"What, If Anything, is Mahāyāna Buddhism? Problems of Definitions and Classifications."

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Citation

WHAT, IF ANYTHING, IS MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHISM?*
PROBLEMS OF DEFINITIONS AND CLASSIFICATIONS

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Summary

This study investigates some problems regarding the definition of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Tracing the history of the notion in modern scholarship, it pays particular attention to the question of the relation between Mahāyāna and so-called Hīnayāna or Sectarian Buddhism. Finding the commonly used methods of classification which rely on necessary and sufficient conditions to be inadequate to the task, it suggests the alternative employment of polythetic classification, a method which permits a constantly variable set of questions and data to be taken into account in the most flexible and accommodating manner.

Any attempt to focus on a given object of study presupposes, in the very first place, the ability to recognize that relevant object, to distinguish it from the surrounding world, that is, to define the object. And any attempt to sort or order more than one object requires us to classify those multiple objects. Thus, our very attempts to perceive the world around us require us to define and to classify.

Usually, of course, we have no need to consciously reflect on the definitions and classifications we employ. But when we are unsure of the status of an object, when we think there may be some errors in the way objects are organized, when we encounter some apparent disagreement with those with whom we are attempting to communicate concerning an object, or when the very identity or even existence of an object is in question, then we must resort to explicit strategies of definition and classification in order to clarify the discussion.

The identity and the status of Mahāyāna Buddhism are points very much in question, and it is virtually self-evident that communication concerning Mahāyāna Buddhism occasions many disagreements. Therefore, the need for the definition and classification of Mahāyāna Buddhism is obvious. But how we should approach such definition and classification is somewhat less plain. For it is basically true that in order to define an object one must have some fundamental sense of what it is. I cannot know that my definition of apples must accommodate MacIntosh, Red Delicious and Fuji, but not navel oranges, unless I know beforehand that the former are apples and the latter is not. And yet, this process must be more than circular. I must be able to refine my understanding and my definition, to correct misclassifications or even alter entirely the basis of the classificatory scheme as my familiarity with my object of study grows. How this process may begin in the first place is a question primarily for cognitive scientists, and need not concern us here. We may accept as an irreducible given that an object of study exists, which has been labeled "Mahāyāna Buddhism," and that certain senses of its definition and classification are and have been held by students of this object. We may therefore fruitfully begin by examining some of these ideas.[1]

An apparently fundamental presupposition in at least most of the conceptualizations of Mahāyāna Buddhism so far is that it is one pole of a binary set, that is, it is seen in opposition to something else, some other form of Buddhism. The question then arises how the two are related. Depending on who is talking, the opposite pole may sometimes or even usually be called "Hīnayāna," or by those with somewhat more historical awareness denoted by such names as Sectarian Buddhism, Nikāya Buddhism, Conservative Buddhism, Śrāvakayāna, and recently Mainstream Buddhism (or similar terms in other languages). Whatever the names used, the conceptualization is

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[1] One of the terminological issues that might be addressed is whether we aim at typology or taxonomy; the former is conceptual and qualitative, the latter empirical and quantitative. I think we will see below that ultimately what we seek is a taxonomy. See Bailey 1994:6–7.

often basically as follows: First, there is an older portion of monastic Buddhism, usually felt to be conservative, closer to the source, which emphasizes a personal liberation from saṃsāra accessible only to the monk who can devote himself to intensive meditation practice, and so on. This is the Buddhism whose modern living representative is the Theravāda school, and when the term is used it is this which is called Hīnayāna, the small, or more literally inferior, vehicle.

The opposite of this, the Mahāyāna or great, superior vehicle, is opposite in every way. As portrayed by its partisans, Mahāyāna Buddhism can be presented as a sort of Reformation, in which the decayed parts of the old tradition are rejected in favor of new, positive innovations, although these innovations are of course wholly in concert with the original and authentic core intentions of Śākyamuni's Buddhism. The selfishness of the old monastic, world-denying search for escape from rebirth is replaced by the bodhisattva ideal. The bodhisattva is the polar opposite of the Hīnayāna monk, and this Mahāyāna Buddhist hero, active in the world, must work tirelessly for the liberation from suffering of all beings, because he knows that there is no difference between all beings and himself. Thus portrayed Mahāyāna Buddhism is at once both a timeless, universal truth, a path to liberation for all, monk and layperson (man or woman) alike, and a replacement for the older, limited, indeed inferior, Hīnayāna path.

It almost goes without saying that there are too many objections to this picture, this caricature, really, of Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna to list them all. Among the problems we might number the question of whether this account claims to be history. History happens in time, of course, and Mahāyāna Buddhism so presented seems to be timeless. How can the timeless occur in history? Another objection might be simply that the picture of Hīnayāna presented here is not accurate, a view taken by many modern partisans of Theravāda Buddhism, for example, who nevertheless may accept the basic binary scenario. That such views are prevalent is easily demonstrated.

The late Professor André Bareau, in his article on "Hīnayāna Buddhism" in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, promoted as a new standard reference, wrote:

The term *Hīnayāna* refers to the group of Buddhist schools or sects that appeared before the beginning of the common era and those directly derived from them. The word *Hīnayāna* . . . is pejorative. It was applied disdainfully to these early forms of Buddhism by the followers of the great reformist movement that arose just at the beginning of the common era, which referred to itself as the Mahāyāna. . . . It would be more correct to give the name "early Buddhism" to what is called Hīnayāna, for the term denotes the whole collection of the most ancient forms of Buddhism: those earlier than the rise of the Mahāyāna and those that share the same inspiration as these and have the same ideal, namely the *arhat*.[2]

Yet other formulations are more abstract, less quasi-historical. A look at several standard sources, some rather recent, is instructive. The *Bukkyō Daijii* says:

Daijō. Mahāyāna. In contrast to *Shōjō* [*Hīnayāna]. The Dharma-gate ridden by people of great disposition. *Dai* means vast, *Jō* means carrying. So, this is the Dharma-gate of compassion and wisdom, self-benefit and benefit for others, which carries the people who have the bodhisattva's great disposition, depositing them on the other-shore of Bodhi-nirvāṇa. . . . The Mahāyāna Doctrine is designated as what is preached in order to convert [beings] through this Dharma-gate. In opposition to this is the Hīnayāna, the Dharma-gate of selfish liberation which carries the Śrāvakas and Pratyekabuddhas to the goal of the nirvāṇa of destruction. This is designated the Hīnayāna Doctrine. . . .[3]

Nakamura's *Bukkyōgo Daijiten* says:[4] "Great Vehicle. One of the two great schools (*ryūha*) of Buddhist teachings. Arose in the 1st–2nd centuries. In contrarst to the preceding Buddhism, so-called Hīnayāna. It is especially characterized by practice which saves others rather than working for its own benefit, and thus emphasizes becoming a Buddha. . . ." Oda's *Bukkyō Daijiten* says:[5] "*Dai* is distinguished from *Shō* [small]. *Jō* means vehicle, and refers to Doctrine, that is the Great Teaching. Hīnayāna is the teaching which causes [beings] to seek for the quiescent nirvāṇa of the wisdom of destruction of the body, within which are distinguished the Śrāvaka and Pratyekabuddha, while the

[2] Bareau 1987:195.

[3] Ryūkoku Daigaku 1914–1922:5.3169c, s.v.

[4] Nakamura 1981:920cd.

[5] Oda 1917:1144b.

Mahāyāna is the teaching which opens up omniscience, within which are distinguished the One Vehicle and the Three Vehicles." In his short description at the beginning of his long article "Daijō" in the *Hōbōgirin*, Hubert Durt states that Mahāyāna is a "Metaphorical term describing the soteriological movement, divided into many tendencies, which developed within Buddhism with the aim of promoting the conduct of the Bodhisattva as the ideal of practice for the followers of the movement."[6] Mochizuki's *Bukkyō Daijiten* says:[7] "Great Vehicle. In contrast to Hīnayāna. That is, the Dharma-gate which practices the six perfections, saves all beings, and converts bodhisattvas who aspire to become buddhas." It is clear from this sample that, at least in our standard sources, the explicit formulations of the definition and classification of Mahāyāna Buddhism almost universally contrast it with "Hīnayāna."

But even if we do not use the term Hīnayāna, which without question is in origin intentionally caluminous, is it right to see the structure of Buddhism as essentially dichotomous (or if we take another approach which includes the so-called Vajrayāna, tripartite)? Or from another point of view, is the best way to think about—that is, to try to conceptualize, define and classify—Mahāyāna Buddhism really to divide things into Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna at all?

This seems to be the way things have always been done, with Mahāyāna contrasted either doctrinally or institutionally with Hīnayāna or Sectarian Buddhism. And it might even be possible to trace one source of this formulation in modern scholarship. Most scholars who have expressed themselves concerning the institutional relations between Mahāyāna and Sectarian Buddhism seem to have been motivated by their interpretations of remarks made in the medieval period by Chinese pilgrims, travellers from Buddhist China to Buddhist India who kept records which report in detail the Mahāyāna or Hīnayāna populations of various monasteries in India and Indian Central Asia. It

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[6] *Hōbōgirin*, p. 767 (published 1994).

[7] Mochizuki 1932–36:4.3248b.

is partly on the basis of these accounts that Étienne Lamotte, for example, wrote his highly influential study on the origins of the Mahāyāna.[8] Since the general and overall honesty and accuracy of the information in these pilgrim's records can be verified from archaeological and other evidence, there seemed *prima facie* to be little reason to question their accounts. But the interpretation of these documents is not always straightforward, and it is perhaps ironic that Auguste Barth, basing his ideas of the relationship between the Mahāyāna and the Hīnayāna on exactly the same accounts, reached conclusions diametrically opposed to those of Lamotte.

Among the writings of the Chinese traveller-monks Faxian, Xuanzang and Yijing,[9] that of Yijing, the *Record of Buddhist Practices,* dating from 691, is the only one which makes a point of carefully defining its terminology. This makes it, for us, probably the most important of the available accounts. Yijing's crucial definition runs as follows:[10] "Those who worship the Bodhisattvas and read the Mahāyāna Sūtras are called the Mahāyānists, while those who do not perform these are called the Hīnayānists." In a phrase immediately preceding that just quoted, it seems to be stated that schools or sects may belong to either vehicle, and on this basis Junjirō Takakusu already observed over one hundred years ago, in the introduction to his translation of Yijing's work, that "I-Tsing's statement seems to imply that one and the same school adheres to the Hīnayāna in one place and to the Mahāyāna in another; a school does not exclusively belong to the one or the other."[11] Only two years later, Auguste Barth offered his detailed comments on Yijing in the form of a review of the work of Takakusu and Chavannes.[12] Discussing Yijing's statement about the definition

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[8] Lamotte 1954.

