

Introduction

BUDDHISM – DOCTRINAL DIVERSITY AND MORAL UNITY

There is a Tibetan saying that just as every valley has its own language so every teacher has his own doctrine. This is an exaggeration on both counts, but it does indicate the diversity to be found within Buddhism and the important role of a teacher in mediating a received tradition and adapting it to the needs, the personal transformation, of the pupil. This diversity prevents, or strongly hinders, generalization about Buddhism as a whole. Nevertheless it is a diversity which Mahāyāna Buddhists have rather gloried in, seen not as a scandal but as something to be proud of, indicating a richness and multifaceted ability to aid the spiritual quest of all sentient, and not just human, beings.

It is important to emphasize this lack of unanimity at the outset. We are dealing with a religion with some two and a half thousand years of doctrinal development in an environment where scholastic precision and subtlety was at a premium. There are no Buddhist popes, no creeds, and, although there were councils in the early years, no attempts to impose uniformity of doctrine over the entire monastic, let alone lay, establishment. Buddhism spread widely across Central, South, South-East, and East Asia. It played an important role in civilizing and spiritualizing nomads and tribesmen, but it also encountered peoples already civilized, most notably those of China, where it interacted with the indigenous civilization, modifying its doctrine and behaviour in the process. Some

scholars have seen this looseness and adaptability of its doctrinal base as a major weakness in Buddhism, contributing to its eventual absorption by a triumphant Hinduism in India and tending to syncretism when confronted by indigenous cultures. Etienne Lamotte (1958), in his *Histoire du Bouddhisme indien*, the standard work on pre-Mahāyāna Buddhist history, has bemoaned the way the Buddha left the order without master or hierarchy, and sees this as a major factor contributing to the eventual collapse of unity and the formation of sects. While Buddhists themselves lament the disappearance of the Dharma, the Doctrine, from its homeland, however, they tend to see this as an inevitable occurrence in an epoch when, as the Buddha predicted, spirituality is on the decline. Mahāyānists in particular see adaptation, and perhaps even syncretism, as a virtue in the Dharma, enabling the teachings to be adapted to the needs of hearers, and thereby indicating the wisdom and compassion of the Omniscient Buddha. From earliest times in Buddhism there was a strong tendency to portray the Doctrine not as a series of tenets to be accepted or rejected, but rather as a medicine for curing quite specific spiritual ills. As we shall see, in Mahāyāna Buddhism the emphasis on intention dominated by compassion has often led to a pragmatic view of truth, whereby the value of teachings lies in their spiritual benefit. Great scholar as he was, Monsignor Lamotte's negative assessment of Buddhist diversity reflects perhaps the inherent Western tendency to adopt a view of truth which requires an exclusive correspondence of certain statements with an objective reality. The first lesson for the student of Buddhism is a constant mindfulness and wariness of his or her own cultural presuppositions.

The importance of appreciating doctrinal diversity applies not just to Buddhism as a whole but to the Mahāyāna itself. There is a fallacy which I shall call the 'essentialist fallacy'. This occurs when we take a single name or naming expression and assume that it must refer to one unified phenomenon. This is indeed a fallacy, as a little thought will show, but it is a peculiarly pervasive and deep-rooted fallacy, giving rise to the feeling that because we use the same word so there must be some core, an essence, identified by the relevant definition. Thus the *same thing* is expressed each time the utterance is used. Because the expression 'Mahāyāna' (or its equivalent in the local language) has been used by Buddhists from perhaps as early as the first century BCE to the present day, from India through Tibet, Central Asia, Mongolia, China to Japan, Far East Asia and the Western world, so it must refer to some identifiable characteristics which we can capture in a definition. 'Surely the author

must be able to define his subject,' we are thinking, 'otherwise how does he know what he is talking about?'

Buddhist philosophy from its inception embodied a sustained criticism of this essentialist fallacy. As far back as we can trace the teaching of the Buddha we find a penetrating analysis by which unities are dissolved into their constituent parts and true diversity is revealed. An ability to look behind unities and see them as merely words, convenient but misleading linguistic constructs, has always formed an important factor in developing insight meditation, the spiritual cultivation which alone will lead to seeing things the way they really are, the *sine qua non* of *nirvāṇa*, enlightenment, the cessation of moral obscurations and ignorance. The Buddha himself dissolved away the unity we call the human being, or person, into an ever-changing series of physical matter, sensations, conceptions, further mental contents such as volitions and so on, and consciousness. Thus there is dissolved away any real Self, any essence or unchanging referent for the name, the word 'I'. To understand this deeply and directly is to see things the way they really are, the practical repercussion of which is a complete cessation of egoistic grasping, attachment, and self-concern. Thus the forces which lead to continued rebirth come to an end, and thence ends, to quote the scriptures, 'this complete mass of frustration, suffering' (*dukkha*). Such, as far as we can now tell, was the principal religious project of the Buddhist virtuoso monk at the time of the Buddha and in the early centuries after his death. As time went on, so those monks engaged in insight meditation took their analytical knives to the unities into which the human being had been dissolved, extending them to other beings, taking a closer look at the world around them and, as we shall see, in the Mahāyāna one tradition, the Madhyamaka, set out to show that absolutely nothing, no matter how exalted, could resist this penetrating analysis, this analytic dissolution.

So the critique of the essentialist fallacy was always an integral part of Buddhist philosophy and spiritual practice, although not all Buddhist traditions went as far as the Madhyamaka in its application. It would be a good idea, I think, if we too could learn from the Buddhists at this early stage in our study of Mahāyāna to look behind linguistic unities and see them as simply constructions imposed by the use of a single naming expression. Mahāyāna is not, and never was, a single unitary phenomenon. It is not a sect or school, but rather, perhaps a spiritual movement which initially gained its identity not by a definition but by distinguishing itself from alternative spiritual movements or tendencies. Within Mahāyāna as a spiritual movement we find a number of

philosophical schools and thinkers who cannot be placed so easily inside identifiable schools. Mahāyāna was, moreover, not a sudden phenomenon with a readily identifiable and unitary geographical or conceptual origin, it was not a planned movement spearheaded by a committee of geniuses (or fanatics). It developed over a number of centuries as an alternative and distinctive view of what Buddhism and the concern of Buddhists should ultimately be, and its growth and development in the early centuries was marked by, and from our perspective is all but identical with, the evolution of a new and distinctive canonical literature, the Mahāyāna *sūtras*. If we look at this enormous literature, claiming a disputed canonical authenticity, what we find in reality is a shifting mass of teachings with little or no central core, many of which are incompatible with each other and within which we can sometimes detect mutual criticism. There is scarcely a unitary phenomenon here, save in its concern to identify itself as Mahāyāna, as a great, superior path to religious fulfilment, distinguished from other religious tendencies which are seen as inferior, small in scope, that is, as Hīnayāna.

What unifying element there is in Buddhism, Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna, is provided by the monks and their adherence to the monastic rule. In the centuries after the death of the Buddha there arose a number of schools, often with their own Vinayas, or monastic codes. These do differ, and their differences indicate past schism and form fruitful fields of minute comparison for modern scholars. Theravāda monks in Sri Lanka are forbidden to handle money. In Tibet monks were sometimes quite wealthy. Sri Lankan monks wear orange robes. Tibetan monks wear robes of heavy-duty maroon cloth, while Zen monks in Japan wear black. Heinz Bechert has pointed out that the Buddhist term usually translated as 'schism', *saṃghabheda*, literally 'splitting of the *saṃgha*', the monastic order, 'does not mean a "schism" in the sense known from Christian church history, where it nearly always implies dissensions in the interpretation of dogma. In Buddhist tradition, "splitting of the Sangha" always refers to matters of monastic discipline' (Bechert 1982a: 65). This is important. Schools and traditions might differ on doctrinal matters, and of course doctrinal differences might arise after schism has occurred, which would then differentiate further the groups thus formed. Nevertheless, differences of doctrine as such are a personal matter. In theory a monastery could happily contain monks holding quite different doctrines so long as they *behaved* in the same way – crucially, so long as they adhered to the same monastic code. One of the major non-Mahāyāna

philosophical schools, the Sautrāntika, seems to have had no monasteries and no separate monastic code. There were no Sautrāntika monks, although there were monks who held Sautrāntika views.

