

Chapter 5

Orality, Authority, and Conservatism in the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras

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Introduction

No other corpus of Mahāyāna texts has captured the modern scholarly imagination more than the collection of Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras (Perfection of Wisdom scriptures) has in the last half century. Among these the *Aṣṭasahasrikā-prajñāpāramitā* (*Aṣṭa*) has garnered the most attention since the late Edward Conze proclaimed it to be the oldest Perfection of Wisdom text, leading some to speculate that it is the oldest Mahāyāna sūtra.¹ Although the *Aṣṭa* can no longer claim special status as the oldest Mahāyāna scripture,² its antiquity is confirmed by its inclusion among the oldest Chinese translations of Mahāyāna sūtras and a recently discovered Gāndhārī manuscript fragment.³ No doubt some of the scholarly focus on the Prajñāpāramitā texts is due to Edward Conze's pioneering translation work. This in turn must be due in part to the survival of many of these sūtras within the extant Nepalese and Pāla manuscript collections. While the popularity of the *Heart Sūtra* and *Diamond Sūtra* in the Tibetan and East Asian Buddhist traditions have made them common objects of scholarly inquiry,⁴ the

¹ See Edward Conze, *Prajñāpāramitā Literature* (Tokyo, 1978). Several scholars accept Conze's assertion of the *Aṣṭasahasrikā*'s antiquity and draw conclusions about early Mahāyāna based on this. See especially Lewis Lancaster, 'The Oldest Mahāyāna Sūtra: Its Significance for the Study of Buddhist Development', *The Eastern Buddhist* 8 (1975): 30–41; Andrew Rawlinson, 'The Position of the *Aṣṭasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* in the Development of Early Mahāyāna', in Lewis Lancaster and Luis O. Gómez (eds.), *Prajñāpāramitā and Related Systems: Studies in honor of Edward Conze* (Berkeley, 1977); and Stephen A. Kent, 'A Sectarial Interpretation of the Rise of Mahayana', *Religion* 12 (1982): 311–32.

² Other sūtras such as the *Pratyutpanna-buddha-sammukhāvasthita-samādhi-sūtra* and the *Ugraparipṛcchā* may be just as old, if not older than the *Aṣṭa*. See Paul Harrison (trans.), *The Samādhi of the Direct Encounter with the Buddhas of the Present: An Annotated English Translation of the Tibetan Version of the Pratyutpanna-Buddha-Sammukhāvasthita-Samādhi-Sūtra* (Tokyo, 1990); and Jan Nattier (trans.), *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to the Inquiry of Ugra (Ugraparipṛcchā)* (Honolulu, 2003).

³ For the various dates of the *Aṣṭa*'s translations into Chinese, see Lancaster, 'The Oldest Mahāyāna Sūtra'. At the conference for the International Association of Buddhist Studies held at Emory University in Atlanta, Harry Falk presented a paper, 'Another Collection of Kharosthi manuscripts from Gandhara' (27 June 2008), in which he referred to a manuscript fragment of the *Aṣṭa* in the Gāndhārī language dated to possibly as early as the first century CE.

⁴ For three important studies on the *Heart Sūtra*, see Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *The Heart Sūtra Explained: Indian and Tibetan Commentaries* (New York, 1988); Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Elaborations on Emptiness: Uses of the Heart Sūtra* (Princeton, 1996); and Jan Nattier, 'The Heart Sūtra: A Chinese Apocryphal Text?', *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 15/2 (1992): 71–102. For a study and translation of the Sanskrit manuscript of the *Diamond Sūtra* from Gilgit, see Gregory Schopen, 'The manuscript of the Vajracchedikā found at Gilgit', in Luis Gómez

Indian commentarial tradition demonstrates the continued attention that Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras received within the Indian Buddhist intellectual tradition.⁵

Much of the work done on the *Aṣṭa* and other Prajñāpāramitā texts has focused on philosophical aspects, or attempted to reconstruct the ‘early Mahāyāna’ from them. However, few studies have investigated these texts as literature, and examined how they employ certain literary devices in order to promote their specific brand of Buddhism. One exception to this trend has been the recent monograph by Alan Cole, *Text as Father: Paternal Seductions in Early Mahāyāna Buddhist Literature*.⁶ In this provocative and highly original work, Cole interrogates four Mahāyāna sūtras (the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Diamond Sūtra*, the *Tathāgātagarbha Sūtra* and the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*) in order to expose their various rhetorical strategies. Following Cole’s approach, I will in the following pages investigate several Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras as literature existing within the larger textual system of Indian Buddhism. Specifically, I investigate the following themes found in the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras: the conceit of orality, the construction of textual authority, the employment of certain mainstream Buddhist characters, the concept of radical negation, and religious conservatism.⁷

In his chapter on the *Diamond Sūtra*, Cole makes two insightful observations about the text: the *sūtra*’s illusion of orality and its strong conservatism despite its radical program of philosophically negating the substantial nature of all phenomena.⁸ These same two themes I will address in relation to several other Prajñāpāramitā texts. A primary conclusion of the current investigation is that as a whole the Prajñāpāramitā corpus also demonstrates the characteristics that Cole has witnessed in the *Diamond Sūtra*. Moreover, because these traits span numerous texts within the corpus throughout several centuries, their appearance cannot be analysed solely in terms of a relative chronology vis-à-vis other Mahāyāna sūtras, but must be considered as one particular cluster of ideological postures in relation to a spectrum of religious orientations existing (both synchronically and diachronically) within Indian Buddhism.

Sources

I will limit my study to these Prajñāpāramitā texts: *The Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines (Aṣṭasahasrikā-prajñāpāramitā)*,⁹ *The Perfection of Wisdom in 25,000 Lines*

and Jonathan Silk (eds.), *Studies in the Literature of the Great Vehicle: Three Mahāyāna Buddhist Texts* (Ann Arbor, 1989), pp. 89–139.

⁵ Some of the most important and influential commentaries are Maitreya’s *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*, Haribhadra’s *Abhisamayālaṅkāraloka*, Nāgabodhi’s *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra*.

⁶ Alan Cole, *Text as Father: Paternal Seductions in Early Mahāyāna Buddhist Literature* (Berkeley, 2005).

⁷ Other chapters in this volume, particularly those of Esposito, Nicholson, and Rohlman, elucidate the complex relationship between literary and philosophical genres in Jain and Hindu traditions as well as Buddhist ones.

⁸ Cole, *Text as Father*, pp. 174ff.

⁹ For an English translation, see Edward Conze (trans.), *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines & Its Verse Summary* (San Francisco, 1973 [1958]). For a Sanskrit edition, see P.L. Vaidya (ed.), *Aṣṭasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (Darbhanga, 1960). The *Aṣṭa* was first translated into Chinese by Lokakṣema as the *Dàoxing bōrě jīng* 道行般若經 (T. 224) in 179 CE. See Charles Muller

(*Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā*),¹⁰ *The Perfection of Wisdom in 2,500 Lines (Sārdhadviśāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā)*,¹¹ *The Perfection of Wisdom in 700 Lines (Saptaśatikā-prajñāpāramitā)*,¹² and *The Heart Sūtra (Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya)*.¹³ Edward Conze divides the development of the Prajñāpāramitā corpus into four phases: (1) the elaboration of a basic text (ca. 100 BCE – 100 CE), which constitutes the original impulse; (2) the expansion of that text (ca. 100 CE – 300 CE); (3) the restatement of the doctrine in short texts and versified summaries (ca. 300 CE – 500 CE); (4) the period of Tantric influence and the absorption into magic (600 CE – 1200 CE).¹⁴ Conze identifies the *Aṣṭa* and its verse summary (the *Ratnagaṇa-saṃcaya-gāthā*) as representing the earliest strata.¹⁵ *The Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā (Pañcaviṃśati)* falls approximately within phase 2 (expansion phase); while the *Sārdhadviśāhasrikā, Saptaśatikā, Diamond and Heart Sūtras* fall roughly into phase 3 (restatement of doctrine in short texts).¹⁶ I must emphasize at this point that I am not strongly committed to definitive dates for these texts. As is well known, the dating of Mahāyāna sūtras is notoriously difficult and relies largely on the dates of Chinese translations. Here I merely use Conze's scheme as a rough approximation to demonstrate the strong likelihood that the Perfection of Wisdom texts evolved over several centuries.¹⁷ In what follows I will not attempt to develop a more definitive relative or absolute chronology of these texts. Rather, I hope to demonstrate the continuity of certain themes such as the conceit of orality, the construction of authority, the appearance of mainstream Buddhist literary figures, the rhetoric of radical negation, and an underlying conservatism within these texts.