[9] Faxian (mid-late 4th century), Xuanzang (602–664) and Yijing (635–713).

[10] Takakusu 1896:14–15. The text is the *Nanhai jigui neifa-zhuan* T. 2125 (LIV) 205c11–13.

[11] Takakusu 1896:xxii–xxiii.

[12] Barth 1898, while actually a detailed study in its own right, is written as a review of Takakusu 1896 and Chavannes 1894.

of the Mahāyāna, Barth concluded that "there were Mahāyānists and Hīnayānists in all or in almost all the schools."[13] He went on to draw out some of the implications of this observation:[14]

> The Mahāyāna thus appears to us as a religious movement with rather vague limits, at the same time an internal modification of primitive Buddhism and a series of additions to this same Buddhism, alongside of which the old foundations were able to subsist more or less intact. . . . It is thus very probable that there are many degrees and varieties in the Mahāyāna, and that it is perhaps something of an illusion to hope that, when we define that of Asaṅga or Vasubandhu, for example, we will thereby obtain a formula applicable to all the others. All things considered, we can suppose that things here are as they so often are in this so unsteady and murky Buddhism, and that the best way of explaining the Mahāyāna is to not try too hard to define it.

At the same time, however, Barth remained extremely cautious. He suggested, even argued, that it was in Yijing's own interests to persuade his audience that there was little or no fundamental difference between the Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna, since Yijing was trying to propagandize among his Chinese compatriots, almost all exclusive Mahāyānists, the Vinaya of the Sarvāstivāda.[15] This is an insightful observation, and illustrates Barth's acute sensitivity to the multiple factors which could have been at work in the background of the statements of any of our witnesses.

Barth's approach and his observations seem to have remained unnoticed by most scholars until Jean Przyluski, an extremely creative and iconoclastic scholar, again remarked on the relation between the Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna. Having discussed various Mahāyāna scrip-

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[13] Barth 1898:448.

[14] Barth 1898:449–450.

[15] Barth 1898:450. It is actually the Vinaya of the Mūla-Sarvāstivāda that Yijing translated into Chinese. Although the relation between these two sects is not yet entirely clear, it would be well to avoid conflating the two whenever possible. I confess that I remain unconvinced by the arguments of Enomoto 2000 that the two, Sarvāstivāda and Mūla-Sarvāstivāda, are the same.

tures in his seminal study on the early Buddhist Councils, Przyluski concluded:[16]

> As rapid and as incomplete as it is, this discussion of the Mahāyānist canons allows us at least to recognize the insufficiency of the theories which have prevailed until now in European learning. The Mahāyāna has long been represented as a unique school which developed from the first in the regions of North-west India, from whence it spread to Central and East Asia. It is a subdivision of "Northern Buddhism." But this so-called "Northern Buddhism" is only a geographical expression. It already appeared to open minds, like a shower of diverse sects oriented toward the North, East or West, and more precisely, each sect resolves itself in its turn into two distinct parts, one Mahāyānist, the other Hīnayānist. Without doubt one cannot negate the existence of aspirations, of great dogmas common to all the Mahāyāna factions. But these convergent tendencies do not cause us to fail to recognize the remoteness of the original groups. Our analysis of the canons has shown us that there had not been a sole Mahāyāna issued from the Sarvāstivāda school. One can also speak, up to a certain point, of a Dharmaguptaka Mahāyāna, a Mahāsāṁghika Mahāyāna, and so on. The establishment of this fact, in addition to its obvious historical interest, has the advantage of allowing us, on many points, a new and more precise interpretation of documents and of facts.

Noting the opinion of Louis Finot that there is some contradiction between Yijing's description of Buddhism in Champa and the epigraphical evidence, Przyluski responded as follows:[17]

> The contradiction between the testimony of Yijing and epigraphy is only apparent. It seems inexplicable that for such a long time the Mahāyāna has been taken as a 19th sect, separate from the Hīnayānistic 18 sects. But all difficulty disappears at the moment when one admits the existence of a Sarvāstivādin Mahāyāna and a Sammitīya Mahāyāna—that is to say, of groups the canon of which was formed out of one or many baskets consistent with the doctrine of the Great Vehicle and the many Śrāvakapiṭakas belonging to the Mūlasarvāstivāda or Sammitīya proper.

Soon after the publication of Przyluski's remarks they and the earlier observations of Barth were noticed by Louis de La Vallée Poussin. La Vallée Poussin observed that the question of "sect" is a matter of Vinaya, of monastic discipline, and that the designation "school"

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[16] Przyluski 1926–28:361–362.
[17] Przyluski 1926–28:363.

is a matter of Abhidharma or doctrine. "There were in all the sects, in all the groups subject to a certain archaic Vinaya, adherents of the two schools, Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna, schools which are further subdivided into Sautrāntikas and so on."[18]

La Vallée Poussin has clarified a very important distinction here, although later scholars have not always followed his lead. Since some confusion seems to have been caused heretofore by a certain inconsistency in vocabulary, it is perhaps best to clarify our terms. By the term "sect" I follow La Vallée Poussin and intend a translation or equivalent of the term *nikāya*. A *nikāya* is defined strictly speaking not by any doctrine but by adherence to a common set of monastic rules, a Vinaya. One enters a *nikāya* or sect through a formal ecclesiastical act of ordination, an *upasampadā karmavācanā*. My use of the term "sect" here differs, therefore, from at least one established modern usage. A common presumption of Western uses of the term "sect" posits a Weberian dichotomy, even an antagonism, between Church and sect.[19] This is not the case for the sects of Indian Buddhism, as I use the term. *All* independent institutional groups in Indian Buddhism, as defined by their (at least pro forma) allegiance to their own governing Vinaya literature, are sects. The Buddhist Church in India is constituted by the sects.[20] There is no implication here of

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[18] La Vallée Poussin 1929:234. In what is perhaps an isolated case in Japan, the same position was espoused by Tomomatsu Entai 1932:332. There can be little doubt that Tomomatsu, who studied in France, was deeply influenced by Przyluski's thought.

[19] van der Leeuw 1938:I.261 goes even farther: "[T]he sect ... severs itself not only from the given community but from the "world" in general. ... [T]he sect is not founded on a religious covenant that is severed from another religious community such as the church; it segregates itself, rather, from community in general. ... The correlate of the sect is therefore not the church but the community; it is the most extreme outcome of the covenant."

[20] The only meaningful candidate for a "Buddhist Church" in India is the so-called Universal Community, the saṁgha of the four directions. However, it appears that this was a purely abstract and imaginary entity, with no institutional existence. (But it is not known, for example, how gifts to this universal community, often recorded in inscriptions, were administered.) It may, in this sense, be something like the

schism, of an old and established institution set off against a new and innovative one.[21]

The term "school," on the other hand, refers to the notion designated in Sanskrit by the word *vāda*. Schools are defined primarily by doctrinal characteristics, and are associations of those who hold to common teachings and follow the same intellectual methods, but they have no institutional existence. A Buddhist monk must belong to a sect, that is to say, he must have one, unique institutional identification determined by the liturgy according to which he was ordained.[22] There is no evidence that there was any kind of Buddhist monk other than one associated with a Sectarian ordination lineage until some Chinese Buddhists began dispensing with full ordination and taking only "bodhisattva precepts."[23] To break the ordination lineage in these terms would be to sever oneself from the ephemeral continuity which

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"Brotherhood of Man." This Brotherhood, though it may exist, has no officers, no treasurer, no meeting hall, no newsletter.

[21] It is this latter type of definition, however, which was assumed by T.W. Rhys Davids 1908:307a when he wrote about "Sects (Buddhist)" for the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics.* Rhys Davids assumed the meaning of "sect in the European sense—i.e. of a body of believers in one or more doctrines not held by the majority, a body with its own endowments, its own churches or chapels, and its own clergy ordained by itself." He went on to say 308b: "There were no 'sects' in India, in any proper use of that term. There were different tendencies of opinion, named after some teacher . . ., or after some locality . . ., or after the kind of view dominant. . . . All the followers of such views designated by the terms or names occurring in any of the lists were members of the same order and had no separate organization of any kind." I think this view is also questionable, but in any case the point is that Rhys Davids is applying here a very different definition of the term "sect" than I am.

[22] This point, and the terminological distinction, has been noticed and reiterated by Heinz Bechert a number of times recently. Bechert however refers in his notes only to La Vallée Poussin's discussion.

[23] La Vallée Poussin 1930:20 wrote: "I believe that in the India of Asaṅga as in that of Śāntideva one could not have been a Buddhist monk without being associated with one of the ancient sects, without accepting one of the archaic Vinayas." On the other hand, I mean exactly what I say by the expression "there is no evidence. . . ." This does not mean that there absolutely were no monks other than those associated with Sectarian ordination lineages. It means we have no evidence on this point.

guarantees the authenticity of one's ordination by tracing it back to a teacher ordained directly by the Buddha in an unbroken line of teachers, each of whom had in turn received ordination from such a properly ordained teacher. Thus the mythology is such that if one's ordination cannot be traced back in a line which begins at Śākyamuni, it is not valid. It is again La Vallée Poussin who offers a crucial observation:[24]

> All the Mahāyānists who are *pravrajita* [renunciants] renounced the world entering into one of the ancient sects.—A monk, submitting to the disciplinary code (Vinaya) of the sect into which he was received, is 'touched by grace' and undertakes the resolution to become a buddha. Will he reject his Vinaya?—'If he thinks or says "A future buddha has nothing to do with learning or observing the law of the Vehicle of Śrāvakas," he commits a sin of pollution (*kliṣṭā āpatti*).'

In the same study, La Vallée Poussin concluded thus:[25]

> From the disciplinary point of view, the Mahāyāna is not autonomous. The adherents of the Mahāyāna are monks of the Mahāsāṃghika, Dharmaguptaka, Sarvāstivādin and other traditions, who undertake the vows and rules of the bodhisattvas without abandoning the monastic vows and rules fixed by the tradition with which they are associated on the day of their Upasampad [full ordination]. In the same way, at all times every bhikṣu was authorized to undertake the vows of the dhūtaguṇas. . . .
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> The Mahāyāna, in principle and in its origins, is only a 'particular devotional practice,' precisely a certain sort of mystical life of which the center is the doctrine of pure love for all creatures: this mystical life, like the mystical life of ancient Buddhism which was oriented toward Nirvāṇa and personal salvation, has for its necessary support the keeping of the moral laws, the monastic code. The Mahāyāna is thus perfectly orthodox and would have been able to recruit adepts among those monks most attached to the old disciplinary rule.

