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The Doctrinal Position of the Mahīśāsaka School of Buddhism and the
Development of Mahāyāna Buddhism

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1. Situating the Problem

Research on the origin of Greater Vehicle Buddhism (Mahāyāna) has traditionally hinged on two questions: (1) did the Mahāyāna arise within one particular school of Lesser Vehicle Buddhism (Śrāvakayāna / Hīnayāna), and, if so, within which particular school; or (2) is the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism a general trend within all schools of early Buddhism. With respect to the first hypothesis, it traditionally is the Mahāsāṃghika School that has been credited with this major innovative movement.¹ However, as also other schools of early Buddhism show 'mahāyānistic' developments, the second hypothesis has become predominant.² A re-examination of the specific role of the Mahāsāṃghika School in the rise of the Mahāyāna (Dessein, 2008) shows that the Mahāsāṃghikas who resided in the North of the Indian subcontinent have to be distinguished from those that were centered in the valley of the Kṛṣṇā River in Andhra country. It especially are the latter sub-schools that accepted the typical Mahāyāna interpretations of the Buddha and the *bodhisattva*. Epigraphical evidence shows that also the Mahīśāsaka School was present in Andhra country. Textual sources, further, differentiate the earlier from the later Mahīśāsakas. A

¹ See e.g. Dutt, 1930; Conze, 1951; Lamotte, 1954.

² See e.g., Hirakawa, 1963; Bechert, 1964; Bechert, 1973; Bechert, 1977; Schopen, 1997.



study of the Mahīśāsaka viewpoints on the status of the Buddha and the *bodhisattva* therefore may throw light on the internal development of Mahīśāsaka doctrine, and may further substantiate an answer on the general question of the origin of the Mahāyāna.

2. Textual and Epigraphical Sources on the Origin and Spread of the Mahīśāsakas

Our knowledge of the origin and spread of Buddhist schools and sects primarily relies on the historical accounts preserved in the Buddhist literature, and on epigraphical sources. Of the Buddhist historical accounts of what André Bareau (1955: 16-22) described as the accounts of the first period, i.e., accounts predating the 6th century CE, the *Dīpavaṃsa*, a chronicle of Ceylon that was likely composed not long after 350 CE,³ informs us that the Mahīśāsakas issued from the Theravādins in the course of the second century after the demise of the Buddha (*parinirvāṇa*).⁴ Mahāsāṃghika sources of the 6th and 7th centuries CE, i.e., the second period, claim that the Mahīśāsakas issued from the Vibhajjavādins. Sources of Sarvāstivāda lineage of the first and second period alike, inform us that they emerged from the Sarvāstivādins in the course of the third century of the Buddhist era.⁵ After a thorough study of all different sources concerned, Louis de La Vallée Poussin (1930: 133-9) concluded that the Vibhajjavādins are those Buddhists who opposed the doctrinal position of the Sarvāstivādins, thus leading to a schism within the Sthaviravāda (later Theravāda) community. The Sthaviravādins are that faction of the Vibhajjavādins who resided in Ceylon, while the Mahīśāsakas are the Vibhajjavāda subgroup that most likely originated around the turn of the 3rd century after the Buddha's

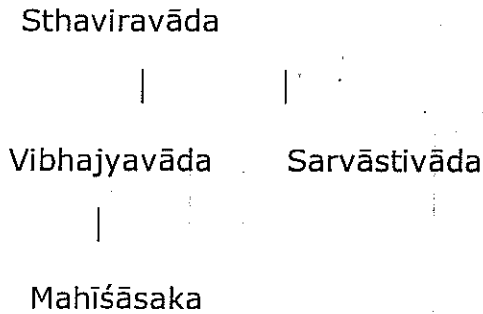
³ Hinüber von, 1996: 89.

⁴ *Dīp*, V: 6-7.

⁵ T.2031: 15b14-15; T.2032: 18a29-b1; T.2033: 20b14-15. T.1465: 900c3.



parinirvāṇa, and that became the most important group on the continent.⁶
Schematically:



The presence of Mahīśāsakas in India is attested through an inscription 'Mahī[sā]saka' on a pillar at Nāgārjunikoṇḍa in Andhra country, from the year 11 of Ehuṇula Śāntamūla II of the Ikṣvākus of the 3rd century CE,⁷ and by an inscription 'Mahīśāsaka' on the Kura pillar South of Taksaśilā, from the reign of Toramāṇa Shāha Jaṇvīla, of the end of the 5th century.⁸ For the present study, especially the inscription in Nāgārjunikoṇḍa is important. Etienne Lamotte (1958: 581) in this respect claims that the Mahīśāsakas "formed an islet in the middle of the Mahāsāṃghika".

