

On the Emergence of Mahāyāna Buddhism

by Yoshifumi Ueda, translated by Dennis Hirota

Research on the early development of Mahāyāna Buddhism has advanced rapidly in recent years, and many hitherto obscure facets of it have been brought to light. But there appears to be, among Buddhist scholars, a single, common understanding concerning the origins of Mahāyāna about which I have basic doubts. Although there are variations in expression among individual scholars, we find a general consensus that Mahāyāna Buddhism was a movement that arose among *lay* Buddhists. Professor Ryūjō Yamada, for example, writes:

A movement to return to the fundamental teaching arose among the *laity* as distinct from the community of elders. This movement labeled the sectarian Buddhism, which had fallen into a kind of conceptual play through emphasis on debate and disputation, with the name “small vehicle” (Hīnayāna), and its own outlook was that of lay believers who were absorbed in reverence for the founder (Śākyamuni). This was a matter of returning to the realization of the law of interdependence. The term “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) came to represent the fundamental concept of the new movement. Most scholars have taken this perspective concerning the origin of Mahāyāna Buddhism. (emphasis added; *Daijō bukkyō seiritsuron josetsu*)

As Yamada states here, most scholars, with minor variations, have accepted this understanding of the origins of Mahāyāna.

The emphasis on laity is, in one sense, understandable. The distinguishing characteristic of

Mahāyāna, “the great vehicle,” is that it leads all beings to true and real enlightenment—not only certain people, but any person whatsoever; moreover, it does this unfailingly. When Mahāyāna Buddhism first arose, it labeled all the preceding Buddhism the “small vehicle,” implying that such Buddhism was inferior because it lacked this capacity. The person who walks the path of Mahāyāna is called “*bodhisattva*” (being of enlightenment). The spirit of the *bodhisattva* is expressed as “benefiting others,” by which one brings all other beings across to the other shore, the world of nirvāṇa, before crossing over oneself.

It is said that in the Hīnayāna path, one strives to escape from this shore of *saṃsāra* and attain the other shore, and there is no vision of the people remaining on this shore as oneself. The *bodhisattva*, however, possesses precisely this vision; hence, he cannot cross first to the shore of nirvāṇa, and yet neither is his “benefiting others” a form of self-sacrifice for the sake of others. Mahāyāna transcends the dualism in which self and other are separate. It delves to the root-reality in which both self-benefit (attaining nirvāṇa) and benefiting others (bringing all sentient beings to nirvāṇa) are established together as one and identical. The *bodhisattva* does not, like those of the Hīnayāna path, discard this shore and pass on to the other; rather, he brings all people of this shore to the other. According to the religious philosopher Keiji Nishitani:

[The *bodhisattva*] stands in the position of a ferryman who passes back and forth between this shore and the other. This is a stance founded on going and returning between shores. Such a stance is, among

the world religions, a highly unique one found only in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

The attitude of the *bodhisattva* is expressed in the phrase, "*Samṣāra* is itself *nirvāṇa*." That is, the mundane world is itself the realm of perfect wisdom.

The essential spirit of Mahāyāna is manifested in concern for a Buddhist path for the laity; hence the prevalence of the supposition that it originated among the laity itself. The fundamental position of Mahāyāna, however, should not be understood as one of lay religion. It does not stand on a dualistic opposition of monk and lay and establish itself on one side; rather, it transcends such dualism and attaches no significance to the distinction of monk and lay. This position arises naturally from the fundamental Mahāyāna stance expressed "*Samṣāra* is itself *nirvāṇa*." This nondifferentiation of lay and monk in Mahāyāna thought is seen in such Indian Mahāyāna scriptures as the *Vimalakīrti-sūtra*, and its most thoroughgoing expression is found in the Buddhism of Hōnen and Shinran.

To return to the problem of the origin of Mahāyāna, the view that it lies among the laity raises several fundamental questions that touch on the very nature of Mahāyāna. Is it, for example, actually possible for "believers" or "laity" to have created a new form of Buddhism? Even if we accept that Mahāyāna could not have arisen from the monks, there is still some question whether we should therefore seek its origins among lay believers. Below, I will treat two basic problems: the nature of the authors of the Mahāyāna sūtras, and the nature of the awareness of one's form of Buddhism as Mahāyāna.