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[24] La Vallée Poussin 1930:25. The reference at the end of this quotation is a translation, although without any mention of the source, from the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (Wogihara 1936:173.5–10). La Vallée Poussin had in fact quoted this passage years earlier, 1909:339–40, there giving the Sanskrit in note 1. At that time he also noted the difficulty of translating *kliṣṭā āpatti*, suggesting "un péché mortel."

[25] La Vallée Poussin 1930:32–33. In his preface to Dutt 1930:vii–viii, La Vallée Poussin expressed exactly the same sentiments.

After the time of La Vallée Poussin, few indeed are the scholars who seem to have noticed these observations or pursued the study of the Mahāyāna with an eye on this hypothesis. One scholar who has, however, paid attention to the hypotheses of La Vallée Poussin is Heinz Bechert.[26] I think, however, that Bechert has gone beyond where his evidence leads him. He writes, for example:[27]

> We learn from the accounts of Chinese pilgrims, and from the Indian Buddhist sources themselves, that there had been Mahāyānic groups in various nikāyas. Thus, a late text like the Kriyāsangrahapañjikā still emphasizes that the adherents of Mahāyāna must undergo the ordination or upasampadā as prescribed by their nikāya before being introduced as Mahāyāna monks by another formal act. Thus, the outside forms of the old nikāyas were preserved, though they did not retain their original importance.

The claim that the old nikāyas did not retain their original importance is not defended, and as far as I know there is little evidence that would suggest this is true. What is more, without specifying what we think "their original importance" was, how would we begin to investigate whether this may or may not have been retained? In another formulation, Bechert has suggested the following:[28]

> For those who accepted Mahāyāna, their allegiance to their nikāya was of quite a different nature from that of a Hīnayānist: it was the observance of a vinaya tradition which made them members of the Sangha, but it no longer necessarily included the acceptance of the specific doctrinal viewpoints of the particular nikāya. In the context of Mahāyāna, the traditional doctrinal controversies of the nikāyas had lost much of their importance and, thus, as a rule, one would not give up allegiance to one's nikāya on account of becoming a follower of Mahāyānistic doctrines originating with monks ordained in the tradition of another nikāya.

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[26] Bechert has repeatedly published more or less the same remarks, sometimes in the same words. See for example: 1964:530–31; 1973:12–13; 1976:36–37; 1977:363–64; 1982:64–65, and 1992:96–97. Hisashi Matsumura 1990:82–85, note 53, has also offered some bibliographic notes which indicate his awareness of the opinions of Barth and his successors.

[27] Bechert 1973:12. The reference to the *Kriyāsaṅgrahapañjikā* is evidently to Dutt 1931:263.

[28] Bechert 1992:96–97, virtually identical with 1977:363–64.

Whether or not this is partially or even totally true, I know of no evidence which might decide the matter either way, and neither does Bechert provide any. It is worth keeping firmly in mind that we almost always wish to say more than the available evidence actually allows. These are urges which, if not resisted, will almost surely lead our studies astray.[29]

One thing that the approaches mentioned above have in common is their implicit assumption that the concept of Mahāyāna movements is meaningful, but only in the context of some contrast with what is not Mahāyāna. This is generally understood to refer to pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism, although it need not, and I think in very many cases in fact certainly does not. This non-Mahāyāna Buddhism is often designated in modern writing "Hīnayāna." I think it is quite certain, however, that the referent of the term "Hīnayāna," when it occurs in Buddhist texts themselves, is never any existent institution or organization, but a rhetorical fiction. We can say rather freely, but I think quite accurately, that "Hīnayāna" designates "whomever we, the speakers, do not at the present moment agree with doctrinally or otherwise here in our discussion."[30] Although the example is not from the earliest period, the scholar Asaṅga's comment in his *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* "That which is inferior (namely, the Hīnayāna) is truly inferior,"[31] can hardly be construed as referring to an actual, specific, and institutionally identifiable group of Hīnayāna Buddhists. In addition, the rhetorical context in which we find such references suggests that such "enemies" were imagined to be contemporary, which in turn is a strong indication that whatever "Hīnayāna" might refer to, it is not pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism as such. A fundamental error is thus made

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[29] As an example see Cohen 1995:16, who says, without a shred of evidence: "Mahāyānists might come from all *nikāyas*; yet there is an expectation that prior *nikāya* affiliations are moot once a *yānic* conversion is made."

[30] It is in this sense formally similar to the designation *tīrthika* or *tīrthya*, the former defined by Monier-Williams 1899 s.v. quite well as "an adherent or head of any other than one's own creed." The terms are, of course, derogatory. (It is perhaps also worth noting that, as far as I know, Buddhist texts do not refer to other Buddhists as *tīrthika*.)

[31] Lévi 1907:I.10d: *yat hīnaṃ hīnam eva tat*.

when we imagine references to "Hīnayāna" in Mahāyāna literature to apply to so-called Sectarian Buddhism, much less to Early Buddhism.[32]

It may be largely due to the numerous vitriolic references in Mahāyāna literature to the "inferior vehicle" that some scholars, such as Stephen Kent, have found it hard to believe that there could be any sort of continuity between Sectarian Buddhism and the Mahāyāna.[33] This misunderstanding is based on a series of erroneous identifications, which we can encapsulate as the equation: Hīnayāna = Śrāvakayāna = actual identifiable nikāyas. Sasaki Shizuka points to the equally erroneous equation: *śrāvakayāna = śrāvaka = bhikṣu*.[34] While it is

[32] An example of a scholar led into just such an error is Cohen 1995:20, who says: "Of all the categories through which to reconstruct Indian Buddhism's history, Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna are the most productive. Nevertheless, our reconstructions have a secret life of their own. Each *yāna* can be defined positively, through a necessary and sufficient characteristic for individuals' membership within that taxon. Moreover, because these two *yānas* are logical opposites, each can also be defined negatively, through its lack of the other's necessary and sufficient characteristic. However, in both cases, these positive and negative definitions are not conceptually equivalent. That is, the Mahāyāna is positively characterized by its members' pursuit of the bodhisattva path; the Hīnayāna is negatively characterized as the non-Mahāyāna, i.e., its members do not necessarily pursue Buddhahood as their ideal. However, when positively characterized the Hīnayāna is defined by members' affiliation with one or another *nikāya*, which, of course, means that the Mahāyāna is known negatively by its members' institutional separation from those same *nikāyas*."

[33] See Kent 1982. Kent, a specialist in sectarian movements but not terribly knowledgeable about Buddhism, suggested that the rhetoric of Mahāyāna sūtras resembles the rhetoric common to embattled sectarian groups in various religions. He portrayed the contrast between Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna monks as one of great hostility, and emphasized the role of the laity as a force in forming the Mahāyāna communities and their outlook. Notice here that Kent's use of the term "sect" follows the standard dichotomous Weberian definition, and essentially differs from the way I use the term.

[34] I will discuss below the views of Lamotte, who considers the Mahāyāna to be anti-clerical. Hirakawa also believes that Mahāyāna texts are anti-clerical. His reasoning, as Sasaki has pointed out, is based on the idea that the so-called Śrāvakayāna is heavily criticized in that literature. But attacks on the Śrāvakayāna are not attacks

probably true that all *śrāvakas* are *bhikṣus*,[35] the reverse certainly does not follow. The polemical attacks on *śrāvakas* that we find in some, although certainly far from all, Mahāyāna scriptures should be understood as a criticism not of all monks but of those who do not accept the Mahāyāna doctrines. Since the term Hīnayāna is not an institutional label but an ideological one, we might even loosely translate it as "small-minded." The term embodies a criticism of certain types of thinking and of certain views, but does not refer to institutional affiliations. I therefore strongly doubt, pace Kent, that the Mahāyāna literature which criticizes the Hīnayāna is a product of sectarians who isolated themselves, or were isolated, physically or institutionally. Rather, I would suggest that it is a product of groups which doctrinally opposed other groups, quite possibly within one and the same community or group of communities.

If Mahāyāna Buddhism is not institutionally separate from the sects of Sectarian Buddhism, and if it might exist in some form more tangible than a set of abstract doctrinal ideas, how then can we define it, how can we locate it? Let us posit that Mahāyāna Buddhists were the authors of Mahāyāna scriptures, and a Mahāyāna community was a community of such authors. One immediate and fundamental result of this formulation is that we must stop referring, at the very least provisionally, to "the Mahāyāna" in the singular. Until and unless we can establish affinities between texts, and therefore begin to identify broader communities, we must—provisionally— suppose each scripture to represent a different community, a different Mahāyāna.[36] We should note here that if each Mahāyāna scripture

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on monasticism in general (that is, *śrāvaka bhikṣu*), but attacks on those who hold doctrinal positions which are worthy of criticism, that is anti-Mahāyāna positions. There is nothing "anti-clerical" about it. Nevertheless, as Sasaki has emphasized, this misunderstanding pervades Hirakawa's work on the subject. See Sasaki 1997.

[35] At least in Mahāyāna literature, as far as I know. On this point, however, see the interesting study of Peter Masefield 1986.

[36] Quite obviously, in the case of some texts, as Shimoda 1991 has argued for the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* for instance, a given literary work may be the product of more than one community, as it grew over time. I do not necessarily

represents a different Mahāyāna community, we have gone farther in the direction of diversity than Barth, Przyluski, La Vallée Poussin, and others who suggested that we think in terms of Sectarian Mahāyānas, a Sarvāstivāda Mahāyāna, a Dharmaguptaka Mahāyāna and so forth. In fact, theoretically speaking we might even go farther still and say, with modern theorists, that each *reading* of a work which produces a new interpretation allows, although it does not necessitate, the creation of a new community. Radical re-readings, which amount to re-writings, may indeed create new communities, but access to this level of the tradition(s) is certainly impossible to obtain and so, from a practical point of view, we are surely justified in accepting the generalities of a given text as an integral unit, at least as a starting point.

