symbols are by their very nature not reducible to a set of propositions, or a body of doctrines or moral guidelines. Still less is a religion's power reducible to narrow socio-political considerations of control and dominance.

Now, all these airy generalities are well and good, you are no doubt thinking, but how exactly do they relate to the topic? What do I have to say about the origins of the Mahāyāna?

To begin with, to be frank, I doubt that I or anyone else can say anything definite about the origins of the Mahāyāna or—and this may be less expected—even about early Mahāyāna. The more I work in this field the more sceptical I become about such an undertaking. As Professor Hirakawa has noted, the *sūtras* translated by Lokakṣema were probably composed at some time before 150 C.E., but some of them appear already to have undergone a long process of accretion.⁸ He thus pushes the date of their composition back in many cases to the 1st century C.E., but it is difficult to be sure if this is going far enough. For some of these early translations seem to refer to other, even earlier *sūtras*, and Hirakawa makes particular mention of references in the *Kāśyapa-parivarta* (KP) and elsewhere to the *Bodhisattva-piṭaka*, the *Ṣaṭ-pāramitā*, and the *Triskandhaka-dharma-paryāya*, treating these as if they were discrete texts.⁹ Of course, works with these titles survive, in Chinese and/or Tibetan, but there is no guarantee that they are the ones referred to. Indeed, in the case of references to the *bodhisattva-piṭaka*, I suspect that we are dealing with a rather elastic *category* of texts rather than a single defined work.¹⁰ The same is probably true of the *Ṣaṭ-pāramitā*, but one ought to note that this is reminiscent of one of the alternative titles of the *Druma-kinnara-rāja-paripṛcchā-sūtra* (DKP), which contains within itself a long and fairly systematic 32-part exposition of all six perfections. We ought at least to consider the possibility that the larger work has incorporated the smaller.¹¹ As for the

⁸ This is especially true of the best known of them, the *Aṣṭa-sāhasrikā-prajñā-pāramitā-sūtra* or *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines* (AsPP).

⁹ See *History of Indian Buddhism*, p. 275.

¹⁰ On this question, see now Ulrich Pagel, *The Bodhisattvapitaka: Its Doctrines, Practices and their Position in Mahāyāna Literature* (Tring: Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1995).

triskandhaka, many of the references are probably to a ritual complex, and not to a text. For all that, it can still be argued that by the time of Lokakṣema the Mahāyāna had already been in existence for several centuries, and that some of its scriptures had not only been a long time in the making, but had in the process also drawn on even older traditions, both textual and ritual. I prefer, therefore, to think of most of the extant translations of this period as works of the *early middle* period of the movement and to regard the early period as more or less out of reach, except for the survival of a few archaic works in the oeuvres of Lokakṣema and other translators. For example, the *Lokānuvartanā-sūtra* (*LAn*) may be a work of this type, and I suspect the *KP* is also very old. However, a great deal more research will need to be done on these texts before we can be sure about their relative chronology. With this caveat, therefore, I still believe we can use the translations of Lokakṣema, our oldest dateable evidence, to draw some conclusions about the nature of at least some forms of the Mahāyāna as it entered its medieval phase, conclusions which may also hold good for its earliest period. But there are, I believe, some things which we cannot do.

One of the things we cannot do with these materials is determine the sectarian affiliation of the early Mahāyāna. I used to think that this was possible, but now believe it to be hopeless, since it has become accepted that the Mahāyāna was a pan-Buddhist movement—or, better, a loose set of movements—rather like Pentecostalism or Charismatic Christianity, running across sectarian boundaries. This, incidentally, is why the term Nikāya or Sectarian Buddhism (Japanese: *buha bukkūō*) seems to me less than apt for non-Mahāyāna, since it must surely be the case that the Mahāyāna was “pervaded” by so-called Nikāya Buddhism (i.e., all ordained Mahāyānists were members of a *nikāya*, but not all *nikāya* members were Mahāyānists). Therefore I prefer to use the term “Mainstream Buddhism.” If we accept that *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs* belonging to many or even all Mainstream *nikāyas* or Vinaya lineages may have been followers of the Mahāyāna, then we must also accept that Mahāyāna literature, as it circulated, is likely to have been subject to diverse sectarian pressures. To illustrate this point, a *sūtra* com-

