

David McMahan

ORALITY, WRITING,  
AND AUTHORITY  
IN SOUTH ASIAN  
BUDDHISM: VISIONARY  
LITERATURE AND  
THE STRUGGLE FOR  
LEGITIMACY IN THE  
MAHĀYĀNA

INTRODUCTION

The doctrinal differences between the sūtras of the Pāli canon and the Mahāyāna sūtras composed in South Asia have been widely commented on and debated by scholars, but seldom has attention been given to what the strikingly contrasting literary styles of the Pāli and Mahāyāna sūtras themselves might reveal about Buddhism in South Asia. Scholars have had many productive debates on whether the doctrine of emptiness is a radical departure from early Buddhism, whether the Mahāyāna introduces a subtle self (*ātman*) that contradicts the doctrine of *anātman*, and whether the Yogācāra was really “idealist” or not. But the literary styles in which these doctrines emerge in the Mahāyāna sūtras is so strikingly divergent from that of the Pāli sūtras that an exploration of what might contribute to this divergence might be as fruitful for the study of the Indian Buddhist world as that of their doctrinal differences. Indeed, even attention to only the introductory passages of certain sūtras opens up a number of important issues in the study of Buddhism.

Notice, for example, the introductory passages to two sūtras. The first is an early Pāli text, the Saḷāyatana-vibhaṅga Suttam, which discusses the sense fields (*āyatanas*). It begins: “Thus have I heard. At one time the Lord was staying at Sāvattī, in Jeta Grove at Anāthapiṇḍika. The disciples greeted the Lord, and the Blessed one said: ‘Disciples, I will now discuss the distinctions between the six sense fields.’”<sup>1</sup> This, of course, is

<sup>1</sup> Saḷāyatana-vibhaṅga suttam, in *Majjhima-Nikāya*, ed. Robert Charles (London: Luzac, for the Pāli Text Society, 1960), pp. 215–22.

the standard introduction that is common to virtually all of the Pāli sūtras. The Buddha then goes on to give a straightforward presentation of the doctrine of the six *āyatana*s in the typical repetitive style of the Nikāyas, with many formulaic expressions repeated often throughout the text for purposes of memorization. Compare this with the introduction to the Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra, a Mahāyāna text from about the second or third century C.E., which is set in the same location: “Thus have I heard. At one time the Lord was staying in Śravastī, in a magnificent pavilion in the garden of Anāthapiṇḍika in Jeta Grove, together with five thousand bodhisattvas, led by Samantabhadra and Mañjuśrī.”<sup>2</sup> So far, except for the mention of the bodhisattvas, the two passages are almost identical—but the similarities dissolve quite abruptly. After the names and good qualities of a number of the bodhisattvas present are listed, the bodhisattvas observe that most beings are incapable of comprehending the great merits and abilities of the tathāgata, and they ask the Buddha telepathically, not to *tell* them, but to *show* them (*saṃdarśayet*) these things. In response, the Buddha enters a state of profound concentration, and suddenly,

the pavilion became boundlessly vast; the surface of the earth appeared to be made of an indestructible diamond, and the ground covered with a net of all the finest jewels, strewn with flowers of many jewels, with enormous gems strewn all over; it was adorned with sapphire pillars, with well-proportioned decorations of world-illuminating pearls from the finest water, with all kinds of gems, combined in pairs, adorned with heaps of gold and jewels, and a dazzling array of turrets, arches, chambers, windows, and balconies made of all kinds of precious stones, arrayed in the forms of all world-rulers, and embellished with oceans of worlds of jewels, covered with flags, banners, and pennants flying in front of all the portals, the adornments pervading the cosmos with a network of lights. . . . The Jeta grove and buddha-fields as numerous as atoms within untold buddha-fields all became co-extensive.<sup>3</sup>

The text goes on in this vein for quite a few pages, describing in the most lavish terms the luxuriant scene that suddenly arises before the group right there in Jeta Grove, the sight of so many of the Buddha’s talks. There are endlessly winding rivers of fragrant water that murmur the teachings of the buddhas; palaces that float by in the air; countless mountains arrayed all around; clouds laced with webs of jewels and raining down diamond ornaments, garlands, flowers, and even multicolored robes; celestial maidens fly through the air with banners trailing behind them, while countless lotus blossoms rustle in the incense-filled air. After the initial description of the scene, bodhisattvas from distant world systems

<sup>2</sup> Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra, ed. P. L. Vaidya, Buddhist Sanskrit Texts no. 5 (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1960), p. 1 (hereafter cited as Gaṇḍavyūha).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 4–5.

begin to arrive, and with each of their appearances, more wonders are revealed penetrating to the farthest reaches of the most remote worlds, then zooming back to the body of the Buddha, to the tips of his hairs or the pores of his skin, within which are revealed countless more world systems.

What can account for the striking stylistic differences between these two texts, and why would many Mahāyāna sūtras make such a radical departure from the accepted genre of sūtra composition established by the earlier sūtras? The standard answer would be, perhaps, that the Mahāyāna, being originally a lay movement, was more disposed toward literary extravagance, mythical imagery, and themes appealing to the popular religious imagination. All of this is true, but it is not the end of the story. For a fuller understanding of the stylistic differences between “Hīnayāna” and Mahāyāna sūtras, at least two more factors must be addressed. One is the fact that the Mahāyāna was a written tradition, while many pre-Mahāyāna Buddhist works of literature are written versions of a vast corpus of orally transmitted sayings. One of the important changes in Indian culture at the time of the arising of the Mahāyāna was the development of writing. The beginnings of the widespread use of writing in India contributed to some of the transformations Buddhism faced a few hundred years after the founder’s death and was crucial to some of its most significant cultural and religious developments. Literacy disrupted the continuity of the oral tradition and reoriented access to knowledge from the oral- and aural-sense world to the visual world. The transition from pre-Mahāyāna to Mahāyāna Buddhist literature, then, provides a valuable case study of the changes that may occur during the transition from oral to written culture.

But the transition from orality to literacy was part of a wider concern for the Mahāyāna—the difficulty of establishing legitimacy and authority as a fledgling heterodox reform movement facing a well-established monastic orthodoxy. The orality of early Buddhism was not only an instance of historical happenstance but also an important means by which the early Saṅgha made its claim to authority. Pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism was, in fact, quite self-consciously an oral tradition, relying on the oral recitation and hearing of the Buddha’s discourses—talks that were maintained in the memories and mouths of monks who were, according to tradition, repeating, generation after generation, the very words that the Buddha himself spoke. This tradition of recitation, then, was the way by which the Saṅgha established its claim to the *Buddha-vacana*—the words of the Buddha—which conferred authority and legitimacy to the early Buddhist community.

Initially, the Mahāyāna sūtras, composed hundreds of years after the Buddha’s death, enjoyed no such institutional maintenance and legitimacy and, thus, had to look elsewhere for legitimation. That “elsewhere”

was the higher visionary worlds supposedly visible only to those more advanced followers of the Great Vehicle, whose visionary capacities revealed the bases for the unorthodox doctrinal claims of this new form of Buddhism. The Mahāyāna sūtras bear the marks of the movement's efforts to legitimate its novel doctrines and practices in the face of orthodox monastic communities with implicit authority, which by and large rejected its innovations. The otherworldly imagery in the Gaṇḍavyūha and other Mahāyāna sūtras has roots not only in the vivid experiences and religious inspirations of early Mahāyānists but also in the challenges that this heterodox minority movement faced in its struggle for legitimacy, patronage, and membership.