If each Mahāyāna scripture denotes a Mahāyāna community, we must next ask ourselves: What, then, is a Mahāyāna scripture? As, again, only a starting point, a very practical and reasonable answer is to posit that those scriptures identified by tradition, for instance in the Tibetan and Chinese canonical collections, as Mahāyāna sūtras should be so considered.[37] In fact, efforts to second-guess such traditional attributions are virtually always based on preconceptions modern scholars hold concerning the nature of the Mahāyāna, and almost never on a considered and methodologically sophisticated approach to the sources.

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agree completely with the details of Shimoda's analysis of the case of the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, but the general point is beyond dispute.

[37] This should not be taken to mean that, with a certain hindsight, we may not find traditional attributions to be occasionally wrong. We do find, for example, that Chinese scripture catalogues sometimes designate alternate translations of Mahāyāna scriptures as non-Mahāyāna. We may note for example the cases of T. 1469, in fact a section of the *Kāśyapaparivarta*, or T. 170, in fact a translation of the *Rāṣṭrapālaparipṛcchā*. Neither text is recognized by traditional Chinese classifications as a Mahāyāna scripture. I am of course aware of the fact that the classification of scriptures in China and Tibet (and doubtless in India too) was a polemical activity, motivated by a multitude of forces. These sources are not "objective," of course, a trait they share with every other type of source.

I have mentioned that I think it more helpful, if not more accu-
rate, to refer to multiple Mahāyāna groups, to communities of the early
Mahāyāna, rather than to employ the definite article "the" before the
word Mahāyāna. Since I have defined these communities by the texts
they produced, which are of course multiple, it is natural that we should
speak of these Mahāyānas in the plural. It is a possible but not cer-
tain hypothesis that there were actual people, perhaps monks, arranged
in multiple groups sharing Mahāyānistic ideologies. It is again pos-
sible, but not certain, that various monastic communities distributed
geographically over India on the one hand, and associated with differ-
ent sects of Sectarian Buddhism on the other, produced different vari-
eties of early Mahāyāna Buddhism. If this is so, almost certainly, then,
later on there was a kind of leveling, perhaps by the time of Nāgārjuna,
leading to a more generalized "Mahāyāna," in which originally distinct
sources were treated and utilized equally.[38] The suggestion of this type
of diversity in the early stages of the movement is in harmony with
the fact that, while apparently having some characteristics in common,
various early Mahāyāna sūtras express somewhat, and sometimes rad-
ically, different points of view, and often seem to have been written in
response to diverse stimuli. For example, the tenor of such (apparently)
early sūtras as the *Kāśyapaparivarta* and the *Rāṣṭrapālaparipṛcchā* on
the one hand seems to have little in common with the logic and rhetoric
behind the likewise putatively early *Pratyutpannasaṃ mukhāvasthita*,
Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā or *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* on the other.

When we read this sūtra literature, we should make an attempt to
pay particular attention to its lateral internal stratification. By this I
intend an analogy to archaeology, and would suggest that we should
be able to distinguish not only vertical, which is to say chronological,
layers, one text being later than another, but different horizontal strata
of texts which may be more or less contemporaneous. Texts dating

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[38] I think as a clear case of the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, dating from a rather later period
to be sure, in which diverse sūtras are quoted together without apparent regard for
their initial source or provenance. I think that the approach of this text to its materials
reflects a sort of "leveling."

to the same period may still belong to different lineages, and may be the products of distinct communities. Many scholars seem, perhaps without properly having considered the matter, to have tried to fit all Mahāyāna literature (or more honestly, the small portion of it with which they are familiar) into one chronological progression, with little regard for the possibility that we may be dealing not with one tradition but with many. A conflation of the multiple traditions of Mahāyāna literature into "the" Mahāyāna, that is into a unitary and monolithic entity, inevitably produces considerable confusion and apparent contradiction.[39]

The very nature of this approach, letting the many texts define the communities which are grouped together under the general rubric of Mahāyāna, means on the one hand that the community of concerns which we may extract from a single text cannot represent more than one aspect of the many faceted Mahāyāna. On the other hand, it suggests that a simultaneous study of multiple texts might detect generalized patterns, but is unlikely to uncover the worldview of a particular community of authors. It seems reasonable then that we might speak about the Mahāyāna ideology imagined by one text or group of texts without prejudicing the Mahāyāna ideology we may be able to extract from other sources. Where there is overlap between this ideology and that found in other (early) Mahāyāna scriptures, we may dare to speak of these overlapping features as characteristic of some generalized Mahāyāna doctrine. There will be other features which, while allowing us to group our texts together into, and as representing, a community of concerns, at the same time set this community apart from others.

In addition to the problem of the multiplicity of texts, we must also confront the problem of the inherently fluid state of any single text itself. If we insist upon the vertical and horizontal stratification of the sūtra literature, are we justified in treating admittedly diverse sources

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[39] The comparable situation in studies of the "tree of life" is critiqued in Gordon 1999.

such as late Sanskrit manuscripts, multiple Chinese and Tibetan translations, and other types of evidence, as a single unit? Must we not rather treat each and every element in isolation? One practical solution to the potential infinite regress we confront here is to treat as representative of an imagined authorial community those materials which have a community of character or of value. To treat as a unit materials which we may identify with each other conceptually means that we may well be dealing occasionally with chronologically and geographically heterogeneous materials, and we must keep this fact in mind.[40]

Given that the sources through which we might locate Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism and its communities are by definition its texts, it is natural that in investigating the origins and early history of the Mahāyāna movement we should wish to avail ourselves of the earliest accessible evidence. Unfortunately, we have absolutely no reliable way of determining in just what that might consist. For despite a rather facile application of the designation "early Mahāyāna," this usage is rather disingenuous. The reason lies in the fact that we have very little idea about either what sources belong to the earliest period of the Mahāyāna movement, or even how we might find that out. There may in fact be good circumstantial grounds for assuming, as Paul Harrison has suggested,[41] that none of the extant examples of Mahāyāna literature date, in the form in which we have them, to the period of the movement's rise, and so even the very earliest recoverable materials must in some sense be called "medieval" (in the chronological sense).[42] Almost the only hint we get to the relative

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[40] I am quite aware that there is a certain circularity to this suggestion, but, as I said above, I would prefer to see the logic as spiral rather than as a closed circle, progress being possible.

[41] Harrison 1993:139–140.

[42] I do not know if this is what Mochizuki 1988:157 means when he says that "The *Mahāratnakūṭa*, viewed from the point of view of its establishment, may be called a Medieval Mahāyāna scripture." He may be referring to the compilation of the collection by Bodhiruci in the eighth century, but at the end of the same paragraph, Mochizuki asserts that these *Mahāratnakūṭa* texts are certainly older than the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra.*

chronology of comparatively old Mahāyāna materials comes from their Chinese translations, dating back to roughly the second and third centuries C.E. What makes us suspect that the literature is older still is the impression we get from this material (which is, admittedly, not always easy to understand) that it already represents a considerable degree of sophistication and development, rather than recording the first few rough steps toward an expression of a new and raw set of ideas. If this impression is right, we will probably never have access to the oldest stratum of the Mahāyāna tradition's literary expressions. This is a crucial point, since in fact the tradition's literary remains are virtually all we have. Whatever archeological or other evidence we might wish to employ can be contextualized and given meaning only through an examination of the tradition's literature.

Because the content of Mahāyāna texts shows a very high degree of familiarity—we might say a total familiarity—with virtually all aspects of Sectarian Buddhist thought and literature, it is very difficult to believe that the authors of these texts, the de facto representatives of the Mahāyāna communities, were other than educated monks. It is difficult to imagine that the Mahāyāna sūtras could have been written by anyone other than such monks or, more likely, communities of such monks. If we follow the classical reasoning as expressed in the normative Vinaya literature, the only way to become a monk would have been through an orthodox ordination lineage, one which traces its imprimatur directly back to Śākyamuni Buddha. At a very early period, perhaps by the time of the so-called Second Council (although we cannot be sure about this), there would have been no way to become a monk except through orthodox ordination into one of the sectarian Vinaya traditions. Unless there existed a tradition of which we are totally ignorant—and this is far from impossible—the only way for one to become a monk (or nun) in the Indian Buddhist context was through orthodox ordination. If we follow the assumptions just articulated, the immediate implication is that all authors of Mahāyāna sūtras, that is to say all those who made up the communities we have defined as representative of the early Mahāyāna, were at one time members of

orthodox ordination lineages, members of sects as I have defined them above.

Could the monk-authors of these texts, our prototypical early Mahāyānists, have split from those ordination lineages and the sects they defined? What would it mean to leave such a sect and start another sect, given that the normatively defined ordination lineage could not—in its own terms—be broken? Without a Vinaya of their own, the breakaway monks would have been unable to carry out further ordinations of new monks in their own lineage. If correct, this suggests that most probably it would not have been possible, in an Indian Buddhist context, for one to become a Buddhist monk at all without ordination in an orthodox ordination lineage. Again, if this is true, Mahāyāna communities could not have become institutionally independent of Sectarian communities, for they would have had no way of effecting the continuity of the movement other than by conversion of already ordained monks. Such an approach to the maintenance of a religious community, while not uninstanced in world religions, is relatively rare, and difficult to maintain. Moreover, if these Mahāyānists were either doctrinal rebels or reactionaries—which is also far from sure—how could they have coexisted with their sectarian brethren? Would it have been necessary to establish a new sect in order to freely profess their new doctrines and beliefs? It would not, if dissent in matters of doctrine was permissible.

The way in which sectarian affiliations are decided is not necessarily connected with questions of doctrine. An institutional split in a Buddhist community is technically termed *saṃghabheda*. It has been suggested at least since the time of the Meiji period Japanese scholar Maeda Eun that early and fundamental Mahāyāna doctrines have much in common with the teachings of the Mahāsāṃghika sect.[43] It is therefore of great interest to notice the Mahāsāṃghika definition of *saṃghabheda* as offered in the Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya. *Saṃghabheda* is constituted by a failure of all the monks resident in the same sacred

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[43] Maeda 1903.

enclosure (*sīmā*) to communally hold the *uposatha* rite.[44] Differences over doctrine are *not* grounds for *saṃghabheda* in the Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya. In fact, what appears to be a contrast with the views of other sects, some of which allow doctrinal disputes to split the community (*cakrabheda*), has been shown by Shizuka Sasaki to be in reality a virtual universality of opinion that the only true cause of schism, at least in the times after the Buddha's nirvāṇa, is failure to hold joint rituals (*karmabheda*).[45] On the other hand, this virtual uniformity of opinion suggests that the explicit position of the Mahāsāṃghika in this regard cannot serve as evidence for its particular connection with a nascent Mahāyāna movement.

