The Recompilation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* under the Influence of the *Mahāmeghasūtra*

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1. The Process of the Compilation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* and Unsolved Questions

Thanks to the magnificent efforts by Shimoda [1997] and a few other scholars, the following facts have been clarified regarding the process behind the formation of the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* (*MPNS*): in the chapters of Group 1 in the *MPNS*, ātman is defined as tathāgata in terms of their identical qualities to being eternal and almighty; the tathāgata is completely different from ordinary sentient beings because it has an eternal body composed of dharma (dharmakāya), and in addition it is to be regarded as asamskrta and śubha, whereas sentient beings are anitvā, saṃskṛta and aśubha.

The proponents of this group are called dharmakathika (or -bhānaka), and they do not reside in monasteries, caring little about the taboos shared by Hindu society. They mainly concern themselves with preaching the merit of the giving of dāna by householders and show no interest in samādhi practice.

The compilation of the *MPNS* was initially terminated at this stage with the chapters of Group 1, and subsequently the new chapters of Group 2 began to be added, starting with Chapter 8. The proponents of Chapter 8 have characteristics which stand in stark contrast to those of Group 1, such as insisting on the prohibition against meat-eating rooted in concerns about the taboos of Hindu society, identifying themselves with the tathāgata by applying the concept of lokānuvartanā mediated by the samādhi practice they seem to have performed, and the change in their designation from dharmakathika to bodhisattva. In particular, in contrast to the assertion made in Group 1, which was formulated mainly on the basis of the notion of the equality of tathāgata with śūnyatā, the latter half of Chapter 8 declares that tathāgata/mokṣa is eternal, almighty, non-empty and embodied (rūpin), and it then introduces...
the tathāgatagarbha theory from the Tathāgatagarbhasūtra (TGS).

Starting with chapter 9, the chapter which marks the beginning of a new stage of the MPNS in Group 2, this theory becomes highly developed, culminating in the primordial idea represented by the statement “all sentient beings have tathāgatagarbha/buddhadhātu within themselves.” What most attracts our attention in this stage is the fact that tathāgatagarbha/buddhadhātu in the MPNS do not remain idealistic terms in the sense of tathāgata/atman within all sentient beings, but are taken by their proponents as an interiorized stūpa/dhātu(relics) of the tathāgata.

This shift from Group 1 to Group 2, including the development in Group 2 starting from Chapter 9 and taking place both in the ideas and in the social background of the MPNS, has been aptly elucidated by Shimoda from the perspective of influence both from the TGS and from the Mahāsāṅghika in Group 1, but at the same time it has been suggested that these points need to be further elaborated through research on other materials. In this short paper, I wish to discuss the possibility of the recompilation of the MPNS under the influence of the Mahāmegha-sūtra (MMS) and to provide a possible answer to the question posed by Shimoda.

2. The Mahameghasūtra (MMS)

In spite of the achievements of Takasaki [1974] concerning the close relationship between the MMS and the MPNS, the question regarding the chronological order of these two sūtras remains unsolved to date.

The chief subject of the MMS is the eternalness of the tathāgata. The MMS completely rejects stūpa worship, condemning it as nothing more than the worship of a fragile Buddha, and insists on the eternalness of the tathāgata with a body composed of dharma. The discourse on buddhakāya is almost identical with that in Chapter 6 of the MPNS (Group 1), with almost the same passages shared by both sūtras. The MMS defines ātman as tathāgata in terms of its being eternal and almighty in such a way that it would seem to be relying on an already established theory. Given that Chapter 4 of the MPNS (Group 1) is considered to have pioneered the use of the term ‘ātman’ in an affirmative sense in Buddhist textual history, we can safely assume that Group 1 of the MPNS antedates the MMS. The proponents of the MMS do not reside in monasteries, and regardless of the prohibition against meat-eating, they do not concern themselves about the taboos of Hindu society,
much the same as the proponents of Group 1 of the \textit{MPNS}.

On the other hand, the \textit{MMS} also has many characteristics which do not correspond to those of Group 1 of the \textit{MPNS}. For instance, the proponents of the \textit{MMS} call themselves \textit{bodhisattva}, not \textit{dharma-kathika}. Their main practice is not giving and taking \textit{dāna}, but performing \textit{samādhi} with the aim of realizing the eternalness of the \textit{tathāgata}. They argue that \textit{bodhisattvas} who dwell in this \textit{samādhi} are to be regarded as being in a state of inconceivable liberation (*\textit{acintyavimokṣa}). They thus identify themselves with the \textit{tathāgata} by virtue of their merit of giving relief to sentient beings on behalf of the \textit{tathāgata}, which act is represented by the idea of \textit{lokānuvartana}. They furthermore equate \textit{tathāgata} with \textit{mokṣa} through the medium of \textit{samādhi} practice and develop the statement “the \textit{tathāgata} is eternal and almighty,” which is already found in Group 1 of the \textit{MPNS}, into a more developed form, viz. “the \textit{tathāgata/mokṣa} is eternal, almighty and non-empty.” Their main concern, however, remains within the confines of the eternalness of the \textit{tathāgata} throughout the \textit{sūtra}, and the \textit{tathāgatagarbha} theory is not once referred to.