¹¹ This possibility is confirmed in the case of the *Ajātaśatru-kaukrīya-vinodanā-sūtra* (*AjKV*), another text translated by Lokakṣema, which has indeed swallowed another, smaller *sūtra* whole. Incidentally the *DKP* contains a reference to the *AjKV*.

posed in a Mahāsāṃghika milieu is likely to have reflected Mahāsāṃghika doctrinal preferences, but when later circulated by monks and nuns whose ordination lineage was Sarvāstivādin or Dharmaguptaka, it could easily have been changed, either inadvertently or deliberately, to fit its new context.¹² If this supposition is correct, we have very little means of establishing the sectarian origins of any given Mahāyāna *sūtra*, since the form in which it is extant may reflect its original context or a later one. While this caveat is true for minor doctrinal items (e.g., six *gatis* instead of five), it does not hold with the same force, I suspect, for major doctrinal emphases (e.g., lokottaravādin buddhology), but even there we may still need to tread very carefully, and avoid overly hasty conclusions.¹³

If the early or original Mahāyāna lies hidden behind our oldest literary sources and if the question of the sectarian origins of the movement must remain unanswered and unanswerable, surely we can deduce certain things about the make-up of some forms of the early middle Mahāyāna from the translations of Lokakṣema. Yes, this is possible, although there are still difficulties. In effect, as I have said, we can only draw conclusions concerning the milieu in which the Lokakṣema *sūtras* were composed, if indeed they all came from the same milieu. It is possible that they did not. However, assuming that they did, I would like to focus on five general themes with regard to which they might give us some clues, relating these where appropriate to Hirakawa's theories about the early Mahāyāna. The five are: the role of the laity; cult-practice directed towards *bodhisattvas*, the Buddha and *stūpas*; the wider cultural context of the new movement; the role of meditation; and the significance of magic. As we shall see, all these themes are closely interconnected, so it is not entirely easy to separate them out for the purposes of analysis.

The first theme raises the question of what has become known in sociological work on the Japanese New Religions by Helen Hardacre and others as "lay centrality." Hirakawa has stated baldly that early Mahā-

¹² Sadly this distortion is most likely where it could be most revealing, i.e., in citations and paraphrases of Āgama texts.

¹³ Cf., e.g., Hirakawa, "The Rise of Mahāyāna," pp. 61, 63, where he concludes that the prominence of certain *dvādaśāṅga* sequences in Mahāyāna *sūtras* is proof of Sarvāstivādin affiliations. However, see also the note of caution he sounds on p. 69.

yāna Buddhism was primarily lay in character, stressing the lay origins of the movement and the role of the lay *bodhisattva* in its texts.¹⁴ Naturally he admits the existence of the renunciant or *pravrajita bodhisattva*, but he ascribes historical priority to the *grhastha bodhisattva*. "Two types of Mahāyāna bodhisattva are distinguished in Mahāyāna literature: lay and monastic. The monastic bodhisattva model was the youth (*kumāra*) who practiced religious austerities and lived a celibate life. No precepts specifically for the monastic bodhisattva seem to have existed. In the older Mahāyāna texts the precepts mentioned are all lay precepts."¹⁵ This statement and others like it are a little misleading. It is quite natural that no precepts for the monastic *bodhisattva* existed, since Mahāyāna *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs* would have already been covered by the Vinaya of their respective *nikāya* or ordination lineage. This is stated explicitly, for example, in the *Pratyutpanna-buddhasaṃmukhāvasthita-samādhi-sūtra* (*PraS*), one of the older Mahāyāna texts which Hirakawa himself cites, at 9B and 9Mv1, where *pravrajita bodhisattvas* are enjoined to observe the Prātimokṣa (see also *KP* 134). And yet Hirakawa asserts that this early evidence points in the opposite direction.¹⁶ The relative silence of the texts in this regard surely means that it was taken for granted that fully ordained *bodhisattvas* were bound by the Vinaya of their *nikāya*. This relates to the more general issue of institutional organisation: Hirakawa asserts that Mahāyānists, specifically monastic *bodhisattvas*, formed their own orders, which were "organised in a fashion similar to that of the orders of Nikāya Buddhism."¹⁷ I would say that this poses too much of a split, and there is insufficient evidence for it: it is probable that the organisation of monastic *bodhisattvas* was itself along *nikāya* lines. It is not likely, therefore, that the early Mahāyānists functioned with an incomplete or small set of rules and only later adopted the rules used by the "Hīnayāna" monastic orders, as Hirakawa claims. His view of an originally lay movement taken over by monks and nuns is, I think, almost the reverse of the truth. In this respect I would modify his view of what he calls Nikāya Buddhism as one of the origins of the

