

Avadāna-vāda and the Pure Land Faith

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One of the disagreements between American Buddhologists and Japanese Buddhist scholars is how the origin of Mahayana should be dated. This is crucial enough to a number of scholars on opposite sides of the Pacific, because there is still a shared assumption that what is good and true lies in the origin. Mahayanists might not accept that value judgment so long and still being championed by the Pāli scholars. (They usually point to the belatedness of Pāli canonization such that a number of Mahayana sutras might be seen as being contemporaneous with the Pāli materials.) But among Mahayanists, there is still the old concern that one's favorite Mahayana text might not be ancient enough. Buddhas should be ancient (*ku-fo*), so Truth should be old, especially in a climate where innovation might be charged to being a heresy and not the word of the Buddha, *buddhavaçana*.

Since most Western scholars would follow Edward Conze in regarding the *Aṣṭa-sāharikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* to be the first of Mahayana sutras, those of the Pure Land faith, following the *Sukhāvatīvyūha* corpus, are somewhat anxious to date these as old if not even older than the *Aṣṭa*. Thus, it is common practice in Japan to consider the Pure Land sutras to belong to the period of the "Early Mahayana Sutras" — meaning, works from the first century B.C.E. to the first century C.E. or before the time of Nāgārjuna. Diligent Pure Land scholars would go even further. Fujita Kōtatsu would even labor to push the Pure Land faith in some seminal form to the primitive days of Buddhism itself.

But is this the only way or even the proper way to respond to the modernist requirement to date scriptures so exactly in terms of relative priority? Is the time-scale of modern man the infallible standard to measure other temporal

horizons in other times and other faiths? Are there not presumptions about history and ideology that need to be placed in the open for a fairer critique so that we do not unknowingly free ourselves from one dogma only to fall into another? This essay will address some of these issues, especially the issue of the origin of the Pure Land faith and secondarily the issue of the "historicity" — the usual Christian critics will say "ahistoricity" — of Amitābha himself.

A FLAW IN THE WESTERN THESIS

If the Japanese Buddhist scholars can be faulted for always retrojecting their sectarian traditions to the founding days of Mahayana — such that, by a miraculous count of sorts, we have usually as many streams of Mahayana as there are the standard schools (a *Sukhāvatīvyūha* corpus, a *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* corpus, an *Avataṃsaka* [*Daśabhūmika*] corpus, alongside the *Prajñāpāramitā* corpus) — the Western Buddhologists may err in so single-mindedly focusing only on the last set.

The truth is that Mahayana was never a single or even a homogeneous movement, but a number of cults coexisting at the same time, some of which developed into the Far Eastern schools as we know it now while some never did or simply disappeared from history. It was never a matter of a Four (corpera) or a One (single genesis). Since it is not possible to attend to the Many, I shall fall back out of expediency in this essay to speak of a Pure Land tradition as one stream distinct from the tradition of the *Prajñāpāramitās* in order to make a case for looking to an inspiration which I tentatively call "*avadāna-vāda*." In this way, we may identify a different line of development leading to the rise of Mahayana.

The Conze thesis that Mahayana emerged with the *Aṣṭa* is not incorrect. It is correct in that *Aṣṭa* reveals the origin of the self-conscious *yāna* (vehicle) which knew and called itself Mahayana. This wisdom (*prajñā*) text coined the term "Mahayana" to characterize its *bodhisattvayāna*. (The term "*bodhisattvayāna*" was already known in the sectarian Buddhist circle as one of the three *yānas* or vehicles. The wisdom text actually used a more unique term "*mahāsattva*" [great being] or its compound "*mahāsattva bodhisattva*" to characterize its heroic ideal.) To contrast itself with the two other *yānas* it sought to displace, it called the *śrāvakayāna* and *pratyekabuddhayāna* "Hinayana." If we are interested in the genesis of Mahayana as the genesis of a self-conception called Mahayana, then indeed the *Aṣṭa* is the earliest of Mahayana text.