WHO WROTE THE MAHĀYĀNA SŪTRAS?

Firm evidence for the establishment of Mahāyāna Buddhism is found in the appearance of Mahāyāna sūtras; outside of such writings, we have no direct information concerning the origins (of Mahāyāna). It is generally accepted that the earliest such sūtras are the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*.

At present the origins of Mahāyāna Buddhism are thought to extend back to the first century B.C. The Mahāyāna sūtras profess to be the teachings of the Buddha, but they appear in large numbers one after another over a lengthy period extending to the seventh century A.D. Until long after Śākyamuni's death, then, it was possible for sūtras to appear as the Buddha's teaching. Moreover, not only the body of Mahāyāna sūtras as a whole, but even individual sūtras often appear to have been formed by gradual accretion and expansion. Such a process in the formation of a sacred canon is surely unique in the history of religions. It is as though the Bible or the Qur'an were to appear in numerous different versions in quick succession.

The Hīnayāna canon represents the teaching of Śākyamuni Buddha as formulated from memory after his death by his disciples; it has, as the Buddha's teaching, been handed down to the present, and there is nothing in it that stems from a later date. The Mahāyāna scriptures, however, did not appear until hundreds of years after Śākyamuni's demise, and even from the perspective of content, they differ completely from the Hīnayāna scriptures. Since the Mahāyāna sūtras cannot be considered the direct words of Śākyamuni, we must assume that people other than Śākyamuni composed them, and that the authors of the early forms of the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras* were the earliest Mahāyāna Buddhists.

Who, then, wrote the Mahāyāna sūtras? I will not consider here what specific group those authors belonged to or their relations to groups that existed during Śākyamuni's lifetime. These are possibly important problems, but my basic concern here is more generally whether the authors of the earliest Mahāyāna sūtras (the early versions of the *Prajñāpāramitā*, *Lotus*, *Garland*, and other sūtras) were people who could be described as "believers" or "laity," or whether they were another kind of people. This is because the issue I wish to pursue lies less in the historical background of Mahāyāna than in its fundamental nature. I raise the question of the nature of the authors as a means of approaching the larger question of how we are to understand the basic

nature of Mahāyāna.

Most scholarly works dealing with the problem of the formation of Mahāyāna state that the early Mahāyāna sūtras were either written or gathered and shaped by lay believers (some scholars also include progressive monks). In other words, in contemporary scholarship, the thought of early Mahāyāna is understood as something that people described as believers or laity were capable of formulating. Professor T. Kimura, for example, writes:

They (the instigators of the Mahāyāna movement) formulated and collected, in the name of Buddha, the thought which they themselves believed to be the Buddha's true intent, and further, they asserted that it was those writings, rather than the scriptures treasured up to then (the Hīnayāna sūtras, precepts, and treatises), that better expressed the Buddha's true intent.

It is assumed here not only that lay followers were capable of composing the sūtras, but further that the sūtras could be written by people who were aware that they themselves had not attained Buddhahood. Needless to say, believers and lay followers—those who take refuge in Buddha and who accept the Buddha's teaching—are not enlightened ones (Buddhas). It is certainly questionable whether such people could take works they themselves had written as the Buddha's teaching. Further, these people, even if they should be *bodhisattvas* who seek the way while maintaining home life, are seekers of enlightenment, not enlightened ones who have attained the goal. It is difficult to accept that the Mahāyāna sūtras, which are written from the perspective of the enlightened one (Buddha), should have been composed by "lay believers" who lacked an awareness of themselves as enlightened.