We have been concerned so far mostly with generalities of received wisdom, accepted ideas which I suggest can no longer be accepted. It might be helpful to briefly indicate here in particular why I have found myself unable to accept many of the ideas of perhaps the two most influential recent scholars of Mahāyāna history, Hirakawa Akira and Étienne Lamotte. The most characteristic ideas of Hirakawa and Lamotte are, respectively, that stūpa worship implies a lay community at the heart of the earliest Mahāyāna, and that Mahāyāna texts are anti-clerical. At least for Lamotte, moreover, these two ideas are not unrelated.

According to Buddhist canon law, the putatively normative stipulations of the Vinayas, the distinction between laity and monastics is defined by the difference in the precepts they take. A monk has taken the primary and secondary initiations (*pravrajya* and *upasampadā*), and has vowed to uphold a set of monastic rules (the *prātimokṣa*). A lay follower of Buddhism has taken the three refuges (in the Buddha, Dharma and Saṅgha) and perhaps five, or eight, vows. In addition, the

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[44] The situation is nuanced by the existence of the categories of *samānasaṃvāsaka* and *nānāsaṃvāsaka* monks. See Kieffer-Pülz 1993:52–54, and Chung and Kieffer-Pülz 1997:15. The constellation of *saṃghabheda*, *nikāyabheda*, *cakrabheda*, *karmabheda*, *samānasaṃvāsaka* and *nānāsaṃvāsaka* deserves to be thoroughly (re)investigated.

[45] Sasaki 1992, 1993.

layman or laywoman may vow to give up not only forbidden sexual activity but all sexual activity whatsoever. One who takes the three refuges, or more, is called an *upāsaka* (male lay disciple) or *upāsikā* (female lay disciple).[46] There would in addition of course be those who casually gave alms and so forth, but these are not considered or recognized to be Buddhist lay supporters in any formal way. In spite of the availability of this terminology, many Mahāyāna sūtras generally seem to prefer the set of terms *pravrajita* and *gṛhastha*, that is, renunciant and householder, a distinction that requires separate discussion.

Richard Robinson has suggested that rather than these technical and strict categories a more useful distinction is that between "laicizing" and "monachizing," and "secularizing" and "asceticizing."[47] By this Robinson means to emphasize tendencies toward lay participation or lay control, as opposed to monastic control, or a greater concern with worldly activities or values as opposed to the values of renunciation and ascetic practice. There is quite a bit of grey space in Robinson's definition, but it serves to highlight the fact that a strict distinction between lay and monastic, regardless of the roles the individuals play in the social life of the community, can be misleading. His distinction allows us to speak of an asceticized laity, for example a householder who vows to give up sex with his wife altogether, or secularized monastics, for example a monk who lives at a royal court.

Lamotte, who strongly advocated the idea that the Mahāyāna represents the triumph of lay aspirations in Buddhism,[48] used the expression "anti-clerical" to characterize early Mahāyāna sūtras, pointing specifically in his influential paper on the subject to the *Rāṣṭrapālaparipṛcchā*,

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[46] Let us recall the words of La Vallée Poussin yet again 1925:20: "Scholars set up between monk, novice and lay people a difference of degree, not of nature. All three are *sāmvarikas*, people who have accepted a *samvara* [vow—JAS]... All three possess the 'morality of engagement,' *samādāntaśīla*, the morality which consists not in the simple avoidance of sin but in the resolution to refrain from it."

[47] Robinson 1965–66:25–26.

[48] He flatly stated this in Lamotte 1955:86: "The advent of the Mahāyāna consecrated the triumph of lay aspirations."

which he calls an "anti-clerical tract."[49] It is true that the single verse he quotes appears to be a violent criticism of monks,[50] but a glance at the context makes it quite clear that the *Rāṣṭrapālaparipṛcchā* is not criticizing monks in general and is far from anti-clerical—rather quite the opposite. The text is concerned with (future) evil and degenerate monks, and the decay of the true teaching. In this sense the text might be considered more a reactionary document than a revolutionary one. What we see here is not anti-clericalism, but again rather the opposite: a concern with the purification of the clergy, and the related assertion of its superiority and rightful place as the sole legitimate representative of Buddhist orthodoxy. I have addressed this theme in another paper,[51] and observe there how pervasive this ideology is in Buddhism, not only in Mahāyāna sūtras, but even in earlier canonical texts belonging to the Nikāya/Āgama corpus.

If, as I have argued, the Mahāyāna came into existence and persisted within pre-existing Buddhist social and institutional structures, it would follow that all monastic members of the Mahāyāna should have been associated with a traditional ordination lineage. I have further suggested that the Mahāyāna texts must have been written by monks, and have defined my notion of a Mahāyāna community as one constituted by the authors of these texts. There may, of course, have also (or instead) been another type of Mahāyāna community, but it would be incumbent upon whomever asserted this to be the case to show how this could have been so. Hirakawa Akira is probably the most influential of those who do not believe the earliest Mahāyāna to have been a monastic movement, and he suggests that formal Mahāyāna Buddhist social units did exist independently of the traditional sectarian saṅghas. He has offered an alternative solution to our questions, centering on the suggestion that what made such non-monastic Mahāyāna groups possible was their orientation around stūpa worship.

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[49] Lamotte 1954:379.

[50] He gives no reference, but the verse is in fact to be found in Finot 1901:28.17–18.

[51] See Silk forthcoming.

Hirakawa holds the Mahāyāna to have been a movement promoted in contrast to Nikāya communities by non-ordained people who devoted themselves to stūpa worship.[52] One of the main presuppositions behind Hirakawa's thinking on this subject is the contrast between Nikāya Buddhism and the Mahāyāna, in which he was perhaps influenced by the writings of Nalinaksha Dutt.[53] The importance of this should be clear. If we compare, as we inevitably must, Mahāyāna Buddhism with its ubiquitous background, mistaken ideas about that background or pre-existing Buddhism will lead to erroneous conclusions about the situation of the Mahāyāna. In one particular regard I think it is precisely here that Hirakawa has gone astray.

Hirakawa's ideas are based on a very wide reading in the Vinaya literatures, Āgamas, and Mahāyāna sūtras. Basically stated, his position is that the Mahāyāna grew out of lay communities institutionally external to the Nikāya Buddhist communities. These lay communities grew up around stūpas not associated with any Nikāya Buddhist sect, and the lay groups managed and administered the stūpas. Gradually they infiltrated the monastic communities, and in response to this there was a transformation within the monastic communities in which some of these outside ideas and practices were adopted. This is the genesis of the Mahāyāna.

Hirakawa's argument for this theory runs as follows: According to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra*, just before the death of the Buddha he forbade monastic participation in the stūpa cult, ruling that this was

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[52] I translate as "Nikāya community" Hirakawa's Japanese expression *buha kyōdan*. Although Hirakawa has published a certain number of articles in English, and an English translation of one half of his popular survey of Indian Buddhism has appeared (Hirakawa 1990), I refer in all cases to his latest Japanese publications, on the assumption that these present his most recent and considered views. He has, moreover, been publishing a series of Collected Works in which many of his older studies are reprinted, sometimes with some modifications. When newer versions of old papers are available, I generally refer to the more updated publication. In the main, the ideas discussed in the present context are found in Hirakawa 1954 (rpt. 1989).

[53] Hirakawa seldom refers to Western scholarly works, but does occasionally take note of Dutt 1930—not however in Hirakawa 1954.

the domain of the laity. In addition, since the cult of the stūpa consists in worship offered with flowers, perfumes, dance, and music, it would not have been possible for monks to participate, since such activities were forbidden to them by the Vinaya. In addition, the fact that there are no inscriptions on stūpa sites identifying a stūpa as belonging to a particular sect proves that stūpas were not the domain of the monastic community. All of this shows that, despite some suggestions that the Mahāyāna grew up from within specific sects of Nikāya Buddhism, it could not have been Nikāya sect monks who created the Mahāyāna. It must have been lay people who were the managers of the stūpas.[54]

   Gregory Schopen has shown conclusively that the standard interpretation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra*'s prohibition of monastic stūpa worship is wrong.[55] The sūtra is far from prohibiting monastic worship of stūpas, since the prohibition applies only to participation in the actual funeral ceremony, and moreover may apply not to all monks but only to Ānanda, and not to all funerals but only to that of the Buddha. Be that as it may, it is clear that there are no doctrinal grounds, at least in earlier literature, for the idea that monks were prohibited from participation in stūpa rites. Schopen has also shown elsewhere that in fact stūpas were a common if not central feature of Indian Buddhist monastery life, and that the main stūpas of monastic sites did in fact belong to specific sects of Sectarian Buddhism.[56] As far as the

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[54] I believe we can lay out Hirakawa's argument rather clearly almost in his own words: Hirakawa 1954 (1989):377: Because lay believers (*zaike shinja*) erected the stūpa of the Buddha, and distributed his *śarīra* (relics), therefore (*yue ni*) in the time when the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* was redacted in the primitive Saṅgha the believers (*shinja*) were responsible for the administration of the stūpas (*buttō no keiei iji*), and bhikṣus were not directly involved. Because Vinayas of the sects (*buha*) discuss stūpas they were taken care of by the Nikāya Buddhist communities (*buha kyōdan*) in the Nikāya Buddhist Age (*buha bukkyō jidai*—whatever that is!). At the same time, there were many independent stūpas not connected with sects (*buha*). The many stūpas with dedicatory inscriptions which do not record a sect name proves there were stūpas not connected to a sect.

[55] Schopen 1991.

