

REVIEW ARTICLE

The *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* and the Origins of Mahāyāna Buddhism

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THE SEARCH FOR THE ORIGINS of Mahāyāna Buddhism has been an important theme for Japanese Buddhist scholars since the Meiji Period. Many ancient historical texts contain the claim that the Mahāsāṃghika, one of the traditions of sectarian Buddhism, is the source of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and so for long it was commonly held that Mahāyāna Buddhism derived from this Mahāsāṃghika tradition. In other words, it was thought that Mahāyāna Buddhism was a new Buddhist movement that developed out of traditional sectarian Buddhism. This idea was fundamentally challenged and overturned by Hirakawa Akira. Through a careful search and analysis of the textual accounts of daily life among Mahāyāna followers, Hirakawa developed a new theory that the origin of Mahāyāna Buddhism was totally unrelated to the traditional sectarian organizations; instead, he claimed that it was a religious movement that arose among groups of lay followers (see HIRAKAWA 1963 and 1968). According to Hirakawa, the practice of these lay followers centered around stūpa worship, and the members of these groups were called bodhisattvas. They rejected the traditions

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of sectarian Buddhism, centered around the renunciants (bhikṣus), and followed the path of the Buddha while remaining in lay life, thus advocating a completely new form of practice. According to Hira-kawa's thesis, Mahāyāna is a lay form of Buddhism from its very origins. Since Mahāyāna is the basis of Japanese Buddhism, this means that Japanese Buddhism has been lay-oriented from its very beginning. Hira-kawa's thesis was widely accepted and has been the standard explanation among Japanese Buddhists, standing unchallenged for over thirty years.

In recent years, however, a number of questions have been raised concerning Hira-kawa's thesis from a variety of sources. Scholars have pointed out many facts that cannot be explained by Hira-kawa's theories, and his thesis has ceased to become the standard explanation. Now it appears more likely that, indeed, Mahāyāna Buddhism arose as an extension of traditional Nikāya Buddhism, and that it was originally a religion of the renunciants. On the other hand, just because Hira-kawa's thesis has lost its dominant position does not mean that there is a new thesis ready to replace it. Even if there is general agreement that Mahāyāna has its origins in traditional Nikāya Buddhist organizations, there is still disagreement among scholars as to the concrete details of this development, and we still have not even established a common basis on which to proceed with the debate. As the edifice of Hira-kawa's thesis crumbles before our eyes, there is a feeling among scholars that battle lines are being drawn for a fierce debate aiming to establish a new thesis regarding the origins of Mahāyāna. As of now it is impossible to construct a unifying theory that encompasses all aspects of the origin of Mahāyāna Buddhism. For the time being it is necessary for various scholars to accumulate new information and arguments concerning this issue from the perspective of their respective areas of specialty. Perhaps a theory that incorporates and unifies them all can be proposed after this information has been gathered and absorbed.

Leading the pack in this scholarly goal of reaching a new explanation for the origins of Mahāyāna is the work of Gregory SCHOPEN (see, e.g., 1985, 1997). He has succeeded in clarifying various aspects of Mahāyāna Buddhism that were previously overlooked, by systematically studying ancient epigraphical materials and inscriptions, and by comparing this information with textual data. The Mahāyāna Buddhism that appears to us through such research is clearly a movement that was born from the womb of traditional Nikāya Buddhist organizations. After Schopen we find the spirited and energetic work of scholars such as Jonathan SILK (1994a, 1994b) and Paul HARRISON (1995a,

1995b), who have published excellent work in their respective fields. The theories proposed by these scholars are united in their opposition to the Hirakawa thesis. They reject the lay origin of Mahāyāna and present a new image of the establishment of Mahāyāna as an extension of Nikāya Buddhism. The broad image presented by these three scholars is generally in agreement, but their theories differ in many of their details and do not necessarily converge to present a single thesis. Part of the reason for this is that they are approaching the question from different perspectives. The differences among these three scholars have not yet been resolved, mainly because the data required to debate these differences is not available.