¹⁴ See, e.g., *History of Indian Buddhism*, pp. 259, 310.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 308; see also pp. 302–303.

¹⁶ "The Rise of Mahāyāna," p. 74.

¹⁷ *History of Indian Buddhism*, p. 310.

Mahāyāna; I would prefer to call it the matrix, postulating thereby a much more intimate and permanent relationship.¹⁸

In any case, coming at the problem from another angle, I think we have to be very careful about what we mean by the "laity" in Buddhism, and specifically, how we understand the meaning of the terms *upāsaka* and *upāsikā*, of such frequent occurrence in our sources. To divide Buddhist society into two groups, clergy and laity, is simplistic and unduly influenced by inappropriate Western categories, as scholars like Hubert Durt have pointed out.¹⁹ Such a model is an inadequate representation of the real situation, at least in the Indian context, and probably elsewhere in the Buddhist world as well. The status of the clergy—*bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs*—is relatively unproblematical. It is with the so-called laity that the difficulties begin, which is of the essence here, given the importance of lay centrality and the householder *bodhisattva* in the received wisdom concerning the Mahāyāna. To put it simply, the terms *upāsaka* and *upāsikā* do not mean "layman" and "laywoman" in the usual English sense, but refer rather to persons hovering just below ordained status, those who are, as it were, semi-ordained. "Lay practitioner" might be a useful translation for them. In any event such persons are to be distinguished from the greater run of supporters of the Buddhist teaching and the Buddhist monastic establishment. Even in that regard there are no doubt finer distinctions to be drawn, between those who supported Buddhism exclusively and those who supported Buddhism along with other *śramaṇa* movements and *brāhmaṇas*. At the extreme end of this spectrum of participation stood those who paid no attention to Buddhism at all, who would still be subsumed under a very loose definition of the English word "laity," viz., anybody who is not clergy. There are some wider implications in all of

¹⁸ See also Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 20ff. The specifically institutional aspects of Hirakawa's theories have more recently been the object of a devastating critique by Richard Gombrich, in an article written in 1994 for a Festschrift for Professor K.K. Dasgupta: "Organized Bodhisattvas: A Blind Alley in Buddhist Historiography." I thank Professor Gombrich for showing me a preliminary draft of this. A paper on the same theme by Sasaki Shizuka was apparently read at the International Association of Buddhist Studies conference in Mexico City in October 1994, but I have not seen a copy yet.

¹⁹ "Bodhisattva and Layman in the Early Mahāyāna," *Japanese Religions*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (1991), pp. 1-16. See esp. pp. 4-5.

this, but at this point I merely wish to highlight the meaning of the words *upāsaka* and *upāsikā*. Our current notions of the householder *bodhisattva* do, I think, reflect our own cultural contexts rather too heavily. In Japan a married priesthood and, more recently, the upsurge in the so-called “New Religions” (Sōka Gakkai, Reiyūkai, etc.) with their strong emphasis on lay participation and the attendant relegation of the clergy to supporting roles predispose many scholars to finding a charter in the scriptures of Mahāyāna Buddhism for these circumstances. In the West the situation is a little different, but for committed Western Buddhists with strong democratic and anti-hierarchical tendencies, the cosy and relaxed domesticity of unordained participation with perhaps periodic bursts of monastic asceticism provides a model for which antecedents may be thought desirable. Thus the spirit of Vimalakīrti is invoked to legitimate all types of Buddhist involvement and degrees of commitment. However, the *upāsakas* and *upāsikās* on whom this fictional character was presumably based may have been rather different types of people. I suspect, in fact, that they were more ascetic types, who for some reason were unwilling to take that final step of ordination, but were nevertheless committed to rigorous meditation and ritual practice in what was essentially an adjunct role: not independent of the Saṅgha, let alone in competition with it, but attached to it. Like the people who still bear the title *upāsaka* and *upāsikā* in Theravādin societies today, they were probably advanced in years. They were not, I suspect, your average lay supporters, dropping into the monastery on the odd *poṣadha* weekend for a spot of casual meditation and *sūtra*-chanting. In short, I feel very uneasy about any interpretation of the Mahāyāna as a kind of alternative Buddhism made easy for the masses, just as I am reluctant to see it as a devotional shortcut, a topic to which I shall now turn.