#### ORALITY IN EARLY BUDDHISM

Early Buddhist culture was an oral culture. The earliest archeological evidence of an Indian language being written in India, with the exception of the Harappān seals, are the inscriptions of Aśoka dated circa 258 B.C.E. The early Buddhist sūtras were not written documents but verses committed to memory and recited by monks who specialized in the memorization and recitation of what were understood to be the words of the Buddha. The orally preserved teachings were the substitute for the actual speaking presence of the Buddha; they were not merely the words of the teacher, but, after his death, they were the teacher itself. As the Buddha says in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta: "It may be, Ānanda, that some of you will think 'The word of the teacher is a thing of the past; we have now no teacher.' But that, Ānanda, is not the correct view. The doctrine and discipline, Ānanda, which I have taught and enjoined upon you is to be your teacher when I am gone."<sup>4</sup> Hearing and the spoken word were also inextricably tied to authority in early Buddhism. The *śrāvakas* (hearers) claimed to have directly heard and reported the words of the Buddha when he taught in India, and elaborate institutional efforts were employed by the Saṅgha to keep these words alive. The source of authority for the early teachings was the fact that they were heard from the self-authenticating presence of the Buddha. The repetition of these words was itself the Dharma and was the link to the living presence of Gautama who was now gone forever.

In an article on orality in Pāli literature, Steven Collins shows that the monastic Buddhist tradition was, even after the introduction of writing, largely an oral and aural one.<sup>5</sup> The traditional method of educating monks and nuns was for these students to hear and commit to memory the words

<sup>4</sup> H. C. Warren, trans., Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, in *Buddhism in Translation* (New York: Atheneum, 1984), p. 107.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Collins, "Notes on Some Oral Aspects of Pāli Literature," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 35 (1992): 121–35.

of their teacher, and most of the words in the Pāli literature referring to the learning process are related to speaking and hearing.<sup>6</sup> The monumental task of committing the received words of the founder to memory and reciting them regularly was based on the need to maintain the Dharma and protect it from corruption and innovation, as well as on the mandate to train disciples and maintain mindfulness of the teachings. Collins maintains that the oral/aural aspects of Pāli literature are important “both as a means of preservation and as a facet of the lived experience, the ‘sensual dimension,’ of Buddhist ‘scriptures.’”<sup>7</sup> From Collins’s arguments, it is evident that this “sensual dimension” was, in the first few centuries after the Buddha’s death, primarily oriented toward one particular sense—that of hearing.

While Buddhist vocabulary was rife with visual metaphor, vision in a literal sense and visual imagery were not emphasized as a way of communicating the teachings, as the aniconic nature of early Buddhism indicates. The earliest phases of Buddhism produced none of the elaborate monuments and sculptures so characteristic of its later developments. Making images of the Buddha was discouraged, and the only early representations of the awakened one were aniconic suggestions of his life and teachings such as the footprint symbolizing both the Buddha’s absence and the path that he left behind. Hearing the words of the awakened one, either through being in his presence during his lifetime or by hearing his teachings recited, was the primary and perhaps only way of receiving and engaging the teachings. Even after texts were being written down, it was not for the purpose of their being read privately—the Vinaya gives detailed lists of all the items of property a monk may have but never includes books or writing utensils.<sup>8</sup> Rather, the Buddha’s words were committed to palm leaf so that they would be preserved and read aloud in the context of instruction or public recitations.

By current scholarly consensus, it is only after the Buddha had been gone for some four hundred years that the Saṅgha wrote down his words. In and of itself, writing seems to have been held in some degree of suspicion, as indicated by the *nīti* verse with which Collins begins his study: “Knowledge in books [is like] money in someone else’s hands: when you need it, it’s not there.”<sup>9</sup> Writing was dangerous in that it relinquished control over the distribution of the Dharma and removed the words of the Buddha even further from their original source in his living speech

<sup>6</sup> For example, Collins (p. 124) notes the following: *vāceti*, “to make (the pupil) recite”; *uddisati*, “teaches, recites”; *suṇāti*, “listens”; *uggaṇḥati*, “grasps in memory”; *adhīyati* and *pariyāpunāti*, “learns (by reciting)”; *sajjhāyati*, “recites”; and *dhāreti*, “retains (what he has learnt in memory).”

<sup>7</sup> Collins, p. 129.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

and presence. Lance Cousins has argued that systematic oral transmission within institutions such as the Saṅgha is more likely to preserve texts intact than writing would, because in the former situation, it takes the agreement of a large number of people to make changes to the text. Manuscripts, on the other hand, can be changed by any individual scribe.<sup>10</sup> For an orthodoxy trying to maintain the authenticity of its founder's teachings, writing was probably seen as a danger that eventually became a necessary evil. Pāli commentaries claim that the writing down of sūtras began only after there was merely one man left alive who had a particular text committed to memory and that the text was written down for fear of its being lost forever.<sup>11</sup> Donald Lopez suggests that the reluctance of the Saṅgha to commit the sūtras to writing may have to do with an "ideology of the self-presence of speech," that is, the notion that only the Buddha's *speech* could truly present the Dharma, the uncreated truth, as he discovered it and that writing stands further removed from this truth—derivative, displaced, and dead.<sup>12</sup> The repetition of words that were heard from the Buddha by a disciple, then transmitted to his disciple, and so on through a lineage of hearers, not only had the effect of rendering the Dharma in the manner that most closely approximated its original utterance but also provided a source for genealogical legitimacy. The introduction of writing could not help but rupture this sense of authentic presence and continuity. In the early Buddhist tradition, then, the written word had little inherent value; it was seen, at best, as a merely instrumental vehicle for the spoken word.

#### WRITING IN THE EARLY MAHĀYĀNA

In the Māyāna, however, the written word took on quite a different significance, especially with regard to Mahāyāna sūtras. Writing was crucial to the development and character of the Mahāyāna in at least three respects: first, written texts were essential to the survival of this heterodox tradition; second, they provided a basis for one of the most important aspects of early Mahāyāna practice, that is, the worship of written sūtras themselves; and third, writing contributed to a restructuring of knowledge in such a way that vision, rather than hearing, became a significant mode of access to knowledge.

#### WRITING AND THE SURVIVAL OF THE MAHĀYĀNA

The first point is offered by Richard Gombrich, who has suggested that the rise and sustenance of the Mahāyāna was largely due to the use of

<sup>10</sup> Lance Cousins, Internet communication, Buddha-L discussion group, February 7, 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Gombrich, "How the Mahāyāna Began," in *The Buddhist Forum*, vol. 1, ed. Tadeusz Skorupski (London: School of Oriental and African Studies), p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> Donald Lopez, "Authority and Orality in the Mahāyāna," *Numen* (1995): 20–47, quote on 39.

writing.<sup>13</sup> He notes that the task of preserving the immense Pāli canon orally was made feasible only through the considerable efforts of the Saṅgha, which was organized enough to train monks in the memorization and recitation of the oral teachings. The Saṅgha had standards for determining whether or not an utterance was authentic and should be considered the word of the Buddha; if it did not meet these standards, it was not preserved.<sup>14</sup> Because the preservation of extensive oral teachings required the institutional organization and systematic efforts of the Saṅgha, teachings that were not accepted and preserved by this collective effort most likely withered away. Gombrich suggests that many monks and nuns may have had unique visions or inspirations that led them to formulate new doctrines and teachings, but if those teachings were not preserved by the Saṅgha, they were lost forever. The Mahāyāna, however, arose at about the same time writing was becoming prevalent in India, and writing provided a means by which heterodox teachings could be preserved without the institutional support of the Saṅgha. Gombrich argues that this was a major factor in the ability of the Mahāyāna to survive.

