

1 Introduction

as a medicine for curing quite specific spiritual ills. 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.

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’. It 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 unchanging core, perhaps a type of essence, to be 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 itself, 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 nirvāna, enlightenment, the cessation of moral obscurations and ignorance. As far as we know 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 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’ (Pali: *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 Mādhyamika, 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

Buddhism: doctrinal diversity and (relative) 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 2,500 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 aiding the cultural and spiritual development of nomads and tribesmen, but it also encountered peoples already very culturally and spiritually developed, 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. Étienne Lamotte (1958), in his *Histoire du Bouddhisme indien*, perhaps the standard work covering pre-Mahāyāna Buddhist history in India, 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. 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

Mādhyamika 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, an overall single unitary phenomenon. It is not a sect or school but rather perhaps a spiritual movement (or, as Jan Nattier insists below, a *vocation*) 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 doctrinal and 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 some or perhaps even all Buddhists should ultimately be. 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 eventual concern to identify itself as *Mahāyāna*, as a great, superior path to religious fulfilment – or perhaps the path to the greatest spiritual fulfilment – distinguished from other religious tendencies which it considers to be inferior, that is, as *Hīnayāna*.¹ It is for reasons like this that Jonathan A. Silk has suggested (in Williams 2005b: 377) adopting a minimalist approach to defining (or, better, specifying) Mahāyāna Buddhism and Mahāyāna Buddhists:

Let us posit that Mahāyāna Buddhists were the authors of Mahāyāna scriptures, and a Mahāyāna community was a community of such authors. One immediate and fundamental result of this formulation is that we must stop referring, at the very least provisionally, to ‘the Mahāyāna’ in the singular. Until and unless we can establish affinities between texts, and therefore begin to identify broader communities, we must – provisionally – suppose each scripture to represent a different community, a different Mahāyāna.

Hence, Silk contends, we should thus be prepared to refer to ‘Mahāyānas’ rather than ‘Mahāyāna’.²

In general 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 doctrinal schools and monastic sects.³ The latter are primarily identified through 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. Monks in Sri Lanka are forbidden to handle money. In Tibet⁴ 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). Sects might as a matter of fact differ on doctrinal matters, and of course doctrinal differences might arise after schism has occurred, which could then differentiate further the groups thus formed. Nevertheless, differences of doctrine would seem to be a matter of the individual group attracted or convinced by them, rather than a monastic sect as such. 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.

We need to be cautious, however, about whether Bechert is right that *saṃghabheda* in ancient India was always a matter of monastic discipline, and could not be generated solely or primarily by doctrinal dispute. Recently Joseph Walser has argued that even in Theravāda, at least if we can follow Buddhaghosa (fifth century CE), the term *saṃghabheda* can be found applied to cases of monks who teach what is not the Dharma (Doctrine) to be the Dharma, and not applied just to *Vinaya* matters (2005: 99–100). And Walser recounts too a discussion in the Mahāsaṃghika *Vinaya* that suggests ‘disturbance in the institutional mechanism for scriptural reproduction’ as contributing to *saṃghabheda*, as well as *Vinaya* innovations (*ibid.*: 100–1). On the other hand Jonathan Silk says of the definition of *saṃghabheda* in the *Vinaya* of the Mahāsaṃghika sect that it ‘is constituted by a failure of all the monks resident in the same sacred enclosure (*simā*) to communally hold the *uposatha* rite. Differences over doctrine are *not* grounds for *saṃghabheda* in the Mahāsaṃghika *Vinaya*’. Silk is aware of an apparent contrast with some other sects, since he continues (in Williams 2005b: 380; italics original):

In fact, what appears to be a contrast with the views of other sects, some of which allow doctrinal disputes to split the community (*caṅkhabheda*), has been shown by Shizuka Sasaki to be in reality a virtual universality of opinion that the only true cause of schism, at least in the times after the Buddha’s nirvāṇa, is failure to hold joint rituals (*karmabheda*).

Clearly, as Silk himself points out in a footnote, *saṃghabheda* and associated issues need further research.