Later Mahāyāna Buddhism has an extensive cultic repertoire, the history of which has yet to be unravelled. One aspect of that repertoire is the well-known cult of the great *bodhisattvas*. In an earlier article²⁰ I examined the evidence for this in the early translations and came to the conclusion that—as far as these sources were concerned—the *bodhi-*

²⁰ “Who Gets to Ride in the Great Vehicle? Self-image and Identity Among the Followers of the Early Mahāyāna,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (1987), pp. 67–89; see especially pp. 79–80.

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sattva-cult was not the be-all and end-all of the Mahāyāna, as is often supposed, but a later and secondary development. As I put it then, “as far as *bodhisattvas* are concerned the *initial* message of the Mahāyāna is clear: people should not worship *bodhisattvas*, they should become *bodhisattvas* themselves.” Nowadays I would be less dogmatic about this, since the cult of the great, mythical or so-called celestial *bodhisattvas* is not necessarily inconsistent with the pursuit of the *bodhisattva* path—in other words, it is theoretically possible to combine the ideal of aspiration with the ideal of inspiration—but in general terms my position is the same.

Of course, the cult of the *bodhisattvas* is just one aspect of Mahāyāna cult-practice. Even more important is the cult of the Buddha, which brings us to the question of *stūpa*-worship. Professor Hirakawa’s views on this are well-known.²¹ He hypothesizes that lay pressure for a source of salvation led to a kind of devotional movement centred on *stūpas* and run by lay people themselves, independent of monastic control. *Stūpas*, he says, were predominantly for the laity. The specific textual sources for such a view (especially the oft-cited passage in the *Mahā-parinirvāṇa-sūtra* about *śarīra-pūjā*) have been extensively and convincingly critiqued by Schopen, and it is unnecessary to repeat the arguments here.²² Speaking more generally, it is implausible that such a powerful movement as *stūpa*-worship would ever have been allowed to pass under predominantly lay control, since that would have posed a major threat to the livelihood of the Saṅgha. Even if it had not been the case directly after the *parinirvāṇa* of Gautama, surely monks and nuns would soon have moved to take control of this potent symbolic apparatus and source of economic support. Naturally they would have appointed laypeople to run the business end of things for them, but I imagine the ultimate control would have remained in their hands, with most *stūpas* being sited in or near monastic compounds. On this the archeological and anthropological record in South East Asia is perfectly clear: even in the Theravāda environment, the *stūpa*-

²¹ See, e.g., *History of Indian Buddhism*, pp. 270–274.

²² See Schopen’s “Monks and the Relic Cult in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta*: An Old Misunderstanding in Regard to Monastic Buddhism,” in G. Schopen and K. Shino-hara, eds., *From Benares to Beijing: Essays on Buddhism and Chinese Religion in Honor of Jan Yün-hua* (Oakville: Mosaic Press, 1991), pp. 187–201.