The problem is whether that criterion, one favored naturally by people who work on texts — philologists who pour over the use of words — is the only criterion we can use. Philologists have the idea that everybody else should be philologists and, even more inappropriately, that the Buddhists whose tradition they study should also be people who have nothing less than a good and consistent sense in their use of words. The latter assumption is simply unreasonable and untrue to human reality. Academics might have to dot every *i* and cross every *t* but only the very credal of religions — and even therein, only those guardians of creeds — would insist that salvation be based on a very exact use of words and concepts.

An analogy might help to clarify this. There were Bostonians in Boston before there was the charter to create the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. There were people from the Old World in America who were acting already like a people of a new land before the signing of the Declaration of Independence. It is textually correct, and in the practice of a History of Ideas, only too proper to date the birth of a self-conscious entity

called the United States of America with that declaration. But there is no reason to presume that a Thomas Jefferson is a different man before and after the ink was dry. Only a very legalistic definition of America — when and where such legality is proper — would be right in insisting on that divide. Otherwise, any responsible history of the United States would have to include all the important goings on since the Pilgrims landed on the Rock.

To date the genesis of Mahayana by the date of the *Aṣṭa* is a legalist's dating, which is doubly questionable. Unlike the Declaration of Independence, we do not have a date on the document, we do not even have the first written manuscript of said text that presumably was just orally transmitted at one point. Nothing is perfect in historiography, so it is perfectly legitimate to do the best with what we have. We can still accept with some leeway (a century or two off if need be) the dating Conze would see for the *Aṣṭa* and see it as the charter of Mahayana independence from the Old Country, the old sectarian Buddhist landscape now called Hinayana.

This does not mean the ideas making up this Mahayanist declaration — concepts like *śūnyatā*, *prapañca*, *bodhisattva*, etc. — did not have a prehistory like "liberty, equality" (if not exactly the legal freedom to pursue happiness) had a prehistory. The prehistory of those concepts have been traced back to the sectarians, especially to their *abhidharmas*, and traced back so well that if there is any fault, it is the fault of excess, i.e., of reducing Mahayana to especially the Mahāsaṅghika school as if one is only the natural outgrowth of the other. That is not entirely correct for it would fail to locate the items that account for the discontinuity. It is like nostalgic Englishman seeing America as an extension of its empire, an old colony that "just happened" to get a bit out of hand. But what that catalytic element responsible for the break of Mahayana is something better left for another occasion to ponder. Old assumptions there need to be questioned, too.

Our more immediate problem is this: we do not know who signed the *Aṣṭa*'s declaration of independence. We do not know what particular community supported this break. We still are divided on the geographical location of this tradition — is it better placed in Northwest India, or in South India. What is inferable and educational is that it is recognized by the tradition as a "local" tradition, one that became "para-local" (spreading north/south, east/west) only in time, such that what we now sometimes simplistically called a single Mahayana movement is a result of the slow spread of this *Aṣṭa* gospel and its gradual assimilation of, as well as by, other coexisting cults and "proto-Mahayana" traditions such that in time a certain consensus of people calling themselves Mahayanists did rise. (There is no reason to assume that the message got to everyone or that everyone felt obliged to decide one way or the other.)

To extend our analogy: this declaration of independence came, as it were, not out of some thirteen New England states who decided to call themselves the United States of America. One state, the one with the *Aṣṭa* identity, somewhere decided to call itself the Great Vehicle (Mahayana) and dissociated itself from the Small Vehicle (Hinayana) and the idea caught on in some other states who joined the bandwagon, even though it is entirely possible that many of those communities were not founded on the *Aṣṭa* principle. The end result is a hotch-potch, not really very united, Mahayana front that gives the semblance — especially to the recipients of this mixed bag, i.e., the Chinese — that there is one entity called "Mahayana." The Chinese ended up trying to make sense of the Unity-in-the-Diversity in their *p'an-chiao* (tenet classifying) system. The West just more recently was exposed to this wave of religion, had some hard time figuring out how it can be so diversified, and, blessed (or cursed) by its insistence on a neat objective history, is trying now to find its own way to a not-so-organic classification of the tenets. It is only that the West gen-

erally still often operates on a unilateral model of Mahayana genesis and cannot get away from the idea of dating the rise of a singular Mahayana in the *Aṣṭa*.

AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW: A MULTICENTERED GENESIS

To give the *Aṣṭa* such prominence is to tilt the balance of Mahayana in favor of gnosis, *prajñā*, wisdom. Understandable for academics who love to work with ideas, it is not that understandable for the common folk. (Pardon the intentional oversimplification; in a different context, I will as readily correct myself.) To the extent that the *Prajñāpāramitā* is anti-intellectual, it is dependent on the excess intellectualism it perceives in the target of its criticism. Whether this new gnosis is anti-intellectual or anti-intellect — if I may so borrow from Merton White who distinguishes the former from the latter by noting how the anti-intellectual is still an intellectual whereas the other is plainly iconoclastic — it is reacting to the intellectualism in their opponents.

It is true that the early *Prajñāpāramitā* corpus was not as much concerned with critiquing the details of *abhidharma* as the latter ones closer in time to (or possibly even influenced by) Nāgārjuna, an anti-intellectual more than he was anti-intellect, but that increase in anti-*abhidharmic* polemics can simply be credited to a parallel increase in time of *abhidharmic* scholastics in the sectarian circle. In short, light or heavy in dosage, *abhidharma* constitutes the presupposition in the rise of the *Sūnyavāda* critique. Before there was the realism of the former, there would be no need for the negative critique of the latter. To declare as empty the Four Noble Truths when the historical Buddha just finished preaching them is unthinkable, out of place, and serves no purpose. The relative dating of the realist and the negativist traditions here lends support to this thesis.

It is believed that unlike the first schism at the Second Council a hundred years after the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*, the later sub-schisms within the Theravāda and the Mahāsaṅghika wings were along *abhidharmic* lines. Developed out of the *māṭrkā* lists used in memorizing teachings of the Buddhas (by numbers), the *abhidharma* — the third and latest basket in the Pāli canon — is a meta-reflective system developed after King Aśoka. Imperial patronage at endowed temples made such learning possible and indirectly fostered the further schisms among the sectarians. The rise of the *Prajñāpāramitā* has to further postdate this. I would associate this with the resurgence/protest of the forest-dweller tradition, symbolized by Subhūti — the lover of mountain and lakes made the hero in the new corpus — but it will take more time and work to prove this. Minus that sociological correlate (forest-dwelling Subhūti against village-serving Śāriputra) which is my thesis, Ernst Troeltsch's characterization of the "mystic" has already pointed to the same direction. The radical, religious individualist often dialectically lives off the very mainline tradition (the "church" type) he consciously antagonizes. In short, man opts for the irrational only as man becomes overly rational. And conscientious monks escaped to the forest in noticeable numbers only when the village monastery had become too worldly under Aśokan patronage.

How true that is may be open for debate. The point we want to make lies somewhere else. The Prajñā tradition belongs to a sub-strand in the development of the Dharma side of the Buddha-Dharma equation. The *bodhisattvayāna* rose consciously out of a definition of the Dharma and prided itself specifically in the new wisdom of Emptiness captured in the key slogan in the new corpus of work as the gift of *anuttara-dharma-kṣānti*. Although that line of development is very important, because only with a new Dharma could a new set of sutras (one distinct from the sutradharma of the Theravādins) appear, it is not the only line possible. With the mark of a (Mahayana)

Dharma, Mahayana could declare its independence from the old canon or Tripiṭaka. But this in the end is only one of two major lines of development.

SEPARATE DEVELOPMENTS OF TWO SEPARATE JEWELS

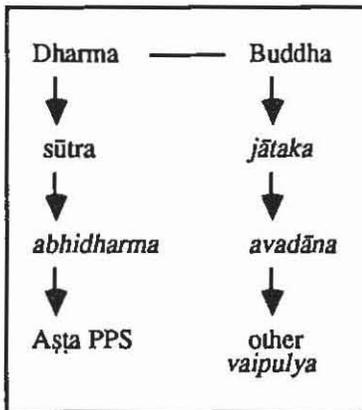
The second line of development is focused on the Buddha. Instead of having sutras taught by the Buddha, it claims at first only non-sutric (paracanonical) teaching about the Buddha — the stories of his past lives or prebirths. More of a folk origin though no doubt edited by some custodian of learning, these stories were attributed to being also words of the Buddha, *buddhavacana*, because in theory only the Buddha could have recalled his past lives and have them told to his following. The *jātakas* still stand in ambivalence to the proper *buddhavacana* of the sutra basket in the Pāli canon.