(chief editor), *The Digital Dictionary of Buddhism* (<http://www.buddhism-dict.net/ddb/>; accessed 16 July 2010).

¹⁰ For an English translation, see Edward Conze (trans. and ed.), *The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom with Divisions of the Abhismayālankāra* (Berkeley, 1975). For the Sanskrit text, see Nalinaksha Dutt (ed.), *The Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā edited with critical notes and introduction* (London, 1934). The *Pañcaviṃśati* was first translated into Chinese by Dharmarakṣa as the *Guāngzàn bōrě bōluómì jīng* 光讚般若波羅蜜經 (T. 222.8.147a–216b) in 286 CE (Muller, *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*).

¹¹ For an English translation, see Edward Conze (trans.), *Perfect Wisdom: The Short Prajñāpāramitā Texts* (London, 1973), pp. 1–78. For the Sanskrit text, see P.L. Vaidya (ed.), *Mahāyānasūtrasaṃgrahaḥ*, Part I (Darbhanga, 1961), pp. 1–74. This sūtra was translated by Upāśūnya as the *Shèngtiānwáng bōrě bōluómì jīng* 勝天王般若波羅蜜經 (T. 231) in 565 CE (Muller, *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*).

¹² For an English translation, see Conze, *Perfect Wisdom*, pp. 79–107. For the Sanskrit text, see Vaidya (ed.), *Mahāyānasūtrasaṃgrahaḥ*, Part I, pp. 340–51. The Chinese translation translated by Mandra is known as the *Wénshūshìlì suōshuō móhēbōrě bōluómì jīng* 文殊師利所說摩訶般若波羅蜜經 (T. 232.8.726a–732c) (Muller, *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*).

¹³ For an English translation, see Conze, *Perfect Wisdom*, pp. 140–43. For the Sanskrit text, see Vaidya (ed.), *Mahāyānasūtrasaṃgrahaḥ*, Part I, pp. 97–8. The *Heart Sūtra* was translated seven times into Chinese; the most popular translations were by Kumārajīva and Xuanzang (Muller, *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*).

¹⁴ Conze, *Prajñāpāramitā Literature*, p. 1.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See Conze, *Perfect Wisdom*, pp. i–iii.

¹⁷ The Chinese translations of the *Aṣṭa* clearly demonstrate this development over time. See Lancaster, 'The Oldest Mahāyāna Sūtra'.

The Conceit of Orality

The oral nature of the early Vedic and Buddhist textual traditions is universally recognized. The original medium of composition of the earliest Mahāyāna sūtras is unknown, but in recent decades some scholars have speculated that they were originally written compositions. Beginning in the 1990s, a debate began within Buddhist studies over the oral versus written composition of Mahāyāna sūtras. Sparked by the emergence of ‘Orality Studies’, and the recognition that the earliest use of writing for Buddhist texts seemed roughly to correspond to the time when the Mahāyāna began, some scholars imagined a possible connection between the new technology of writing and the emergence of the Mahāyāna. Richard Gombrich first put forth the idea that the Mahāyāna began as a written tradition.¹⁸ Discussing the several Mahāyāna sūtras known to proclaim the merit acquired through writing them down and enshrining them for worship, Gombrich states: ‘My feeling is that these texts preserve a sense of wonder at this marvelous invention [writing] which permits an individual’s opinions or experiences to survive whether or not anyone agrees or cares.’¹⁹ More recently, Alan Cole has also argued for the written nature of the early Mahāyāna in his *Text as Father*.²⁰ One point raised by Cole is the fact that Mahāyāna sūtras often refer to themselves as texts that should be copied and transmitted to others. Moreover, the word ‘book’ commonly appears and the act of writing is specifically mentioned.²¹ Cole admits that these elements might have been added later to an oral tradition; however, he sees another type of evidence as militating against this idea: there is change in the style of presenting the voice of the Buddha often on a level of narrative sophistication not found in non-Mahāyāna sources.

While it is true that Mahāyāna sources often mention the merit of copying sūtras, they also frequently praise the memorizing, reciting, and hearing of sūtras.²² Moreover, written texts from Gandhāra radiocarbon dated to as early as the second century CE demonstrate the early use of writing by non-Mahāyāna Indian Buddhists as well.²³ No doubt there existed in the ancient Indian Buddhist world a complex relationship between oral and written texts. We know that early Chinese translators such as Dharmarakṣa (third century CE) worked from written Indic texts.²⁴ It also seems likely that some sūtras were transmitted orally from

¹⁸ Richard Gombrich, ‘How the Mahāyāna Began’, in Tadeusz Skorupski (ed.), *The Buddhist Forum, Vol. I: Seminar Papers 1987–88* (London, 1990).

¹⁹ Ibid. (brackets mine). For the now famous article on this ‘cult of the book’ in the Mahāyāna, see Gregory Schopen, ‘The Phrase “*sa prthivīpradeśaś caityabhūto bhavet*” in the *Vajracchedikā*: Notes on the Cult of the Book in Mahāyāna’, *Indo-Iranian Journal* 17 (1975): 147–81. For a recent critique of this article, see David Drewes, ‘Revisiting the phrase “*sa prthivīpradeśaś caityabhūto bhavet*” and the Mahāyāna Cult of the Book’, *Indo-Iranian Journal* 50 (2007): 101–43. In this writer’s opinion, while many of Drewes’ criticisms are accurate, the fact that many Mahāyāna sūtras mention the merit gained through the copying and worshipping of the written text remains an important insight of Schopen’s study.

²⁰ Cole, *Text as Father*, pp. 14–17.

²¹ Cole does not give a Sanskrit term; however, *pustaka* is often used in the surviving Sanskrit sources such as the *Lotus Sūtra*.

²² David Drewes, ‘Early Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism I’, *Religion Compass* 3 (2009): 6 (accessed electronically, Doi 10.1111/j.1749–8171.2009.00195.x).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See Daniel Boucher, *Bodhisattvas of the Forest and the Formation of the Mahāyāna: A Study and Translation of the Rāṣṭrapālaparipṛcchā-sūtra* (Honolulu, 2008), p. 93.

an Indic language into written Chinese. However, this transmission from Indic oral text to written Chinese text does not mean that an Indic written archetype did not exist. The mixing of media between oral and written was most likely complex and interwoven. However, the oral/aural component of this complex relationship has been lost to us. All we possess now are the linguistic remains of a written tradition. Furthermore, there is no definitive way of demonstrating from the written records that any Mahāyāna sūtra, or part of a sūtra, existed in a prior state as a strictly oral text.

In sum, while parts of the earliest strata of the Perfection of Wisdom literature may have existed in strictly oral form, we find evidence that sometime in the early centuries of the Common Era these texts appear in writing. The creation and/or appearance of Buddhist sūtras in writing generated a particular problem of authority in the Indian context. It is widely agreed that the earliest Buddhist sūtras were memorized and passed down orally for generations prior to the use of writing for religious purposes. The oral nature of these texts is reflected in the standardised opening phrase found at the beginning of every sūtra: ‘Thus have I heard, at one time the Lord dwelled...’ (*evaṃ mayā śrutam ekasmin samaye bhagavān... viharati sma*). Traditionally, these words were believed to be recited at the first Buddhist council following the final *nirvāṇa* of the Buddha, by Ānanda, faithful monk-servant and cousin of the Buddha, who not only was present at practically all of the Buddha’s sermons, but also possessed an eidetic memory and could recall verbatim every teaching occasion of the Buddha. In this way, the phrase ‘Thus have I heard’ became the authenticating mark of a text as sūtra, endowing it with all the authority of the ‘Buddha’s words’ (*buddhavacana*).