Although there are a number of different Vinayas the differences, while important to the monks concerned, are nevertheless relatively insignificant. Moreover there is no Mahāyāna Vinaya as such. Mahāyāna Buddhist monks and nuns adhered to Vinaya rules which were formulated by the non-Mahāyāna traditions. In ninth-century Tibet, for example, during the early transmission of Buddhism to Tibet, the king Khri lde gtsug brtan (pronounced: Tri day tsuk ten) decreed that monks should all adhere to the monastic code of a non-Mahāyāna tradition, the Mūlasarvāstivāda. As a result of this only the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya was translated into Tibetan. The only complete Vinaya surviving in the original language is the Pāli Vinaya of the Theravādins, the non-Mahāyāna tradition associated with Sri Lanka and South-East Asia. Other Vinayas are available in Chinese translation, and Chinese monks, almost completely Mahāyāna, generally adhered to the Sarvāstivāda and Dharmaguptaka Vinayas. The Mahāyāna produced texts modifying the spirit of the Vinaya, emphasizing the importance of a compassionate intention even if that might involve breach of the letter of the precept, but there was no significant attempt, indeed no need, to construct and impose a systematic Mahāyāna Vinaya rivalling those of the non-Mahāyāna schools. Mahāyāna was not a rival *school*. It was therefore not, incidentally, a result of schism (*saṃghabheda*). Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna monks could live without discord in the same monastery so long as they held the same code, even though we have reason to believe that the non-Mahāyāna monks may have viewed with some scorn the beliefs and private practices of the Mahāyāna monks. It is not surprising that Chinese pilgrims to India, who left detailed accounts of their travels, often found monasteries containing both Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna monks. This is not so much Buddhist tolerance as different ideas of what makes for unity and which forms of unity are important. It follows from this that it is possible for members of any Buddhist school, or any Buddhist tradition with a separate Vinaya, also to embrace Mahāyāna. Mahāyāna is held by its adherents to be a higher religious aspiration, the aspiration to full and perfect Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings, and it seems certain that this aspiration as a concern originally took form across the boundaries of a number of pre-Mahāyāna traditions.

That Mahāyāna was embedded in its origins and development in the non-Mahāyāna schools is supported by inscriptional evidence. With the

exception of one inscription from perhaps 104 CE (Indian dating is an extremely precarious business), the earliest inscriptions containing recognizably Mahāyāna formulations date from as late as the fourth or fifth centuries CE. Moreover the earlier inscription, on a statue of Buddha Amitābha found recently in North India, while clearly Mahāyāna, also uses formulae characteristic of non-Mahāyāna epigraphy. As far as inscriptional evidence is concerned, Mahāyāna appears to have been an uninfluential minority interest until well into the Common Era, originating firmly within the framework of other monastic traditions thought of as non-Mahāyāna (Schopen 1979; and forthcoming). It seems clear that Mahāyāna was in its origins and for some centuries almost exclusively the concern of a small number of monks and nuns from within the non-Mahāyāna schools, and as such subject to non-Mahāyāna Vinayas. The idea of schism or radical break, and dramatic religious changes, simply fails to cohere with what we now know of Buddhist religious development as it occurred, not in texts but in actual practice.

The moral unity provided by the Vinaya also has its parallel in the code for the laity. There are some differences, but generally speaking all over the Buddhist world someone will be deemed a good Buddhist, a pious lay person, if he or she takes refuge in the Buddha, his Dharma, and the Community (*saṃgha*) – usually or primarily the monastic order, although in Mahāyāna it can also include the wider community of committed practitioners – and tries to adhere firmly and strictly to a renunciation of killing, stealing, sexual immorality, lying, and taking alcohol or mind-disturbing drugs. Thus in spite of the considerable diversity in Buddhism there is a relative unity and stability in the moral code and in particular in the order of monks (and, in Mahāyāna countries, nuns).

THE INDIAN BACKGROUND

Richard Gombrich, in his companion volume to this one on Theravāda Buddhism (1988), has spoken of the councils after the death of the Buddha. Only the first two councils are accepted by all Buddhist traditions, although even here the details of their occurrence differ widely, so much so that it has been suggested that the First Council, supposedly held at Rājagṛha immediately after the death of the Buddha, was in fact not held at all. Traditionally the reason for holding the First Council was a hint of moral laxity (that is, *saṃghabbheda*) on the part of at least one monk, combined with the need to establish through recitation the Canon, to be

transmitted in immaculate state to succeeding generations. The reciting and authorization by Arhats, those who had achieved sainthood, of the texts of the Canon was the most important event of the First Council as far as Buddhist tradition is concerned. Indeed the event of the council was so important for succeeding generations that there is a Mahāyāna tradition which maintains that contemporaneous with the First Council which established the non-Mahāyāna canon there was another council of Bodhisattvas, those beings who have vowed to become perfect Buddhas, superior to the Arhats. At this contemporaneous council the Bodhisattvas recited and authorized the collection of Mahāyāna *sūtras*. Thus the Mahāyāna *sūtras*, of debated authenticity, were given the prestige of antiquity and a respectable *imprimatur*.

Nevertheless, with all due respect to Buddhist tradition, it really would be quite wrong to think that the Canon was settled and closed at this early date. There are works contained in the Theravāda canon, for example, which date from many years after the death of the Buddha. In time different sects produced different canons, each claiming to be the one recited at the First Council. Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, that over a period of centuries there arose new texts also claiming to be the authentic word of the Buddha. One school, the Sarvāstivāda (Vaibhāṣika) complained, with reference to the three-fold division of the Canon, 'After the Nirvāṇa of the Buddha in the Sūtras, false Sūtras were placed; in the Vinaya, false Vinayas were placed; in the Abhidharma, false Abhidharmas were placed' (Lamotte 1983–4: 9); and a later text: 'What can we do about it? The Master has entered Nirvāṇa, the Saddharma [True Doctrine] no longer has a leader. Many sects have formed which debase the meaning and the letter as they fancy' (ibid.). Be that as it may, there is significant legendary evidence of dissension even at the time of the First Council. A monk named Purāṇa is reported to have commented that 'the Doctrine and the Discipline have been well chanted by the Elders; nevertheless, I maintain that I retain the Doctrine in my memory just as I heard it, just as I obtained it from the very lips of the Blessed One' (ibid.).

It is important in looking at the development of Buddhism in India between the death of the Buddha and the rise of Mahāyāna to remember that we are dealing with centuries of doctrinal change combined with geographic dispersal over a subcontinent. It is easy to forget that while we can write in a few words about changes which took, say, two hundred years, this is nevertheless to render artificially definite what was in reality a gradual shift not experienced, not lived through, by any one person. A

series of gradual, almost imperceptible changes, from the perspective of the scholar who stands back and observes centuries in one glance, can indicate a massive change which no monk or lay person ever actually experienced. As with a painting by Seurat, for example, the picture is only visible from a distance. At the level of the canvas itself there is simply no picture at all. So too with changes in space. Buddhism probably spread within India and into Central Asia along trade routes, particularly the rivers, and the monks, who were by nature semi-nomadic, were natural missionaries. Nevertheless, India is a subcontinent with considerable regional, cultural, and geographic variation. In the days before fast public transport and telephones the spread of ideas was slow and ideas would necessarily undergo changes to suit local conditions and interests. It is quite wrong to think of Buddhism as an identifiable and homogeneous doctrine superimposed upon an identifiable and homogeneous 'Indian people'. Time and space led to change and adaptation (without necessarily changing the fundamental moral and soteriological concerns). Moreover, in India after the time of the Buddha variations of time and space were compounded with considerable forces of political and social change. During the period from the death of the Buddha to an identifiable Mahāyāna we find, first of all, the breakdown of old monarchies and republics under forces of political unity and centralization, issuing in the first great national empire of Ancient India, that of the Mauryas. With unification and strong central control, national and international trade and travel, society and ideologies invariably changed.

Richard Gombrich has devoted some space to discussing the importance for Buddhism of the great Buddhist Mauryan emperor Aśoka (Asoka in Pāli). Aśoka seems to have extended the Buddhist cult of relic worship (contained in *stūpas*, relic mounds), perhaps as a unifying factor for his fundamentally disunited empire, and to have encouraged Buddhist missionary activity. More importantly, he provided a favourable climate for the acceptance of Buddhist ideas, and generated among Buddhist monks certain expectations of patronage and influence on the machinery of political decision making. The historian A. L. Basham has argued convincingly in a recent paper that prior to Aśoka Buddhism was a relatively minor factor in the religious life of India (Basham 1982: 140). Indeed one suspects that the impact of the Buddha in his own day was relatively limited. He is portrayed as an intimate of kings and nobles, and yet the friendship of the Buddha did not prevent the deposing by the crown prince of the king of the imperial power of Magadha, Kingra. Bimbisāra. According to the legends, this ungrateful son, Ajātaśatru, even

conspired with the Buddha's erring cousin Devadatta to kill the Buddha himself, a story of jealousy and enmity which suggests that the Buddha's charisma was not such as to banish all evil thoughts from the mind! According to Basham, archaeological evidence for Buddhism between the death of the Buddha and Aśoka is scanty; after the time of Aśoka it is abundant. Unfortunately, however, the sequence of events in these centuries is extremely complex and obscure. It is often held by scholars that the Buddha died sometime around 480 BCE. Aśoka died in about 232 BCE. This date for the death of the Buddha is based on what is known as the 'corrected Ceylonese chronology' (see Bechert 1982b: 30). This chronology has recently been strongly criticized, however, by Heinz Bechert. Bechert favours the shorter 'Indian chronology'. What this amounts to is that in common with certain earlier scholars Bechert advocates placing the death of the Buddha more than a century later than is usual, at roughly 370–368 BCE. There is much to favour this later date, which would give just one hundred years between the death of the Buddha and the reign of Aśoka and would increase the value of the relatively abundant Aśokan and post-Aśokan materials in understanding early Buddhism. Aśoka himself advised monks on their reading matter and, according to tradition, purified the monastic order by expelling erring monks. This established a tradition of close contact between the monastic order and the secular arm which was not always to have favourable results, but for our purposes what is significant is the phenomenon of extensive lay patronage, with monks and laity drawing closer together. As we shall see, while I do not hold to the theory that Mahāyāna Buddhism arose under direct lay influence and involvement, nevertheless it is in the close relationship between monks and lay patrons, and the concern of certain monks with the spiritual welfare of as wide a social group as possible, that we can trace formative elements of the Mahāyāna. It is from the time of Aśoka that the forces issuing in the Mahāyāna, forces for an alternative conception of the spiritual path and goal, begin to crystallize.