Although there are a number of different *Vinayas* that were formulated in ancient India, the differences, while important to the monks concerned, are nevertheless relatively insignificant. Moreover there was no Mahāyāna *Vinaya* as such produced in India. Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist monks and nuns all adhered to *Vinaya* rules which were formulated by the sects that originated during the early centuries of Buddhism in India. Outside India too, 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 important monastic code of the Mūlasarvāstivāda, a sect and not in itself anything to do with Mahāyāna. As a result of this only the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya was translated into Tibetan. The only complete Vinaya surviving in the original language is the Pali Vinaya of the Theravādins, the Buddhist tradition now associated with Sri Lanka and South-East Asia.⁵ Other Vinayas are available in Chinese translation, and Chinese monks, nowadays and throughout most of history almost completely Mahāyāna in terms of their orientation and aspiration, generally adhered to the Sarvāstivāda and Dharmaguptaka Vinayas. In East Asia monks with Mahāyāna orientation sometimes 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 in India to construct and impose a systematic Mahāyāna Vinaya rivaling those of the sects of Nikāya Buddhism. Mahāyāna was not in origins, and really never was, a rival sect. It is unlikely therefore that as such it was a result of schism (*sanghabhedā*).⁶ Mahāyāna-oriented monks, and monks with no interest in Mahāyāna whatsoever, could live without necessary 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 and sometimes this scorn at least in the early days may have spilled over into more overtly antagonistic behaviour (see below). It is hence not surprising that some Chinese pilgrims to India, who left detailed accounts of their travels, not infrequently found monasteries containing both Mahāyāna-oriented monks and non-Mahāyāna monks. Yijing (I-tsing), for example, writing at the very end of the seventh century CE, contrasts Mahāyāna and 'Hīnayāna' as follows:

Both adopt one and the same discipline (Vinaya), and they have in common the prohibitions of the five *skandhas* ('groups of offences'), and also the practice of the Four Noble Truths. Those who worship the Bodhisattvas and read the Mahāyāna Sūtras are called the 'Mahāyānists', while those who do not perform these are called the Hīnayānists.⁷

It follows from this that it is possible for members of any Buddhist sect, any Buddhist tradition with a separate Vinaya, also to embrace Mahāyāna. Assuming the Pali expression *vetullavāda* refers to Mahāyāna, then we know that there were quite early on followers of Mahāyāna in Sri Lanka within what would now be thought of as Theravāda, who were suppressed by king Vohārikatissa in the early third century CE.⁸ Mahāyāna is held by its adherents to be the highest religious aspiration, the aspiration to full and perfect Buddhahood, to which is often added that this is 'for the benefit of all sentient beings'. It is effectively the *bodhisattvayāna*, the vehicle, path, or way followed by a Bodhisattva, one who is on the path to becoming a fully enlightened Buddha. As Jan Nattier puts it, with reference to one relatively early Mahāyāna sūtra:

For the *Ugra[paripṛcchā Sūtra]* . . . the Mahāyāna is not a school, a sect, or a movement, but a particular spiritual *vocation*, to be pursued within the existing Buddhist

community. To be a 'Mahāyānist' – that is, to be a bodhisattva – thus does not mean to adhere to some new kind of 'Buddhism,' but simply to practice Buddhism in its most rigorous and demanding form.⁹