I would add to this observation that the sacred status that many Mahāyāna sūtras ascribed to themselves, both as bearers of doctrine and as material objects, encouraged their reproduction and dissemination and thus contributed to their survival. In addition to introducing the notion of sacred books to India, many Mahāyāna sūtras present the copying of these texts as a highly meritorious act. A number of sūtras devote a considerable amount of space to extolling their own greatness and telling of the immense benefits to be gained from reading, copying, memorizing, promoting, and distributing them. The Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra (the Lotus Sūtra), for example, promises to those who promulgate even one of its verses incalculable moral and spiritual benefits, including great wisdom, compassion, rebirth in luxurious heavenly realms, and intensification of the sense capacities for receiving broad ranges of stimuli; also included were more mundane benefits, such as an abundance of food, drink, clothing, and bedding, and freedom from disease, ugliness of countenance, bad teeth, crooked noses, and imperfect genitals.<sup>15</sup> Even illiterate devotees of sūtras copied their script in hopes of gaining such benefits. Thus, writing, combined with the promise of merit through reproduction of the texts, gave many sūtras a built-in promotional device and distribution system. Evidently, what made the orthodox tradition wary of

<sup>13</sup> Gombrich, pp. 21–30.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of rules for determining textual authenticity, see Étienne Lamotte, “The Assessment of Textual Interpretation in Buddhism,” trans. Sara Boin-Webb, in *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, ed. Donald Lopez (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988), pp. 11–28.

<sup>15</sup> Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra, ed. P. L. Vaidya, *Buddhist Sanskrit Texts* no. 6 (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1960), pp. 265–67; see chaps. 17–19 for discussions of merit.

writing—fear of losing control over teachings—was worth the risk for Mahāyānists, who were attempting to expand and spread their movement.

#### SACRED TEXTS AND SACRED SITE

According to recent scholarship, the earliest forms of the Mahāyāna were probably cults centered around the worship of the movement's new sūtras, and these cults played an important part in the growth of the Mahāyāna. Certain Mahāyāna sūtra manuscripts were considered sacred objects with the power to consecrate places, thereby establishing sacred sites and Mahāyāna centers of worship that were similar to, and modeled on, stūpa cults that were already prevalent. To understand the importance of this phenomenon, it is first necessary to consider briefly these stūpa cults and their socioreligious significance.

The primary sacred places that existed within the early Buddhist tradition were designated by stūpas—reliquaries containing remains of the Buddha and, later, disciples or revered monks. Stūpa building and stūpa reverence most likely started among the laity and was an important part of lay practice. The eight stūpas within which the Buddha's relics were supposedly housed after his death became places of pilgrimage and thriving centers of both religious and commercial activity, populated by lay religious specialists as well as by merchants who would all gather for religious services and festivals. These centers may have been more popular among laypersons than the monastic community, who were not permitted to participate in commercial activities, pluck living flowers for offerings, listen to worldly stories and music, or watch dancing, all of which were part of the festivities at the stūpas.<sup>16</sup> According to Akira Hirakawa, the congregations that developed around these centers of worship gradually developed into lay orders that were stūpa cults not directly tied to monastic Buddhism.<sup>17</sup> As iconic art began to develop, the stūpas often contained illustrated scenes from the *Jātaka* stories, detailing the amazing and selfless deeds of Gautama in his past lives as a bodhisattva. Hirakawa speculates that the repeated telling and interpreting of these scenes to pilgrims by the religious specialists gave rise to forms of Buddhism that emphasized the salvific power of the Buddha and promoted worship and devotion toward him. The stūpas, therefore, were important factors in the development of the devotional elements that would constitute certain aspects of the Mahāyāna. Hirakawa also suggests that this was the origin of groups that considered themselves to be bodhisattvas, distinct from the

<sup>16</sup> Kajiyana Yūichi, "Prajñāpāramitā and the Rise of Mahāyāna," in *Buddhist Spirituality*, ed. Takeuchi Yoshinori (New York: Crossroad, 1993), pp. 143–44.

<sup>17</sup> Akira Hirakawa, *A History of Indian Buddhism: From Śākyamuni to Early Mahāyāna*, trans. Paul Groner (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), pp. 270–74.

Śrāvakas and Arhats, and who would be presented as the most advanced disciples in most Mahāyāna texts.<sup>18</sup>

As much as stūpa culture may have directly contributed to the Mahāyāna, it also served as a complex arena of tension and conflict between these cults and the wisdom schools. While Hirakawa makes a good case for the contributions of stūpa cults to the development of the Mahāyāna, he admits that the origins of some of the most important Mahāyāna literature, the *Prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom) texts, must be sought for elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> This body of literature, along with a number of Mahāyāna wisdom texts, downplays the value of stūpa/relic worship in comparison to devotion to the text itself, that is, the written manuscript of a Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra. The reason for the devaluing of stūpas in Mahāyāna literature is both doctrinal and pragmatic. One of the earliest Perfection of Wisdom texts, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (henceforth, *Aṣṭa*), contains an interesting discussion indicating the ambivalence and tension between stūpa cults and the emerging groups devoted to Mahāyāna wisdom texts. In one passage, the Buddha questions Śakra about the value of the relics contained in stūpas compared to the Perfection of Wisdom, asking which he would prefer if he had the choice between an enormous number of relics of all the tathāgatas and one written copy of the text. He, of course, chooses the Perfection of Wisdom, arguing for its primacy over relics, since the Perfection of Wisdom is the cause of the wisdom of the tathāgatas, rather than its depository.<sup>20</sup> The value of relics is derivative in that they, being identified with the enlightened buddhas, are the results of, and are pervaded by, the Perfection of Wisdom. Furthermore, he claims, the Perfection of Wisdom supersedes relics (*śarīra*) insofar as it is itself the “true body of the Buddha,” which is the body of the Dharma (*dharmakāya*).<sup>21</sup> This passage illustrates the effort by the followers of the Perfection of Wisdom to replace, or at least augment, devotion to the physical remains of the Buddha enshrined in stūpas with both the message and physical presence of the written text of the *Prajñāpāramitā*; invoking the traditional notion of the functional equivalence

<sup>18</sup> While Hirakawa associates the birth of the Mahāyāna directly with the laity and the stūpa cults, which he claims were almost exclusively the domain of the laity, Paul Williams argues that the laity did not themselves bring about Mahāyāna Buddhism. Rather, the Mahāyāna, or at least its literature, was the product of monks within the established traditions whose understanding of the Dharma was more inclusive of the laity and their practices and perspectives. See Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: the Doctrinal Foundations* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 20–23.

<sup>19</sup> Hirakawa, p. 274.

<sup>20</sup> “Perfection of Wisdom” is used in this sense as the state of enlightenment or that which leads to such a state, as well as the text itself.