Then, in 1997, Shimoda Masahiro published his massive study that is the focus of this review. We now have, in addition to the positions of Schopen, Silk, and Harrison, a fourth position. Shimoda's thorough analysis of the Mahāyāna *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* (including the Chinese translations [T 12. #374–376], the Tibetan translation, and Sanskrit fragments) succeeds in presenting a concrete picture of the process through which the Mahāyāna movement developed. Through a meticulous study of the textual materials he re-creates the long history of the Mahāyāna movement, from the period of embryonic development before the establishment of the Mahāyānist concept of the bodhisattva, to the arising of *tathāgatagarbha* ideas. He shows clearly that Mahāyāna Buddhism in its embryonic period arose not from lay groups, as the Hirakawa thesis would have it, but within the traditional Nikāya organizations. Shimoda has taken us one step closer to answering the question, "If the Hirakawa thesis is not correct, then where and how did Mahāyāna Buddhism originate?"

Shimoda's Thesis on the Origin of Mahāyāna

Shimoda's book on the Mahāyāna *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* is divided into three sections. The first section contains an introduction that outlines "Topics in the study of Mahāyāna sutras," and the first chapter, "A preliminary history of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*" (pp. 3–151). The second section contains four chapters (pp. 153–453), from the second chapter on "The formation of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*" to the fifth chapter of "Conclusions." The third section (pp. 455–683) contains voluminous notes. It is rather unusual for notes to make up an independent section, but this is necessitated by the nature of the notes, in which the author pursues in extraordinary detail related ideas and topics beyond the scope of his main text. The result brings to mind Etienne Lamotte's French translation of the *Ta chih tu lun*. The importance of Lamotte's

work goes beyond the translation itself; no one would argue that his notes are extraneous and that it does not matter whether the notes are there or not. Lamotte's translation and notes together form an astonishing intellectual achievement. The same can be said of Shimoda's notes. His main text presents a consistent theoretical argument, while the notes frame it with rich layers of information, and together they form a single body that manifests the state of current research on Indian Buddhism. Surely Shimoda was conscious of Lamotte's work as he prepared his notes, and the results are impressively successful. One is taken aback by the profound depth of Shimoda's scholarship, which stands shoulder to shoulder with that of Lamotte.

Let us take a look at the relationship between the first two sections. Shimoda's research actually began with the content of section two. Through a close analysis of the Mahāyāna *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, Shimoda discovered that old and new layers were intermixed in the text. The further discovery that there was a continuity of ideas between these layers became the point of departure for Shimoda's research. Shimoda was not satisfied with identifying and classifying the old and new layers. The preeminent contribution of Shimoda's research is that he perceived the organic continuity between these numerous layers and logically explains the theoretical development of the Mahāyāna followers who upheld and preserved the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*. The chapters in section two are the results of Shimoda's work in this area. There are many important conclusions that are drawn from this work, but the following three are the most important.

1. When the oldest layer of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* appeared, the producers of this work were called *dharmakathika* (法師, "Dharma masters"; Jpn. *hōshi*). This fact contradicts the commonly-accepted idea that the upholders of Mahāyāna were called bodhisattvas. The importance of the notion of *dharmakathika* has already been pointed out by SHIZUTANI Masao (1974), but until now no one realized that materials were available that tell so concretely of the *dharmakathika*'s existence. This is a very important discovery. But, as Shimoda himself says, just because the oldest layers of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* were produced by *dharmakathikas* rather than bodhisattvas does not necessarily mean that the creators of Mahāyāna were the *dharmakathikas*. At the very least, however, it has been proven as a fact that the *dharmakathikas* were deeply involved in the establishment of Mahāyāna Buddhism.
2. Shimoda clarifies the process whereby the *dharmakathikas* at first rejected stūpa worship, and then later reaffirmed it in a different form through the worship of "Buddha nature," that is, "the Bud-

dha-stūpa immanent in sentient beings.” This is a momentous discovery that overturns previous theories that characterized all of Mahāyāna Buddhism in terms of the single phenomenon of the centrality of stūpa worship.