It seems certain that this aspiration as a vibrant living option alongside the aspiration to simply one's own liberation, nirvāna, the state of an Arhat, originally took form across the boundaries of a number of Buddhist sects, and was no doubt in origin a generalization from an appreciation of the career of wisdom and compassion over many lifetimes of Śākyamuni, the 'historical' Buddha himself. Research into the sectarian origins of putative early Mahāyāna sūtras (or of some versions of them) is very tentative and still very much in its infancy. But there is some evidence to support the suggestion that the *Ugraparipṛcchā Sūtra* (Nattier 2003a: 80–1) or the *Ratnāśī Sūtra* (Silk 1994: 32) may have originated among the Dharmaguptakas. It has also been suggested that the *tathāgatagarbha* ('Buddha Nature') teachings – and therefore the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* – may have had something in origins to do with the Mahāśāṅghika sect.¹⁰ Moreover it may have been the case that the audience for the 25,000 *Verse Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* and 100,000 *Verse Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* was familiar with Dharmaguptaka teachings while the audience for the 8,000 *Verse Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* was not (Walser 2005: 233–4). If we move outside the early Mahāyāna sūtras we find for example that the great compendium of Mahāyāna doctrine and practice known as the *Dzhdūlun (Ta-chih-tu Lun: *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra)* was almost certainly written by authors from a Sarvāstivāda or Mūlasarvāstivāda background (Demiéville 1973: 477).¹¹ The issue is however complicated since Nattier's work on the *Ugraparipṛcchā* has suggested that the sūtra may have circulated in a number of sectarian communities and been modified in accordance with sectarian context (Nattier 2003a: 129). Hence the actual sectarian origins of a sūtra may be elusive.

That Mahāyāna was embedded in its origins and development in the Buddhist sects, not in themselves Mahāyāna, 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 fifth or sixth centuries CE. Moreover the earlier inscription, on a statue of Buddha Amitābha found in North India, while clearly Mahāyāna, also uses formulae characteristic of non-Mahāyāna epigraphy. As far as inscriptional and indeed artistic evidence is concerned, Mahāyāna appears to have been an unimportant minority interest until well into the Common Era, originating firmly within the framework of other monastic traditions thought of as non-Mahāyāna (Schopen 2005: Chs 7–8). Summarizing the results of his extensive research into evidence for Mahāyāna in Indian inscriptions and art, Gregory Schopen (*ibid.*: 12) comments:

The cumulative weight of the different evidences is heavy and makes it clear that regardless of what was occurring in China and although Mahāyāna sūtras were being written at the time, it is virtually impossible to characterise Indian Buddhism in the Middle Period – the period from the first to the fifth century – as in any meaningful sense Mahāyāna. In India it appears more and more certain that the Mahāyāna was not institutionally,

culturally, or art historically significant until after the fifth century, and not until then did Mahāyāna doctrine have any significant visible impact on the intentions of Buddhist donors.

Moreover Schopen also points out that the material evidence suggests that when Mahāyāna did emerge in India, perhaps in the fifth or sixth centuries, as a clearly named group with its own monasteries, this was in peripheral, marginal, areas where Buddhism had previously little or no presence or, alternatively, where it had declined (*ibid.*: 14).¹²

The suggestion, then, is that Mahāyāna was in its origins and for many centuries in India almost exclusively the concern of a small number of monks and nuns originating from within the regular Buddhist sects, and as such subject to *Vinayas* that were not in themselves anything to do with Mahāyāna. Still, as David Seyffort Rugg (2004: 16) has recently pointed out, absence of evidence for Mahāyāna in, e.g., art and inscriptions does not *in itself* indicate that Mahāyāna was not present, or how many followers of Mahāyāna there were:

[E]arly Mahāyāna would appear neither to have been generally established as an organized institutional entity nor to have been constituted a socio-religious order separate and apart from the Nikāyas [sects] of the Śrāvakayāna [i.e. non-Mahāyāna Buddhism], which are better attested epigraphically at this early time. Accordingly, the absence from many a donative inscription of mention of either the Mahāyāna or the Mahāyānist is perhaps just what might be expected in the circumstances. . . . [A]n argument from silence can have force only if there exists a cogent reason for expecting a given document to refer to some thing had it in fact been in existence at the time of the writing of the document.

Be that as it may, Schopen and Rugg are both agreed that 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 in India, over a number of centuries.

The relative moral unity provided by the *Vinaya* (at least for most of the Buddhist world) 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 particularly good Buddhist, a pious layperson, if he or she takes refuge in the Buddha, his Dharma, and the Community (*sangha*) – 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 what we find is that Buddhism has a relative unity and stability in the moral code and in particular in the order of monks and (where they still exist) nuns.¹³

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