Etienne Lamotte has commented that if the Mauryan period, and particularly that of Aśoka, marks the golden age of Buddhism, the two final centuries of the ancient era constitute a period of crisis (Lamotte 1958: 385). The Mauryan empire fell within fifty years of the death of Aśoka, seized by a Brahmin general, Puṣyamitra Śuṅga. There is a tradition that this general inaugurated a persecution of Buddhism, and it is from this time that it is possible to detect the growth of classical devotional Hindu theism. Nevertheless Buddhist missionary activity

continued, and the Sunga period (second century BCE) also inaugurated the flowering of early Buddhist sculpture. With the decline of the Sungas, North Indian history is dominated by invasions from Central Asia – by Greeks, Scyths (known as the Sakas in India), and the Yüeh-chih. These Yüeh-chih were known in India as the Kuṣāṇas, and their Indian empire was part of an extensive empire in Central Asia. The Kuṣāṇa king Kaniška (c. 78 CE, or possibly c. 144 CE) is said to have been an important patron of Buddhism, and in terms of patronage the age of invasions was significant for Buddhists, since the foreign invaders were among the most enthusiastic supporters of Buddhism. This was no doubt partly due to the willingness of monks to recognize kings as Bodhisattvas, or Universal Emperors (*cakravartin*), and also the fact that Buddhism is more readily able to accept foreigners than is orthodox Brahminism, for which a foreigner is automatically an outcaste.

There is some reason to think that these foreign invasions may have engendered a sense of crisis in both orthodox and heterodox Indian traditions. According to Basham (1981: 46–7):

The well known *Mārkaṇḍeya Parvan*, interpolated into the *Mahābhārata*, gives us an idea of how the time appeared to some at least of the orthodox brahmins. In the form of a prophecy, ... we are told of impure barbarians overrunning the holy land of Bhāratavarṣa [India], slaughtering and looting, bringing in their wake insecurity of life and property, banditry, and the disintegration of the norms of family life. In these circumstances the sacrifices and rituals of orthodoxy are neglected, and the only religions to flourish are those of the heretics, who teach people to worship mounds (*eḍūka*) containing dead men's bones – a clear reference to the Buddhists.

Nevertheless, in Buddhism too invasion by foreigners seems to have been associated with legends and traditions of the final disappearance of the Buddha's teaching. There was a widely held view, found in the Canon, that the Buddhist Doctrine would last for only 500 years. It would have lasted for 1,000 years had it not been for the decision to admit women into the order! After these 500 years the Dharma would not completely disappear. There would remain a 'counterfeit Dharma' followed by the Final Dharma. But eventually the Dharma would be completely lost – until its rediscovery by a future Buddha. Not all sources are agreed on the figures of this eventual decline (see Lamotte 1958: 210 ff.). There is not infrequently a tendency to prolong each period. Nevertheless, an awareness of living in the 'last days', an era when things are on the

decline, or are not what they were, 'life under siege', is common in early Mahāyāna sources, and it is possible that Mahāyānists saw their own practices and beliefs in this context as bulwarks against moral and spiritual decline.

FACTORS WHICH TENDED TO PROMOTE CHANGE

I have argued that for Buddhism doctrinal differences are not a serious matter in the way they are for religions where salvation is based primarily on faith. Schism, however, is classed as one of the most serious monastic offences, and we have also seen that the appearance after the death of the Buddha of *sūtras* deemed spurious was a source of concern to each school which considered its own canon to be the sole complete and authentic testimony of the teaching of the Master. As far as we can tell from accounts of the last days of the Buddha, the Lord was at some pains to make sure that his followers were united as a monastic body, and also united on, and fully understood, those practices which would lead to *nirvāṇa*, to Arhatship. He nevertheless refused to appoint a successor, but seems to have favoured a relative freedom for each disciple to go his or her way within the framework of Dharma thus laid down. He does not seem to have thought of his teaching as a massive and monolithic dogmatic structure. According to the account of the Buddha's last days contained in the Sarvāstivāda *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* the Lord gently told his attendant, Ananda

From the beginning, Ananda, I have taught you that whatever things are delightful and desirable, joyful and pleasing, these are subject to separation and destruction, to disintegration and dissociation. So Ananda, whether now or after my decease, whoever you are, you must remain as islands to yourselves, as defences to yourselves with the *Dharma* as your island and the *Dharma* as your defence, remaining unconcerned with other islands and other defences. If you ask the reason for this, then know that whether now or after my decease, whoever remain an island to themselves, as defences to themselves, with the *Dharma* as their island and the *Dharma* as their defence, not concerning themselves with other islands and other defences, such ones are the foremost of my questing disciples.

(Trans. in Snellgrove 1973: 401–2)

It seems clear to me that the Buddha would not have been averse to later doctrinal innovation if it occurred within the fundamental structure

of the Dharma, that is, if it was of spiritual benefit on the path to *nirvāṇa*. Of course, the absence of a hierarchical system with a leader at the top to whom all disputes could be referred tended to promote the possibility of doctrinal divergence as each person or group 'remained an island to itself'. In particular, much of the Master's teaching was unsystematized and perhaps sometimes ambiguous – or, from a point of view favourable to innovation, flexible and open. From the perspective of later doctrinal concerns it was not always clear whether the Buddha had been talking in colloquial terms or within the framework of literal philosophical truth. For example, the school (or schools) known as the Vātsīputriya-Sammatīya taught the existence of a *puḍgala*, a person, which appeared to its opponents to play a number of the roles given to a Soul or Self. In defence of this teaching the Vātsīputriya-Sammatīya quoted a *sūtra* in which the Buddha maintained that the five psycho-physical constituents (*skandhas*) which make up the human being are a burden, and the bearing (or 'bearer'; see Collins 1982: 164–5) of the burden is the person (*puḍgala*) with this or that name. The person must therefore be an entity in addition to the psycho-physical constituents which other Buddhists accepted as the true analysis of the human being. Opponents objected that the Buddha was not speaking here literally but loosely. The so-called 'person' is not an ultimate reality but just a verbal object, a concept superimposed upon the psycho-physical constituents in the same way that the concept 'table' is superimposed upon the table's parts. The need to elucidate and systematize, to list the phenomena which do indeed really exist and distinguish them from the conceptual constructions of our everyday life, eventually issued among the pre-Mahāyāna schools in the great lists of the Abhidharma. It is important to remember, however, that all the schools of pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism considered their teachings and traditions to be perfectly orthodox. They each tended to highlight passages of their canon which supported their own views while ignoring or reinterpreting passages which might be taken to support other schools.

Let us note now some institutional factors in early Buddhism, in addition to the absence of one supreme head, which may have promoted the development of rival traditions of interpretation and practice, and eventually rival schools (see here, in particular, Dutt 1970: 42–50).

First, there was the division of monks into bodies, each concerned with the recitation and preservation of particular sections of the scriptures. We know that from an early time there were specialists in the *sūtras*, and specialists in the Vinaya. With time the *sūtra* specialists, for example, also tended to divide into groups specializing in particular sections of the *sūtra*

canon. With the rise of the Abhidharma as a systematic analysis of the totality into its ultimate constituents there undoubtedly followed groups of monks specializing in philosophical analysis, fragmentation of the everyday world into its ultimately or finally real elements. It is quite possible that the Sautrāntika tradition, which rejected the Abhidharma and subjected it to trenchant criticism, favouring the *sūtras*, was composed of *sūtra* specialists and its opposition to the Abhidharma reflected such opposition between rival groups of scriptural recitation and exegesis.

Second, there was the grouping of monks around noted teachers, who were themselves specialists in particular branches of the teaching. The names of a number of the early schools appear to be derivatives from personal names – Dharmaguptakas from a teacher named Dharmagupta, the Vātsīputriyas from Vātsīputra, and so on. We hear in the Canon of personal disciples of the Buddha who were noted for their attainments in particular branches of the Doctrine. Thus we find reference to Śāriputra as the great philosophical analyst, and Upāli as a specialist in the Vinaya.

Third, we should note that initially there appears to have been a relative flexibility in the rules of discipline. According to Nalinaksha Dutt, the monastic rules were defined but not codified at the time of the Buddha, and there is evidence that the Buddha himself was willing to adapt the rules to fit in with particular personal or group circumstances. Adaptation was possible to suit particular local conditions and it appears that a well-controlled monk could be permitted greater freedom than his ill-disciplined brethren. We know also that the Buddha permitted greater austerity in some cases, but resisted attempts to persuade him to require austerities of all monks.