<sup>21</sup> *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, ed. P. L. Vaidya, Buddhist Sanskrit Texts no. 4 (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1960), p. 49.

of the Dharma body, as the collected teachings of the Buddha, with the Buddha himself.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the doctrinal disagreements between the emerging textual traditions of the Mahāyāna and the stūpa cults, more concrete concerns regarding the establishment of places of worship may have been operative. During the earliest developments of the Mahāyāna, sacred places associated with the life of the Buddha were controlled by the stūpa cults connected to the orthodox traditions. Evidence exists in the Perfection of Wisdom texts that the Mahāyāna polemics against the Hinayāna stūpa cults were not only about doctrine but were also about the struggle of the Mahāyāna to establish its own sacred places. Gregory Schopen deals with this issue in his study of the early Mahāyāna as a loose federation of different “cults of the book” in which sūtras themselves become objects of worship and the cults who worshipped them were structured similarly to stūpa cults.<sup>23</sup> Schopen argues that the tradition of the cult of the book drew from the idea that the presence of the Buddha in a particular place during a significant episode of his life rendered that place sacred. This was also the rationale behind early stūpa cults. The idea was combined with the notion expressed in the stock phrase “Whoever sees the Dharma, sees the Buddha,” which indicated that wherever the teachings were set forth, the Buddha was effectively present. From this idea, “it followed naturally that if the presence of the *Bhagavat* at a particular place had the effect of sacralizing that spot, then by extension, the presence (in some form) of the *dharmaparyāya* [setting forth of the Dharma, i.e., a sūtra] must have the same effect.”<sup>24</sup> Reciting a text purporting to be the words of the Buddha over a particular place, then, would render it sacred in the same sense in which a stūpa is a sacred place, that is, in that the Dharma was taught there, and even in that it contained “part” of the Buddha himself, in this case his Dharma body rather than merely his physical remains. Schopen argues that this was one way in which early Mahāyānists dealt with the problem of “localization of the cult of the book” by way of “authoritatively legitimating that spot as a cultic center.”<sup>25</sup> This was a way of establishing new sacred places that probably served as permanent teaching centers that were not tied to those sacred sites associated with the Buddha’s life, which were under the control of more orthodox groups.

Furthermore, the recitation of a sūtra or formula at a particular place was not the only way to consecrate the site; the presence of a written

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 96. The reference to *dharmakāya* is likely a later interpolation; nevertheless, it shows one way in which the cult of the *Prajñāpāramitā* attempted to supersede devotion to relics by playing the terms *śārira* and *kāya* off of each other.

<sup>23</sup> Gregory Schopen, “The phrase ‘*sa pṛthivīpradeśā caityabhūto bhavet*’ in the *Vajracchedikā*: Notes on the Cult of the Book in the Mahāyāna,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 17 (November–December 1975): 147–81.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 178–79.

copy of a sūtra was understood to have the same effect. Schopen argues that the shift from a primarily oral to a primarily written tradition was important to the establishment of these Mahāyāna cultic centers, because the presence of the written sūtra eliminated the need for oral consecrations by the monks who specialized in reciting sūtras (*bhāṇakas*). The written sūtra could serve as a focal point of the cult and as a permanent source of the power and presence of the Dharma, independent of the need for recitation.<sup>26</sup> This, in turn, freed Mahāyānists from the need to have the institutional sanction and support of the Saṅgha.

The transposition of the Dharma into physical form to be worshiped, combined with the promises of great benefits gained from copying and promoting the sūtra, ensured that devotees would reproduce and distribute the texts widely, expanding the influence and power of the Mahāyāna cults and contributing to its devotional flavor. The *Aṣṭa* presents a compelling picture of some of its cult's practices in passages suggesting what activities are most meritorious with regard to the sūtra:

If a son or daughter of good family has genuine confidence and trust in this Perfection of Wisdom [i.e., the *Aṣṭa*], is intent on it, has a clear mind, has thoughts raised to awakening, has earnest resolution, and hears it, grasps [its meaning], speaks it, studies it, spreads it, demonstrates it, explains it, expounds it, repeats it, makes it manifest in full detail to others, makes its meaning clear, investigates it with the mind, and with superior wisdom, examines it thoroughly; then copies it in the form of a book, bears it in mind and preserves it so that the good Dharma will last long, so that the guide of the buddhas will not disappear, and so that the bodhisattvas may incur benefits by means of this flawless guide; indeed, that son or daughter of good family who makes this Perfection of Wisdom his or her teacher, honors and respects with flowers, incense, perfume, garlands, ointments, powders, raiment, parasols, emblems, bells, banners, with lamps and garlands all around it; whoever pays obeisance to it in these various ways will generate great merit.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to its emphasis on promotion and distribution, this passage shows how a text like the *Aṣṭa*, usually known for its early enunciation of the most abstract philosophical concepts of the Mahāyāna, had more uses than just the development of the movement's theoretical foundations. In fact, it and other early sūtras were the object of perhaps some of the earliest forms of Buddhist *bhakti*, or worship, which suggests how inseparable the traditions of high philosophy were from devotional practices. The passage also shows another facet of the importance of the physicality of the Dharma in the form of the written book in the early Mahāyāna.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> *Aṣṭa*, pp. 46–47.

Closely connected to this issue is another implication of the uses of writing in the Mahāyāna—and particularly in its written sūtras—namely, that it challenged the traditional notions of sacred space. As a heterodox minority movement, the early Mahāyāna was enabled through writing to expand and develop by granting to the book the sacrality of the Buddha himself, thus providing lay followers with forms of devotion and, through the consecrational power of these manuscripts, creating new sacred sites under its control. Cults of the book also attempted to establish a new relation to sacred space that was not tied inevitably to those traditional sacred sites associated with the life of the founder and that were controlled by orthodox monks or stūpa cults. The fact that anywhere the text was placed could now become a sacred place equivalent to those associated with the life of the Buddha had the effect of de-emphasizing the significance of the specific, localized, and temporal presence of Śākyamuni. Sacred space was now mobile. This is perhaps the beginning of a marked tendency in the Mahāyāna, which I will discuss later, toward a more general dislocation of the sacred from the locus of the “historical” life of Śākyamuni in favor of more abstract and unlocalizable understandings of the sacred and of the Buddha.

#### WRITING AND THE VISUAL

A further way in which writing was significant to the Mahāyāna in particular, and to all of Buddhism and South Asian thought, practice, and literature in general, was that it shifted access to and organization of knowledge from a primarily oral and auditory mode to a primarily visual mode. In order to explore some of the implications of this shift, it is necessary to make a digression into some general theoretical observations about these two cognitive-perceptual orientations and the effect that they may have on consciousness and culture. While these general observations about hearing, vision, and writing may be useful to a greater or lesser extent depending on the specific cultures to which they are applied, I outline them here because they seem relevant and applicable to the case of South Asian Buddhism.

A number of scholars have attempted to elucidate the ways in which vision and hearing each orient consciousness to the world in distinctive ways. Drawing mainly from the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Hans Jonas, David Chidester notes that hearing is associated with time and sequence, while seeing is associated with space; that is, the eye sees objects in space while the ear hears sounds arising and passing away in time.<sup>28</sup> The “dimension,” as it were, of sound is time, while the three

<sup>28</sup> David Chidester, *Word and Light: Seeing, Hearing, and Religious Discourse* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), p. 9.

dimensions of space are the medium in which objects of vision subsist. Auditory experience is inherently related to flux and discontinuity in that it structures and presents things in a temporal sequence. The kind of sound that is most important to this inquiry, the spoken word, is paradigmatic of this sequentiality, being what Merleau-Ponty calls “an indefinite series of discontinuous acts.”<sup>29</sup> A word, like any sound, is an event that is always passing away, always mobile. Because words are always disappearing as they are pronounced, Walter Ong suggests that orality is essentially dialogical and that, in oral cultures, thought must be “shaped into mnemonic patterns ordered for oral recurrence” and consist of rhythmic and repetitive patterns and formulaic expressions.<sup>30</sup> This, of course, is precisely the constitution of the early Buddhist sūtras, such as our example, the Saḷāyatana-vibāṅga.