With the advent of written Mahāyāna sūtras a dilemma was generated: does authority now reside in the written text or in the testimony of a faithfully transmitted oral tradition? Donald Lopez phrases the problem thus:

The question of the identity of the rapporteur, then, is the question of where authority should lie: in what is written, or in the testimony as to what has been heard. If there is to be resolution, it would seem to come in the moment that is so difficult to imagine, when a monk puts stylus to palm leaf and penned the words, *evaṃ mayā śrutam ekasmin samaye...*²⁵

Like their mainstream Buddhist counterparts, all Mahāyāna sūtras begin with the ‘Thus have I heard’ opening phrase. While some Mahāyāna sūtras such as the *Avataṃsaka* and *Gaṇḍavyūha*²⁶ seem happy to apply this required stamp of authentication to their beginnings and then quickly transition to highly ornate visually overloaded descriptions of the cosmically baroque, other sūtras such as the Perfection of Wisdom texts demonstrate a style reminiscent of their oral ancestors. About the *Diamond Sūtra*, Cole makes the following comments:

²⁵ See Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ‘Authority and Orality in the Mahāyāna’, *Numen* 42/1 (1995): 42.

²⁶ For an English translation of the *Avataṃsaka*, see Thomas Cleary (trans.), *The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the Avataṃsaka Sutra* (Boston, 1993). For a study of visual metaphor in the Mahāyāna, see David McMahan, *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahāyāna Buddhism* (New York, 2002). For a recent study of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, see Douglas Osto, *Power, Wealth and Women in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra* (London and New York, 2008).

Though the first line of the text announces in traditional form, ‘Thus I heard,’ the narrator disappears until the closing lines. Hence the narrative, while obviously a composition, is attempting to present its content as a historical, oral moment, unaffected by the medium that it inhabits. Slipping from awareness of a constructed narrative into the impression of unadulterated orality presumably brings the reader more intimately into the discussion and obviates addressing both problematic sides of the narrative composition: the authorial work in bringing the Real into narrative-textual form and then the reader’s hazardous work of interpreting that discourse... The studied effacement of the narrator gives the illusion that spoken words were transmitted perfectly into narrative and then into written words, with no subsequent shift in form, content, or meaning.²⁷

Here we witness in the *Diamond Sūtra* an attempt to capture the ‘oral moment’ of the traditional *sūtra* genre, and thereby efface or conceal its written nature. This move is a basic strategy of the Perfection of Wisdom *sūtras*, and it is achieved primarily through the use of dialogue. Through their seeming reproduction of historical, oral discourse, these texts demonstrate a basic anxiety about their own authority. Thus the position of the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras is both highly traditional and innovative. In their literary mode, they are traditional in that one of the means of establishing the authority of the *sūtras* is by simulating the ‘unadulterated orality’ of dialogues faithfully memorized by the monastic tradition. On the other hand, in their doctrine the Perfection of Wisdom’s teaching of radical negation by means of the doctrine of ‘emptiness’ (*śūnyatā*) is philosophically innovative.

Now let us examine in more detail how the Prajñāpāramitā texts attempt to establish their religious authority.

Authority

The beginning of the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines* (*Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, or *Aṣṭa*) reveals a number of characteristic features of the Perfection of Wisdom corpus. It reads:

Thus have I heard at one time the Lord dwelled at Rājagṛha on Gṛdhakūṭa Mountain together with a great assembly of monks, with 1250 monks, all of whom were arhats whose cankers were destroyed, who were without defilements, controlled, with minds completely liberated, who were completely freed through wisdom, who possessed perfect knowledge, who were well-bred steeds, who were great serpents, whose work was done, who had done what needed to be done, who had put down their burden, whose aim had been obtained, whose bondage to existence had been destroyed, whose minds were liberated through perfect knowledge, who had obtained the supreme perfection of control over all their thoughts, except for one person – namely the Venerable Ānanda.

At that time, the Lord addressed the Venerable Elder, Subhūti, ‘Subhūti, reveal²⁸ to the bodhisattvas, the great beings, the perfection of wisdom such as how bodhisattvas, the great beings, ought to go forth to the perfection of wisdom’.

²⁷ Cole, *Text as Father*, pp. 173–4.

²⁸ In the expression *pratibhātu te subhūte...* (literally, ‘Let it be [made] clear by you, Subhūti...’), *te* seems most likely to be a Buddhist hybrid form of the second person, instrumental case. See Franklin Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary, Volume I* (New Haven, 1953), §20.22.

Then the thought occurred to the Venerable Śāriputra, ‘Will the Venerable Elder Subhūti expound the perfection of wisdom to the bodhisattvas, the great beings, by himself through his own application and his own power from the force of inspired wisdom, or through the might of the Buddha?’

The Venerable Subhūti, through the might of the Buddha, perceived with his mind these thoughts of the Venerable Śāriputra and said to him, ‘Venerable Śāriputra, whatever the disciples of the Lord say, teach, explain, utter, illuminate, declare; all this is to be known as the heroic work of the Tathāgata. What is the reason for this? Whatever dharma is taught by the Tathāgata, they practice that preaching of the dharma, and realize and preserve its essence; having realized and preserved its essence, they say, teach, explain, utter, illuminate, and declare only just that; all of this is compatible with the essence of dharma.’²⁹

In this introductory passage (*nidāna*) to the *sūtra* we find a number of features distinctive of the Perfection of Wisdom literature. The first point of interest is the rather brief and modest (for Mahāyāna *sūtras*) introduction of who was present before the Buddha, here referred to by his common titles as ‘Lord’ (*bhagavān*), and Tathāgata (‘Thus Gone One’). Noteworthy in the Sanskrit version is the fact that no *bodhisattvas* are mentioned as specifically present, nor are any particular bodhisattvas named. I will return to this point below.

The next distinctive feature of this passage is the presentation of the characters that are present before the Buddha. These are the 1250 monk disciples of the Buddha described as *arhats* (‘worthies’) who have attained (with the exception of one) a number of spiritual accomplishments, each of which is actually a different way of saying that they

Graeme MacQueen, ‘Inspired Speech in Early Mahāyāna Buddhism II’, *Religion* 12 (1982): 49, translates *pratibhātu te subhūte...* as ‘May something be clear to you, Subhūti...’ This completely misses the sense that the Buddha is commanding (politely with the third person, imperative form of the verb) Subhūti to expound the Perfection of Wisdom to the bodhisattvas. Edward Conze’s ‘Make it clear now, Subhūti...’ captures the correct sense here. See Conze, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, p. 83.

²⁹ *evaṃ mayā śrutam / ekasmin samaye bhagavān rājagṛhe viharati sma grdhakūṭe parvate mahatā bhikṣusamghena sārđham arđhatrayodaśabhirbhikṣuśataiḥ, sarvarirarhadbhiḥ kṣiṇāsravair niḥkleśair vaśibhūtaiḥ suvimuktacittaiḥ suvimuktaprajñair ājñair ājāneyair mahānāgair kṛtakṛtyair kṛtakaraṇyair apahr̥tabhāir anupṛptasvakārthaiḥ parikṣiṇabhavasamyojanaiḥ samyagājñāsuvimuktacittaiḥ sarvacetovaśiparamapāramipṛptair ekaṃ pudgalaṃ sthāpayitvā yaduta āyusmantam ānandam //*

tatra khalu bhagavānāyusmantam subhūtiṃ sthaviram āmantrayate sma – pratibhātu te subhūte bodhisattvānāṃ mahāsattvānāṃ prajñāpāramitāṃ ārabhya yathā bodhisattvā mahāsattvāḥ prajñāpāramitā niryāyur iti //

atha khalv āyusmataḥ śāriputrasyaitadabhavat – kim ayamāyusmān subhūtiḥ sthavira ātmīyena svakena prajñāpratibhānabalādihānena svakena prajñāpratibhānabalādhiṣṭhānena bodhisattvānāṃ mahāsattvānāṃ prajñāpāramitāṃ upadekṣyati utāho buddhānubhāveneti?