For "believers" or "laity" to be perfectly convinced that certain concepts represent "the true meaning of the Buddha," it is necessary for concepts that can be understood and accepted as the Buddha's meaning to exist beforehand. Since

those concepts and ideas are Mahāyāna concepts differing from those of Hīnayāna, it is impossible that they be the products of Hīnayāna followers. Neither can they be the products of believers who stand in the position of accepting the Buddha's teaching as truth. It is precisely because the Buddha's teaching includes truths so profound that they cannot be fully grasped or understood that they can only be accepted and believed. Since the Buddha's teaching comprises concepts and ideas born from the experience called perfect enlightenment, believers who have not yet experienced perfect enlightenment have no choice but to accept. Here, "progressive monks" or "lay *bodhisattvas*" may be substituted for the term "believers"; in not yet having become enlightened ones, there is no essential difference. Regardless of whether they have abandoned home life or not, believers, monks or *bodhisattvas* have the awareness that they are not Buddhas, and people with such an awareness would surely find it unthinkable to place themselves in the position of Buddha, whom they revere, and compose sūtras in his name.

Even without stating as bluntly as Kimura that "they formulated and collected, in the name of the Buddha, thoughts which they themselves believed to be the Buddha's true intent," if one asserts that the Mahāyāna movement was instigated by lay believers or by lay or monk *bodhisattvas* who had not yet attained enlightenment, one's fundamental position does not differ significantly from Kimura's. In this case, Mahāyāna Buddhism as the Buddha's teaching is not an historical fact but no more than the conjecture of the believing minds of ordinary human beings.

The Mahāyāna sūtras do not represent the direct teaching of Śākyamuni; nevertheless, they were not composed from the perspective of belief in Buddha, but can only be seen as written from the perspective of having become Buddha. Who then wrote the sūtras? It is not that people who had not yet attained Buddhahood expressed what they believed to be the Buddha's true meaning as the Buddha's own words. Rather, enlightened people—people who possessed the realization of

already having attained Buddhahood themselves—expressed their own realization, their own experience, in the form of the sūtras. We find evidence for precisely such awareness in the *Mahāyāna-sūtralaṃkāra* by Maitreya and Vasubandhu's commentary on it:

[In the Treatise,] "because it is established" (*siddha*) means that if a person other [than Śākyamuni] realizes perfect enlightenment (*abhisambuddhaya*) and teaches it, and that [teaching] is established to be the Buddha's teaching (*buddha-vacanatva*), the person who has attained perfect enlightenment and teaches in accord with [his enlightenment] is none other than Buddha. (Chapter 1, verse 4; Ui Hakuju, *Daijō shōgonkyōron kenkyū*, p. 46).

From these words we know that in the time of Maitreya and Vasubandhu, even a person other than Śākyamuni was considered to be a Buddha if he actually realized and taught perfect enlightenment. In the statement, "Because it is established," Maitreya offers a basis for asserting that Mahāyāna Buddhism is the Buddha's teaching; it is clear, therefore, that Mahāyāna Buddhists of the day possessed this kind of self-realization, and that based on this way of thinking, works composed by people other than Śākyamuni were written in the form of the Buddha's teaching. For Hīnayāna Buddhists, a sūtra is the Buddha's teaching because it was preached by the Buddha (Śākyamuni), but for Mahāyāna Buddhists, the reverse holds: a teacher is called Buddha because the content of what is taught is established to be the Buddha's teaching. We see, then, that the Mahāyāna sūtras were written by people who possessed an awareness of having attained perfect enlightenment—of being Buddhas—and that because of this their works took the form of the teaching of the Buddha. If the earliest Mahāyāna sūtras were composed about the beginning of the Christian era, there is a space of at least several hundred years between them and *Mahāyāna-sūtralaṃkāra*, but the thinking concerning what makes the Mahāyāna sūtras the teaching of the Buddha seen in these words of Maitreya and Vasubandhu may

be understood to reflect the traditional thinking among Indian Mahāyāna Buddhists.