cult has remained one of the foundations of the religion. Indeed, nowhere is the prevalence of the *stūpa*-cult throughout the Buddhist world more strikingly illustrated than at the site of the ancient Burmese capital of Pagan, a stronghold of Theravāda. It is consequently only natural that *stūpas* would appear often in Mahāyāna sources, like many other common features of Mainstream Buddhism, but if one reads them carefully, one comes to different conclusions about any inherent link between the Mahāyāna and *stūpa*-worship. *Stūpa*-worship, or, as it is often expressed, making offerings to the Realized Ones (*Tathāgatas*), is indeed frequently cited as (hitherto) the most meritorious activity conceivable, but the purpose is not to promote it, nor even to forbid it, but to compare it unfavourably with other religious activities or values, e.g., the realisation of *prajñā-pāramitā*, the memorisation of *sūtras*, or the practice of *samādhi*. Indeed, the emphasis on the notion of *dharma-kāya* (not exclusive to the Mahāyāna) and on the related cult of the book explored by Schopen are best understood as an attempt to reinterpret the *stūpa*-cult.²³ Is this the work of a lay order of *stūpa*-worshippers engaged in devotional religion? I believe it is quite the contrary: it is the work of a predominantly monastic order of meditators engaged in strenuous ascetic practices, people asserting, in short, that the Buddha is to be found in and through the realisation of the dharma, not the worship of relics.

There is no space here to go into the many detailed arguments advanced by Hirakawa to substantiate his theories on this aspect of Mahāyāna Buddhism, but I believe that they will not withstand critical scrutiny. For example, he invokes the argument from silence to claim that where *stūpas* bear no inscriptions mentioning a *nikāya*, they must therefore have been looked after and used by Mahāyānists.²⁴ Indeed, Hirakawa is right to be tentative about this. Equally suspect is his claim that because the Vinaya forbids monks to do certain things, they could not have participated in the *stūpa*-cult.²⁵ Schopen has recently shown

²³ See Gregory Schopen, "The phrase '*sa pṛthivīpradeśāś caityabhūto bhavet*' in the *Vajracchedikā*: Notes on the Cult of the Book in Mahāyāna," *Indo-Iranian Journal*, Vol. 17 (1975), pp. 147-181. In my view Schopen over-emphasizes the negative attitude displayed by Mahāyāna *sūtras* towards *stūpa* worship.

²⁴ See "The Rise of Mahāyāna," pp. 100-102; *History of Indian Buddhism*, pp. 245-246.

²⁵ See "The Rise of Mahāyāna," p. 100.

the danger of such arguments, which privilege textual sources above the overwhelming archeological evidence.²⁶ Further, Hiraakawa's exegesis of Chinese terms for *vihāra* and *stūpa* in successive translations of Indic texts and his attempt to postulate some kind of historical development on that basis need to be reexamined closely.²⁷

The archeological evidence is indeed extremely important, as Professors Shizutani Masao and Hiraakawa have pointed out and as Schopen has continued to show. But it hardly renders the evidence of the texts worthless; indeed, it can help us to interpret that evidence more effectively. In the process of doing this, I think we might also try to arrive at a rather more careful imaging or picturing of the cultural and religious context in which Buddhism developed during the first five centuries after the death of Gautama, towards the end of which period the Mahāyāna as we first encounter it in the translations of Lokakṣema took shape. What kind of world was it? Well, the clues are there for us to see in the Buddhist texts themselves, which frequently refer to the two classes of religious practitioners in general—*brāhmaṇas* and *śramaṇas*—and to other *śramaṇa* movements in particular, either by the generic terms *tīrthika*, *anya-tīrthika* and so on, or specifically by name. It is clear from these references that the India of Gautama's day and after was the site of what we would call ideological contestation, in which many religious groups laid claim to the veneration and respect of the population. In practical terms, however, what this meant was that they were laying claim to the material support of the people. When Buddhist texts glorify the Buddha as the supreme one in the world, the unsurpassed *punya-kṣetra* or field of merit, there is a subtext or even a "bottom line" we should not forget. Such claims reflect what in the business-speak of today's world would be called an attempt to enlarge market share, a push unlikely to abate even when royal support could be counted on.

This leads me to what I regard as one of the most important and least emphasised features of Mahāyāna *sūtras* and indeed of Buddhism as a whole: the pivotal role of magic. Others have commented on this—in English I might cite in particular the articles by Stephan Beyer and Luis

²⁶ See especially "Archeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism," *History of Religions*, Vol. 31 (1991), pp. 1-23.

²⁷ "The Rise of Mahāyāna," pp. 89-98.