3. Mahīśāsaka Literature

The only extant text of the Mahīśāsakas is the Chinese version of their Monastic Code (Vinaya), the *Mishasai bu hexi wufen lü* (T.1421).⁹ This text is close to the

⁶ Bareau, 1951a: 6 notices that since only 9 of 219 theses refuted in the *Kathāvatthu* (see further) are attributed to the Mahīśāsakas, and since 8 of these 9 are not typically Mahīśāsaka, the Mahīśāsakas and Theravādins must have generally agreed.

⁷ *EI*, XX: 24-25.

⁸ *EI*, I: 238.

⁹ Faxian discovered their Vinaya in Ceylon. This attests their presence on the island. See Lamotte: 1958: 581. The text was translated by Buddhajīva, Huiyan and Zhu Daosheng between 422 and 423. See Yuyama, 1979: 37-8.



Pali Vinaya of the Theravādins, which attests their close historical relation.¹⁰ This text informs us that the Mahīśāsaka *Sūtrapīṭaka* consisted of five parts: *Dīrghāgama*, *Madhyamāgama*, *Samyuktāgama*, *Ekottarāgama*, and *Kṣudrakāgama*.¹¹ In the absence of a separate Mahīśāsaka Abhidharma work,¹² we have to derive their philosophical position from polemical texts of other early schools of Buddhism. In this paper, we focus on the doctrinal positions attributed to them in the *Samayabhedoparacanacakra*, a treatise that is attributed to the Sarvāstivāda master Vasumitra and that discusses the origin of Buddhist schools and sects.¹³ When appropriate, these positions will be interpreted making use of the *Kathāvatthuppakaraṇa-atthakatā* of the Pali tradition, a 5th century commentary on the polemical *Kathāvatthu* of the 3rd century of the Buddhist era.

4. Mahāsāṃghika and Mahīśāsaka Viewpoints on the *Bodhisattva* and the Buddha

The *Samayabhedoparacanacakra* informs us that, according to the Northern and Southern Mahāsāṃghikas, "All World-honored Buddhas are supermundane (*lokottara*);"¹⁴ and that, among others, "The Buddha has neither sleep nor

¹⁰ See Przyluski, 1926-1928: 315, 316, 322, 330, 340, 363; Hofinger, 1946: 167, 190, 192, 193, 194, 237, 238, 240, 250.

¹¹ T.1421: 191a23-29. Also the Mahāsāṃghikas appear to have had a *Kṣudrakāgama* that, however, would have been transformed into a fourth 'pīṭaka': the *Samyuktapīṭaka* in which expanded texts of Mahāyāna nature would have been deployed. See T.125: 549c24 ff.; T.1425: 481c20-22; Bareau, 1951b: 7, note # 2; Rahder, 1939: 9; Przyluski, 1926-1928: 147-8, 211, 217; Demiéville, 1931-1932: 21, 41, 43.

¹² Bareau, 1955: 5 claims that, although there is no certain proof that they possessed an *Abhidharmapīṭaka*, their position with regard to Abhidharma was, according to some studies, very important.

¹³ Lamotte, 1958: 301-2 dates Vasumitra 400 years after the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*. Masuda, 1925: 8 dates Vasumitra in the 1st century CE. Cousins, 2001: 146 suggest the 3rd century CE. On the dates of the Chinese versions of the *Samayabhedoparacanacakra*: see Masuda, 1925: 5-6.