Finally, it has been suggested that the Buddha's preference for preserving and teaching the Dharma in local languages rather than the pan-Indian Sanskrit may have led to misunderstanding and differences between traditions. In some cases, such undoubtedly happened, but it is doubtful to my mind whether this could have been a major factor in promoting the growth of different schools.

ABHIDHARMA

Perhaps the most interesting doctrinal developments among the early non-Mahāyāna schools were the growth of the Abhidharma on the one hand and the 'supramundane' (*lokottaravāda*) teachings on the other.

Early Mahāyāna *sūtras*, particularly those of the *Perfection of Wisdom* (*Prajñāpāramitā*), show in general a certain animosity towards the Abhidharma, while it is possible to detect in the Mahāsaṃghika supramundane doctrines the crystallization of ideas which, in a developed and systematized form, are often thought of as characteristically Mahāyāna. In spite of this, however, it would be wrong, I think, to portray the Mahāyāna as originating or occurring exclusively, or even mainly, within the Mahāsaṃghika group of schools, perhaps in some sort of rivalry with those schools associated with the Abhidharma. We have already seen that Mahāyāna did not originate on a sectarian basis, and we have no historical evidence to identify the Mahāyāna as a whole with one particular group of pre-Mahāyāna schools.

The Abhidharma itself is not a school but a body of literature. Not all the non-Mahāyāna schools had Abhidharmas, but those that did, most notably the Sarvāstivāda (Vaibhāṣika) and the Theravāda, gave their Abhidharmas canonical status alongside the *sūtras* and the Vinaya, the three together forming the Tripiṭaka, the Three Baskets, the Buddhist canonical corpus. This Abhidharma literature seems to have grown out of lists of technical concepts which were drawn up very early in the history of Buddhism, perhaps as mnemonic devices which provided the framework for teaching, systematic exegesis through discussion, and also equally systematic meditation. The Abhidharmas we have now appear to be a product of the period between Aśoka (third century BCE) and Kaniṣka (first or second century CE), although the taxonomic tendencies of the Abhidharma can be found in the *sūtras* and were common to pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism.

All Buddhist traditions accepted an analysis of the human being into the five psycho-physical constituents. As we have seen, there is no independent being, he or she is really made up out of an ever-changing series of physical matter, sensations, conceptions, volitions and so on, and consciousness. Implicit in this very old analysis, therefore, is a distinction between what appears to be true and what is really the case. Eventually, in the Abhidharma traditions, this issues in a distinction between conventional (*saṃvṛti*) and ultimate (*paramārtha*) truth (or reality – *satya*). The conventional reality is the world in which we live. Ultimate realities are the elements which *really* compose the world of our experience. The main concern of the Abhidharma, at least as it was systematized by Buddhist scholars, is the analysis of the totality, of all that is, into the building blocks which, through different combinations, we construct into our lived world. The name given to these building blocks,

which are said to be ultimate realities in the sense that they cannot be reduced further to other constituents, is *dharmas* (*dharmas* in Pāli; not to be confused with Dharma, meaning the Doctrine). In the Theravāda there are eighty-two such constituents. Eighty-one are said to be conditioned, and one, *nirvāṇa* (Pāli: *nibbāna*), is unconditioned. In the Sarvāstivāda there are seventy-five, seventy-two conditioned and three unconditioned. Conditioned constituents arise and cease in a continuous stream. They are the results of causes, exist for a very short time indeed, and yet, unlike the objects of our everyday world, which have merely conventional or conceptual existence, all *dharmas* in some fundamental sense really exist. According to the Sarvāstivāda they are substances (*dravyas*); each one inherently and uniquely exists; it alone, in the technical terminology of the Abhidharma, 'bears its own essence' (*svabhāva*: see Williams 1981).¹

The Theravāda Abhidhamma divides its list of constituents into:

- (i) Physical constituents – twenty-eight *dharmas*, including the four gross elements of earth, water, fire, and air, and agility, elasticity, malleability, material food and so on;
- (ii) Mental constituents – fifty-two *dharmas*, twenty-five morally good, including non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion (the opposites of the three root poisons), faith, mindfulness, compassion; fourteen morally bad, including wrong views; and thirteen morally neutral, which gain moral colouring depending on the *dharmas* to which they are conjoined. The first seven of these thirteen are common to all mental acts: contact, sensation, conception (these are the second and third *skandhas* (*khandha* in Pāli)), will or volition, mental life, concentration, and attention.
- (iii) Consciousness, the last conditioned constituent, which like all other conditioned *dharmas* arises, remains for a split second, and ceases, to be replaced by another constituent of the same type.

A monk developing insight meditation, wishing to see things the way they really are, develops the ability constantly to analyse his experiences into their constituents. He is said to dwell peacefully, observing the rising and falling of *dharmas*, thereby dissolving the objects of his attachment and cutting at the root of desire. Thus by learning to see things the way they really are he brings his ignorance to an end. With the cessation of ignorance, craving ceases and the meditator attains *nirvāṇa* and becomes a saint, an Arhat.

Not all of the early non-Mahāyāna schools accepted the Abhidharma

analysis of the world. The Sautrāntikas appear to have rejected the Abhidharma Piṭaka *in toto*. It is sometimes thought that one of the characteristics of early Mahāyāna was a teaching of the emptiness of *dharmas* (*dharmāśūnyatā*) – a teaching that these constituents, too, lack inherent existence, are not ultimate realities, in the same way as our everyday world is not an ultimate reality for the Abhidharma. As a characteristic of early Mahāyāna this is false. Such a teaching can be found already in a canonical text of the Pūrvaśailas, one of the non-Mahāyāna subschools of the Mahāsaṃghikas. There is a *sūtra* called the *Lokānuvartana Sūtra*, described in the Chinese and Tibetan canons as a Mahāyāna *sūtra*. However, this very same *sūtra* seems to be quoted by the Madhyamaka commentator Candrakīrti (seventh century CE) as a canonical *sūtra* of the Pūrvaśailas (see Harrison 1982: 225–7). The *Lokānuvartana Sūtra* teaches both the doctrine of a supramundane Buddha and the absence of ultimate, inherent existence in all things, including *dharmas*. Thus not only is the emptiness of *dharmas* found in a non-Mahāyāna text (the same is also found in the non-Mahāyāna *Satyasiddhi Śāstra* of Harivarman), but this *sūtra* was later accepted into the Mahāyāna. This was certainly not the only time that non-Mahāyāna *sūtras* were subsequently to be taken as Mahāyāna.²

MAHĀSAṂGHIKAS AND THE LOKOTTARAVĀDA

According to the Ceylonese chronology, about a century or so after the death of the Buddha a Second Council took place at Vaiśālī which, if we can follow Theravāda accounts, led to a schism between the Sthaviravādins, using this term to include the sects which later rose from them, such as the Sarvāstivāda, and the Mahāsaṃghikas. The expression 'Sthaviravāda' means Doctrine of the Elders, and it is this tradition with which the Theravāda identifies itself. For Heinz Bechert's shorter chronology the Vaiśālī council should occur during the reign of Aśoka, were he to accept the traditional view of one hundred years between the death of the Buddha and the calling of the council. However, Bechert calculates the Vaiśālī council at forty to fifty years after the death of the Buddha, which would place it perhaps at 330 or 320 BCE.

The Theravāda tradition leads us to believe that the schism occurred over a number of points of discipline in which the monks who were later to become the Mahāsaṃghikas were relaxing the Vinaya rules. They were accused of handling money donated by laymen, for example, which may

reflect an adaptation of the Vinaya to the growing town-based mercantile economy of North India.³ A council was convened, the 'lax' monks were defeated but they remained stubborn and sometime later convened their own council, breaking away from the orthodox body. They are said to have then altered the Canon and added new scriptures. This explanation is clearly one of schism, of *saṃghabheda*, but it does not fit with another well-attested tradition found in non-Theravāda sources which attributes the breach to the so-called 'Five Points of Mahādeva'. According to this tradition a council was held some decades after the Vaiśālī council, this time at Pāṭaliputra. The five points were debated at the council and were accepted by the majority, hence the name 'Mahāsaṃghikas', those who adhere to the Great Saṃgha, that is, the majority. The monks who refused to accept the majority decision subsequently named themselves Sthaviravādins. Since the five points of Mahādeva concern doctrinal matters there was not at this time technically a schism. Nevertheless, it is clear that where doctrines differ so differences in monastic practice may well follow, and such seems eventually to have happened in this case.

Mahādeva's five points mainly concern the status of the Arhat, the enlightened saint. Mahādeva is said to have taught:

- (i) An Arhat is able to be seduced by another. This appears to mean that an Arhat was capable of having erotic dreams.
- (ii) An Arhat can be subject to ignorance. This probably does not mean religious ignorance, but rather an Arhat may be ignorant of a person's name, and so on
- (iii) An Arhat may have doubt.
- (iv) An Arhat may be instructed by another person.
- (v) And finally, entry into the Buddhist Way may be accompanied by a sound, such as 'Oh, sorrow'. It is difficult to know now what this last point meant (see Lamotte 1958: 300 ff.).