SELF-AWARENESS AS THE GREAT VEHICLE

Another basic problem concerning the origins of Mahāyāna is why the concept of the "great vehicle," which had not appeared among Buddhists before, suddenly arose. At some point in history, some Buddhists labeled all the preceding Buddhism "the small vehicle" and distinguished their own Buddhism as the "great vehicle." Why? What was the basis upon which the self-awareness of Mahāyāna Buddhists arose? As we have seen, most scholars stated that the origins of Mahāyāna are to be found in the activity of lay followers and progressive *bhikkus* who were dissatisfied with the traditional order, which centered on monks and nuns. They sought to give rise to a more positive Buddhism in which lay people as well as monks could find salvation—a Buddhism that reflected the original spirit of Śākyamuni. Since they themselves also held the possibility of attaining Buddhahood, they believed that they should be called "*bodhisattvas*"—enlightenment-beings. Moreover, they committed to writing, in the Buddha's name, the thought and concepts which they strongly believed to express the true intent of the Buddha, and these writings became the Mahāyāna sūtras.

If such an account is true, then "great vehicle" signifies the vehicle by which all people are saved, lay as well as monks and nuns; "great" essentially means "broad" or "all-embracing." Such is not the explanation given in the Mahāyāna treatises and commentaries, however. For example, it is stated, "Foolish beings are attached to *saṃsāra*; the two vehicles (*śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*; those of the Hīnayāna path) are attached to *nirvāṇa*. The *bodhisattva* sees no distinction between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*." Here, the *nirvāṇa* of Hīnayāna and that of Mahāyāna are distinguished. Moreover:

In the emancipation of the two vehicles (Hīnayāna), there are no three bodies; in the emancipation of the *bodhisattva*, there

are three bodies. Those of the two vehicles are incapable of eliminating obstructions of wisdom (blind passions affecting intellect); hence, they have no great compassion and do not practice benefiting others. Therefore they have no accommodated body or transformed body. (Asaṅga 310-390, in *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha*).

Here, it is taught that the emancipation or enlightenment of Hīnayāna and that of Mahāyāna differ. While the *bodhisattva* realizes the no-self or nonsubstantial nature of both persons and things, practitioners of Hīnayāna cannot eliminate obstructions of wisdom because they know only the no-self nature of persons. Hence, in their emancipation, they cannot rid themselves completely of blind passions or attachments, and so do not attain true enlightenment or dharma-body. They do not practice benefiting others because of stubborn attachments that prevent them from truly becoming one with others. It is not, as many modern scholars would have it, that Hīnayāna does not emphasize salvation of others because it focuses on monks and nuns who have renounced home life and looks down upon those remaining in secular life. Because Hīnayāna practitioners have not rid themselves completely of egocentricity, they distinguish between themselves and others—whether monk or lay; hence, they cannot genuinely benefit others. We see, then, that Hīnayāna is considered inferior not because it takes the perspective of monks and discriminates against the laity, but because practitioners of this way do not attain true nirvāṇa (eradication of blind passions) or true enlightenment.

Thus, at some point in history, among some Buddhists, there arose the self-awareness that their Buddhism was the great vehicle. This came about because they had sought enlightenment and performed practices according to the Buddhist tradition up to that time, but however much they strove, they could not reach ultimate enlightenment. So they abandoned the tradition and, seeking a new path, at length discovered one by which they could attain ultimate enlightenment. Thus they transcended the traditional Buddhism.

They called the new path that had made their attainment possible “the great vehicle.” The concept that symbolizes the earliest Mahāyāna Buddhism is *prajñāpāramitā* (ultimate wisdom or enlightenment), of which Nāgārjuna (c. 150-250) states:

It is called *pāramitā* (having reached the other shore— because one reaches the other shore of the great ocean of wisdom and goes to its ultimate limit.

The *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* states, “Mahāyāna signifies turning the wheel of *Dharma* (teaching the *Dharma*), having attained all-knowing wisdom; it lies beyond the capacities of *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*.” Nothing other than *prajñāpāramitā* could attain the ultimate depths of wisdom. Thus, the origins of Mahāyāna lie not in a movement among lay believers, but with people who had attained such full and complete enlightenment (eradication of attachments) that they could criticize as immature and unfulfilled even the enlightenment of the venerated elders of the tradition. These enlightened ones expressed their own awakening in the Mahāyāna sūtras, and the content of their teachings was established to be the Buddha’s teaching. It is not that believers or monks and *bodhisattvas* lacking awakening wrote what they conceived to be the Buddha’s intent in the Buddha’s name.