*atha khalvāyusmān subhūtirbuddhānubhāvena āyusmataḥ śāriputrasya imam evarūpaṃ cetasaiva cetaḥparivitarakamājñāya āyusmantam śāriputram etad avocat – yatkiṃcidāyusman śāriputra bhagavataḥ śrāvakā bhāṣante deśayanti upadiśanti udīrayanti prakāśayanti samprakāśayanti, sa sarvastathāgatasya puruṣakāro vedītavyaḥ / tatkasya hetoḥ? yo hi tathāgatena dharmo deśitāḥ, tatra dharmadeśanāyāṃ śikṣamānās te tāṃ dharmatāṃ sākṣātkurvanti dhārayanti, tāṃ dharmatāṃ sākṣātkṛtya dhārayitvā yadyadeva bhāṣante, yad yad eva deśayanti, yad yad eva upadiśanti, yad yad evodīrayanti, yad yad eva prakāśayanti, yad yad eva samprakāśayanti, sarvaṃ tad dharmatayā aviruddham. See P.L. Vaidya (ed.), *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramita* (Darbhanga, 1960), pp. 1–3. My translation.*

have achieved the ultimate goal of mainstream Buddhism: *nirvāṇa*. The one exception is Ānanda, who had not attained the goal due to his emotional attachment to the Buddha. The other two monks mentioned by name are Śāriputra and Subhūti, two important figures in mainstream Buddhist *sūtras*. I will return to the use of these types of literary figures in the Prajñāpāramitā literature below. For now, I only wish to emphasize that these disciples are positively portrayed as having attained a worthy goal, and the ones mentioned by name (Ānanda, Śāriputra, and Subhūti) would have been familiar to any Buddhist audience in ancient India.

One of the most significant aspects of this passage is Subhūti's statement that 'whatever the disciples of the Lord say, teach, explain, utter, illuminate, declare; all this is to be known as the heroic work of the Tathāgata'. Graeme MacQueen has written how this passage from the *Aṣṭa* borrows the ideas from mainstream Buddhism concerning the 'Buddha's words' (*buddhavacana*), and 'inspired speech' (*pratibhāna*), but interprets them in a new manner.³⁰ Whereas the concept of inspiration (*pratibhāna*), or inspired speech is found in mainstream sources such as the Pāli Canon to authorize the words of others (often disciples of the Buddha) as extended *buddhavacana*, in the *Aṣṭa pratibhāna* becomes the basis for the new revelation of the *sūtra*. MacQueen speculates that the Dharma preachers (*dharmabhāṇaka*) mentioned in the Mahāyāna *sūtras* may have employed this new idea in order to generate new *sūtras*, thus leading him to conclude that:

Mahāyāna has brought about a truly radical shift in the relationship between *buddhavacana* and *pratibhāna*: no longer is *buddhavacana* the truth that once came to the community, to the formulation of which the *pratibhāna* of people other than the Buddha contributed a small part (as extended *buddhavacana*) but beyond which such *pratibhāna* no longer had any authority; rather *buddhavacana* is that which comes to the community *now* and comes not otherwise than through *pratibhāna*.³¹

Thus MacQueen sees Subhūti's statement as demonstrating a strategy to legitimize what follows as *buddhavacana*; and that this passage is one example of a method whereby the Mahāyāna established the authority of its new *sūtras*.

In order to appreciate better the nature of this legitimating strategy, we can contrast this approach with another found in the Mahāyāna *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*. The *Gaṇḍavyūha* begins:

Thus have I heard at one time the Lord was dwelling at Śrāvastī in Jeta Grove, the pleasure park of Anāthapiṇḍada, within the Great Array pavilion accompanied by five thousand bodhisattvas with the bodhisattvas Samantabhadra and Mañjuśrī foremost among them – namely the bodhisattva, the great being Jñānottarajñānin, Sattvottarajñānin, Asaṅgotarajñānin, Kusumottarajñānin....³²

³⁰ Graeme MacQueen, 'Inspired Speech in Early Mahāyāna Buddhism I', *Religion* 11 (1981): 303–19; and MacQueen, 'Inspired Speech in Early Mahāyāna Buddhism II'.

³¹ MacQueen, 'Inspired Speech in Early Mahāyāna Buddhism II': 60. Emphasis his.

³² *evaṃ mayā śrutam | ekasmin samaye bhagavān śrāvastyām viharati sma jetavane nāthapiṇḍadasyārāme mahāvīyūhe kūṭāgāre sārḍham pañcamātrairbodhisattvasahasrahi samantabhadramañjuśrībodhisattvapūrvamgamaiḥ | yaduta jñānottarajñāninā ca bodhisattvena mahāsattvena | sattvottarajñāninā ca | asaṅgotarajñāninā ca | kusumottarajñāninā ca |* (P.L. Vaidya [ed.], *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra* [Darbhanga, 1960], p. 1). My translation. A list of 153 *bodhisattvas* follows grouped in sets of ten according to the final compound members in their names (*-jñānin*, *-dhvaja*, *-tejas*, etc.). There are 153 rather than 150, because the fifth group (*-netra*) contains 12 members, and the eighth group (*-ketu*) has 11 members.

In this way the Lord dwelled together with five thousand of the foremost bodhisattvas all of whom had embarked upon the vow to follow the course of the bodhisattva Samantabhadra, whose range was unobstructed due to their pervasion of all buddha fields, who had entered an infinitude of proclamations due to their unceasing approach toward the perfect awakening of all the tathāgatas, whose splendour was endless due to having obtained the light of gnosis of an ocean of principles of all the teachings of the buddhas, whose elucidation of good qualities would not end after endless eons due to the purity of their special knowledge, whose purity and range of supreme knowledge was unchecked all the way to the realm of space due to their seeing the Form Body as the basis for the world, who were free from darkness through the knowledge of the realm of beings as without beings or souls, whose gnosis was equal to the sky through their pervading nets of light-rays throughout the entire Dharma Realm.³³

Also present were five hundred disciples with great psychic powers of whom all had perfectly awakened to the essence of the principle of reality, who had arrived at the direct perception of the limit of the real, who had penetrated into the nature of phenomena, who had escaped from the ocean of becoming, whose range was the sky of the Tathāgata; who had turned back the fetters, evil dispositions and evil latent tendencies; whose residence was an unobstructed firm basis; whose abode was sky-like peace; who had uprooted doubt, uncertainty and scepticism with regard to the Buddha; who had penetrated the path of resolution to attain the ocean of gnosis of the Buddha.³⁴

The text proceeds to describe how the *bodhisattvas*, disciples, and others in attendance wondered about the previous bodhisattva practices of the Buddha. Thereupon,

reading the thoughts of the bodhisattvas, the Lord entered a trance called ‘The Lion’s Yawn’ that was an array illuminating the world.... And immediately upon this occurrence, the Lord’s Great Array pavilion became infinite in size. The pavilion became an array with a ground-surface of unsurpassed diamonds, with a surface that appeared to be a royal net of all jewels, covered with many gem flowers, evenly dispersed with great jewels, adorned with pillars of lapis lazuli, with royal ornaments evenly distributed, with jewels illuminating the world and a multitude of pairs of all gems.³⁵

³³ *evaṃpramukhaiḥ pañcamātrairbodhisattvasahasraiḥ sarvaiḥ samantabhadrabodhisattvacar yāprañidhānābhiniṛyātaṛasaṅgocaraḥ sarvabuddhakṣetraspharaṇatayā| anantakāyādhiṣṭhānaiḥ sarvatathāgatopasamkramaṇatayā| anāvaraṇacakṣurmaṇḍalaviśuddhaiḥ sarvabuddhavikurvita darśanatayā| vijñaptiṣvapramaṇagataiḥ sarvatathāgatābhisambodhimukhopasamkramaṇāprati prasrabdhātayā| anantālokaiḥ sarvabuddhadharmasamudranayajñānāvabhāsapratilabdhātayā| anantakalpāksīṅgaḡaṇarīdeśaiḥ pratisamāvidiśuddhyā| ākāśadhātuparamajñānagocaraviśuddhyani grhītair yathāśayajagadrūpakāyasamdarśanatayā| vitimirair niḥsattvanirjīvasattvadhātuparijñayā| gaganasamaprajñaiḥ sarvadharmadhāturaśmijālaspharaṇatayā| (Vaidya, Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra, p. 3). My translation.*