The term *avadāna* is an extension of the term *jātaka*. *Jātakas* tell of the past lives of the Buddha when he was a wisdom seeker, *bodhisattva*. *Avadānas* tell of other past lives of other Buddhas such as the Six Past Buddhas and the Future Buddha Maitreya already admitted into the Theravāda count of Buddhas. Being focused on the Buddha and not the Dharma, *avadānas* are not known for their philosophical sophistication. All the Buddhas listed above tend to be born son of kings (*cakravartin* for Maitreya), princes among men who left home, sat under a bodhi tree (a number of species are available), and gained enlightenment into the Four Noble Truths, the Eight Noble Paths, and the Twelve Chains of Causation. Early Buddhology has Buddhas virtual clones of one another. The Buddhas also tended to teach men like those who followed Śākyamuni, i.e., *śrāvakas* who would later become arhats. Maitreya's "threefold assembly" under the Nāgā Flower Tree are *śrāvakas*.

Because this *avadāna* tradition centered on the Buddha jewel was developing outside the

Tripiṭaka proper and because it was not enticed at first into new *abhidharmic* reflections or anti-*abhidharmic* polemics, we do not see in the early examples of this genre the mention of the higher teachings of *bodhisattvayāna*, *śūnyatā*, *anutpattika-dharma-kṣānti*. Lying outside of sectarian Buddhism proper, these early texts do not even know themselves as — if they were ever indeed destined to become — part of the eventual Mahayana corpus. Maitreya is one example of a figure that is ambivalent. He barely appears in the Pāli canon; he has a more developed mythology in the Mahāsaṅghika and the northwestern Sarvāstivāda material. He is to be a Hinayana carryover into later Mahayana.

When *bodhisattva-avadānas* are told of Buddhas not admitted in the Theravāda count, Buddhas like Akṣobhya and later Amitābha, we can be sure that they would not make the sectarian



canon, but we should not assume that they belong from the start to the so-called Mahayana school. Neither the *Akṣobhya Sūtra* nor the *Shorter Sukhāvativyūha* (Amitābha, Pure Land) *Sūtra* knew or used the term Mahayana to designate itself. Neither bothered with teaching Emptiness. Akṣobhya still teaches basically Hinayana teaching and his Pure Land is still a monastic paradise for ascetics. Its subsequent development will be discussed later.

The picture we see emerging in this discussion is that we have to count at least two strands toward the future Mahayana: the Dharmacentric and the Buddhacentric. The Dharmacentric broke away consciously from the sectarians with the *Aṣṭa*, and coined a new identity called Mahayana. The Buddhacentric, some of which were already nonsectarian, only joined or were recruited into Mahayana later. The indicator of when they came into the Mahayana circle of influence, if I may follow Shizutani Masao's thesis, lies at "what point their *avadāna* literature (now called sutras) include the self-designate 'Mahayana' and the teaching of the *anutpattika-dharma-kṣānti* formula."

THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE AMITĀBHA VISION

To be exact, we have to divide the Buddhacentric line into two: that developing out of Śākyamuni and that developing out of Buddhas other than Śākyamuni. The line developing from Śākyamuni relied first on the relic cult for an emblem of the Buddha. The persistence of the Buddha Jewel was seen in the *stūpa* itself. It is from this line that the *Lotus Sūtra* the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* would rise in time.