Gómez²⁸—but there is more work to be done before we plumb the full significance of this theme. Indeed, speaking now in general terms, I believe that Buddhism is, and has always been, a “shamanic” type of religion, in that the role of the members of the Saṅgha *in society* is not primarily that of exemplary salvation-seekers, nor that of priestly intermediaries, but that of masters of techniques of ecstasy enabling them to access in person another order of reality and transmit the power resulting from that access to others. This function, however, is effectively cloaked by an all-pervasive monastic rhetoric. In my view only this kind of analysis can make sense of Buddhism’s extraordinary success as a religion. Applying it, we might see that, in a situation of competition for resources between religious groups, what counted was not so much the philosophical cogency of one’s ideas, or even the purity of one’s moral observances, but the power perceived to have been generated by one’s ascetic practices, especially one’s meditation. Indeed, the emphasis on purity cannot be fully understood without this in mind. Moral impurity—infractions of *śīla*, especially the codes relating to sexual behaviour—destroy one’s meditation. This is illustrated in a story from the *Upāya-kauśalya-sūtra*, in which a *bodhisattva* falsely accused of misconduct with a woman rises to the height of seven palm trees in the air, thereby confounding his accusers. The text states the message explicitly: an immoral person has no magical powers.²⁹ Now, it is said often enough that the reason why the Saṅgha has throughout history had its most severe schisms over the Vinaya, not over doctrine, is because of the possible impact on the laity if the Order were thought to be morally lax. But surely this is only half the explanation. Moral laxity bothers the lay supporters of Buddhism, as we all know, because their gifts do not bear fruit, yet even this doesn’t quite get to the bottom of it. Surely it is because the laity perceive that an immoral clergy lacks power, the power derived from sexual abstinence, asceticism, and meditation. One look at the anthropological record in Theravādin countries

²⁸ Stephan Beyer, “Notes on the Vision Quest in Early Mahāyāna,” in Lewis Lancaster, ed., *Prajñāpāramitā and Related Systems: Studies in Honor of Edward Conze* (Berkeley: University of California, 1977) pp. 329–340; Luis Gómez, “The Bodhisattva as Wonder-worker,” in the same volume, pp. 221–261.

²⁹ See Mark Tatz, *The Skill in Means (Upāyakauśalya) Sūtra* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994), pp. 35–36.

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proves the point. As has been richly documented, especially by Stanley Tambiah, lay veneration and support reaches its most extravagant heights when directed towards meditating forest-dwelling monks with a reputation for moral incorruptibility and magical powers.³⁰

Let us return to the Mahāyāna. As we are often reminded nowadays, this was probably not one single movement, but the convergence of several trends within Buddhism. One of these, I would suggest, was a meditation movement. My hypothesis, yet to be substantiated in detail, is that some of the impetus for the early development of the Mahāyāna came from forest-dwelling monks.³¹ Far from being the products of an urban, lay, devotional movement, many Mahāyāna *sūtras* give evidence of a hard-core ascetic attempt to return to the original inspiration of Buddhism, the search for Buddhahood or awakened cognition. What is that evidence? The monastic or renunciant bias of the Lokakṣema texts I have already pointed out in my earlier work, but they also display a strong and positive emphasis on the *dhuta-guṇas* (extra ascetic practices) and *araṇya-vāsa* (dwelling in the forest or jungle), which is surely rather strange in the documents of a supposedly lay-dominated movement. Indeed, Hirakawa himself has already pointed out the importance of the forest meditation centre or *āraṇyāyatana* for the early Mahāyāna,³² without acknowledging how inconsistent this might be with his hypothetical lay *stūpa*-cult. But above all, we find a heavy emphasis on *samādhi*. Two of the texts translated by Lokakṣema are explicitly devoted to *samādhi* practice: the *PraS* and the *Śūram-gama-samādhi-sūtra* (Lokakṣema's version of this is now lost). Further, many other texts in this corpus and elsewhere contain long lists of *samādhis*, the exact significance of which has yet to be determined, or reflect the importance of meditation practice in other ways. It is clear from these indications that meditation must therefore have occupied a crucial place in the development of this movement, not merely, we may

³⁰ Stanley Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). See also Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, pp. 402–404.

³¹ And nuns, one might be tempted to add, out of a modern inclusivistic spirit, were it not for the way in which the various Vinayas severely circumscribed the activities of women members of the Saṅgha.