According to Paramārtha (sixth century CE), who wrote a treatise on the schools, the 'heresy' of Mahādeva lay in wishing to incorporate into the Canon the Mahāyāna *sūtras*, and in attributing to the Arhats imperfections. We know that Mahāsaṃghika *sūtras* were incorporated into the Mahāyāna canon. It is possible that the reverse occurred. At any rate, what is interesting is the way in which Paramārtha connects Mahādeva, and the tendencies contained in Mahādeva's teachings, with support for, and possibly the creation of, Mahāyāna literature. The five points seem to contain an implicit lowering of the status of the Arhat, although A. K. Warder (1970: 216) has pointed out that the views of Mahādeva

seem little different from the position on the Arhat found in the Pāli canon. It is possible that in certain circles the Arhat had been exalted in such a way as to abstract him from all possibility of occurrence. Be that as it may, after the breach between the two groups of Sthaviras and Mahāsaṃghikas they gradually began to differ on a number of other matters as well. Among the most important and far-reaching of these differences that arose was the Mahāsaṃghika teaching of the 'supramundane Buddha', an exaltation of the Buddha corresponding with the lowering of the status of the Arhat.

As far as we can tell, in all Buddhist traditions there was a tendency to see the Buddha as more than just a purely human being. He was said to have various miraculous powers and the thirty-two major and eighty minor marks of a superman. At one important point the Buddha denied that he was a man or a god. Rather, he was a Buddha, a fully enlightened one. His skin is described in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, the Pāli account of the Buddha's last days, as taking on a golden and shining appearance, and in the same text the Buddha explains to Ananda that a Buddha can, if he so wishes, live for an aeon.

We know of the supramundane teachings (*lokottaravāda*) of the Mahāsaṃghikas primarily from a work known as the *Mahāvastu*, which describes itself in the preface as a Vinaya text of the Lokottara branch of the Mahāsaṃghikas. Although there was a subschool of the Mahāsaṃghikas known as the Lokottaravāda, nevertheless some form of supramundane teaching appears to have been common to all Mahāsaṃghika schools, since it is found strongly stated in the Pūrvaśāila *Lokānuvartana Sūtra* as well, and Paul Harrison (1982: 224) has argued that this *sūtra* may indeed be one of the sources for the *Mahāvastu*. It is not clear how early the supramundane doctrine developed, however. It seems probable that, as the Theravāda *Kathāvatthu* suggests, the supramundane teaching was based on a statement in the Canon that although the Buddha was born in the world, and so on, he was not tainted by it. From this it was concluded that the Buddha during his life was in reality completely devoid of the impurities of the mundane world – he was not worldly, but was rather extraordinary, supramundane. During the centuries after the death of the Buddha we find developed an extensive and popular literature consisting of tales recounting the many virtuous deeds of the Buddha in his previous lives as a Bodhisattva, one on the path to Buddhahood. In Buddhist theory the result of good deeds is merit, and since the Buddha had developed such immense stores of merit from his previous lives, so there grew up the idea that the Buddha's birth and life could not really be like that of

ordinary humanity. Nevertheless, the Buddha was originally a human being. This is not a case of deification, for gods in Buddhism are as much subject to death, suffering, and rebirth as other unenlightened sentient beings.

So the texts of the supramundane tradition describe the Buddha's birth in a wholly miraculous manner. He is conceived without intercourse, and his birth involves no pain. He emerges from his mother's right side without piercing her body. He is not an illusory being himself, however, but rather all his activities which appear ordinary are illusory. He merely appears to wash, eat, sit in the shade, take medicine, and so on out of conformity with the ways of the world. To quote the *Mahāvastu*:

The conduct of the Lord is supramundane, his root of goodness is supramundane,

The walking, standing, sitting and lying down of the Sage are supramundane.

The Sage's wearing of robes is supramundane; there is no doubt about this.

The Sugata's eating of food is likewise purely supramundane.

The Fully Awakened Ones do indeed bathe, but no dirt is seen on them;

Their forms resemble golden images; this is in conformity with the world.

They make use of medicine, yet there is no sickness in them.

The fruit (of the act of giving the medicine) is to accrue to the givers.

This is in conformity with the world.

Although able to suppress *karma*, the Victors make a show of *karma*.

They conceal their sovereign power; this is in conformity with the world.

They make a show of old age, but there is no old age for them;

The Victors are endowed with a host of good qualities; this is in conformity with the world.

(Translated in Harrison 1982: 216–18; some material omitted.)

And so on and so on. The Buddha is said to be omniscient, never to sleep but in reality always to be in meditation. Such an exaltation of the Buddha among the Mahāsaṃghikas is one with the denigration (by comparison) of the Arhat. We are not very far here from the Mahāyāna teaching that the Buddha's death was also a mere appearance; in reality he remains out of his compassion, helping suffering humanity. Man's religious goal

should be not to become an Arhat but to take the Bodhisattva vows, embarking on the long path to a supreme, totally superior Buddhahood.

THE ORIGINS OF THE MAHĀYĀNA, AND THE LAITY

There is a theory that the origins of the Mahāyāna can be traced to the activities of the laity, a lay revolt against the arrogance and pretensions of the monks. This view was held strongly by the late Etienne Lamotte. In one of his last articles he summed up his views on the origins of the Mahāyāna as follows:

During the first five centuries of its history, Buddhism progressed considerably; nevertheless, it had to face both external and internal difficulties because of the divergent tendencies which formed at the heart of the community. Some monks questioned the authenticity of the early scriptures and claimed to add new texts to them; others leaned towards a more lax interpretation of the rules governing their life; the scholastic treatises, continuously increasing in number, became more and more discrepant; finally, and above all, the laity, considering the monks' privileges to be excessive, tried to win equal religious rights for themselves.

(Bechert and Gombrich 1984: 90)

The view of the lay origins of the Mahāyāna, that lay people were instrumental in the formation of the Mahāyāna, is also widely held as established fact among contemporary Japanese scholars where, it should be said, their emphasis on lay orders of Bodhisattvas engaged in altruistic activities reflects rather closely the situation, interests, and concerns of much of contemporary Japanese Buddhism. An important and widely accepted case for considerable lay influence on the rise of the Mahāyāna was published in an article by Akira Hirakawa (1963). Hirakawa's main point appears to be that the Mahāyāna grew up among an identifiable order of Bodhisattvas, composed of lay and renunciate members of equal status, centred on the *stūpas*, relic mounds, and relic shrine worship. The *stūpas* were administered by the laity, and as relic mounds were eventually identified with the Buddha himself. Hence the growth of Buddha cults and the importance of the Buddha in the Mahāyāna. According to Hirakawa these *stūpas* were quite separate from, and in certain rivalry with, the monastic orders of the monks. Thus we find the development of an alternative religious tradition centred on Bodhisattvas

and Buddhas, showing some hostility to the conduct and aspirations of the monasteries, particularly in respect to the definitely inferior status given to the laity in monastic Buddhism (on the role of the laity in Theravāda, see Gombrich 1988: 118 ff.).

It is impossible to do justice to Hirakawa's long article here. Certainly, many early Mahāyāna *sūtras* show a clear awareness of the superiority of Bodhisattvas and the Bodhisattva path, together with a disparaging attitude to the Hearers (*śrāvakas*), those monks who were following the old path to Arhatship. Moreover, a number of the early Mahāyāna *sūtras* stress the importance of the laity. In the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra* the layman Vimalakīrti is portrayed as an advanced Bodhisattva with a developed understanding of philosophy, admonishing and correcting a number of the Buddha's leading monastic followers. In another *sūtra*, the *Bhadrāmāyākāravajākaraṇa Sūtra*, it is said that Bodhisattvas are the true renunciates, not those (like monks) who merely renounce the household life; while yet another *sūtra* teaches that Bodhisattvas of correct understanding have no need to renounce the world and become monks. Corresponding to this is the role of interlocutors of the Buddha given to wise lay women and girls, who are finally predicted to obtain perfect Buddhahood in the future. Particularly interesting in this context is the *Āśokadattāvyākaraṇa Sūtra*. Āśokadattā was a 12-year-old princess who refused to stand and make obeisance to the monks when they entered the palace. The monks were followers of an Inferior Vehicle, a Hīnayāna: 'Your Majesty, why should one who follows the path leading to supreme enlightenment, who is like the lion, the king of beasts, salute those who follow the Hīnayāna, who are like jackals?' (trans. in Chang 1983: 116). She explained the supremacy of the Bodhisattvas. Even a novice Bodhisattva exceeds all those on the Arhat path. To mock the monastic teaching of the spiritual inferiority of women, a low, dualistic way of thinking, Āśokadattā turns herself into a man, and then back into a girl again. It is all relative, all in the mind! Her female form, we are told, was taken out of compassion to win (feminists?) over to the Dharma. Of course, to the traditional pre-Mahāyāna monastic way of thinking nothing could be worse, nothing more absurd, than religious instruction of monks by a 12-year-old lay girl!