¹⁴ T.2031: 15b27; T.2032: 18b11-12; T.2033: 20b27.



dream."¹⁵ With respect to the first thesis, *Kathāvatthu* XVIII,1 informs us that this is the opinion of the Vetullakas.¹⁶ Not much is known about these Vetullakas. Their doctrines most likely have their roots in an Andhaka-Mahīśāsaka-Dharmaguptaka syncretism.¹⁷ The statement that "The Buddha has neither sleep nor dream" is connected to the first of the 'five points of Mahādeva': it is in a state of dream that the *arhat* has emission of semen.¹⁸ Dreams arise out of delusion and desire. As the Buddha has neither of these, he has no dreams. This alludes to the supermundaneity of the Buddha, as also the following statements do: "The physical body (*rūpakāya*) of the Tathāgata is indeed limitless (*ananta*);"¹⁹ "The divine power (*prabhāva*) of the Tathāgata is also limitless;"²⁰ and "The length of life of the Buddhas is also limitless".²¹ The latter ideas are precursory of the general Mahāyāna concept that the Buddha has a twofold body: a physical body, i.e., the mortal body with which the Buddha appeared in the world (i.e. as Śākyamuni), and a doctrinal body (*dharmakāya*), i.e., his everlasting doctrine to which the adept takes refuge.²² This also explains why "The Buddha is never tired of enlightening the sentient beings (*sattva*) and awakening pure (*śuddha*) confidence (*śraddhā*) in them".²³ The idea that "For the benefit of sentient beings, *bodhisattvas* are born into bad states (*durgati*) at will,

¹⁵ T.2031: 15c2; T.2032: 18b15; T.2033: 20c2.

¹⁶ Aung and Rhys Davids, 1905: 323.

¹⁷ Bareau, 1955: 254.

¹⁸ See note 27.

¹⁹ T.2031: 15b29; T.2032: 18b13-14; T.2033: 20b29.

²⁰ T.2031: 15b29-c1; T.2032: 18b14; T.2033: 20b29-c1.

²¹ T.2031: 15c1; T.2032: 18b14; T.2033: 20c1.

²² La Vallée Poussin (1913: 259)

²³ T.2031: 15c1-2; T.2032: 18b14-15; T.2033: 20c1-2.



and can be born into any of them as they like"²⁴ points to it that a human interpretation of the *arhat* gradually also led to a more human interpretation of the *bodhisattva*,²⁵ thus highlighting Buddhahood as final goal to be achieved by the Buddhist adept, and ascribing supermundane characteristics to the Buddha only.²⁶ This interpretation is peculiar for the Mahāsāṃghikas subgroups that were active in Andhra country.

It therefore comes as no surprise that the *Samayabhedoparacanacakra* only reiterates the famous 'five points of Mahādeva' that demote the *arhat* from his status of near-perfection which the Buddhist tradition had ascribed him,²⁷ and the connected viewpoint that the *bodhisattvas* are not free from bad rebirth states (*durgati*) as peculiar for the Southern Mahāsāṃghikas.²⁸ The idea that the Buddha lives on may very well have inspired worship of funeral mounds (*caitya*) that became so prevalent in the Kṛṣṇā river valley. Discussing the Southern Mahāsāṃghikas, the *Samayabhedoparacanacakra* informs us that "Even if one makes offerings to a *stūpa*, one cannot acquire great fruit (*mahāphala*)".²⁹ The question is then what the aim of *caitya* worship was. The Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya informs us that "all offerings [...] are for benefit (*anugraha*) in this world and to

²⁴ T.2031: 15c10-11; T.2032: 18b20-21; T.2033: 20c11-13.

²⁵ See Nattier and Prebish, 1976-1977: 259 ff.

²⁶ Dessein, 2008: 56.

²⁷ The 'five points of Mahādeva' are: *arhats* can be tempted by others, [some *arhats*] are subject to ignorance, [some *arhats*] have doubts, [some *arhats*] attain enlightenment through the help of others, and they obtain their path by emission of voice. See T.2031: 15c17-18; T.2032: 18b25-27; T.2033: 20c20-21. See also *Ktv* II,2, II,2, II,3, II,4 and II,5 (Aung and Rhys Davids, 1905: 111-123).

²⁸ T.2031: 16a23; T.2032: 18c24-25; T.2033: 21a26-28 and T.2031: 16a22; T.2033: 21a25 resp. Buddhaghosa's commentary to the *Kathāvatthu* II,10; III,12; VIII,11 completes our picture of the Southern Mahāsāṃghikas. (Aung and Rhys Davids, 1905: 134-6, 142-3, 228-9). See also Dessein, 2008: 44-45.