\section*{3. The Relationship between the \textit{MMS} and Chapter 8 of the \textit{MPNS}}

Given the several important characteristics of the \textit{MMS} described above, which do not correspond to those of Group 1 of the \textit{MPNS} but agree with those of Chapter 8 (the first chapter of Group 2) of the \textit{MPNS}, an interesting process behind the formation of the \textit{MPNS} comes to light: that is to say, the \textit{MPNS} seems to have been expanded to Group 2 under the influence of the \textit{MMS}. We shall discuss this matter from three perspectives.

First, with regard to the concept of \textit{tathāgata} (and \textit{mokṣa}), it seems likely that the \textit{MMS} developed its own theory into the more developed form “the \textit{tathāgata/mokṣa} is eternal, almighty and non-empty,” unifying the \textit{tathāgata} with \textit{mokṣa} through the practice of \textit{samādhi}, on the basis of the statement “the \textit{tathāgata} is eternal and almighty” expressed in Group 1 of the \textit{MPNS}. Reflecting this, the \textit{MPNS} seems to have started expanding its discourse on the concept of \textit{tathāgata}. Chapter 8 of the \textit{MPNS} has two formulas that seem to have developed from passages in the \textit{MMS}, e.g. ”\textit{tathāgata/mokṣa} is eternal, almighty, non-empty and embodied,” and further developed the formula “\textit{tathāgata/mokṣa} is eternal, almighty, non-empty, embodied and immanent,” the latter of which seems to have been formulated after the intro-
duction of tathāgatagarbha thought from the TGS.

Secondly, concerning the compilation of the third stage of the MPNS, which starts with Chapter 9, we should take note of the fact that this group is the last stage in which the expansion of the sūtra is completed. According to Shimoda, the discourse in the second half of Chapter 8 is slightly confusing and unintelligible, whereas this Chapter 9, which was composed after the tathāgatagarbha theory had been introduced into the sūtra, is once again more consistent. He assumes that this confusion was caused by the introduction of the tathāgatagarbha theory from without. However, given the fact that the compilation of the MPNS was initially completed with Group 1, it seems more likely that not only the second half of Chapter 8, but the entire chapter would have been in a confused state on account of its recompilation. One of the reasons for this confusion would have been the influence of the MMS.

There must have been a situation in which the MPNS and MMS mutually influenced each other but were not completely assimilated to each other. Consider, for instance, the attitude of both sūtras toward stūpa worship. Both Group 1 of the MPNS and the MMS take a negative attitude toward stūpa worship, but the latter rejects it far more rigorously, saying that worship of a stūpa is nothing more than worship of a fragile Buddha, denying the existence of the dhātu (relics) of the tathāgata, and insisting on the eternalness of the tathāgata with a body composed of dharma. This rigorism carried to such lengths in devaluing stūpa worship is no longer compatible with the relatively moderate attitude of the MPNS. As we saw above, tathāgatagarbha/buddhadhātu in Group 2 of the MPNS is taken as an interiorized stūpa or a dhātu (relics) of the tathāgata residing within all sentient beings. This internalization of the outer stūpa/dhātu has been explained by arguing that Group 2 of the MPNS accepts and purifies stūpa worship. Even if this attempt at purification was done critically, this attitude of Group 2 of the MPNS in accepting the stūpa/dhātu of the tathāgata in some form or other and making it its new central idea must have come in sharp conflict with the attitude of the MMS. Seen in this light, Chapter 8 of the MPNS, in a confused state under the influence of the MMS, probably represents a "battlefield" where two contradictory forces encountered each other, one being against and the other for stūpa worship. By accepting stūpa worship in an internalized form, the MPNS succeeded in avoiding complete assimilation to
Thirdly, let us reconsider the development of the concept of tathāgata/mokṣa, this time by focusing on the concept of ātman. As is generally known, the acceptance of ātman as individual essence has been carefully avoided in the long history of Buddhism. Group 1 of the MPNS, however, running counter to this general tendency, first accepts ātman in terms of its qualities of being eternal and almighty. It is true that this acceptance of ātman is, at least in the intent of the MPNS, restricted to the manner of representing the characteristic features of the tathāgata, and it does not signify a complete acceptance of ātman as individual essence. It is also true that Buddhism has introduced many terms from Brahmanism, adapting them to the contexts of Buddhism from its very beginnings. But when a word is excessively influential, it cannot help bringing its original, primordial meanings or connotations into its new context and thereby goes beyond the initial intention in introducing the word. Taking account of the wide influence of ātman in Indian philosophy, it is most probable that Buddhism could not afford to restrict ātman to eternalness and almightiness. We can thus understand the development of the concept of tathāgata/mokṣa from Group 1 of the MPNS through the MMS to Group 2 of the MPNS as being an attempt to modify the connotations of ātman, i.e. from “eternal and almighty” through “eternal, almighty and non-empty” to “eternal, almighty, non-empty, embodied and immanent.”

With the help of the MMS, the formation of the MPNS can be clarified in a more detailed and refined manner, including the reason that tathāgata had to be interiorized in the tathāgatagarbha/buddhadhātu theory in the MPNS. This gives us the important suggestion that several sūtras could share the same context and could have been created and modified under mutual influence. This in fact holds true in the case of the Mahābhārata. We cannot discuss this point any further here, but the compilers of the Mahābhārata conspicuously removed the term ‘almightiness’ from the attributes of ātman and reconstructed a religious ethics different from that of the MPNS.