In the history of Indian Buddhism, the evolution from the preceding Buddhism to Mahāyāna was not a successive and linear development, but a leap of radical change. This does not necessarily reflect, as is often asserted, a shift in the sociological background of Mahāyāna from the order of Hīnayāna monks and its community of supporters to a social group centering on lay believers. Once the new Buddhism had been established, it is a matter of course that the social groups that supported it should differ from those that supported the traditional community, for the founders of the new Buddhism had taken their leave of the old order. The non-successional shift from Hīnayāna to Mahāyāna arose not because of differences in the social background of supporting

groups; rather, it arose because, in the depths of enlightenment, the Hīnayāna had been transcended. This can be grasped if we consider Hōnen, Shinran, Dōgen and others who broke with the Buddhism of Mount Hiei and founded new Buddhist paths. The new Buddhism—the newly opened enlightenment—naturally received the support of different segments of society. Even if efforts were made deliberately to create a new teaching to save segments of society that were not included in the traditional Buddhism, they would be bound to fail. For to truly save others, one must exercise great compassion, and such activity requires above all emancipation from egocentricity. This is possible only as the new realization of enlightenment.

BECOMING BUDDHA VERSUS BELIEVING IN BUDDHA

As we have seen, the stance of the authors of the Mahāyāna sūtras reflects not faith, but rather of the experience of perfect enlightenment; this attitude pervades the origins of Mahāyāna Buddhism and the history of its development. Herein lies one of the differences of Buddhism from such religions of faith as Christianity and Islam. It is undeniable that many have lived with faith in Mahāyāna. What is important, however, is that Mahāyāna has flowed from the experience and thought and acts of persons who attained Buddhahood, and with only those who assumed the attitude of faith, the history of Mahāyāna Buddhism could not have been established. In contemporary Japan, people who have attained Buddhahood are extremely rare, and even those who seriously embrace a determination to attain enlightenment seem not to be numerous. The great majority take the stance of faith or belief, and perhaps for this reason it appears that the Buddhist community is composed only of those who have faith in the Buddha. The perspective of having become Buddha has lost its actuality. Although the original goal of Buddhism is to attain Buddhahood—and this is especially emphasized in the Mahāyāna tradition—the modern academic approach has been to abandon the perspective of attaining enlightenment and to perceive Mahāyāna

from the perspective of faith in Buddha. This approach can only lead to distortion and misconception when treating the history of Buddhism, but it is reflected in the dominant understanding of the origin and growth of Mahāyāna. The matter of attainment is even more important for those who strive not merely to understand Buddhism, but to make it their own. There can be no grasp of Buddhism if one seeks it apart from the perspective of attaining Buddhahood.

As we have seen, a large number of Mahāyāna sūtras appeared in India over a period of hundreds of years. It must be said, then, that there were a large number of Buddhas. The Mahāyāna concept of many Buddhas has its origins here. In the view of most scholars, the Mahāyāna tradition idealized the Buddha (Sākyamuni) and transformed him by imparting superhuman powers to him. Further, out of this inclination to take Buddha as an object of worship, numerous Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* were conceived; thus, the Mahāyāna conception of many Buddhas is considered the product of longing and devotion on the part of followers. Or, it is said that the concept arose out of the consideration that if a large number of people aspire for Buddhahood, there is a *possibility* of many attaining it, and in addition, there is the possibility of the people who have already attained Buddhahood existing. I think, however, that the Mahāyāna conception of many Buddhas did not arise from the perspective of faith in Buddha, nor from a concept of the possibility of the attainment of Buddhahood by numbers of people, but rather from the historical reality of people other than Sākyamuni actually having been able to attain Buddhahood. It became possible to assert with certainty that “even people other than Sākyamuni are able to become Buddha through this method (i.e., practicing *prajñāpāramitā*)” on the basis of experience, and this formed the foundation for the conception of many Buddhas. If people who have realized enlightenment appear, having attained Buddhahood through methods that lead to Buddhahood for anyone who practices them, then it is possible for people everywhere to attain Buddhahood; hence, it is said that there are Buddhas throughout the three times and ten

directions. For the Mahāyāna Buddhist, Buddhas are not objects of faith, they are himself—the true subject, not the absolute object. Only the person who has not awakened to this views them objectively. In the Buddhism of Shinran also, the fundamental nature of Amida Buddha is not that of an object of worship, but rather the true subjectivity functioning as self-knowledge.