²⁹ T.2031: 16a22-23; T.2032: 18c24; T.2033: 21a25-26.



let all beings (*sarvasattva*) have joy in this world (*dīrgharātra*).³⁰ *Kathāvatthu* VII,6 explains that, according to the schools in Andhra, 'joy' is "That what is given here sustains elsewhere," whereby 'elsewhere' are 'the deceased'.³¹ This implies that *stūpa* cult was not thought to be conducive for one's own liberation, but was done for the sake of someone else. This phenomenon has been labeled 'transference of merit' in literature.³² This type of giving is connected also to the Mahīśāsakas in the inscription from Nāgārjunikoṇḍa mentioned above.³³ Basing himself on inscriptional evidence, Gregory Schopen (1997: 160) claims that *caityas* were thought to house the living presence of the Buddha. Put differently, any worship of "it" would actually be of *him*.

It is not unlikely that the idea that the Buddha lives on and the practice of *stūpa* worship were further expanded to worship of the community (*saṃgha*), the third element in the 'threefold refuge' (*triśaraṇa*): refuge in the Buddha, in his doctrine, and in his community. This explains the Mahāsāṃghika viewpoint that "The community is supermundane".³⁴ The latter opinion appears to have been shared by the Mahīśāsakas, as, according to the *Samayabhedoparacanacakra*, they claimed that "Buddha is in the *saṃgha*; [it is so that when] giving (*dāna*) to the *saṃgha*, one acquires a great fruit (*phala*)".³⁵ This has to be understood as follows: the Buddha is in the community, since he is counted among the disciples. As he already is in *nirvāṇa*, however, he cannot enjoy giving done to

³⁰ T.1425: 498c7-9.

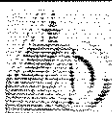
³¹ Aung and Rhys Davids, 1905: 203-5.

³² See Schopen, 1997: 251-3.

³³ See also Schopen, 1997: 38.

³⁴ Bareau, 1956: 175.

³⁵ T.2031: 17a12; T.2032: 19b24-25; T.2033: 22b1-2.



the community. It are therefore the living members of the community who enjoy the giving, that therefore is with great fruit.³⁶

The *Samayabhedoparacanacakra* also lists some opinions adhered to by the later Mahīśāsakas, in disagreement with the earlier Mahīśāsakas. One of these opinions is the idea that "Even if one makes offerings to a *stūpa*, the fruit which one acquires is little".³⁷ This makes the viewpoint of the later Mahīśāsakas on this issue identical to the viewpoint of the Southern Mahāsāṃghikas. Put differently, the development of Mahīśāsaka doctrine on the status of the Buddha shows to be parallel to the development within Mahāsāṃghika doctrine. That the later Mahīśāsakas took over some viewpoints of the Southern Mahāsāṃghikas is confirmed also with respect to the following: the later Mahīśāsakas are said to disagree with the earlier Mahīśāsakas in their acceptance of the viewpoint that "Past and future exist".³⁸ This opinion further contradicts the opinion of the Northern Mahāsāṃghikas,³⁹ however, agrees with the viewpoint of the Andhakas.⁴⁰ The later Mahīśāsakas further were of the opinion that "There is intermediate existence".⁴¹ Also this opinion contradicts the viewpoint of the earlier Mahīśāsakas⁴² and of the Northern Mahāsāṃghikas,⁴³ but is in accordance with the opinion of the Southern Mahāsāṃghikas.⁴⁴

³⁶ Bareau, 1955: 185.

³⁷ T.2031: 17a18; T.2032: 19b28; T.2033: 22b7-8.

³⁸ T.2031: 17a15-16; T.2032: 19b27; T.2033: 22b5; T.2031: 16c26-27; T.2032: 19b12; T.2033: 22a16-17 resp.

³⁹ T.2031: 16a1-2; T.2032: 18c7; T.2033: 21a4.

⁴⁰ *Kathāvatthu* I,10 (Aung and Rhys Davids, 1905:).

⁴¹ T.2031: 17a16; T.2032: 19b27.

⁴² T.2031: 17a2-3; T.2032: 19b17; T.2033: 22a21-22.

⁴³ T.2031: 16a3; T.2033: 21a5.

⁴⁴ *Kathāvatthu* VIII, 2 (Aung and Rhys Davids, 1905:).



5. Conclusion

The doctrinal development that characterizes the Mahīśāsakas who were active in Andhra country appears to be in line with that of the Andhra Mahāsāṃghika subschools. This corroborates the claim that (1) Andhra country and the Southern Mahāsāṃghikas were important for the development of the Mahāyāna, and (2) that the development of the Mahāyāna is a general developmental trend within early Buddhism.

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