³⁴ *pañcabhiśca śrāvakamaharaddhikaśataiḥ sarvaiḥ satyanayasvabhāvābhisambuddhair bhūtakoṭipratyakṣagatair dharmaprakṛtyavātirṇair bhavasamudroccalitaḥ tathāgatagaganagocaraiḥ saṃhayanānuśayavāsānāvinivartitair asaṅgālayanīlayairgaganasāntavīhāribhir buddhakāṅkṣāvima tivīcīkīśāsamucchinnaḥ buddhajñānasamudrādhimuktīpathāvatīrṇaiḥ|| (Vaidya, Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra, p. 3). My translation.*

³⁵ *atha khalu bhagavāṃsteṣāṃ bodhisattvānāṃ cetaśaiva cetaḥparivīṭakamājñāya. sīmhavijrmbhitāṃ nāma samādhiṃ samāpadyate sma jagadvirocanavyūham| samanantarasamāpannasya ca bhagavato mahāvīyūhaḥ kūṭāgāro nantamadyaviṇipulāḥ saṃsthitō bhūti|*

The *Gaṇḍavyūha* continues to describe a similar transformation of Jeta Grove and how countless other ‘buddha fields’ (*buddhakṣetra*) are made manifest and are likewise arrayed with jewels.

In these passages we see a number of features that sharply contrast with the beginning of the *Aṣṭa*. Foremost is the foregrounding of the *bodhisattvas*. Not only are there said to be 5,000 present, but 155 are mentioned by name. Moreover, their spiritual abilities and powers are described before those of the disciples. Next, is the *Gaṇḍavyūha*’s rather baroque visionary description of how the Buddha’s trance (*samādhi*) transformed his pavilion, Jeta Grove and countless other buddha lands. However, more significant for our current discussion is the polemical turn that occurs following the description of this visionary experience.

The omniscient narrator of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* states that the great disciples present before the Buddha did not perceive this transformation. The narrator then informs his target audience of the many reasons why this was the case. The first and foremost reason given is that the disciples lacked the ‘corresponding roots of merit’.³⁶ In other words, they had not developed enough good karma and subsequently established themselves on the Mahāyāna path. About this contrast between the *bodhisattvas* and disciples (*śrāvaka*) in this passage, David McMahan states, ‘The fact that the *bodhisattvas* are depicted as seeing the vision, while the *śrāvakas* remain oblivious, is at once an assertion of the value of seeing over hearing and the Mahāyāna over the “Hīnayāna”.’³⁷ Based on this and other examples, McMahan develops the idea that the Mahāyāna employed these types of visionary accounts as a legitimating strategy and that the emergence of Mahāyāna corresponded to a shift from auditory means of knowing to more visually based means of knowing. Moreover, he speculates that this transformation may have been the result of the shift from an oral mainstream tradition to a written Mahāyāna tradition.³⁸ However, as we have seen, the *Aṣṭa* quite clearly right from the start claims legitimacy through ‘inspired speech’, not through visionary experience.

The insights of MacQueen and McMahan demonstrate that there are multiple means of establishing legitimacy and authority in Mahāyāna sūtras. While more visionary texts such as the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and others sūtras from the *Avataṃsaka* collection may place more emphasis on the seeing of visions, the *Aṣṭa* and other sūtras from the Perfection of Wisdom corpus stress the discourses and dialogues as inspired speech. Moreover, the Prajñāpāramitā texts employ characters from the mainstream Indian Buddhist tradition in a much more positive light than many other Mahāyāna sūtras, a point to which I shall now turn.

Characters

One of the most distinctive features of the Perfection of Wisdom literature is the presence of important roles given to certain characters drawn from ‘mainstream’³⁹ Indian Buddhism.

aparājītavajradharaṇītalavyūhaḥ sarvamaṇiratnarājajālasaṃsthitabhūmītalamanekaratnapuṣpābhi kīrṇo mahāmaṇiratnasuvikīrṇo vaiḍūryastambhopaśobhito jagadvirocanamaṇirājasuvibhaktālaṃkārah sarvaratnayamakasaṃghāto. (Vaidya, *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra*, pp. 4–5). My translation.

³⁶ *kuśalamūlāsabhāgatayā* (Vaidya, *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra*, p. 13).

³⁷ David McMahan, ‘Orality, Writing, and Authority in South Asian Buddhism: Visionary Literature and the Struggle for Legitimacy in the Mahāyāna’, *History of Religions* 37/3 (1998): 269.

³⁸ This idea is fully articulated in David McMahan, *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahāyāna Buddhism* (New York, 2002).

³⁹ The term ‘mainstream’ has now entered common scholarly usage for Indian Buddhist schools that are non-Mahāyāna (and often represent pre-Mahāyāna Buddhist ideas).

Recently Brian Black and Jonathan Geen suggest that when one South Asian religious tradition borrows characters from another, ‘the characters may be popular or may strongly present authority, leading one tradition to adopt another’s characters with a sort of me-too attitude’.⁴⁰ Often this is clearly the case when Mahāyāna *sūtras* introduce mainstream Buddhist figures into their narratives. As a new religious movement in India, the Mahāyāna must have struggled to legitimate itself to the wider Buddhist community. By employing characters from the mainstream tradition, the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras attempt to borrow the authority of these characters, use their traditional personas as a means of critiquing the views of earlier schools, and present its new philosophical message as if it were part of the original teachings of the Buddha. In this section, I briefly discuss the most significant mainstream characters occurring in the Perfection of Wisdom texts and detail how their roles differ from their use in mainstream sources such as the Theravādin Pāli Canon.

The most important character found in mainstream Indian Buddhist sources is, of course, the ‘historical’ Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama (Pāli: Siddhattha Gotama), also known as Śākyamuni Buddha. Although the Buddha has always been considered by Buddhists to be more than merely human, non-Mahāyāna sources such as the Pāli Canon often present a rather human side to the Buddha. For instance, in mainstream sources, we find the Buddha at times getting annoyed with his monks,⁴¹ making jokes⁴² and suffering back pain.⁴³ But most importantly, in mainstream *sūtras* the Buddha teaches the *dharma* through his many discourses. While this might seem obvious, it is important to note the significant changes that occur concerning the Buddha in many Mahāyāna *sūtras*. As we have seen from the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, the Mahāyāna Buddha sometimes does not speak at all but instead enters a trance (*samādhi*) that leads to some magical display, which has some beneficial effect upon his audience. On some occasions instead of teaching, the Buddha performs other miracles such as causing light-rays to shoot forth from his forehead illuminating far-distant Buddha lands.⁴⁴ Although these more ‘theistic’ and miraculous aspects of the Buddha are also present in the Perfection of Wisdom texts, they are less significant and less common.⁴⁵ As MacQueen points out, the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras tend to emphasise the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) as the ultimate source of enlightenment and the ‘mother’ of all Buddhas.⁴⁶ In relation to this idea, we find that the Buddha of these *sūtras* teaches the perfection of wisdom in discourses and enters into dialogues and lively debates with his disciples and *bodhisattvas*. This type of dialogical Buddha is more in line with the literary Buddha of mainstream sources such as the Pāli Canon.

⁴⁰ See Brian Black and Jonathan Geen, ‘The Character of ‘Character’ in Early South Asian Religious Narratives: An Introductory Essay’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79/1 (2011): 16.

⁴¹ See John Powers, *A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex and the Body in Indian Buddhism* (Cambridge: 2009), p. 152, wherein Powers recounts an incident from *Vinaya Piṭaka* 1.351–2, of the Buddha entering solitary retreat after becoming disgusted with his arguing monks.

⁴² See for example, Shayne Clark, ‘Locating Humour in Indian Buddhist Monastic Law Codes: A Comparative Approach’, *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 37 (2009): 311–30.

⁴³ See for example, *Aṅguttara-Nikāya* V.122ff.

⁴⁴ See for example, P.L. Vaidy, (ed.), *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* (Darbhanga, 1960), pp. 2–3.