Further, it is said that people “who acted with the conviction that all people could attain Buddhahood” gave rise to Mahāyāna Buddhism, but merely asserting on the basis of Śākyamuni’s thought the conviction that all people can attain Buddhahood is certainly inadequate. Mahāyāna Buddhism was first formed when the possibility of all people attaining Buddhahood ceased to be merely a concept or idea and came to possess actuality. There had to be more than mere activity based on the conviction that all people can attain Buddhahood; there must have been people other than Śākyamuni who were actually able to attain it. What is important here is that there is not simply “conviction in the possibility of attaining Buddhahood,” but the “actuality of having attained Buddhahood.” In the Mahāyāna sūtras, people who had realized perfect enlightenment, based on their own experience, explained such matters as the content of perfect enlightenment, what one should do to attain it, and how an enlightened person thinks and acts. Hence, the sūtras must be understood as composed from the perspective of Buddhahood, not as born from faith or idealization. In other words, they should be seen not from the perspective of holding faith in Buddha, but from that of attaining Buddhahood. If one takes this perspective, problems that have been treated lightly or overlooked from the attitude of faith surface as serious questions. Problems that, for the mere believer, are ignored or insufficiently understood come to be seen as taught in the Mahāyāna sūtras. How we deal with such problems is an important question.

A word must be said concerning the Buddhism of Hōnen and Shinran, who are said to teach the stance of faith in Buddha. We must bear in mind that in their Buddhism, to entrust oneself to

Amida Buddha holds the significance of attaining Buddhahood, and though they speak of being saved by the Buddha’s Primal Vow or of being born in the Pure Land, the content in both cases is becoming Buddha. Shinran’s *shinjin* is not faith as commonly conceived, but the awakened mind that signifies attainment of the stage of non-retrogression. In general Mahāyāna thought, the *bodhisattva* attains the stage of nonretrogression—meaning that he will never fall back in his advance to Buddhahood—when he has realized suchness or true reality; for the *bodhisattva*, this is the first stage of the Path of Insight, and is the basic turning point in his progress. Upon realization of *shinjin*, a person reaches the stage of nonretrogression, and his attainment of enlightenment becomes certain. Shinran himself states that the person of true and real *shinjin* is the same as Maitreya, the *bodhisattva* in the upper level of the tenth and final stage of advance to perfect Buddhahood. The entire history of Mahāyāna, then, is a tradition not of people believing in Buddha, but of people becoming Buddha. It is no different in Hōnen and Shinran.

The foundation of Mahāyāna Buddhism—enlightenment—is divided into two aspects, great wisdom and great compassion. In actual attainment, these two are one and undivided, but from the perspective of human beings, in whom the intellectual and the emotional are distinct, enlightenment has two sides. Because of this, the path from unenlightenment to enlightenment is taught to have both sides of wisdom and compassion. “To see things as they actually are” or “to know one’s mind” express the path of wisdom, “to be grasped by the great compassion of Amida” is the path of compassion. Even though wisdom and compassion are divided, originally they are one; hence, the path of wisdom also includes the aspect of compassion, and the path of compassion also possesses the aspect of wisdom. Whichever path one advances upon, through awakening to one’s true self one becomes a true and genuine human person, and at the same time, one realizes and manifests the mind in which oneself and all things of the universe are one both intellectually and emotionally. That is, one becomes Buddha.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE:

This translation has not benefited from a review by Professor Ueda; hopefully it will be published again in the future with corrections and revisions.