Vision, on the other hand, suggests a different orientation toward knowledge and its organization. The visual system is capable of apprehending a variety of things simultaneously and is less tied to temporal sequence. It apprehends a number of copresent things and unifies them in the moment, making them more susceptible to analysis. Chidester suggests that visual perception is more conducive to the discernment of patterns and to detached contemplation, while hearing, particularly hearing a voice, may be more apt to induce action, since it informs the hearer of an event or a change in the situation that calls for response.<sup>31</sup> These observations apply not only to visually apprehended objects but also to the written, as opposed to the spoken, word. Ong asserts that writing “restructures consciousness” and that the literate mind is forever changed in its thinking and orientation to the world, not only when engaged in reading or writing, but even when speaking, hearing, and composing thoughts orally: “More than any other invention, writing has transformed consciousness” because, among other things, it “moves speech from the oral-aural to a new sensory world, that of vision [and therefore] transforms speech and thought as well.”<sup>32</sup>

The implications of these suggestions on ways in which oral-aural and literate-visual modalities structure consciousness and culture cannot be fully drawn out in the limited space of this inquiry, but some points about

<sup>29</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), p. 193, quoted in Chidester, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982), p. 34. While some of Ong’s other generalizations about oral cultures seem disproved by the case of early Buddhism, such as the requirement that they are “agonistically toned” (p. 43) and would never contain “a vehicle so neutral as a list” (p. 42), the observation regarding mnemonic patterns certainly applies to the early sūtras.

<sup>31</sup> Chidester, p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> Ong, pp. 78, 85. See also, on the shift from ear to eye, Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

South Asian Buddhism in this regard can be noted. The difference between accessing the teachings of the Dharma through hearing and through reading undoubtedly had significant effects on the ways in which Buddhists appropriated the sūtras. Writing was a medium that was uniquely appropriate to the Mahāyāna and its creative reinterpretations of doctrine in that it freed access to texts from being dependent on the collective activities of chanting and recitation and thus from the need for the institutional sanction of the monastic Saṅgha. Further, because the written manuscript frees the reader from being locked into the temporal flow of the recitation and to the particular place where the recitation is performed, it lends itself to appropriation in ways very different from those that are possible in either the performing or hearing of oral recitation. Since the manuscript is present in its entirety, rather than constantly passing away in time, as is the case with oral utterance, a greater degree of analysis and reflection on the material is possible. A reader can move back and forth through a text at will, drawing correlations between different passages, analyzing and comparing statements, and cross-referencing with other texts. These activities allowed more individual reflection, interpretation, and analysis, which may have predisposed readers to novel interpretation, individual insight, and embellishment.

The analytic and interpretive activities to which writing lent itself were not confined to the Mahāyāna but had an impact on all of the Buddhist schools. It is around the time of the emergence of writing that systematic philosophy and analysis of doctrine, such as that found in the Abhidharma, begins to take shape. Ong has suggested that analysis and philosophy are only possible in a literate culture.<sup>33</sup> If the early Pāli sūtras that we possess today are anything like their oral antecedents (which they most likely are), this is obviously not true in the case of Indian Buddhism. Considerable theoretical reflection and analysis is present in these texts. However, it seems clear that extensive analysis of the sūtras themselves arose in conjunction with the development of writing. The attempt to systematize the teachings of the sūtras into a consistent order came about from the relative freedom from temporal sequence that writing afforded. Abhidharma thought, with its extensive lists, categories, correlations, headings, and subheadings, bears the marks of literate composition in that it culls teachings from a number of different sources and attempts to systematize, synthesize, and categorize them. Such activities would be extremely difficult if one were limited to the sequentiality that structures oral recitation of memorized utterances. The simultaneous presence of written texts in visual space is necessary for such work. The multiple categories and subcategories in the Abhidharma and other commentarial

<sup>33</sup> Ong, p. 15.

literature are, in part, the products of the ability to represent complex classificatory schemas spatially. In contemporary books dealing with the Abhidharma, one can scarcely come across a discussion of this literature that does not contain at least one chart in which the various elements of existence (*dharmas*) are laid out spatially, allowing all the complex classifications and their relationships to present themselves spatially.

The fixed, static nature of the book, and its passive unresponsiveness, may also give it a sense of implicit authority and unchallengeability on an intuitive level, particularly to those for whom writing is a new phenomenon. Ong suggests that writing establishes a “context free” or “autonomous” discourse that is more detached from its authors than oral discourse and, therefore, cannot be questioned directly.<sup>34</sup> These points are helpful when thinking about the Mahāyāna and heterodox movements in general. Writing helps in establishing an unorthodox movement because written words may have their own implicit authority; they do not call for justification, response, and argumentation as easily and immediately as spoken words. Their soundless presence is perhaps more likely to evoke a sense of implicit legitimacy than is a human voice, whose authority depends on the social position of the speaker in a given context. The impassivity of the written word may evoke a sense of authority that gives the appearance of being free from or floating above social context, since the conditions of its production (at least in the case of Mahāyāna sūtras) are obscure. Its very unresponsiveness may seem to elevate it above the spoken word, which tends to call for an immediate response. In many cultures in the early stages of literacy, writings confer on themselves a self-authenticating and sacred quality, perhaps because of the mute, unresponsive authority that they present or because sacred words are among the things most likely to be written down.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, by providing a technology by which any literate person could access and interpret the Dharma outside the context of the Saṅgha, writing encouraged unorthodox insight, creativity, and dissent. The writer could compose his or her own ideas, which would be present before the eye, laid out with the same seeming permanence and unassailability as the *Buddha-vacana*. The physical presence of the written manuscript, in turn, contributed to the likelihood that these ideas would not die the moment the author’s voice fell silent. Therefore, the inherently conservative tendencies of the oral tradition, which strove to maintain the integrity of the words of the founder through its various institutional practices and rules, were subverted in part by the introduction of writing.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>35</sup> For examples, see Jack Goody, ed., *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

Finally, in looking at the introductory passages of the sample sūtras, the most obvious difference is that they are unmistakably structured around different sense modalities, the sūtra on the sense fields being composed in mnemonic patterns for oral memorization and recitation and the Gaṇḍavyūha being written as a visual extravaganza, not only in its barrage of vivid imagery, but in its frequent use of visually oriented language and metaphor. The emphasis throughout the text is on what is seen rather than what is heard. The emergence of visionary literature is not confined to Mahāyāna Buddhism but is a pan-Indic phenomenon beginning around the first or second century B.C.E.—the same time as the emergence of writing. Parts of the Bhagavadgītā and the Pure Land texts are the most ready examples of such visually oriented literature emerging around this period. It is also noteworthy that visualization practices became more elaborate and important in both Buddhism and Hinduism at this time. I would not want to attribute all of this exclusively to the emergence of writing, but the coincidence of a wave of visionary literature and practice sweeping India at about the same time as literacy was becoming widespread does suggest that writing and the attendant shift to the visual sense modality played a significant part in the development of visionary literature in India.

THE *Buddha-Vacana* AND STRATEGIES OF LEGITIMATION IN THE  
MAHĀYĀNA

Of course, the implicit advantages of writing and written sūtras were not the only factors in the relative success of the Mahāyāna movement(s) in South Asia. Aside from being composed in the propitious medium of written language, the content of Mahāyāna sūtras written in South Asia went to great lengths to attempt to establish the movement's authority and legitimacy—something that would have been quite difficult for what was probably a minority reform movement facing well-established and powerful monastic institutions with their own claims to authority and legitimacy. The contention of this article is that at least one factor in the evocative imagery and rhetorical style of many Mahāyāna sūtras involved its use as such a strategy of legitimation. Before examining a specific instance of such a use, though, it would be helpful to place this claim in context by discussing some of the ways in which the early Mahāyāna struggled against the more orthodox schools' claims to exclusive authority based on possession of the *Buddha-vacana*, the words of the Buddha. As we have seen, the early Buddhist community's identity involved its role as the keepers of the *Buddha-vacana* given by Gautama and, according to tradition, memorized by his disciples and passed orally from generation to generation. This community considered itself to be those who heard, either directly or through others, the words of the Buddha. Thus, the hear-

ers of the *Buddha-vacana* were not only those who were actually present at the talks of the Buddha, but also disciples who received the teachings through hearing oral recitation. Although not the only criterion for legitimacy, the most important and unambiguous way in which a teaching was understood to be authentic was that it was considered to be the very words that the Buddha spoke.<sup>36</sup> Thus the *Buddha-vacana* was the primary seal of authenticity.