In spite of these texts, however, and many like them, I remain extremely sceptical of the thesis of the lay origins of the Mahāyāna. Hirakawa's paper relies on too many suppositions to be fully convincing, and Gregory Schopen has argued against Hirakawa that a number of important early Mahāyāna *sūtras* show a distinctly hostile attitude to the

stūpa cult. Schopen's view, convincingly argued, is that reference to worshipping the texts themselves, an extremely reverential attitude to the Mahāyāna *sūtras*, indicates that early Mahāyāna was centred on a number of book cults, groups of followers who studied and worshipped particular *sūtras*. In the *sūtras* themselves worshipping the text is specifically contrasted with the *stūpa* cult, to the detriment of the latter. Geographically, Schopen argues, early Mahāyāna gravitated towards the place where the book was set up, worshipped with 'incense, flags and bells' – the very same forms of worship usually given to *stūpas*.⁴ Many Mahāyāna *sūtras* conclude with the great, immense merits to be obtained from studying, memorizing, or just worshipping even one verse of the *sūtra*. They likewise condemn to hell those who would denigrate the *sūtra*, or the person who preaches the text (*dharmabhāṇaka*), a figure who seems to have played an important institutional role in the origins and spread of the early Mahāyāna. Schopen concludes that,

since each text placed itself at the centre of its own cult, early Mahāyāna (from a sociological point of view), rather than being an identifiable single group, was in the beginning a loose federation of a number of distinct though related cults, all of the same pattern, but each associated with its specific text.

(Schopen 1975: 181)

It seems unlikely to me that the Mahāyāna was the result of organized and influential activity by lay people. Gregory Schopen's further work on the evidence for Mahāyāna in Indian inscriptions has shown that by far the majority of those associated with making donations and other religious activity towards *stūpas* were monks and nuns, and a large number of these were also learned members of the monastic community rather than their exclusively simpler brethren. Moreover in all inscriptions which are recognizably Mahāyāna in type, over 70 per cent of the donors are monks or nuns, mainly monks. Laymen are very much in the minority (Schopen 1985: 25–6; cf. 1979). Epigraphic evidence shows conclusively that by far the majority of those associated with donor activity from the earliest available inscriptions onwards were monks and nuns, and the proportion of monastic donors increased as time passed. These monks and nuns were not ignorant but often doctrinal specialists. Inscriptional evidence also shows that the cult of images was primarily a monastic concern, and that it was moreover a monastically initiated cult (Schopen 1985: 28–30). Japanese scholars and Etienne Lamote notwithstanding, this should not come as a great surprise. In India generally,

religious change was initiated by those who had the time, which is to say, Brahmins and renunciates. We have absolutely no historical evidence of lay people constructing or preaching new *sūtras*, and while we have the names of a number of monks, such as Nāgārjuna (probably second century CE), who advocated the early Mahāyāna – indeed, according to one source Nāgārjuna was accused of actually composing one of the Mahāyāna *sūtras* – nevertheless apart from the mythical lay heroes and heroines of the *sūtras* we have no names of lay people who contributed to the doctrinal origins of the Mahāyāna. The Mahāyāna *sūtras* were clearly the products of monks, albeit monks whose vision of the Dharma embraced the aspirations of the laity, and who used lay figures in the *sūtras* to embody a critique of other monks seen as elitist or perhaps ultra-conservative. I am influenced in this view by a comment made in a different context by J. A. B. van Buitenen. Commenting on the theory that there was a tradition of *kṣatriya* (warrior) philosophy in Ancient India, he observes:

I do not wish to raise once more the specter of '*kṣatriya* philosophers,' ... for I think it is without substance. What such a *kṣatriya* alignment means is not that there existed independently a strain of *kṣatriya* thought zealously and secretively concealed from brahmins who were hermetically sealed off from it; but that new thought might identify itself as 'new' by calling itself non-brahmin, i.e., not in line with those hidebound orthodox Vedic specialists who could think only old thoughts.

(Buitenen 1981: 12)

It seems to me that there were equally no lay doctrinal traditions in Buddhism at the roots of Mahāyāna. Rather, to adapt the quotation, 'new thought might identify itself as "new" by calling itself non-monastic, i.e. not in line with those hidebound orthodox monks who could think only old thoughts'. My view is supported, I think, by the *Ajitasenavyākaraṇanirdeśa Sūtra*, which we will examine in the next section, and also by a very interesting and early Mahāyāna *sūtra* with the wonderful title of the *Pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthitasamādhi Sūtra* – or *Pratyutpanna Sūtra* for short! This *sūtra* was delivered by the Buddha to a group of Bodhisattvas and monks, but the most important group in the audience was said to be 500 householder Bodhisattvas, led by a certain Bhadrāpāla to whom the body of the *sūtra* is addressed. The text describes how, after circulating for a short period, it will be hidden in a cave and rediscovered in the future, during the period of the decay of the Dharma (see Harrison

1978: 57; trans. in Harrison 1979: 86 ff.). The 500 lay Bodhisattvas ask that it should be their future incarnations which will rediscover and propagate the text. Thus far, the *sūtra* appears to teach the lay origins of the work. However, it does not say that the 500 Bodhisattvas will be laymen in their future incarnations. Rather the *sūtra* explains in detail how, in future times, very few people will believe in this *sūtra*. There will be monks who will revile the *sūtra* and laugh at it, saying: 'Such sūtras as these they made themselves, they are poetic inventions; they were not spoken by the Buddha, nor were they authorised ... by the Buddha' (trans. in Harrison 1979: 50). And they will ridicule those few monks who accept the *sūtra*:

These bhikṣus [monks] are arrogant. ... These bhikṣus are garrulous. ... It is a great wonder indeed that they should give the name of 'sūtra' to that which was not spoken by the Buddha, that which they made themselves and is a poetic invention, that which is a motley of words and syllables. ...

(trans. in Harrison 1979: 52)

Thus the *sūtra* itself describes how one group of monks will accuse another group of monks with having fabricated the *sūtra*. We see how literary sources support the epigraphic evidence that early Mahāyāna was very much a monastic movement with little widespread support. From a non-Mahāyāna perspective the Mahāyāna was simply *absurd*. All of this fits with the accusation of Nāgārjuna, and the association of the Mahādeva with a wish to incorporate the Mahāyāna *sūtras* into the Canon. Both Nāgārjuna and Mahādeva were monks.

One final point. Doctrinal innovation in Buddhism was almost entirely the concern of monks, but it should not be thought that there is a great divide between monks and laity in Buddhism, as has sometimes been the case in the West. It is always possible for a fully ordained monk to return to lay life, or for a lay person to become a monk for a short period. Thus while it is not possible to see the Mahāyāna as an attempt by the laity to obtain equal status with the monks, nevertheless one can see in the Mahāyāna growth of a form of religiosity prepared to give validity and doctrinal orthodoxy to religious practices and concerns, such as *stūpa* worship and devotion, which are seen as inferior, not the concern of monks and, in a sense, not properly 'Buddhist' by certain other rather elitist monks. The growth of the Mahāyāna can perhaps be characterized by what might be called 'doctrinal widening', rendering doctrinally res-

pectable certain activities and beliefs which some monks viewed with disdain, and associated primarily with the ultimately useless activities of lay people.⁵ The origins of the Mahāyāna are obscure in the extreme, and it is difficult to give a satisfactory explanation of why this widening happened. But from a doctrinal point of view the key lies in the changing status of the Buddha, and the growth of an idea that the Buddha's death was mere appearance – out of his compassion he remains to help suffering, sentient beings. Sociologically, it may be that the changing status of the Buddha corresponds with the growing socialization of Buddhism, its reabsorption into the society which it had originally renounced and from which it had distanced itself.

Parallel to this reabsorption the monk, or the lay Bodhisattva, lays claim to a pre-eminent position within society, rather than outside it, and the Buddha himself, as the religious hero writ large, becomes a spiritual king, relating to and caring for the world, rather than a being who, after his death, has completely 'gone beyond' the world and its cares.⁶ This changing attitude to the Buddha correspondingly turned attention also towards his previous lives as a Bodhisattva (or perhaps it was the other way round). First, if the Buddha is so compassionate then *all* religious practices, if they are of spiritual benefit, become the teaching of the Buddha, regardless of what they are or who is carrying them out. Second, the Buddha as a Bodhisattva was often a lay person, or sometimes even an animal, always out of compassion and acting to develop the path to supreme Buddhahood. As Buddhahood became supreme over Arhatship, so attaining Buddhahood, and therefore becoming a Bodhisattva, became the new religious goal advocated for all Buddhist practitioners. This, if anything, characterizes the Mahāyāna. While the notion of the Bodhisattva as one who is destined to full Buddhahood is common to all Buddhist traditions, to set forth the path of the Bodhisattva as the ultimate aspiration for all seems to be a uniquely Mahāyāna conception. Within this context the lay person, as a Bodhisattva or potential Bodhisattva, gains in importance. Correspondingly, the religious activities held by some to be characteristic of, or of most benefit to, lay people become respectable. We find this growing respectability already in the pre-Mahāyāna tradition. Alone of all the Vinayas the Theravāda Vinaya has no discussion of the construction and cult of the *stūpa* (Bareau 1962: 229). In the *Ekottarāgama*, a canonical collection of the pre-Mahāyāna, we find a *sūtra* in which recollection of the Buddha (*buddhānussmṛti*) can lead to enlightenment (Harrison 1978: 37–8; see Chapter 10 below). The Mahāyāna represents a coming to self-awareness of these currents of thought, and an

attempt, through the creation of a new canon and a new religious system, to render these currents doctrinally orthodox and respectable.