³² *History of Indian Buddhism*, pp. 309–310.

suppose, because its followers saw it as a good thing to do, as spiritually efficacious. It was also important, no doubt, because it provided a channel for fresh revelation and inspiration, explaining the extraordinary proliferation of Mahāyāna scriptures. But, most of all, it was important because meditation and the resulting powers gave the Mahāyānists an edge in their struggle for resources. This struggle, we may assume, was a double one: both against the wider religious community (the normal competitive framework), and also against other Buddhists, with whom they shared ordination lineages and institutional structures. Some of these co-religionists were clearly hostile to the new movement. The followers of the Mahāyāna had to lay claim to be in a sense the true successors of Gautama, the inheritors of his mantle, and they had to establish that claim both with other Buddhists and with the population at large. There were, as far as I can see, two possible ways of doing this: by the possession of relics, and by the (perceived) possession of ascetic techniques and magical powers.³³ Hence the glorification of the great *bodhisattvas* in the texts can be seen as an attempt to establish the Mahāyāna's prior claim to veneration and support, combining an explicit appeal to an established symbol (the figure of the great sage himself, imitated by his successors) with an implicit appeal to the powers and attainments of practitioners of the day. My point is this: the magical apparitions and miraculous displays in Mahāyāna *sūtras* are not just some kind of narrative padding or scaffolding for the elaboration of doctrine; they are the very essence of the Mahāyāna's struggle to make a place for itself and to survive in a competitive environment.

If a substantial proportion of early Mahāyānists were forest-dwelling meditating monks, would that not explain the absence of references to the Mahāyāna in the earlier inscriptions, which has been noted by Hirakawa, Schopen and others? I suspect it would, especially if we concede that this was a minority movement in any case. Given that a large proportion of our Buddhist inscriptions are found at *stūpa* sites, wouldn't the comparative scarcity of Mahāyāna inscriptions at *stūpas*

³³ Another way of stating this would be to say that they had to show possession of the dharma, either concretised in the relics of the Buddha or other realised persons and in written texts, or (better still) realised in practice as magical powers and other signs of attainment.

sit uneasily with the theory of lay *stūpa*-worship origins? And would it make sense to postulate a devotional movement centred around *stūpas* as the starting point of a movement devoted to a more ambitious asceticism?

All that said, we still have to explain the large number of references to lay *bodhisattvas* in the early scriptures. Naturally, even a renegade or revolutionary movement like the Mahāyāna—if we assume it to have been of this nature—would still have to enlist and cultivate the support of the population. My view is that it did this by offering them rather more liberal access to some of the fruits of the monastic life, in particular meditation, and by promising them powers that they would normally expect to be available only to ordained ascetics. The *PraS* is a good case in point: the direct encounter with the Buddhas of the present is possible even if one has not mastered the five or six *abhijñās* or supernormal faculties, usually accessible only after prolonged *dhyāna* practice. My reading of this is that it represents meditating monks (and nuns?) reaching out for lay support, rather than lay pressure on the monastic preserve. But that does not necessarily encompass all the laity, only the semi-ordained, i.e., *upāsakas* and *upāsikās*. It is doubtful that the currency would have been so readily devalued, given the care with which the Buddhist establishment has always watched over the exercise of supernormal powers (hence the *pārājika* offense relating to false claims to them). Even so, the semi-ordained would probably have provided an important pivot with the lay community, as their extended families would also have been drawn into the wider support networks underpinning the operation of Mahāyānist monastic communities. In economic terms the encouragement offered to them would make perfect sense.

As for the glorification of the lay *bodhisattva*, an undoubted feature of many Mahāyāna *sūtras*, we must be careful how we interpret the texts. My provisional view is that the lay *bodhisattva* is glorified and given pride of place not to put laypeople above monks and nuns, but to put *bodhisattvas* above *śrāvakas*. That is to say, if even the lay *bodhisattva* is superior to the ordained *śrāvaka*, how much more so the ordained *bodhisattva*. The point at issue is not social status, but the absolute worth of *bodhicitta* and *bodhisattva*-hood. *Śrāvakas*, after all, are not necessarily monks and nuns, even though they often may be: it is a spiritual category, not a social one, that is being referred to.³⁴ The lay