[56] See for example Schopen 1979 and 1985.

prohibition to participate in dance, the offering of flowers and so on, Sasaki Shizuka has shown that this rule is not in the oldest stratum of the Vinaya tradition, and that even once introduced a specific exception was made for offerings to the Buddha, including stūpa offerings.[57] Given this, Hirakawa's argument against the monastic basis of stūpa worship can be shown to lack evidence, and with this falls the main pillar of his argument for the lay origins of the Mahāyāna. We may mention in addition the idea that only lay people would have been able to afford to endow such expensive structures as stūpas. Here again, Schopen has repeatedly demonstrated that contrary to the impression traditionally derived from a reading of the Vinayas, monks were not at all the completely penniless renunciants we sometimes romantically like to imagine them to have been. Some monastics seem to have been wealthy patrons, and perfectly capable of endowing expensive structures, and moreover of recording this fact in inscriptions carved on those structures.[58]

To be fair, Hirakawa has in fact repeatedly offered extremely detailed and learned arguments for the theories I have summarily critiqued here. A full critique worthy of his arguments would be involved and lengthy, and I am happy to refer here to the detailed studies of Sasaki in this regard.[59] Moreover, the model Hirakawa suggests is not necessarily his alone. A sociological study of a new religious movement has clearly stated the presuppositions as follows:[60]

> New movements in religion tend, in the nature of things, to be the product of lay initiative. They have often arisen as responses to what have been perceived as deficiencies in the clergy, and often as a challenge—expressed or implicit— to priestly dominance. In effect, that challenge has usually been a demand for opportunities of more open access to spiritual resources, accompanied by distrust of complicated liturgies and elaborate doctrines which the priests alone are

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[57] Sasaki 1991.

[58] That monks and nuns of high status made many endowments was already pointed out, for example, by Njammasch 1974:281–282. However, she seems to resist the conclusion that such monks possess personal wealth (p. 283).

[59] Most accessible is his English article Sasaki 1997.

[60] Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994:232.

permitted to claim fully to understand. The lay impulse has been to seek more immediate spiritual help with less of the manipulative apparatus in which priestly classes tend to invest. Consciously or unconsciously, the lay movement seeks a reorientation concerning the vital focus of spiritual endeavor (for example, by emphasis on faith rather than on ritual performances). Priests seek to preserve orthodoxy and become custodians of sacred objects and places. They mark off their purported piety by distinctive means of training, by tonsure, dress, and ritual routines, all of which lead them to distance themselves from ordinary people and everyday affairs which not infrequently they see as mundane, and perhaps even as a source of pollution. In such circumstances, laymen are sometimes prompted to seek new means by which to acquire protection from the untoward and for new sources of reassurance about salvation (in whatever form salvation may, in their culture, be conceived). Such a growing divergence of orientation is likely to be exacerbated if a priesthood—purporting to offer indispensable service—in itself becomes cynical, corrupt, and self-indulgent. A process of this kind leads a disenchanted laity either to have recourse to competing agents who claim to offer assistance toward salvation, or to take spiritual affairs into their own hands.[61]

I do not mean to imply that Hirakawa has knowingly borrowed a model from the sociology of religion, but rather I want to suggest that this model is fundamentally taken for granted in much of the thinking concerning religious history, especially that which is seen to relate to the evolution of "sects." There is little point in speculating on the general applicability of the model in religious studies as a whole, but even if the model were generally applicable, it would remain true that it need not necessarily apply to each and every case.

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[61] The authors go on, in the following paragraph, to make explicit the application of their remarks: "The process outlined in the abstract applies to various historical instances, conspicuously to the history of Protestantism. The Reformation, whist not an initially lay movement, met, with its doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, the aspirations of the laity, whilst subsequent dissenting and schismatic movements sought more direct access to saving grace, and wider opportunities for lay spiritual experience. Such struggles between priests and laity are by no means confined to Christian history: they have occurred in various religious contexts." The authors continue, in an overly credulous manner, I believe, to discuss the issue of the schism between the Nichiren Shōshū and the Sōka Gakkai, relying almost entirely it seems on polemical materials (in English!) published by the respective parties, primarily the latter.

Now, even if we posit Mahāyāna Buddhism as a movement—or, I should prefer to say at least for the early Mahāyāna, movement-s, plural—which has doctrinal but no institutional existence as such, which is neither a *nikāya*, an orthodox ordination lineage, nor a *vāda*, a school defined by doctrines, but rather a sort of meta-level movement, which drew its adherents from monastic Buddhism but adherence to which in no way contradicted the established sectarian identification of its followers, and which was co-local, compatible with, and existed within, the complex of these Buddhist communities, distinguished from non-Mahāyāna primarily on the level of philosophical doctrine or "systematics," some emphases in practice, forms of literary or artistic expression, and some aspects of mythology and cosmology, and even if we accept that it was only in this realm of doctrine and rhetoric that Hīnayāna Buddhism existed, without any real-world existence in India or elsewhere, I think our quest for definition has still fallen into a maze from which it might not escape.

Even if we accept that the distinction between Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna we find in the works of Indian authors has, from a descriptive rather than a polemical point of view, been ill-drawn, the existence of the very distinction itself fixes the basic and hence following questions in a dichotomous frame, setting Mahāyāna against non-Mahāyāna. In other words, the question "What is Mahāyāna Buddhism?" still means more or less the same thing as "What is the relation between Mahāyāna and the Buddhism of the sects?"

By failing to question the very framework which lies behind the dualistic distinction which we recognize as very likely nothing more than polemical, we are casting the whole question of the identity of Mahāyāna Buddhism in entirely the wrong terms.

Another way to look at the problem is to suggest that an examination of the underlying models of definition and classification which have, albeit no doubt subconsciously, guided scholars so far may reveal failures of their theories to adequately account for all the relevant data. Since a theory is nothing more than a structure or construct within which to organize data, such failures are fatal. An examination of the

possible models for definition and classification may likewise suggest new approaches to the problem.

Philosophers of language distinguish between two basic types of definitions, "Stipulative" definitions and "Lexical" definitions. In the former, one stipulates exactly what one means by a certain term, whether or not that sense is intuitive or even acceptable to others. In many cases we must rely on stipulative definitions, and in fields like science and law, they are usually essential. For instance, laws or contracts without stipulated definitions are unenforceable and often meaningless. On the other hand, for many uses stipulative definitions are obviously *not* what are needed. In most cases, in fact, we could not carry out ordinary communication if we were to rely on stipulative definitions. What we are concerned with in these cases is "lexical" definition.

Lexical definition is what a dictionary aims for. How is a word most generally used? What do most users of a word intend by it? What do they intend it to mean? A dictionary aims, among other things, to formalize for us the consensus of a word's usage. One problem, of course, is that this meaning is often extremely hard to pin down. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, for example, defines "red" as

> Any of a group of colors that may vary in lightness and saturation, whose hue resembles that of blood; the hue of the long-wave end of the spectrum; one of the additive or light primaries; one of the psychological primary hues, evoked in the normal observer by the long-wave end of the spectrum.

It is clear how deeply contextualized this definition is. "Red" resembles blood. How close does something have to be to "resemble" something else? What is the "long-wave" end of the light spectrum? How long is long?[62] The same dictionary says that a "hero" is "any man noted for feats of courage or nobility of purpose," or "a person prominent in some event, field, period, or cause by reason of his special

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[62] It may be that there are technical definitions of "long wave light" in optics, stated for instance in terms of a range of Ångtröms. This simply makes this part of the definition into a virtual tautology, however.

achievements or contributions." But what is "nobility of purpose"? Are not villains also "prominent"? What is the problem here?

One problem is that this type of definition aims at identifying an *essence*. These definitions aim to locate one or a very few characteristics that are definitive. And this is very problematic. A definition is a description of a *class*. All members of a class are included in that class because the definition applies to them. Classes are defined by definitions, and what definitions do is define classes.[63] But a definition will not only qualify a given particular for *inclusion* in a class; it must also *exclude* other instances. A definition tells us what qualifies as a member of a class, and also what does *not* qualify. That is one reason that the definition of "hero" has a problem. The word "prominent"—which the same dictionary defines as "widely known"—does not exclude villains. And of course, our common usage tells us that villains are not heroes. While this definition is perhaps sufficiently *inclusive*, it is not sufficiently *exclusive*.

And what of essences? A good definition lets us make *explicit* the *implicit* character of the object of the definition, and establish its *unity as an object*. In other words, it allows us to include and exclude appropriately. Generally speaking, we ordinarily assume that we can do this by locating the definitive features or characteristics of the object of our definition, the feature or group of features which are *necessary and sufficient* to determine membership in the class. This is what we generally mean by *essence*. If such features exist, we can establish what is called a *Monothetic Class* (see below). When we are using real language, however, we generally do not function in this way. We work, as the dictionary quoted above recognizes, by associating *resemblances*. We work by *analogy*. Something is "red" if it resembles—in the appropriate ways—other things we think of as

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[63] It is worth stressing here that while individuals may evolve, classes do not. The characteristics of an individual may change such that the individual may no longer be included as a member of a certain class, but the class itself cannot change.

"red."[64] But how can we formalize that understanding? Or, first, why would we *want* to formalize it?

Of course, we generally don't need to formalize definitions. Most readers have probably never looked up the word "red" in a dictionary. Why should one? We usually only need to resort to definitions in borderline cases, or when there is a problem. But sometimes it is important to resort to a definition, and so we sometimes do want to formalize our understanding. How can we do this when we cannot find an essence, a feature or set of features which is both necessary and sufficient to qualify an object for inclusion in a class?

In developing his philosophy of language, Ludwig Wittgenstein spoke about what he called "Family Resemblances" [*Philosophical Investigations* §67].[65] How do we know, Wittgenstein wondered, that something is a "game." What ties all sorts of games together into a class? Wittgenstein of course was not concerned to formalize the similarity he spoke about, being primarily interested in logical and natural language problems. But a coincidence of intellectual history brought together these ideas of Wittgenstein with those of scholars who *are* concerned to formalize such "Family Resemblances," namely the biological taxonomists. The problem for such scholars is really quite simple. What animals (or for some, plants) are related to others? What forms a species? The connection between Wittgenstein's ideas and those of the biological taxonomists led to the suggestion of utilizing a different approach to classification which does away with the requirement for necessary and sufficient conditions. This approach is that of the *Polythetic Class*. The Polythetic Class, of course, contrasts with the Monothetic Class mentioned above.

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[64] I leave out of consideration here the fact that all humans very closely agree on what is a good example of "red" and what is not. The psychology and neuroscience of this is rather complicated, but the result is a well established fact. See Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1996:157–171, esp. 168; the classic study is Berlin and Kay 1969.

[65] Wittgenstein 1958:32.

In a Polythetic Class, to be considered a member of the class each object must possesses a large (but unspecified) number of features or characteristics which are considered relevant for membership in that class. And each such set of features must be possessed by a large number of members of the class. But—and this is the key—there is no set of features which must be possessed by *every* member of the class. There is no one feature or set of features necessary and sufficient for inclusion in the class. When a class has no single feature or set of features common to all its members, it is called Fully Polythetic.