Concern for the word of the Buddha continued in the Mahāyāna but became a more complex issue. A sūtra is a composition containing a talk given by the Buddha and is therefore by definition *Buddha-vacana*. Whether from the Pāli canon or the Mahāyāna, all sūtras start out with the narrator uttering the same words: “Thus have I heard . . .” (*evaṃ mayā śrutam*). Following this is a description of the particular place the sermon was heard, individuals and groups that were present, and so forth—all reports that would seem to provide verification that the original hearer was in fact in the specified place at the time of the talk. Yet it is clear to modern scholars, as it probably was to most Buddhists in ancient India, that the Mahāyāna sūtras were composed quite a long time after the death of Gautama and that it is highly unlikely that the “historical” Buddha ever spoke any of them. Thus, the need to explain the existence of these sūtras and the attendant novel doctrines was of great concern to the Mahāyāna and is an issue addressed, directly or indirectly, in many sūtras and commentaries.

It is impossible to reconstruct precisely the attitudes and motivations of these early Mahāyāna sūtra writers—to imagine what they conceived of themselves as doing when, hundreds of years after the Buddha’s death, they wrote the words “*evaṃ mayā śrutam*.” Perhaps they had powerful insights that they were convinced were inspired by the Buddha, or perhaps stories and ideas generated in the environments of the stūpa cults eventually were considered to be part of the Buddha’s dialogues. These late sūtra writers may have simply had a far more liberal interpretation of what counts as the word of the Buddha than did their orthodox contemporaries. It is conceivable that many doctrines and practices that we now consider uniquely Mahāyāna were in existence from very early but were simply marginalized by those who determined the legitimacy of teachings; thus we know nothing about them until the Mahāyāna became more organized and began writing its own texts.

Despite the inevitable obscurity to historical investigation of the intentions of these late sūtra writers, many indications do exist as to how Mahāyānists construed their creative reformulations of the Dharma and

<sup>36</sup> The other three criteria were that it be the words of a formally constituted Saṅgha, of a small group of elders, or of a single learned monk. It should also be in harmony with the other sūtras and the Vinaya.

justified them to themselves and to outsiders once they were written. A number of explanations were offered for the emergence of these new sūtras. According to one ancient reconstruction of the Mahāyāna, the *śrāvakas* did not have the capacity to understand the advanced teachings of the Great Vehicle, so they were taught to otherworldly beings and hidden until teachers emerged who could understand them.<sup>37</sup> Another explanation was that the original hearers did not understand the content of these talks but transmitted them anyway for later generations better equipped to comprehend them.<sup>38</sup> The claim was prevalent that certain teachings were revealed only to a select few. Many Mahāyāna commentators went to great lengths to reconcile the teachings of the Hīnayāna with those of the Mahāyāna by a careful reworking of the story of the Buddha's life in which every teaching ever attributed to him was understood to be given to particular disciples on various levels of spiritual attainment. In these scenarios, less spiritually developed people were given teachings of the Hīnayāna, while bodhisattvas and other nearly enlightened being received the higher teachings of the Mahāyāna.

The text that is perhaps the most replete with explanations of novel Mahāyāna doctrines and practices is the Lotus Sūtra. The rhetoric of the Lotus is suggestive of the polemical context in which these doctrines and practices developed. It directly addresses the contradictions between its Mahāyāna teachings and those of the Nikāyas, much like the Christian Church explained its relationship to Judaism, by claiming supersession. It presents three specific types of people on the Buddhist path—the *śrāvaka*, who hears the words of the Buddha; the *pratyekabuddha*, who attains salvation through his own efforts and without a teacher; and the bodhisattva, who renounces his own entry into nirvāṇa until all sentient beings are saved. After warning that this teaching would be quite disturbing to both human beings and gods, the Buddha explains that all of the teachings held by those on these three paths are merely skillful means (*upāya*) that he employed to lead them all to the one true vehicle to Buddhahood, the Mahāyāna. The teachings held by the three archetypal figures on the path were given because the *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas* were capable of understanding only limited truths, such as the doctrine of causes and conditions, and of attaining freedom from rebirth and suffering in the quiescence of nirvāṇa. In the most famous parable of the Lotus, these doctrines were likened to promises told to children in order to lure them out of a burning house.<sup>39</sup> At one time, says the Buddha, these inferior teachings

<sup>37</sup> Tāranātha, *Taranatha's Geschichte des Buddhismus in Indien*, trans. Anton Schiefner (Tokyo: Suzuki Gakujutsu Zaidan, 1965), pp. 61 ff., cited in A. K. Warder, *Indian Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970), p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Lopez (n. 12 above), p. 39.

<sup>39</sup> Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra (n. 15 above), pp. 44–50.

may have been necessary, but now the time has come to reveal the full extent of the Dharma in the teachings of the Lotus. The claim, then, that the Hīnayāna teachings were merely skillful means to prepare disciples to receive the higher truth of the Mahāyāna explained the discrepancies between the two, while at the same time asserting the superiority of the new teachings.

The theme of secrecy was also an important factor in explaining novel texts and contradictory doctrines. The arising of additions to the Dharma and the discrepancies between sūtras were sometimes explained by the claim that the Buddha communicated secret Mahāyāna teachings to certain people, at times even in the midst of giving a Hīnayāna teaching. The most complex examples of this claim occurred outside India, for example, in the Chinese systems of doctrinal classification (*p'an chiao*). Perhaps the most elaborate of such systems was that of the great Chinese thinker Chih-i. According to Chih-i, the Buddha taught different sūtras to people with different levels of understanding and spiritual development, intuiting who was ready to hear advanced teachings and who could only appreciate limited teachings. After teaching the Avataṃsaka Sūtra immediately preceding his enlightenment, he then moderated his approach, proceeding from the more digestible Hīnayāna teachings through to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, the *Śūnyavāda* teachings, and others, until finally he revealed the perfect expression of the Dharma, the Lotus Sūtra. Most interesting is Chih-i's notion of the secret methods by which the Buddha communicated all these divergent doctrines to different people, according to their level of understanding. The "secret indeterminate" teachings were those in which the Buddha said the same thing in such a manner that different listeners, each unaware of the other, heard the teachings in a different way and thus came away remembering completely different discourses. In other cases, the Buddha spoke secretly to separate individuals, each of whom thought that he alone was the exclusive recipient of the message; but, in fact, others were present, magically concealed from each other so that, again, they came away with contradictory teachings. In the "express indeterminate" teachings, Chih-i asserts that the Buddha said the same thing, but different people—this time all present and aware of each other—heard distinctly different sermons; thus, again, each came away with different doctrines. All of these explanations served, first, to explain the wide variety of seemingly conflicting doctrines all claiming to be the words of the Buddha; second, to impose a hierarchical structure on the various doctrines with the teachings of one's own school on top; and third, to try to determine the highest teaching, namely, that which was closest to representing the Buddha's own enlightenment.