⁴⁵ For a discussion of ‘theistic and non-theistic’ aspects of the Buddha in Mahāyāna sources with special reference to the *Aṣṭa*, see MacQueen, ‘Inspired Speech in Early Mahāyāna Buddhism II’.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Another commonly occurring figure in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras is Śāriputra. In the Pāli sources, Śāriputra (Pāli: Sāriputta) is described as the foremost disciple (*aggasāvaka*) of the Buddha.⁴⁷ He is said to be first among those that possess great wisdom,⁴⁸ second only to the Buddha himself. About this Malalasekera points out, ‘Several instances are given of Sāriputta instructing the monks and preaching to them of his own accord on various topics—apart from the preaching of the well-known suttas [such as the *Dasuttara* and *Saṅgīti Suttas*] assigned to him.’⁴⁹ Significant for his role in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras is Sāriputta’s special proficiency in the Abhidhamma (Sanskrit: Abhidharma),⁵⁰ which presents a philosophical elaboration of the Buddha’s discourses based on the theory of fundamental ‘factors’ (Pāli: *dhamma*; Sanskrit: *dharma*)⁵¹ that make up experience.

The single most distinctive feature of Śāriputra in the Prajñāpāramitā texts is that he does not maintain the same exalted status that we find attributed to him in such mainstream sources as the Pāli Canon. This demotion may have to do with his association with the Abhidharma. The philosophical thrust of the entire Perfection of Wisdom corpus may be summarized as the doctrine of ‘emptiness’ (*śūnyatā*). This is the notion that all *dharmas* (factors, elements, phenomena) lack inherent existence, essence or ‘own-being’ (*svabhāva*). This position is both an extension of the Buddhist notion of no-self (*anātman*, Pāli: *anatta*) and an attack on the Abhidharma doctrine (maintained by the most influential and widespread Buddhist school in India, the Sarvāstivāda), that *dharmas* possess *svabhāva*. From the point of view of Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma, the existence of such things as individual selves, souls, tables, chairs, trees and medium-size dry goods are only conventionally real; whereas *dharmas* possess ultimate existence or ‘own-being’. The Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras attack this notion, claiming that even *dharmas* are only conventionally real; ultimately all things lack an essence and are therefore ‘empty’. I will discuss these philosophical issues in more detail below. However, I hope it is now clear why Śāriputra, as the master of the Abhidharma, becomes demoted in Perfection of Wisdom discourse – he embodies the very view these *sūtras* so rigorously attack. Thus, his views are often shown to be in need of ‘correction’ by the Buddha or the disciple Subhūti, to whom I shall now turn.

The disciple Subhūti is an important figure in the Prajñāpāramitā texts. He is the main interlocutor in the *Aṣṭasahasrikā*, the *Pañcaviṃśati*, and the *Diamond Sūtras*. Unlike Śāriputra, Subhūti plays a much less significant role in the Pāli Canon than he does in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras. In the Pāli sources, it is said that after his ordination he dwelled in the forest and attained sainthood (arhatship) through his ‘meditation on loving-kindness’ (*mettājhāna*).⁵² In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha declares Subhūti to be the foremost among those that ‘dwell in peace’, and of those ‘worthy of gifts’.⁵³ Also in the

⁴⁷ See G.P. Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names, Volume II* (New Delhi, 1995), p. 1108.

⁴⁸ *etadaggaṃ bhikkhave mama sāvakānaṃ bhikkhūnaṃ mahāpaññānaṃ yadidaṃ sārīputto* (*Aṅguttara-Nikāya* 1.14.1.2, Pāli Text Society edition, 1885–1900, p. 23). Reference sourced from Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names, Volume II*, p. 1109.

⁴⁹ Ibid. My brackets.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 1116.

⁵¹ *dharmas/dhammas* are also often translated as ‘elements’ or ‘phenomena’.

⁵² Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names, Volume II*, p. 1235.

⁵³ *etadaggaṃ bhikkhave mama sāvakānaṃ bhikkhūnaṃ araṇavihārīnaṃ yadidaṃ subhūti / etadaggaṃ bhikkhave mama sāvakānaṃ bhikkhūnaṃ dakkhiṇeyyānaṃ yadidaṃ subhūti...* (*Aṅguttara-*

Udāna (VI.7), the Buddha praises Subhūti for his skill in meditation.⁵⁴ Why Subhūti was promoted to such an exalted status in the Perfection of Wisdom corpus is unclear. Perhaps the composers and Indian target audience considered his special skills of forest-dwelling and meditation particularly useful in penetrating into the profound reality of the perfection of wisdom. However, such a suggestion at this stage is merely conjecture.

Also present to a lesser degree in Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras are other mainstream disciples such as Ānanda, Mahākāśyapa, Mahāmaudgalyāyana, Pūrṇa, and Mahākātyāyana.⁵⁵ Either little is said regarding these characters, or what is stated appears to reinforce their traditional personas. For example, Ānanda, as the cousin and faithful servant of the Buddha, was thought to be present at practically every occasion of the Buddha's discourses. Although known in mainstream sources for his unshakable loyalty and unfailing memory, Ānanda was considered unable to attain enlightenment during the Buddha's lifetime due to his emotional attachment to the Lord. As seen from the translated passage of the *Aṣṭa* above, this view of Ānanda remained unchanged in the *Perfection of Wisdom* texts.

Significantly, the Prajñāpāramitā corpus generally possesses a positive attitude toward the Buddha's disciples. While Subhūti seems to take pride of place in several important Perfection of Wisdom texts, Śāriputra often plays an important role; and even if his insight may at times be wanting, he nevertheless is portrayed respectfully.⁵⁶ And as we have seen in the opening passage of the *Aṣṭa* translated above, other disciples are mentioned as present and are referred to in salutary terms. However, the Prajñāpāramitā texts seem at times to go beyond mere respect for the Buddha's disciples and imply that some of these at least may have been 'crypto-bodhisattvas'.

Following the opening scene (translated and discussed above) of the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 lines (Aṣṭa)*, Subhūti, Śāriputra, and the Buddha enter into discussion concerning the perfection of wisdom. Subhūti is the main interlocutor throughout the entire text and often engages in dialogue with Śāriputra, clarifying or correcting the views of the latter with the Buddha's approval. Here Subhūti explains, in the dialogical style common to the text, how a bodhisattva ought to train in the perfection of wisdom:

Śāriputra: How then must a bodhisattva course if he is to course in perfect wisdom?

Subhūti: He should not course in the skandhas [aggregates], nor in a sign, nor in the idea that the 'skandhas are signs', nor in the production of the skandhas, in their stopping or destruction, nor in the idea that 'the skandhas are empty,' or 'I course,' or 'I am a bodhisattva' The Bodhisattva then has the concentrated insight 'Not grasping at any dharma' by name, vast, noble, unlimited and steady, not shared by any of the Disciples or Pratyekabuddhas. . . .

Nikāya I.14.2.4–5, Pāli Text Society edition, 1885–1900, p. 24). See also, Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names, Volume II*, p. 1235.

⁵⁴ Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names, Volume II*, p. 1235.

⁵⁵ See for example, the introduction to the *Perfection of Wisdom in 700 Lines* (Conze, *Perfect Wisdom*, p. 79).

⁵⁶ This is not always the case in Mahāyāna sūtras. See for example, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* wherein Śāriputra is made the object of ridicule and transformed into a goddess. For an English translation, see Robert Thurman, *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti: A Mahāyāna Scripture* (University Park, 1976), pp. 56–63. For the Sanskrit text, see Study Group on Buddhist Sanskrit Literature, Tokyo, The Institute for Comprehensive Studies of Buddhism, Taisho University (eds.), *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa, A Sanskrit Edition Based upon the Manuscript Newly Found at the Potala Palace* (Tokyo, 2006), chapter 6.

Śāriputra: Can one show forth that concentration?

Subhūti: No, Śāriputra. Because that son of good family neither knows nor perceives it.

Śāriputra: You say that he neither knows nor perceives it?

Subhūti: I do, for that concentration does not exist.

The Lord: Well said, Subhūti. And thus should a Bodhisattva train therein, because then he trains in perfect wisdom.

Śāriputra: When he thus trains, he trains in perfect wisdom?