This may be expressed in over-simplified form graphically:[66]

	Individuals					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Characteristics	A		A	A		
	B	B	B			
	C	C		C		
	D	D	D	D		
					F	F
					G	G
					H	H

Here individuals 1, 2, 3, 4 form a fully polythetic class, while 5 and 6 form a monothetic class.

One can see how this is an attempt to formalize the notion of Family Resemblances. We can think about it this way: How does one define a "family"? We might want to consider features such as marriage or blood relation, but what of adopted children? We might want to consider cohabitation, but of course, many family members live apart. And so on. Any single feature is open to the challenge of counter-example, but at the same time our classification must also *exclude*, so we cannot simply rely on exhaustive listing of possible features, lest we be forced therefore to include individuals we want to exclude. So while

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[66] Needham 1975:357.

rejecting the "necessary and sufficient features" model, by collecting a large number of features we can establish a pattern, a resemblance between individuals. And in fact, many numerical taxonomists try to formalize this process to the point where it is almost automatic, that is, where the degree of resemblance can be calculated numerically.

There is of course a difference between natural sciences and social or humanistic studies. While for the most part natural scientists try to select features which are themselves discrete empirical particulars (for instance, does an animal have an internal or external skeleton?), even for them an element of the *ad hoc* remains.[67] Nevertheless, despite a certain ambiguity, in many cases natural scientists *can* select monothetically defined features. But for those of us interested in studying social phenomena, the very features which we must consider will themselves often constitute polythetic classes.[68]

A particularly good case for the application of this method concerns the notion of religion. Religion has been notoriously difficult to define, though it is not necessary to recount that history here. Rather we should direct our attention to the question of the *method* of definition. What we want to do, in a nutshell, is find a definition which will allow us to include in the class of religion all those phenomena which we feel are religions or religious, and exclude those we feel are not. In other words, we want to formalize our lexical definitions. Many previous attempts have failed because counter-examples could be produced, because the suggested definitions excluded individuals we sensed, as users of the word "religion," to be religions, or because they included individuals we felt were *not* religions; that is, they failed either to properly include or properly exclude. Sometimes this has caused funny pseudo-problems. Most people consider Buddhism to be a religion, yet

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[67] For example, a researcher might ask, is or is not a single-celled creature tolerant to 0.5 ppm of saline in solution? But why pick the number 0.5 ppm? Is it not totally arbitrary, *ad hoc*? Another example is found in the way morphological features are recognized by those attempting cladistic analyses. Holes and bumps on bones ("large fenestra," for instance) are recognized as significant in basically impressionistic ways.

[68] Needham 1975:364.

many Buddhists do not consider their object of ultimate concern to be God or a god. So, some scholars have suggested that Buddhism is not, in fact, a religion, but rather a philosophy. These scholars tried to impose a stipulative definition where a lexical definition belonged. But those who were willing to let the data direct the theory, instead of letting the theory or definition make them manipulate their data, realized therefore that theism is obviously not a good touchstone for the definition of a religion. The suggestion that Buddhism is not a religion is an example of failure to properly *in*clude an object in the class.

On the other hand, if we look to the functionalists, those who suggest that religion is what produces meaning and focus in one's life, what organizes one's social interactions and so on, we have another problem—not this time of *in*clusion but of *ex*clusion. A theistic definition did not enable us to include Buddhism as a religion, which we want to do. A functional definition, on the other hand, may prevent us from *excluding* American Baseball, for example, from the class of religions. For of course, baseball provides a source of great, perhaps even ultimate, meaning for many people, it can structure their worldview and their social interactions, can produce and focus meaning, and so on. But we should expect our definition of religion to exclude baseball, and so while the functional features which might determine inclusion in the class are certainly important, they cannot be necessary and sufficient. A polythetic approach, on the other hand, allows us to incorporate as many features as we feel necessary, without making any one particular feature decisive. This is its great strength.

Before we try to apply this all to the problem of Mahāyāna Buddhism, let us make the assumption, which I think is not radical, that Mahāyāna Buddhism is a kind of Buddhism, and that there are kinds of Buddhism which are not Mahāyāna. But this is not necessarily the same thing as saying that Mahāyāna is a species of Buddhism, an important distinction. For what, indeed, is the relation between Mahāyāna Buddhism and the rest of Buddhism, or between Mahāyāna and the larger class of Buddhism of which it is a part?

When defining individual religions or religious traditions, we are usually talking about a *structurally* different type of class than the class of religion. The class "religion" qualifies instances for membership purely on what is called by the biologists *phenetic* grounds.[69] Phenetic relationships are relationships of similarity, which are defined strictly synchronically, since they indicate a product. There need be no historical relationship whatsoever between two instances for them to both be members of the same class. In the study of religion an instance of this type of relation is what we call phenomenological similarity. As van der Leeuw has discussed in such interesting detail,[70] we can talk about instances of prayer, of asceticism, and so on in traditions which have had no historical contact, and in the same way we can talk about "religions" without implying in any way a historical connection between the world's religions. In other words, we can group together instances without regard for their history. Their present similarity is what is of interest.[71]

In contrast to this, *phyletic* relationships show the course of evolution, and thus indicate a process. Two individuals related *phyletically* share some commonly inherited features from a common ancestor, and they may share this feature even if their evolutionary paths diverged in the ancient past. If the common ancestry is relatively recent, we speak of *shared derived characteristics*,[72] which link two or more individuals, but separate them from the rest of their common ancestors. Such recent relations, which are defined diachronically, are termed "cladistic."

So we have two basic categories: First are relationships which are synchronic, in which two individuals may be grouped together on the basis of ancient common inheritances or common chance similarities,

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[69] Bailey 1983:256.

[70] van der Leeuw 1938.

[71] These are termed by the biologists homoplasies, similar characteristics independently evolved. When the origins of the similar characteristics are independently acquired they are termed convergent, when independently evolved parallel.

[72] Technically called *synapomorphies*; Gould 1983:358.

adventitious similarities which have been independently acquired by the individual. Second are relations based on common similarities due to a genetic and historical link which produced in both individuals a shared innovation, not shared with their common ancestor.

Phenetic—that is, synchronic, phenomenological—classification is possible for all groups, whether or not they have any previous, that is to say historical, connection, but cladistic or phyletic classification requires historical inference. When we talk about the class "religion," we are of course concerned with phenetic relationships, but when we study a given religious tradition, it is usually the cladistic form of classification that we are interested in, which is to say, historical links are vital.[73]

We can certainly relate some traditions *within* the class "Buddhism" to each other from some perspectives by means of their shared derived characteristics—that is, cladistically. Thus, broadly speaking Mongolian Buddhism can be linked to Tibetan Buddhism by, among other things, their shared derived characteristics, or their shared innovations. We can draw a tree-diagram—what is called by the biologists a cladogram—illustrating such relations.[74]

But does this same approach apply to the object we call Mahāyāna Buddhism? Does the pair of Mahāyāna and other-than-Mahāyāna form, as many writers on Buddhism seem to assume, what is technically called in cladistics a "sister group," that is two lineages more closely related to each other than to any other lineages?[75] Or is the whole question being asked in a misleading way? Is it possible that scholars who have considered the question have somehow assumed some version of a model which mirrors the biologist's cladistic classification? Naturally it is unlikely that their motivation for this is to be

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[73] This is not true, by the way, with classifications of *types* of religions, such as "New Age" Religions. Such classifications, like the classification "religion" itself, almost always rely on phenetic relationships.

[74] On the application of biological concepts to other fields of study, see the very interesting essays in Hoenigswald and Wiener 1987.

[75] Cf. Gould 1983:357.

found in biological classification itself, and while it is obvious that one
possible source is an analogical extension of the Protestant Reforma-
tion idea, and the relation between Catholicism and Protestantism, it
is also far from impossible that general notions of necessary and suffi-
cient conditions and of species classification have led scholars to cer-
tain assumptions. It is these very assumptions which I think we must
question. And so we come back to our core question: Just what *is* the
relationship of Mahāyāna to the rest of Buddhism?

The definition we seek of Mahāyāna Buddhism must be a lexical de-
finition. It would be pointless for us to suggest a stipulative definition,
although such stipulative definitions offered for example in traditional
texts like that of Yijing may certainly become data for our quest. We
want to determine what are generally agreed to be the limits of the
class, in this case of Mahāyāna Buddhism. And this class should be
defined not monothetically but polythetically, through a large number
of features which cumulatively circumscribe the class. I suggest the
place we will look for features which will lead us to a definition of
Mahāyāna Buddhism should in the first place be the Mahāyāna sūtras.

But—and this is not as meaningless as it might at first sound—
Mahāyāna sūtras are Buddhist texts, and all Buddhist texts are Bud-
dhist texts. In other words, we assume that all Buddhist texts are
Buddhist—but really without knowing what we mean by this, and
without having formalized this feeling. This suggests that rather than
asking what makes a Mahāyāna Buddhist text Mahāyāna it might be
better to ask what makes it both Buddhist and Mahāyāna. Or we might
visualize the problem in a quite different way: is there any way we
can localize Mahāyāna texts within some imaginary multi-dimensional
space which we call "Buddhism"?