This sutra glorifies the continual existence of Śākyamuni beyond his *parinirvāna* (now declared a charade) and turned the Buddha *stūpa* with its transferable merits or *guṇas* into the hypostatic Buddha known as Prabhūtaratna, the Buddha of Many Jewels or Abundant Treasures. The name describes not just the adornment lavished on the *stūpa* but also the superior status of the Buddha Jewel and the salvific power assigned to its Treasure Store. Though with ancient materials (that predated the *Aṣṭa*), the *Lotus Sutra* as sutra (claiming now the Buddha as the True Dharma, *saddharma*, for its being a sutra) crystallized only after the *Aṣṭa* had championed Mahayana and stirred up the conflict then between Mahayana and Hinayana. Witnessing the tension

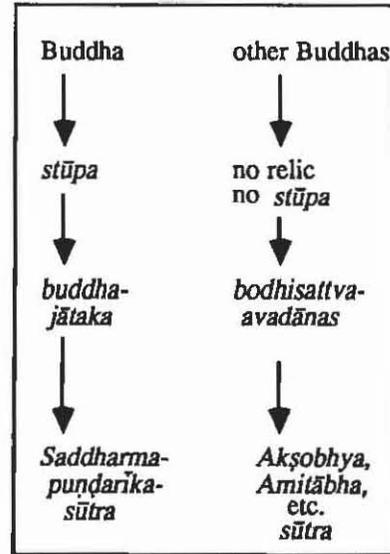
driven into that three *yāna* divide, the *Lotus* called for a compromise — a union of the Three Vehicle under its own Buddhayāna label of a One Vehicle, or Ekayāna. Though cognizant of the Emptiness doctrine, this sutra, like any good mythopoeic *avadāna* scripture, has actually little use of Emptiness.

But contemporaneously there was another line of *avadāna* developing, one that is not dependent on the relic cult and with no particular investment in *stūpas* — because they were not centered on the historical Buddha that passed away. We cannot even be sure of their sectarian or nonsectarian affiliation. The worshippers at the *stūpa* of Śākyamuni could still be counted as the “sons of the Śākya clan.” (From that came the notion, I believe, of the *buddha-gotra* [one belonging to the Buddha clan] later called the Buddha-nature in all sentient beings.) But followers of Buddhas other than Śākyamuni are strictly speaking not even in the Śākya lineage of followers. To the extent that the sectarian canon would not admit of these other Buddhas (than the set they have), it is not even sure how the followers of Akṣobhya and Amitābha and a host of other Buddhas and trasmundane bodhisattvas were related to the sectarians.

What is sure, however, is that the Akṣobhya tradition is very early. It has to predate the *Aṣṭa* to the extent that the present *Aṣṭa* already acknowledges the existence of this Buddha. And again, as Shizutani has done, considering the very early date when some of these *avadāna* type of sutras were translated into Chinese, the genre has to predate the rise of the *Aṣṭa*. It is not hard to imagine how these other Buddhas rose. The Theravāda tradition has already accepted the count of six past Buddhas just as the Jain has a similar count of Past Jinas. That seems to be an astrological count. Maitreya symbolizing the virtue of *metta* is the Friendly One to come in the future. Some time after King Aśoka, the category of pratyekabuddha was created to handle, as the old thesis would say, the reality of other enlight-

ened masters in India — men not of the Śākyamuni lineage though. So it is very plausible that the same cognizance was given to other Buddhas (beyond the six) in time past and to other Buddhas, (coexisting in the Present) inhabiting different worlds in the various directions of the universe. Many of these transmudane Buddhas seem to be hypostases of the same core of Enlightenment that visited upon Śākyamuni. Amitābha as Eternal Life (*Amitāyus*) is the concretization of a hope that an enlightened Buddha would live on for great length of time instead of disappearing after forty years as Śākyamuni has done. Amitābha of Eternal Light can well be, Zoroastrian allegations aside, the Light Eternal of the essence of enlightenment itself and so on.

The production of *avadānas*, past life histories, for these Buddhas has already been perfected in the Buddha-jātakas, in which the past lives of other players in the Buddha’s drama (such



as Ānanda) has also been worked out. Moggallāna's tragic death requires a retrojection of a karmic cause. Kāśyapa's leadership role in preserving the Dharma till the arrival of Maitreya had to be dramatized. And prophetic literature — the *vyākaraṇa* assurance rendered by the Buddha to men and gods about their future fate — has tutored the imagination of the followers of these other transhistorical Buddhas. It is not likely that these followers were totally separate from the sectarian circles per se. It is more likely that certain sectors of the general body of the people following Śākyamuni had, on the side, perhaps in certain localities, confraternal ties to cults of other Buddhas perceived as teaching the same (Hinayanist) truth as Śākyamuni himself. The cult drew its strength not from relic worship but the spiritual space (land of bliss) they were seen to have created for their own self-enjoyment as well as the enjoyment of those who wish to join them in their domain.