The Lord: When he thus trains, he trains in perfect wisdom.

Śāriputra: When he thus trains, which dharmas does he train in?

The Lord: He does not train in any dharma at all. Because the dharmas do not exist in a way as foolish untaught, common people are accustomed to suppose.⁵⁷

Here we find Subhūti explaining the profundities of the perfection of wisdom to Śāriputra, known in the mainstream sources as the foremost disciple in wisdom. Interesting is the fact that Subhūti, a disciple in mainstream sources, details how a bodhisattva should train. I would suggest that implicit in this dialogue and in many others of the vast Perfection of Wisdom corpus in which Subhūti is the main interlocutor is that Subhūti himself is a *bodhisattva*. How else would he have the necessary insight to understand the profound and paradoxical philosophy of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) as it is found in these texts? This conception that certain disciples of the Buddha were actually crypto-*bodhisattvas* fits in well with the *Prajñāpāramitā* idea mentioned above that a true *bodhisattva* does not maintain the idea that 'I am a *bodhisattva*'. Though these *bodhisattva*-disciples are actually *bodhisattvas* in the guise of disciples, as true *bodhisattvas*, they would never admit to being *bodhisattvas*, because the false conception of 'bodhisattva' as a truly existent *dharma* with 'own-being' never occurs in their minds.

This incorporation of disciples into the Mahāyāna as secret *bodhisattvas* in the Perfection of Wisdom texts is made more explicit in sūtras such as the *Gaṇḍavyūha*. For example, following the elaborate visionary experiences of the *bodhisattvas* in the introduction of the *sūtra* (discussed above), which were not seen by the great disciples, the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī departs to the south of India to teach the Mahāyāna. Then Śāriputra, 'by the authority of the Buddha',⁵⁸ sees the *bodhisattva* leaving the Jeta Grove, and thinks that he

⁵⁷ Conze, *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, pp. 86–7. Brackets mine. Here and in the follow passages from Conze's translations, I have modified his translations by adding the proper diacritics to the disciples' names to maintain consistency with the rest of this chapter. NB: Conze often abbreviates his translations by omitting repetitions. For the Sanskrit text, see Vaidya, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, pp. 6–7.

⁵⁸ *buddhānubhāvena* (Vaidya, *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra*, p. 36.21). Here we find the term 'authority' (*anubhāva*) instead of 'power' (*adhiṣṭhāna*), but the general idea is the same: Śāriputra is able to see Mañjuśrī leaving because of the Buddha.

should go with him. Śāriputra approaches the Buddha with sixty monks⁵⁹ and asks the Lord's consent to follow Mañjuśrī. Permission granted, the venerable monk goes to the *bodhisattva* and describes Mañjuśrī's spiritual qualities to his fellow monks. These words inspire the monks and produce Mahāyānist attributes in them such as faith in the *bodhisattvas*, great compassion (*mahākaruṇā*), great vows and faith in omniscience (*sarvajñatāprasāda*).⁶⁰ Mañjuśrī teaches them a discourse, which causes the monks to enter into a trance (*samādhi*) called 'Domain of the Unobstructed Eye Seeing All Buddhas',⁶¹ which firmly establishes them in 'the course of conduct of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra'.⁶² In other words, the disciples are converted to the Mahāyāna, and thereby become *bodhisattvas*. Thus it seems that for both the *Aṣṭa* and the *Gaṇḍavyūha* it was necessary to incorporate at least some of the Buddha's disciples into the Mahāyāna fold. While the *Aṣṭa* does this more through the implication that Subhūti was secretly a *bodhisattva*, the *Gaṇḍavyūha* includes a passage, which explicitly narrates the conversion of Śāriputra and sixty of his monastic brothers to the Mahāyāna.

Why would the *Aṣṭa* and other Perfection of Wisdom texts take such great pains to employ traditional oral means of legitimation and traditional mainstream Buddhist characters? Perhaps one possibility might have been to cushion the blow of their radical philosophical innovation—namely the doctrine of 'emptiness'. To this concept I shall now turn.

Radical Negation

The *Perfection of Wisdom in 25,000 Lines* (*Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā*, or *Pañcaviṃśati*) is one of the older Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras, and a massive text consisting largely of dialogues between and among the Buddha, Subhūti and Śāriputra. Within its pages (repeated over and over again) is found the Mahāyāna notion of emptiness represented through the 'radical negation' typical of the Prajñāpāramitā corpus. To convey this radical negation of conventional thought and language, the Prajñāpāramitā texts employ paradoxical language. Since the *Pañcaviṃśati* is much too long for a detailed discussion here, I will merely cite one short passage from literally hundreds of pages following a similar style:

Śāriputra: For what reason, Subhūti, do you say that 'Although we speak of a 'self', yet absolutely the self is something uncreated'?

Subhūti: Absolutely a self does not exist; how then could its real creation take place? And that is true also of the synonyms of 'self', like being, soul, etc.; and also of form, etc., and all dharmas.

⁵⁹ The narrator mentions ten by name: Sāgarabuddhi, Mahāsudatta, Puṇyaprabha, Mahāvatsa, Vibhudatta, Viśuddhacārin, Devaśrī, Indramati, Brahmottama, Praśāntamati (Vaidya, *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra*, p. 36.27–9).

⁶⁰ Vaidya, *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra*, p. 37.13–19.

⁶¹ *sarvabuddhavidarśanaśaṅgacakṣurviśayaṃ* (Vaidya, *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra*, p. 38.15).

⁶² *samantabhadrabodhisattvacaryāpratiṣṭhitā* (Vaidya, *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra*, p. 38.29). This expression is a synonym for the *bodhisattvacaryā*, or *bodhisattvamārga* in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and indicates that Samantabhadra functions in the text as a personification of the highest spiritual realisation.

Śāriputra: For what reason has the Ven. Subhūti said that ‘all dharmas have no own-being’?

Subhūti: Because an own-being acting in causal connection does not exist.

Śāriputra: Of what is there no own-being acting in causal connection?

Subhūti: Of form, etc. By this method all dharmas are without own-being. Moreover, Śāriputra, all dharmas are impermanent, but not because something has disappeared.⁶³

Here we witness the philosophy characteristic of the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras and much of the Mahāyāna: the position that all factors of existence (*dharmas*) lack inherent existence, an essence, or ‘own-being’ (*svabhāva*). As mentioned above this position is a hallmark of Prajñāpāramitā thought and may be seen as a further development of the mainstream Buddhist notion of no-self. As philosophically innovative as this idea may be, note that it is here presented in a traditional oral style in the form of a dialogue between characters familiar to a mainstream audience—the disciples Śāriputra and Subhūti.

The *Perfection of Wisdom in 2,500 Lines* (*Sārdhadvisāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā*, or *Sārdha*), also known as the *Questions of Suvikrāntavikrāmin*, begins with the Bodhisattva Suvikrāntavikrāmin asking the Buddha questions. Although this *sūtra* starts with a *bodhisattva* (a non-mainstream character) asking questions, substantial portions of what follows include dialogues among and between mainstream characters such as the Buddha, Śāriputra (here called Śāradvatīputra), Ānanda and Subhūti. Particularly striking from the fourth chapter is a passage that continues for several pages wherein the Buddha and Śāriputra engage in a philosophical tit-for-tat dialogue on the emptiness of the perfection of wisdom itself:

Śāradvatīputra: This perfection of wisdom is hard to see!

The Lord: Because it does not admit of being seen by anyone.

Śāradvatīputra: Hard to understand, O Lord, is the perfection of wisdom!

The Lord: Because in it no fully real dharma is apprehended which it has fully known.

Śāradvatīputra: Indefinable, O Lord, is the perfection of wisdom!

The Lord: Because it has not been set up by the definition of any dharma.

Śāradvatīputra: Without own-being is this perfection of wisdom.

The Lord: Because of the absence of own-being in form, etc....⁶⁴

⁶³ Conze, *The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom*, p. 191. For the Sanskrit text, see Dutt, *The Pañcaviṃśarīsāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, pp. 251–2.