What is important about Chih-i's attempt to understand the great diversity of teachings all claiming to be the words of the Buddha is that

it epitomizes the way in which, even after the Mahāyāna attained dominance in China, the Great Vehicle struggled both to subvert and reconcile itself to most orthodox Buddhist doctrine and practice. Although it reached its most elaborate forms in China, this effort began with the early Mahāyāna in India. Virtually every schools of Buddhism in India had its own version of which doctrines had definitive meaning (*nītārtha*) and which had merely provisional meaning (*neyārtha*), and since there were no univocally accepted standards for deciding such matters, each school drew this distinction on the basis of its own doctrinal suppositions. The organization of doctrines based on the notion that some were merely skillful means indicates the strong need felt by Mahāyānists to legitimate their novel teachings, while maintaining a connection of lineage with Śākyamuni. It is noteworthy that, while the orthodox schools often criticized the Mahāyāna as being inauthentic, the Mahāyānists never questioned the legitimacy of the Hīnayāna sūtras, that is, that they were records of talks that the Buddha actually gave. The effort to authenticate the Mahāyāna sūtras was aimed at explaining how the Buddha actually gave doctrines that contradicted each other—how a unity of thought and intention could be understood to lie beneath the apparent discrepancies between the large and small vehicles. The rhetorical devices used to establish legitimacy in the Mahāyāna were always a hermeneutic of inclusion—albeit an inclusion that was also a subversion, for while the Hīnayāna sūtras were considered authentic, they were relegated to being merely provisional.

#### VISIONARY LITERATURE AND GROUNDS FOR LEGITIMACY

Having suggested the significance of writing and various strategies of legitimation for the emerging Mahāyāna movement in South Asia, I now return to the introductory passage from the Gaṇḍavyūha and to the question of the pronounced difference in literary style between the Hīnayāna sūtras and many of the Mahāyāna sūtras. Recall the stark contrast between the sparse style of the Pāli sūtras and the lush visionary images of the Gaṇḍavyūha. While the Gaṇḍavyūha is probably the most effusive example of such literary style in Buddhist writings, it is not alone among Mahāyāna sūtras in presenting dazzling scenes attendant on the Buddha's preparing to deliver a discourse. Many such sūtras begin in similar, albeit toned-down ways. It is tempting to attribute the "magical" elements in Mahāyāna literature to the fact that the movement began among the laity and that these features were products of the popular religious imagination. But, while the laicizing tendencies of the Mahāyāna were certainly important to the development of many novel features of these texts, the works themselves were obviously written by an educated elite who were thoroughly familiar with all facets of Buddhist doctrine and practice. Furthermore, in addition to the nourishing of the popular need for salvific

figures, and of the new religious specialists' predilection for visionary experience, there is embedded in these lavish presentations highly polemical rhetoric designed both to explain the emergence of previously unknown sūtras and to establish them as superior to the Hīnayāna. Thus, the visionary elements of Mahāyāna sūtras, in addition to weaving an aesthetically rich and fascinating fabric of symbolic imagery that would nourish the Buddhist imagination up to the present day, made a unique contribution to the aforementioned strategies of legitimation. The Gaṇḍavyūha makes these polemical strategies quite clear. Continuing with the passage presented at the beginning of this study, we find that after the extensive description of the transfigured Jeta Grove and the wonders attending the arrival of the otherworldly bodhisattvas, the narrator points out that the *śrāvakas* who were present, such as Śāriputra, Mahākāśyapa, Subhūti, and others who are the frequent interlocutors of the Buddha in the sūtras, were completely oblivious to the entire miraculous scene. The reason they did not see it is because, among other defects, they "lacked the roots of goodness conducive to the vision of the transfiguration of all buddhas . . . and did not have the purity of the eye of knowledge."<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, they did not have the "power of vision" to see these things because they were of the vehicle of the *śrāvakas*, who had neither the "developed bodhisattvas' range of vision" nor the "eyes of the bodhisattvas."<sup>41</sup>

Part of the significance of these elaborate visionary depictions, then, is to establish a kind of spiritual hierarchy with those who merely heard the words of the Buddha, the *śrāvakas*, on the bottom, and those bodhisattvas who saw the true transfigured state of the Buddha and his surroundings on top. The fact that the bodhisattvas are depicted as seeing the vision, while the *śrāvakas* remain oblivious, is at once an assertion of the value of seeing over hearing and of the Mahāyāna over the "Hīnayāna."

While the Gaṇḍavyūha is the text that makes this strategy most obvious, other Mahāyāna sūtras employ similar devices, often involving visions of the higher bodies of the Buddha. The Lotus Sūtra is one of the early Mahāyāna texts that lays the groundwork for the importance of having visions of the Buddha, insofar as it explicitly claims that the Buddha is actually a transcendent being.<sup>42</sup> This theme is taken up in the sūtra when the Buddha discusses the countless numbers of beings that he has led to Buddhahood in his past lives. In a rare moment of doubt and confusion, Maitreya broaches the subject of how the Buddha could have led to enlightenment these many beings in countless ages past if Gautama

<sup>40</sup> Gaṇḍavyūha (n. 2 above), p. 14.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>42</sup> The notion of the Buddha as a transcendent, godlike being, however, is not unknown in pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism. The Mahāsaṃghikas taught the notion of a supermundane buddha, e.g., in the *Mahāvastu*. See Williams (n. 18 above), p. 18.

had himself only attained enlightenment in this lifetime and only relatively recently. The answer is a bombshell. The stories of the Buddha's life, his leaving the household, his achieving awakening under the bodhi tree, and his warning that he would soon be gone, were themselves all merely *upāya*, skillful means to lead less developed beings toward the higher teachings of the Great Vehicle. In fact, he reports he attained enlightenment innumerable eons ago and has been teaching the Dharma in this and countless other world systems for incalculable ages. The reason he teaches certain beings that the appearance of a Buddha in a world is rare and that he will soon be gone forever is so that they will practice the Dharma with vigor and be diligent in striving for awakening. But in reality, he says, he is always present and never perishes, is unlimited by time and space, and is able to manifest in the world whenever he is needed.<sup>43</sup>

The notions of the transcendence of the Buddha and the fictitiousness of the received stories of his life were powerful tools in the struggle of the Mahāyāna for legitimacy. First, these ideas de-emphasized the "historical" Sākyamuni and presented many of the core elements of orthodox Buddhism as irrelevant. Second, they gave an additional rationale for the emergence of new sūtras and doctrines. The idea that the Buddha had not, in fact, passed into nirvāṇa but continued to teach on an as-needed basis could serve, in combination with the doctrine of *upāya*, as an explanation for the introduction of new teachings. Pauls Williams points out a tradition in some Mahāyāna literature in which the origins of certain Mahāyāna sūtras were associated not with the historical Buddha per se but with the visionary experience and inspiration by the supermundane buddha or buddhas who exist in Pure Lands or buddha fields. He offers a passage from the Pratyutpanna Sūtra that gives instructions for visualizing the buddha Amitāyus in his Pure Land teaching the Dharma and in which the meditator is actually given teachings by this Buddha: "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."<sup>44</sup> It is possible, then, that some Mahāyāna sūtras were the result of what the author considered a direct visionary revelation of the Dharma from a transcendent source, one that at once augmented and surpassed the teachings in the Pāli canon.

<sup>43</sup> Saddharmapundarikasūtra, p. 16.

<sup>44</sup> Williams, p. 30, citing the translation by P. M. Harrison in "Buddhānusmṛti in the Pratyutpanna-buddha-sammukhāvasthita-samādhi-sūtra," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 9 (1978): 35–57, quote on 43.