3. In connection with the above point, Shimoda clearly outlines the process whereby the gradual internalization of the Buddha developed so that in spiritual terms it was expressed as the Buddha nature, and externally this was expressed through the creation of a sutra, resulting finally in the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* and its *tathāgata-garbhā* philosophy.

These three ideas make up the core of section two, but a number of other new facts are also presented. It is here in section two that Shimoda’s sharp discernment comes into play, resulting in an explosion of exciting insights. The true form of Mahāyāna Buddhism that emerges from his conclusions is not a lay movement, as in Hirakawa’s thesis. It was a movement begun by a group of renunciants who, while dwelling within the Buddhist saṅgha, rebelled against traditional Buddhist doctrines and maintained their own doctrine and life-style. On this point Shimoda’s thesis is in direct opposition to that of Hirakawa. As a necessary result of his research, Shimoda must reject Hirakawa’s thesis, and this becomes the content of section one. In a sense it would be appropriate for the content of section one to follow after section two, but the content concerns the earlier historical developments, so Shimoda must have put it first to follow temporal sequence. In this section Shimoda presents a detailed survey of the various theories, old and new, concerning the origins of Mahāyāna Buddhism, revealing one by one the contradictions in Hirakawa’s thesis. His analysis of stūpa worship is particularly rigorous. He refers frequently to Schopen’s work, pointing out that stūpa worship did not arise simultaneously with Mahāyāna Buddhism, but was already current within the Buddhist saṅgha before the birth of Mahāyāna. He then presents a consistent history of the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism, showing that a new movement arose among certain *dharma-kathikas* who rejected the stūpa worship that was already popular before the establishment of Mahāyāna, and that the multifaceted Mahāyāna movement developed from this point. This is the Shimoda thesis that claims to replace the Hirakawa thesis.

The Shimoda thesis is sure to attract many supporters. It is a powerful theory that explains the origins of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and it will probably become the accepted explanation. The fusion of this work with that of Schopen, Harrison, and Silk will form a strong foundation, and further discoveries and insights from other fields will con-

tribute to an increasingly broad theory. In any case, anyone who wants to do research on Mahāyāna Buddhism in the future will have to deal in some way with Shimoda's thesis.

Some Questions

Since this is a book review, it is not enough to just praise the author. On the other hand, it would be petty to merely point out occasional misprints. Instead, I would like to make some general suggestions concerning the critical work that still needs to be done with regard to Shimoda's thesis. I have nothing to say concerning section two and Shimoda's analysis of the content of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*. As one who is not a specialist in this specific field, I can only say that his arguments appear flawless. There may be a detail here or there that needs correction or clarification, but the main thrust of his argument seems correct. Shimoda's three conclusions, outlined above, appear indisputable. However, among the numerous related arguments and conclusions there are some that still lack sufficient proof. For example, Shimoda provides no clear proof for his claim that wandering *dharmakathikas* rejected stūpa worship within the saṅgha yet were active in the devotional activities connected with stūpas at sacred sites (see pp. 323-30). Again, Shimoda's explanation of the relationship between the *Lokānuvartanā-sūtra* and the *Śūraṅgama-samādhi-sūtra* is persuasive, but he does not offer a good reason for why the title had to be changed from *Lokānuvartanā* to *Śūraṅgama-samādhi* (see pp. 382-86). These points will need to be clarified through further research using other materials.

Besides these minor problems, however, there looms a major question: what is the origin of stūpa worship? Shimoda offers the following answer. Stūpa worship was common at the very earliest stage of the development of Buddhism (at least, before the development of the "Nikāya" *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*. This stream of those who practiced stūpa worship existed apart from the stream of those who emphasized "the word" and produced the Nikāya texts. We know of the existence of this stūpa worship through many references to it in the Chinese translations of the Vinaya texts. As time passed, those who became weary of ritualistic stūpa worship within the saṅgha and sought a "living" Buddha, started a new movement. This is the germination of Mahāyāna Buddhism among *dharmakathikas* (or maybe "bodhisattvas"). They rejected the previous form of stūpa worship, led a life of wandering, maintained strong relations with lay people, sought to perceive a "living" Buddha through the practice of samādhi, and expressed this