MAHĀYĀNA BEFORE 'MAHĀYĀNA' – THE *AJITASENA VYĀKARAṆANIRDEŚA SŪTRA*

The *Ajitasena Sūtra* describes itself as a Mahāyāna *sūtra*, although I suspect that this is another example of a *sūtra* which originally belonged to a pre-Mahāyāna tradition. There appears to be neither a Chinese nor a Tibetan version, and the Sanskrit text (in a rather non-standard Sanskrit) was discovered early in this century inside a mound near Gilgit, which is now in Afghanistan.⁷ The mound was perhaps an ancient library, and the texts discovered date from the sixth or seventh centuries CE (see Dutt *et al.* 1939). The *Ajitasena Sūtra*, however, is undoubtedly much earlier in origin, although how early is at the moment uncertain. It has been little studied, is quite short, and does not appear to have been an important Mahāyāna *sūtra*. Nevertheless, for our purposes it is extremely important, since it seems to indicate a stage of proto-Mahāyāna, a stage of Mahāyāna prior to its own self-awareness as 'Mahāyāna', with all the concomitant senses of superiority and contrast with religious practices and beliefs deemed inferior.

The *sūtra* was clearly written by monks and aimed at the laity. Sociologically it occupies the Buddhist world we are familiar with from Theravāda practice. One of the main themes of the *sūtra* is the importance of giving to monks, and the immense results which will follow from this in the future. An old beggar woman attempts suicide because she has nothing to give to the Buddha. She is presented with suitable alms by a god, and the Buddha explains that she had given such gifts to many previous Buddhas in her former lives. Her present poverty, and the poverty of many of her previous incarnations, was the result of a time when she had changed her mind about giving alms to a begging monk. As a result of her present gift she is now predicted to future Buddhahood, that is, she realizes her status as a Bodhisattva, and it is said that she will not be born in the future as either a woman or a pauper.

One of the key figures in the *sūtra* is a monk disciple of the Buddha called Nandimitra, described as a *mahāśrāvaka*, a Great Hearer, who is sent by the Lord to King Ajitasena as a spiritual friend (*kalyāṇamitra*). The main instruction Nandimitra gives to Ajitasena is on the merits of giving to monks, exactly the form of instruction traditionally given by

non-Mahāyāna monks to their lay patrons. In the meantime the old beggar woman had died and been reborn as the son of King Ajitasena. Both king and son subsequently wish to renounce the world in the presence of the Buddha and become monks. The prince is ordained first, thus gaining monastic superiority over his father. The *sūtra* continues with verses in which the son praises monkhood and exhorts his father to renounce the world while he has the possibility of doing so in the presence of the Buddha himself. The moment he was ordained the prince is said to have become an Arhat. On becoming an Arhat he sees all the Buddha Fields (*buddhakṣetra*; see Chapter 10 below). These are the realms in which the Buddhas reside and teach. They are not a completely Mahāyāna idea, but the notion of seeing all the Buddha Fields does appear to be Mahāyāna, as are the names of two of the realms, Sukhāvātī and Abhiratī, which were mentioned earlier in the *sūtra*.

There is some reason to think that seeing Buddhas and Buddha Fields was a particularly potent impetus to religious practice for Buddhists during the formative period of the Mahāyāna. There is a *sūtra* called the *Pradakṣiṇā Sūtra*, on the merits of worshipping *stūpas*. A version of this *sūtra* has been found written in Khotanese, a Central Asian language, with an epilogue written presumably by the person who had the *sūtra* copied. He describes how, through further endeavour, he would like to be able to see Buddhas everywhere, and how by his merits he hopes to be reborn in the Pure Land, or Buddha Field, of Sukhāvātī, where Amitāyus (= Amitābha) Buddha will foretell for him future Buddhahood (see Bailey 1974: 18). As we shall see, the *pratyutpanna* absorption (*samādhi*), in the *sūtra* of that name, is a meditative practice whereby a Bodhisattva can see with his eyes the Buddhas and receive teachings from them.

So the world of the *Ajitasena Sūtra* presents what appears initially to be a strange mixture of pre-Mahāyāna and Mahāyāna elements. This world is one of monastic supremacy. There is absolutely no antagonism towards the Hearers or the notion of Arhatship. Nevertheless, the Great Hearer Nandimitra is also predicted to full Buddhahood, that is, he too realizes that he is a Bodhisattva. In this respect he is no different from the beggar woman, a lay female, who turns into a prince and then becomes a monk and an Arhat. The *sūtra* describes the miracles of the Buddha, and reciting the name of the Buddha is said to save from suffering and hell. The text ends in the traditional manner of early Mahāyāna *sūtras*. Those who promulgate this *sūtra* will attain Buddhahood, while those who listen to even one verse will become Bodhisattvas. The preachers of the Dharma who recite this *sūtra* will

receive favourable rebirths and ultimately become enlightened. Those who condemn the *sūtra* will go to some very nasty hells.

What marks this *sūtra* is the supremacy of Buddhahood and the possibility of anyone, monk or lay, becoming a Bodhisattva. But what distinguishes it from most other early Mahāyāna sūtras is the lack of antagonism towards the Hearers, Arhatship, and the monastic tradition. This is a gentle, harmonious *sūtra*. What I want to suggest is that the reason why this *sūtra* is different from other and more familiar early Mahāyāna *sūtras* is that the word 'Mahāyāna' does not occur in it, save in the title given in the colophon. This *sūtra* shows clearly Mahāyāna tendencies, but is conceptually prior to the Mahāyāna's own self-awareness. As Mahāyāna, the Great Vehicle, there is always an immediate contrast with Hīnayāna, the Inferior Vehicle. But initially, as the so-called Mahāyāna began to emerge, there was no sense of opposition to the Hearers as such, only an opposition to those who denied the authority of the relevant *sūtra*.

This lack of opposition to the non-Mahāyāna traditions as such in the very earliest proto-Mahāyāna is borne out by Lewis Lancaster's examination of the earliest Chinese versions of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (8,000 verse) *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra*, in which he shows that a number of key Mahāyāna concepts are missing from the earliest versions although present in later texts. The world of the earliest *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* text is reasonably close to that of the pre-Mahāyāna traditions. This is exactly what we would expect from the epigraphic evidence. The earliest use of the word 'Mahāyāna' in Indian inscriptions dates from the sixth century CE, although other terms with an exclusive reference to Mahāyāna monks and lay followers had been used from about the fourth century (Schopen 1979). This is a very long time after the earliest Mahāyāna literature, and indicates that while doctrinally there may have been a growing idea of the Mahāyāna as an alternative aspiration and spiritual path from, say, the first century BCE, nevertheless the notion of a clear separate group identity among Mahāyāna followers, represented by their using a separate name for themselves, took centuries to develop. To a monk in the first or second century CE the Mahāyāna as a visible institution was scarcely evident. Doctrinally, on the other hand, as expressed in texts, what marks the Mahāyāna as Mahāyāna is its own self-awareness in spite of its diversity, from which followed opposition and further distinction. The *Ajitasena Sūtra* is a Mahāyāna *sūtra* prior to the concept 'Mahāyāna'. It shows, therefore, the gentle shift of ideas which was already occurring prior to the polarization and unification given by that self-awareness alone.

ON THE ORIGINS AND JUSTIFICATION OF THE MAHĀYĀNA SŪTRAS

Finally, where did these Mahāyāna *sūtras* come from, and what justification could possibly be given by Mahāyānists for their creation? We have already seen that as far as the non-Mahāyāna traditions were concerned the Mahāyāna *sūtras* were not the words of the Buddha but rather the work of poets. In the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Perfection of Wisdom*, Mahāyānists are warned to be on their guard against this accusation, since it comes from Māra, the Buddhist Tempter (see MacQueen 1981: 304). Nevertheless, we should not think that even for the non-Mahāyāna traditions all the works forming the *sūtra* section of the Canon were considered actually to have been uttered by the Buddha himself. As always with Buddhism, the situation is more complex than that! What was necessary for a text not uttered by the Buddha himself to receive full authority was that the Buddha personally certified the utterance concerned. Graeme MacQueen, in a long and interesting article, speaks of three types of certification recognized among the pre-Mahāyāna traditions: approval after the event, approval before the event, and authorization of persons (MacQueen 1981: 309). Thus the Buddha approves of something someone has preached, or invites a person to preach on his behalf, or a teaching is given by a preacher who has been authorized by the Buddha, in the sense that the preacher has been praised by the Lord for his wisdom and ability. The important point about all of these forms of certification is the requirement of the Buddha's presence in the world. With the death of the Buddha and his immediate disciples, therefore, the Canon in theory becomes closed. It thus follows that the development of the doctrine that the Buddha remains in compassionate contact with the world carried with it the possibility of the creation of a new 'mystically authorized' canon of scriptures.