bodhisattvas may thus be said to outrank the Mainstream *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs* spiritually, but they are soon enough put in their place when it comes to the social and religious conventions of the day: they must pay respect to the ordained and they ought to leave the household life themselves as soon as they can. Monasticism rules, as does maleness, but that is a topic which demands more careful treatment than is possible here. My general point is that we should not read these sources uncritically, or mistake their rhetorical and mythical flourishes—to say nothing of their insults and put-downs!—as direct reflections of sociological or historical fact.³⁵ After all, nobody would interpret the *Candrottarā-dārikā-vyākaraṇa* as evidence for the fact that the Mahāyāna was a movement begun or led by eight-year old girls. In many respects these works are a kind of literature of the fantastic, albeit with a serious religious purpose. Just as we would not read the works of Jorge Luis Borges as history even if they appear to be historical—we know what tricks he gets up to—so too we have to decode the fantasies of the Mahāyāna with great care.

The foregoing remarks have tried, perhaps illicitly, to fit the data culled from my reading of a tiny fraction of Mahāyāna *sūtra*-literature into some kind of general explanatory framework. My thoughts about the early development of the Mahāyāna, at least as far as we can see it in these texts—that it was not primarily a lay devotional movement linked to the worship of *stūpas*, but a renunciant ascetic meditation movement—are entirely provisional, and will have to be checked continually against the earliest Chinese translations. I find that every time I read a text, even one I have read many times before, I see something new. Thus I am constantly in the process of revising my own theories against the evidence, and I expect others to be engaged in this process too, to critique my ideas and their own. In that regard it is heartening to see the amount of innovative and critical scholarly activity in this area of late.³⁶ But there is something more I want to say, and it is this. While there is nothing wrong with synthesizing the evidence and trying

³⁴ For evidence that the term *śrāvaka* does not mean monk or even disciple, see my “Who Gets to Ride,” pp. 81–82. A pertinent discussion may be found in Peter Masefield, *Divine Revelation in Pāli Buddhism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1986), especially Chapter I.

³⁵ But see “The Rise of Mahāyāna,” pp. 71, 80–81, 83–84 for some examples of such an approach.

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to paint the big picture, at the same time each Mahāyāna *sūtra* has its individual and specific value, has a life and integrity of its own which is almost organic. This specificity, this individual integrity will undoubtedly be damaged or even lost entirely when passed through the mangle of some general theory like the one I have sketched here. That is why I believe that each of these works should be studied and translated as a whole. Each of them was written by an unknown person or group of persons who lived and died roughly two thousand years ago. Into them they poured their ultimate concern, to borrow Paul Tillich's phrase. Their bones have long since turned to dust, their ashes scattered on the wind in the ten directions, and now only their words remain, however distorted by time, translation and our own faulty powers of interpretation. These works are not more or less marvellous than the deserted ruins of a lost civilization that we might find scattered over the surface of some distant planet. We should not be too hasty in dismantling them in order to use the materials to build our own monoliths.

This brings me back to the point at which I began, and to the two questions which I set for us to consider. I think it is true that when we study any subject we do it, in one way or another, out of some desire to find out about ourselves. However, we should not be too eager to impose our own image on our subjects lest we fail to see their image when and where it can be made out. It has been said with regard to the quest for the origins of Christianity than when a modern Liberal Protestant theologian looked down the well of history in search of the historical Jesus what he saw looking back up at him through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness was the face of a modern Liberal Protestant theologian.³⁷ A cautionary reflection indeed! I suspect, in fact, that when we look down the well of history in the search for the people who began the Mahāyāna—if we can make anything out at that depth—the faces we see looking back up at us will be leaner and more ascetic than we expected, and their eyes will burn with a religious zeal fiercer and more uncompromising than we might have anticipated.

³⁶ As is evidenced by the Mahāyāna *sūtra* panel at the I.A.B.S. Conference in Mexico (October 1994), and by the work in progress of such scholars as Sasaki Shizuka and Jonathan Silk.

³⁷ This was said by Tyrell of the work of Adolf von Harnack; see George Tyrell, *Christianity at the Crossroads* (London: Longmans Green, 1909), p. 44. I owe the reference to my former colleague Colin Brown.