Another idea that comes into play here is the importance in Buddhist literature of seeing a buddha. Even in the early literature the sight of a buddha is considered to be auspicious, but nowhere are the benefits extolled so much as in the Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra:

The word of a Buddha is hard to come by even in a billion eons;  
How much more so the sight of a Buddha, which ends all craving.<sup>45</sup>

Those who have seen the Buddha, the supreme man, are certain of  
[their own] enlightenment.<sup>46</sup>

All obstructions are removed when a Buddha is seen,  
Increasing the immeasurable virtue whereby enlightenment will be  
attained.

The sight of a Buddha severs all the doubts of sentient beings  
And fulfills all purposes, mundane and transcendent.<sup>47</sup>

While in earlier texts, seeing the ordinary form of a buddha was enough, the Mahāyāna increasingly emphasized the resplendent enjoyment body (*saṃbhoga-kāya*), the body formed as a result of the meritorious karmic accumulations of the buddha.

The idea of supermundane buddhas and the significance of seeing their transcendent form deflected the importance of having heard the words of Śākyamuni when he was in Jeta Grove. While hearing the words of the Buddha was the basis for authenticity and legitimacy in the orthodox traditions, it became less important, if not associated with a handicap, according to certain Mahāyāna sūtras: according to the Gaṇḍavyūha, having heard a discourse from the finite form of the Śākyamuni in an ordinary park merely showed the hearer's limitations, that is, his inability to see the higher form of the Buddha and his Pure Land, which is coextensive with the ordinary world.

Thus, in contradistinction to the ordinary settings of early sūtras, in which a group of simple monks gather in a park to hear the Buddha give a talk, many Mahāyāna sūtras begin by depicting the Buddha revealing himself in his enjoyment body. In another Perfection of Wisdom text, the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā*, for example, before giving his talk, the Buddha's body suddenly becomes radiant, and rays of light emit from his "divine eye," his toes, legs, ankles, thighs, hips, navel, arms, fingers, ears, nostrils, teeth, eyes, and hair pores. This light illumines all the multiple world systems in the triple cosmos. Only after an extensive description

<sup>45</sup> Gaṇḍavyūha, p. 23.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

of the resplendence of the Buddha's form and the attendant miraculous events does he actually begin his sermon.<sup>48</sup> This preliminary visual display is one of the primary means of attempting to establish the legitimacy of the Mahāyāna sūtra—perhaps more so than the dubious claim of the narrator to have heard the sūtra from Śākyamuni. The idea of the transcendent Buddha allowed a reversal of value with regard to the spoken word. The fact that the monks who committed the Pāli sūtras to memory claimed to have heard the teachings of the Buddha as a man in a specific place and time was the seal of authenticity in the Pāli sūtras but is presented as a sign of limitation in the Lotus and other Mahāyāna sūtras. If the Buddha were actually a transcendent being, and the ability to see his higher form was contingent on one's spiritual development, then hearing him preach in the voice of a man, in an ordinary body, at a typical place and time, as depicted in the Hīnayāna sūtras, was simply an indication of the limited capacities of the hearer.

These elaborate introductions are intended to establish the transcendent source of the teachings contained in the sūtras and serve to relativize the comparatively prosaic Pāli accounts. While Mahāyāna sūtras continued invariably to begin according to standard form—with the narrator claiming to have heard the dialogue in a particular historical place and time, thus preserving the legitimacy and connection to received tradition and lineage conferred by the phrase “*evaṃ mayā śrutam*”—the presentation of the transcendent form of the Buddha in his Pure Land served to mitigate the importance of any particular time or place. The tendency of the Mahāyāna sūtras, then, was to disembed the teachings from Deer Park and re-embed them in a transcendent realm. The Mahāyāna attempted to transfer the basis of legitimacy from the spoken word of Śākyamuni to the vision of the transcendent Buddha, which rendered the specificity of the places that the Buddha spoke during his lifetime less relevant. The transfiguration of Jeta Grove shows that the locale in which the Gaṇḍavyūha was given was not really Jeta Grove at all but a kind of placeless place in which the wonders of the Buddha and his world were revealed. The displacement of the Buddha's teaching parallels the displacement of sacred spaces occasioned by the cults of the book. Both tended to de-emphasize the particularities of time and place associated with the Buddha's life in favor of creating the ideal of a universal sacred space that was at once everywhere and yet nowhere in particular. The image of the ground turning into a transparent diamond in our passage from the Gaṇḍavyūha is a most powerful symbol of this displacement—rather than the hills, trees, and other landmarks of Jeta Grove that must have been famil-

<sup>48</sup> Edward Conze, trans., *The Large Sūtra on Perfect Wisdom (Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 38–39.

iar to the disciples who lived in the vicinity or had visited the place on pilgrimage, the land becomes a uniform, crystalline diamond extending in all directions. Such a landscape allows for no distinction or particularity and thus symbolizes the universality and undifferentiation of all spaces—a condition that many Mahāyāna sūtras claim is true from a higher point of view. It reflects, thus, the Perfection of Wisdom texts' assertion that all elements of existence (*dharmas*) are undifferentiated, placeless (*adeśa*), and without locality (*apradeśa*), like space itself.<sup>49</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The foregoing consideration of the literary style of different sūtras opens up a number of issues involving the development, sustenance, and establishment of the Mahāyāna. Writing allowed its heterodox teachings to survive and instituted forms of sūtra worship that would serve to expand the movement, not only through spreading its doctrines but by consecration of places. The development of writing also shifted access to and organization of knowledge from an exclusively oral/aural mode to one that included visuality, and this allowed for greater analysis and commentary, as well as for dissent. The Mahāyāna's embracing of the shift from oral/aural to literate/visual also challenged the authority of the orthodox traditions in a number of ways, the most vivid example being the use of visionary literature to establish authority and supersession. Examining what was at stake in the conflicting claims between the Mahāyāna and the more orthodox schools helps to elucidate the concrete concerns that constituted the conditions under which these Mahāyāna sūtras were produced. All of this suggests some of the social and historical factors that contributed to the intense visual imagery of some Mahāyāna sūtras and that made a highly visual orientation well-suited to the Mahāyāna.

We should be careful not to oversimplify or overstate the point here. It is not that Mahāyāna sūtras were exclusively focused on vision, and Pāli sūtras on hearing and recitation. In fact, some of the resources for the visionary material in the Mahāyāna are found in the Pāli texts in a more subtle form, and these early texts also contain many ocular metaphors, such as the frequent pairing of knowledge and vision. Conversely, traditions of recitation and mnemonic devices are not absent from Mahāyāna sūtras, and some of these sūtras extol the virtues of those who are able to recite long texts from memory. The point is, first, that the Mahāyāna tended to emphasize vision to a greater extent than the orthodox traditions, who emphasized hearing, and second, that these respective orientations were specifically involved with each tradition's claims to authority and legitimacy.

<sup>49</sup> See, e.g., *Aṣṭa* (n. 21 above), pp. 196, 476.

It would also be inadequate to claim that the sole function of and reason for visionary literature in the Mahāyāna was to serve as a strategy of legitimation. As was mentioned, much non-Buddhist Indian literature at the time of the composition of these sūtras was of a similar visionary style, and in many ways these sūtras reflect a pan-Indic visionary trend in literature in the first couple centuries before and after the beginning of the common era. However, the polemical uses of such literature should not be overlooked, for they shed light on the historical and social context in which the Mahāyāna emerged. Nor do these considerations necessarily mitigate the impact and religious significance of this extraordinary visionary literature and the visionary experiences they depict—they do suggest, however, that even the most otherworldly visions are often intertwined with this-worldly concerns.

*University of California, Santa Barbara*