Most Mahāyānists consider that the Mahāyāna *sūtras* were preached by Śākyamuni Buddha, the 'historical' Buddha, and the *sūtras* themselves almost invariably start with Ananda's phrase 'Thus have I heard at one time', plus the geographical location of the discourse. However, source-critical and historical awareness has made it impossible for the modern scholar to accept this traditional account. Nevertheless, it is not always absurd to suggest that a Mahāyāna *sūtra* or teaching may contain elements of a tradition which goes back to the Buddha himself, which was played down or just possibly excluded from the canonical formulations of the early schools. We have seen that even at the First Council there is

evidence of disagreement as regards the details of the Buddha's teaching. Luis Gomez (1976) has detected in one of the earliest sections of the Pāli canon, the *Sutta Nipāta*, teachings close enough to those found in the Mahāyāna Madhyamaka philosophy to justify the name 'Proto-Madhyamaka'. Madhyamaka represents the philosophical systematization and development of the *Prajñāpāramitā* (*Perfection of Wisdom*) *sūtras*, and it is not absurd to see in the *Prajñāpāramitā* a protest against the innovations of the Abhidharma scholars, and perhaps a return to an earlier understanding of the Dharma and the world. More important, however, is a tradition found in the Mahāyāna *sūtras* themselves which would associate the origins of these texts not with the historical Buddha who died, perhaps, in 483 or 370 BCE, but rather with visionary experience and inspiration by one of a number of Buddhas who continue to exist on a higher plane, in their Buddha Fields or Pure Lands (cf. MacQueen 1982: 51 ff.). This teaching, which to my mind provides a convincing basis for understanding the origins of at least some of the Mahāyāna *sūtras*, can be found most vividly stated in the *Pratyutpanna Sūtra*. The central message of this *sūtra* concerns a meditation practice whereby the meditator recollects a Buddha (Amitāyus is particularly mentioned), visualizing him in his Pure Land surrounded by Bodhisattvas and preaching the Doctrine. The practitioner concentrates day and night for some seven days. After this, not surprisingly, perhaps, he sees the Buddha in a vision or in a dream:

while remaining in this very world-system that bodhisattva sees the Lord, the Tathāgata Amitāyus; and conceiving himself to be in that world-system he also hears the Dharma. Having heard their exposition he accepts, masters and retains those Dharmas. He worships, venerates, honours and reveres the Lord ... Amitāyus. After he has emerged from that *samādhi* [meditative absorption] that bodhisattva also expounds widely to others those Dharmas as he has heard, retained and mastered them.

(Harrison 1978: 43; see Chapter 10 below)

It is possible to question the Buddha while in this absorption, and: 'Further ... undeclared, unobtained words of the Dharma come within the range of hearing of that bodhisattva, and he acquires them; by the power of that *samādhi* that bodhisattva hears those dharmas' (ibid., 54).

We have here, therefore, a theory of the revelatory origin of the Mahāyāna *sūtras*, a theory based on the teaching that the (or 'a') Buddha remains in his Pure Land teaching the Dharma.⁸ There is, however, yet

another justification for the Mahāyāna *sūtras*, separate but not necessarily contradictory to the theory of revelation, found in a *sūtra* quoted by Śāntideva in his *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (eight century CE):

Through four factors is an inspired utterance [*pratibhāna* – see MacQueen 1981/1982] the word of the Buddhas. What four? (i) ... the inspired utterance is connected with truth, not untruth; (ii) it is connected with the Dharma, not that which is not the Dharma; (iii) it brings about the renunciation of moral taints [*kleśa*] not their increase; and (iv) it shows the laudable qualities of *nirvāṇa*, not those of the cycle of rebirth [*samsāra*].

(Śāntideva 1961: 12)

The *sūtra* explains that if an utterance has these four features then the believing men and women of a good family (an expression used for the hearers of Mahāyāna *sūtras*) will form the conception of 'Buddha' and hear it as the Dharma. Why? 'Whatever is well spoken [*subhāṣita*], all that is the word of the Buddha [*buddhabhāṣita*].'

This apparent openness as to what is to count as the word of the Buddha can be traced in the Pāli canon, for the assertion that what is well spoken is the word of the Buddha is also found in the Pāli *Uttaravipatti Sutta* (cf. Aśoka's 'Whatever is spoken by the Lord Buddha, all that is well said'). However, in the Pāli context the assertion does not seem to have quite the same meaning as it does in the Mahāyāna. MacQueen has pointed out that we have here an obvious ambiguity:

This can mean that all of the good things in the tradition come from the Buddha, but it can equally well imply that *buddhavacana* [the Buddha's discourse] is being redefined to mean 'whatsoever be well spoken', rather than meaning the actual words of Gautama.

(MacQueen 1981: 314)

Elsewhere in the Pāli canon the Dhamma is characterized as whichever doctrines lead to enlightenment. Of course, to say that whatsoever is well spoken is the word of the Buddha is not to explain exactly what is to count as being well spoken. It is not enough to say that it leads to *nirvāṇa*, since opinions will differ as to which processes and practices will lead thither. Even the standard source among the pre-Mahāyāna traditions on what is to count as an authentic scriptural text, the *Mahāpadeśa Sūtra*, is of little concrete help in the examination of a disputed case. This *sūtra* recommends relying not on the authority of a person, but on checking the

new text for coherence with the authentic *sūtra* and Vinaya corpus (according to the Sanskrit versions it should also not contradict the nature of things (*dharmatā*); see Lamotte 1983/4: 9 ff.). However, as we have seen, the Canon was not in a stable state during the centuries after the death of the Buddha, nor was it clear and unambiguous. Nevertheless, for us the important point is that the framework was there, developed and systematized by the early Mahāyāna, for innovation on the basis of spiritual efficacy.

The Mahāyāna took up the Buddha's assertion that the Dharma should guide his followers after his death, and stressed that the Lord had described the Dharma as whatever leads to enlightenment, that is, whatever is spiritually helpful. What is spiritually helpful will vary considerably, depending on person, time, and place. As time, place, and person change, so innovation becomes inevitable. The only problem lies in justifying that innovation. In a sense, for the non-Mahāyāna traditions to argue against the Mahāyāna that it is not the word of the Buddha is to miss the point. The historical Buddha had declined in significance in favour of, first, the principles which he enunciated and which he set forth as their guide after his death, and second, the growing importance of a continuing Buddha on a plane different from and spiritually more refined than this world occupied by Śākyamuni Buddha as a figure in human history. In the light of this second point, to appeal to the historical Buddha is to appeal to that which is in a sense inferior. Indeed in the light of the doctrine of no-Self (*anātman*) the Mahāyānist attitude is that if the other traditions talk of human beings, as was the Buddha, as though they inherently exist or have any ultimate importance, so this itself is an indication of spiritual backwardness.

Let me now summarize briefly the direction of the preceding discussion. From about the first century BCE the changes occurring within Buddhism seem to have issued in a new literature claiming to be the word of the Buddha himself. This literature is not the product of an organized or unitary movement, and appears to have been produced by monks well within the existing Buddhist traditions. Much of the literature is concerned with the supremacy of the Buddha and his perception of things, and advocates the path of the Bodhisattva, the aspirant to full Buddhahood, as a noble and higher path to be pursued by all who can for the benefit of others. Indeed, concern with the welfare of all beings, not just a specific group, seems to be a characteristic of Mahāyāna Buddhist inscriptions also (Schopen 1985: 42). The monks, nuns, and perhaps a small number of lay practitioners who accepted this new literature

formed a series of cults, probably based on different *sūtras* and their attendant practices. It is likely that they had little or no direct and regular connection with each other. In some cases the followers may have felt themselves in direct contact with a Buddha who inspired them in meditation or in dreams. Sometimes they proclaimed the Doctrine itself, embodied in the text, as the body of the Buddha, his Dharma-body, superior to that found and worshipped in *stūpas*. Our early Mahāyānists may certainly have perceived themselves as a righteous bulwark against moral and spiritual decline. Nevertheless, their public behaviour was not notably different in any fundamental way from that of other monks and nuns. All the evidence suggests that these followers were very much in the minority within Indian Buddhism. As time passed so they identified their aspirations as a 'Mahāyāna', a Superior Way, and the literature begins to show greater animosity towards those who failed to heed the message and still followed the Inferior Way, the Hīnayāna. Even so, it was some centuries before the followers of the Mahāyāna began to identify themselves in everyday life by a different name (*śākyabhikṣu* for a monk; Schopen 1979), and still there is no evidence that in general they radically differed in public behaviour from non-Mahāyāna practitioners.

With this as an introduction, let us now begin to look at the *sūtras* themselves.