experience with new words that grew into the Mahāyāna sutras. The movement did not stop there. The Mahāyāna followers then reestablished a connection between the stūpas and the living Buddha that they had experienced internally, and developed the idea of “Buddha nature” as an internalization of the stūpa. In this scenario, contrary to previous theories, stūpa worship is not a unique characteristic of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Stūpa worship can be traced all the way back to the time of the historical Buddha; it is a feature that was originally part of Buddhism, and Mahāyāna Buddhism arose as a new movement that rejected ritualistic stūpa worship.

I would like to point out another possibility. As Shimoda himself says, even the oldest layers of the Mahāyāna *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* do not reveal the circumstances of the period in which Mahāyāna first developed. There may be another, even older, layer of Mahāyāna Buddhism that goes back further than the oldest layer of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*. What if there was an active incorporation of stūpa worship by Mahāyāna followers at this early stage? If so, then it is not necessarily the case that stūpa worship can be traced all the way back to the time of the Buddha, or that it is a feature that was originally part of Buddhism, but rather that it was a new ritual that appeared with and was closely related to the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The first stage of Mahāyāna Buddhism was the introduction of stūpa worship into the life of the saṅgha. This was the introduction of a concrete, living Buddha. The next stage consists of a rejection of this ritual among *dharma-kathikas* who had doubts about this practice, and who sought a more spiritual, living Buddha. It is possible that Mahāyāna Buddhism developed in this way. Thus my conception of the very earliest stage of Buddhism is very different from Shimoda’s thesis. My doubts concerning Shimoda’s thesis on this point are based on the fact that, among the vast Vinaya texts, it is only in the Pāli Vinaya that there is almost no mention of stūpa worship. The Vinaya consists of texts that paint a very detailed picture of the daily life of those in the Buddhist saṅgha. The fact that there is no mention of stūpa worship in these texts indicates that stūpa worship was not practiced by the saṅgha that used the Pāli Vinaya. SCHOPEN suggests that the Pāli Vinaya originally contained references to stūpa worship but that “they were removed at a comparatively recent date” (see 1989; 1997, pp. 91, 94), but this suggestion has been criticized by VON HINÜBER (1990). SCHOPEN also claims that the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya is the oldest of the Vinaya collections, and the Pāli Vinaya is much newer (see 1994a, 1994b, and 1995). It seems to me, however, that the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya is the latest Vinaya collection to be compiled. True, if one examines the individ-

ual elements, there are old elements within the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, but I do not think it can be denied that the time at which it developed in its current form as an independent collection makes it the newest compilation. On the other hand, of all the Vinaya collections, the Pāli Vinaya seems to preserve the oldest structure. If there is no mention of stūpa worship in the Pāli canon, this may indicate that stūpa worship was still not a common practice within the saṅgha.

There are also many problems with regard to the “Nikāya” *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, a text that serves as an important source for Shimoda’s thesis. As SCHOPEN points out (1991; 1997, p. 100), this text contains references to stūpa worship. However, this text has some features that cannot be found in other Nikāya texts, and it is not certain whether or not it was produced at the same time as other Nikāya texts. If this *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* was produced at a later date, then it is more likely that the period in which stūpa worship appeared is also late. It is possible that the popularization of stūpa worship started at a quite late date (such as during the period of King Aśoka).

It is not my intent to argue too strongly for my interpretation. However, as long as these other possibilities exist, further evidence must be provided to determine the issue, and I look forward to further clarification on the matter. The focus of future research on this issue must be to explain why stūpa worship is not mentioned in the Pāli Vinaya, and to determine the period in which the Nikāya *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* was produced. Whatever the outcome of these issues, the goal of Shimoda’s research is to arrive at an understanding of the earliest period in the development of Buddhism, a goal that is the dream of all Buddhist scholars. I look forward with great anticipation to the results of Shimada’s continuing research.

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