If we imagine Buddhism as a multi-dimensional space, and we do
not prejudge the locations of different kinds of Buddhism—with for
example Theravāda in one corner and Zen far away in another—but
instead start our thinking on the level of individual texts, I think we
would quickly realize that various texts would be located at various
points in this multi-dimensional matrix, some texts being located more
closely to each other than to a third type of text. Of course, there

can be no such thing as an absolute location, but only a location relative to other objects in the space (just as is the case in the three dimensions of our physical universe). This is related to the "degree of resemblance" calculations which, as I mentioned above, numerical taxonomists employ. Slightly more thought would show us that the problem is more complicated still. For what are the criteria by means of which we would locate our texts in this space? In fact, there is an infinite number of possible criteria we might want to use to locate the objects of our study, and an infinite number of ways of relating our data points to each other, and thus an infinite number of multi-dimensional matrices. For instance, we should recognize that even the unit "text" is itself amenable to further analysis and localization. Let us consider the example of one sūtra, the *Kāśyapaparivarta*, just for the sake of argument. We have a Sanskrit version (in this case only one nearly complete manuscript, with a few variant fragments, but sometimes we will have more), a Tibetan translation, and a number of Chinese versions, not to mention a commentary to the text extant in several versions, quotations in other works, and so on. From one perspective, we would expect all of these to be located very closely together in our imaginary space; they are all versions of, or intimately related to, the "same text." From another perspective, however, if we are interested in translation vocabulary for instance, we might also have good reasons to want to relate the Chinese translation of the *Kāśyapaparivarta* of one translator more closely to other translations of the same translator than to other Chinese versions of the *Kāśyapaparivarta*, and certainly more closely than to the Tibetan translation of the same text. Or again, a text with doctrinal content might from that perspective be related more closely to another of similar content, the Heart Sūtra (*Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya*) with the Diamond Sūtra (*Vajracchedikā*), for instance, while if we were interested in the same text used liturgically we might group it with quite another text or texts to which it might be unrelated in terms of its content but with which it may be used together or similarly in ritual, the same *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya* with the Smaller *Sukhāvatīvyūha*, perhaps. So the sorts of groupings the data will produce will depend on

what we are asking of our data. There will not be one final definitive grouping, that is to say, no one unique localization of our objects within our imaginary multi-dimensional space. And the more flexible the organization of our data, the more comprehensively we will be able to understand and classify its internal relations. To put this another way, none of the objects we are interested in—no matter how we are likely to define those objects, singly or as groups—will be related to another object or set of objects in a single, unique way. The relation will depend on what aspects of the objects we choose to relate every time we ask a question. And if we map the relations between objects within our multi-dimensional space, the geography of that space will therefore be determined by the combination of objects and aspects in question. Since we have multiple objects and virtually limitless aspects to compare—constrained only by the imagination which generates our questions—no unique mapping or solution is even theoretically possible.

There are in fact established techniques available in the so-called Social Sciences for thinking about such problems. One of the most important numerical techniques is called Cluster Analysis. What cluster analysis enables one to do is rationally deal with a large amount of data, clustering it into more compact forms for easier manageability. The clusters may be defined in any number of ways. It might be possible for us, for instance, to select features, such as the occurrence of doctrinal concepts, key words, stock phrases or the like, and code them 1 or 0 for Mahāyāna or non-Mahāyāna. But given our goals, one of which is to avoid prejudicing the relationship between Mahāyāna and other forms of Buddhism as this monothetic classification would, such an approach can be seen to embody the same sort of flaw inherent in previous thinking on the subject.[76] A much better approach would be to cluster discretely rather than cumulatively, that is, to measure the presence or absence of given factors, and then measure the total clustered factors individually, not additively. The clusters which result

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[76] This is also the same flaw to which cladistic analyses are prone.

would, then, allow for the formation of a polythetic class.[77] Naturally, the mathematics behind such statistical methods of multivariate analysis are sophisticated, and I do not pretend to have even a rudimentary understanding of the technical details. My wish here is to introduce the broadest, most general outlines of the procedure, and to appeal for a consideration by scholars of Buddhism of this new way of conceptualizing the very nature of the problem, rather than to offer a definitive array of statistical techniques to carry out the details of the project.

Let us step back for a moment to the self-evident claim offered above: Mahāyāna Buddhism is Buddhism. As such, not only should instances of Mahāyāna Buddhism be related and relatable to other objects in the same class, but to other objects in the larger class "Buddhism" as well. Just how those Mahāyāna Buddhist objects are related to Buddhist objects will provide us an answer to our question concerning the relation between Mahāyāna Buddhism and Buddhism as a whole—that is to say, the question What is Mahāyāna Buddhism?

Another way of putting this is as follows: If we start with the assumption that there is something called Mahāyāna, but we do not know what its features are, we will want to look at the objects which we think might be definitive of Mahāyāna and extract from those the qualities which group or cluster them together. Moreover, if we think these same or other objects might also belong somehow to another set—even on a different logical level, for example, the set of Buddhism at large—we will want to have a way of determining to what extent the object is Mahāyāna and to what extent it is simply Buddhist. That is, what we will be looking for is not a presence or absence of Mahāyāna, but a question of degree of identification with some cluster, or even better of general location within the whole space, in this case of "Buddhism."

The only attempt I know of to do anything even remotely like this is that of Shizutani Masao,[78] who looked not at Buddhist literature in general but rather tried to stratify Mahāyāna sūtras chronologically

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[77] See Bailey 1994.

[78] Shizutani 1974.

into what he termed Primitive Mahāyāna (*genshi daijō*) and Early Mahāyāna (*shoki daijō*) on the basis of the presence or absence of certain concepts and technical terms. Unfortunately, as far as I can see, he approached the problem purely impressionistically and without any rigorous method. Moreover, I have grave doubts about the possibility of establishing even a relative chronology of this literature purely on the basis of internal evidence, not to mention the backward methodology of such an approach. Nevertheless, careful reading of Shizutani's study might yield valuable clues for future research.

What I suggest instead in no way precludes taking into account the age or relative age of our sources; it simply does not depend on such a determination. The comprehensive comparison of multiple aspects of a large number of objects will allow us to see the multiple natures of these objects, their relative similarities and differences, in a comparative light. Let us again consider an example. Individuals do not hold consistent sets of ideological or political viewpoints. Not all vegetarians are opposed to the death penalty, not all abortion rights activists oppose nuclear power, and so on. The complex make up of ideologies which characterizes any given population, however, can be studied statistically. It is a similar census which I suggest for the population of "Buddhism," the objects constituting which include texts, art objects, and so on.

Once we reject the groundless assumption that Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna Buddhism are related in the fashion of cladistic classification, then we are freed to explore other dimensions of the definitions of Mahāyāna Buddhism. We are enabled and empowered to think in terms of degrees of similarity and relatedness, rather than simply the dichotomy related/unrelated. This in turn enables us to think more fluidly about the ways in which, for example, a Mahāyāna Buddhist text may borrow literary conceits of earlier literature, or a mythological episode, while reformulating the doctrinal content of the episode. It gives us a tool to think about multiple ways that one and the same object might be used, while the object itself remains essentially unchanged. A stone image of Śākyamuni may have different meanings in different ritual contexts, just as a textual pericope may shift its

meaning—or we should better say, have its meaning shifted—by its changing context. Such an appreciation gives us good tools for re-thinking problems such as the "transfer of merit" or the "perfections," claimed as characteristic of Mahāyāna Buddhism but found in non-Mahāyāna literature as well, among a host of other possibilities.

This also enables us to deal with the problem, alluded to above, that very obviously much of the literature commonly cited in discussions of Mahāyāna Buddhism as that of "Sectarian Buddhism," and surely not rarely implied to represent some pre-Mahāyāna ideas, in fact dates from a period after the rise of the Mahāyāna Buddhist movement. If we assume that Mahāyāna Buddhism arose in the first century of the Common Era—a reasonable dating which in reality we have very little or no evidence to justify—and we simultaneously recognize that no Chinese translation of Buddhist material predates that period, that the Pāli canon was not written down before the fifth century, although its redaction clearly predates that time, and so on, we must come to appreciate that even if we wish to be much more careful about our comparisons of Mahāyāna and pre-Mahāyāna materials than we have been heretofore, we will have a very tough time of it. To this we add the problem of contamination. If we revert to the previous assumption of a cladistic classification for a moment, and borrow here the model of the philologists' cladogram, the stemma or tree diagram he has borrowed from the biologist in the first place, we will have to recognize that the history of Mahāyāna Buddhism reflects a heavily cross-contaminated situation. The materials to which we are comparing our extant Mahāyāna Buddhist literature may well have been written or revised in light of that very Mahāyāna Buddhist material itself, and vice versa ad infinitum. Even theoretically, there is no way to produce a clean schematic of the relations in question, any more than it would be possible to clarify a mixture in a glass after orange juice had been poured into soda, that mix poured into coffee, then added back into the orange juice, and so on. The contamination

is complete, its history irreversible.[79] This leaves us only with the possibility of clarifying various aspects of the phenetic, synchronic relations between objects of our interest. But this does not in any way mean that we are to ignore traditional information. Yijing—and of course he is not the only source—tells us that worship of bodhisattvas is definitive of Mahāyāna Buddhism. We need not take this, even if he so intended it, as a necessary and sufficient condition to accept it as one point in our data set, one object which is to be brought into conjunction with others. The same applies to the problem of the identification of a given text as, for example, a Mahāyāna sūtra. Chinese sūtra catalogues do not give us a definitive answer, but provide one feature to be taken into account in the process of formulating a polythetic definition. And so too for features such as the mention of emptiness, bodhisattvas, the perfections, and so on. With such tools in hand we may be able to approach anew the problem of the definition and classification of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

In conclusion, let me explain what is behind the title of my paper, which I confess to have borrowed from authors more clever than I. I was inspired in the first place by the title of a paper by the paleontologist and biologist Stephen J. Gould, "What, If Anything, is a Zebra?"; Gould in turn had borrowed his title from a paper of Albert E. Wood, "What, if Anything, Is a Rabbit?"[80] What Gould wonders is whether the various stripped horses actually make up a cladistic group. If they do not, then strictly and cladistically speaking there is no such thing as a zebra. This line of thought got me thinking about Mahāyāna Buddhism. I first thought I could ask "What, if anything, is Mahāyāna Buddhism?" because I wanted to know whether Mahāyāna Buddhism was cladistically related to non-Mahāyāna Buddhism. But what I have come to realize is that what we really want to know is how to locate Mahāyāna with respect to Buddhism as a whole, and as

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[79] Of course, some history may be recoverable even from highly contaminated or hybridized examples. Some of the processes which led to an extant complex state may be tracable—but not all.

[80] Gould 1983; Wood 1957.

a part of that question we want to understand above all how objects are defined as "Mahāyāna" in the first place. But cladistics cannot help us here. Asking about the relation of Mahāyāna to Buddhism as a whole is closer to asking about the relation of the zebra to the category "animal" (or perhaps "mammal"). The tools we must use to approach the definition and classification of Mahāyāna Buddhism are much less rigid and dichotomous than cladistics, much more fluid, variable and flexible. And so, with an aesthetic reluctance but a methodological confidence, I concede that this incarnation of Gould's title does not properly set the stage for the task facing us as we attempt to confront the problem of how to define Mahāyāna Buddhism. But after all, perhaps form may be permitted to trump content just this once. As a title "The Definition of Mahāyāna Buddhism as a Polythetic Category" seems sufficiently anaemic to justify the poetic licence.

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