Such cults were already flourishing before the rise of the *Aṣṭa*, and the rise of the new banner called "Mahayana *mahāsattva*" or "*bodhisattvayāna*." The *Aṣṭa* tapped into one such cult, that of Akṣobhya. There is a conflation of the bodhisattva-on-the-way and the accomplished-transmundane-bodhisattva ideals. Though the Dharmacentric and the Buddhacentric lines were ideally separate and structurally distinct, there was as much traffic going back from the latter to the former. In the *Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra* we see the inclusion of the self-label Mahayana and the Emptiness philosophy. (Even so, the blending of Birth in Pure Land as a Non-Birth is something achieved more in the commentary tradition, by Vasubandhu if the work as attributed to him can be seen as an authentic Sanskrit work at one point — but definitely in the writings of T'an-luan in whom wisdom and faith became one.)

There is no reason, therefore, not to consider the *Sukhāvatīvyūha*, or Amitābha, tradition as an early tradition. Though the *Aṣṭa* still retains the claim to being the first Mahayana sūtra

(what Shizutani calls the *shoki daijō*, early Mahayana, tradition), there are reasons to postulate an earlier proto-Mahayana phase (*genshi daijō*). The term proto-Mahayana might be misleading, since it could suggest that the seminal elements of Mahayana were already present in this stage. So perhaps it is best to call it "trans- or nonsectarian," movements that were present within the sectarian Buddhist circle and cutting across them all (as in the trans-sectarian *ur-Lotus* tradition), or movements that lie officially outside the sectarian canon and probably were more regionalized (such as the cult of Akṣobhya and Amitābha). These very early movements recruited themselves into or are recruited into the then expanding Mahayana *bodhisattvayāna* circle so that today it is customary to consider them fully Mahayana — despite the fact that some of their earliest texts were pre-Mahayana in both date and ideology.

CONCLUSION

Intellectuals and anti-intellectuals have dominated the understanding and self-understanding of traditions, past and present. But the Dharmic path is not the only path; the Dharma is not the only Jewel. Now, as then, we need as much attention on myths, the poetry of *jātakas* and the imaginativeness of the *avadānas*. Man does not live by bread alone. Man is not liberated simply by gnosis either. The language of faith, the narrative of personalities, is as much, if not in the long run, the more influential of communications. The Pure Land tradition has from the beginning relied on that personalist vocabulary, not the analysis of elements of reality (*dharmas*) nor their destruction (by *śūnya*). Study of Mahayana genesis to date in the West has been biased toward the history of ideas and therefore not enough attention has been paid to the rich vocabulary of the *avadānas*.

The Japanese scholars have paid some attention to this whole tradition of *setsuwa bungaku*, or *avadāna* narrative literature. And even here perhaps more by literary historians and

folklorists than by Buddhologists per se. Yet the line of this tradition cuts through all time, from the early *jātakas*, through the medieval collection of miracle stories of the *Lotus Sutra* or the *Ōjōden* (Birth in Pure Land) tales in the Amitābha tradition, down to the *shōninden* and the *myōkōninden* and the testimonials of faith in our time. Deemed secondary literature, they are seldom put on par with the creeds and the dogmas of the tradition. Perhaps that bias should be reversed, because the *Sukhāvativyūha* corpus — if we put away our intellectual eyeglasses for a while — has less to do with creed and dogma, Emptiness and dialectics, and more with the expression of simple human hope and divine compassion, the soul of the best of the *setsuwa* faith literature in any period of history.

As a last note, in this essay I have followed the modern historian's criterion in trying to set the Pure Land genre in historical time. I will try in the near future to deconstruct the sense of history and attempt a recovery of the sense of the timelessness that is an attribute of Amitābha himself in an article tentatively titled "The Christian Myth of History, the Buddhist History of Myth."

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