⁶⁴ Conze, *Perfect Wisdom*, p. 30. For the Sanskrit text, see Vaidya, *Mahāyānasūtrasamgrahaḥ*, Part I, p. 28.

Here again, we see the characteristic philosophy of emptiness presented in the dialogical style between mainstream characters. In this case, however, the very perfection of wisdom, which is said to be the source of enlightenment of all Buddhas, is claimed to also lack independent existence or 'self-nature'. In this way, we witness how no concept, no matter how sacred, was considered immune to the philosophical critique of radical negation.

In the *Perfection of Wisdom in 700 Lines* (*Saptaśatikā-prajñāpāramitā*, or *Saptaśatikā*) the primary characters are the Buddha, the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, Śāradvatīputra (Śāriputra) and Mahākāśyapa. Mañjuśrī as the embodiment of wisdom is an important Mahāyāna bodhisattva appearing in numerous *sūtras*. In the *Saptaśatikā*, he engages in lively discourse with the Buddha and Śāriputra on various topics important to the religious-philosophical position of the Perfection of Wisdom collection. For example:

Śāradvatīputra: If, Mañjuśrī, you see in such a way those who use the vehicle of the Disciples, how then do you see those who use that of the fully enlightened Buddhas?

Mañjuśrī: I do not review a dharma called 'bodhisattva', nor a dharma 'set out towards enlightenment', or a dharma called 'he fully knows'. It is in this fashion that I see those who use the vehicle of the fully enlightened Buddhas.

Śāradvatīputra: How then, Mañjuśrī, do you see the Tathāgata?

Mañjuśrī: Leave the great Nāga out of it, Rev. Śāradvatīputra! Do not busy yourself about the great Nāga!

Śāradvatīputra: 'Buddha', Mañjuśrī, of what is that a synonym?

Mañjuśrī: Of what then is the term 'self' a synonym?

Śāradvatīputra: It is a synonym of non-production.

Mañjuśrī: So it is, Rev. Śāradvatīputra. The word 'self' denotes the same thing which the word 'Buddha' denotes.... For 'self' and 'Buddha' are synonymous. Just as the self does absolutely not exist, and cannot be apprehended, so also the Buddha.⁶⁵

Here again we find a good example of the extent the Perfection of Wisdom texts emphasize their doctrine of the ultimate emptiness of all concepts. Even such hallowed ideas as 'Buddha' are no more real than the false conception of a 'self'.

The most famous of all Perfection of Wisdom texts, the *Heart Sūtra* survives in a longer and shorter version (both little more than a page long in translation).⁶⁶ In the longer version, the Buddha enters a trance (*samādhi*), and then Śāriputra asks the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (the Mahāyāna personification of compassion) a question about how one is to train in the perfection of wisdom. The shorter version lacks the typical introduction (*nidāna*) giving the occasion of the *sūtra*, and begins abruptly with Avalokiteśvara

⁶⁵ Conze, *Perfect Wisdom*, p. 87. For the Sanskrit text, see Vaidya, *Mahāyānasūtrasamgrahaḥ*, Part I, pp. 346–7.

⁶⁶ Conze, *Perfect Wisdom*, pp. 140–43. For Sanskrit versions, see Vaidya, *Mahāyānasūtrasamgrahaḥ*, Part I, pp. 97–8.

‘coursing’ (*caramāṇa*) in the profound perfection of wisdom. The bulk of the *sūtra* is the *bodhisattva*’s response to the disciple beginning with his famous statement that the five aggregates of the putative person are empty (*śūnya*) of essence (*svabhāva*) and that ‘form (*rūpa*) is emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and that very emptiness is form’.⁶⁷ The *bodhisattva* then gives his discourse addressed to Śāriputra. Once again, emptiness is the theme of the *sūtra* and paradoxical language is employed claiming such things as that in emptiness there is ‘no arising of suffering, no extinction, no path, no gnosis,’ and so on.

Thus we see in the *Sārdha*, *Saptaśatikā* and *Heart Sūtras* the continuation of themes from the longer and supposedly older texts (*Aṣṭa* and *Pañcaviṃśati*). Although important Mahāyāna *bodhisattvas* such as Mañjuśrī and Avalokiteśvara now appear in central roles, the disciples are still present and continue to engage in dialogue with the Buddha and *bodhisattvas*. Moreover, until the *Heart Sūtra*, the Buddha continues to give discourses in a traditional manner, rather than entering a trance or performing miracles as a primary method of teaching. However, the main philosophical message of emptiness and the corresponding radical negation of all concepts (including the ‘perfection of wisdom’, the ‘Buddha’, and the ‘path’) through the use of paradoxical language is maintained throughout the corpus.

Conservatism

Several elements of the Prajñāpāramitā texts mentioned thus far seem to imply a level of religious conservatism despite their radical doctrinal message. One possible example of this conservatism may be found in the absence of *bodhisattvas* mentioned in the beginning of the *Aṣṭa*. This absence of *bodhisattvas* may well be an attempt to align the *Aṣṭa* more closely to the traditional sūtras, which make no mention of *bodhisattvas*. One might be tempted to infer that this absence is due to the fact that the *Aṣṭa* is one of the earliest Mahāyāna *sūtras*. However, as Jan Nattier has pointed out, in the two earliest Chinese translation of the *Aṣṭa* (late second century CE, and mid-third century CE), *bodhisattvas* are mentioned in the introduction.⁶⁸ Only in one of the translations by Xuanzang several centuries later do we find a Chinese version similar to the surviving Sanskrit version.⁶⁹ I would like to suggest that if this absence of *bodhisattvas* is indicative of conservatism, the evidence found in the Chinese translations suggest that this conservatism endured throughout the centuries in India, becoming more entrenched over time. Also, as mentioned above, the Perfection of Wisdom texts seem to imply that some of the Buddha’s disciples were actually crypto-*bodhisattvas*. This implication rather than assertion of *bodhisattva* status may also be a sign of their conservative nature. Less conservative Mahāyāna sūtras disregard the disciples, or as in the case of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, detail the conversion of certain disciples to the Mahāyāna, thereby asserting their status as *bodhisattvas* outright.

As mentioned above, MacQueen sees Subhūti’s statement in the beginning of the *Aṣṭa* concerning inspired speech (*pratibhāna*) as constituting the words of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*) as a means by which the *sūtra* legitimates its own religious authority. This

⁶⁷ *pañca skandhāṃstāṃś ca svabhāvaśūnyān samanupaśyati sma | rūpaṃ śūnyatā, śūnyataiva rūpam* (Vaidya, *Mahāyānasūtrasaṃgrahaḥ*, Part I, p. 98).

⁶⁸ Jan Nattier, ‘Avalokiteśvara in Early Chinese Buddhist Translations: Preliminary Survey’, in William Magee and Yi-hsun Huang (eds.), *Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin) and Modern Society: Proceedings of the Fifth Chung-Hwa International Conference on Buddhism* (Taipei, 2007), p. 196.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

strategy is significant in that it employs speech acts and preserves the dialogical style of the oral discourses found in the earlier mainstream traditions, thereby suggesting a stylistic conservatism of the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras. In this regard, MacQueen's concluding statement in his study of inspired speech in early Mahāyāna is worth quoting: 'of all the attempts made in early Mahāyāna to open the tradition to the recognition of new revelation without changing the essentials of the religion, that of the Perfection of Wisdom school is surely one of the most impressive'.⁷⁰ As mentioned above, this stylistic conservatism may have been employed to soften the blow of the radical nature of the texts' philosophical message.

As a whole, the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras' use of sermons and dialogues, representing a literary style that is closer to mainstream Indian Buddhism in its recreation of oral discourse, is a more conservative solution to the problem of legitimacy than the more radical approach employing visionary accounts such as those found in the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*. This type of stylistic distinction would allow us to begin to plot Mahāyāna sūtras based on a continuum of conservative to more radical responses to issues of authority and legitimation. Note that such distinctions are not necessarily diachronic developments within the Indian Buddhist tradition, but may represent synchronic choices within different Buddhist communities existing in the Indian subcontinent.

Conclusion

The Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras consist of a vast body of literature, which developed over many centuries within the Indian subcontinent. Although these texts vary in size from a single page to many hundreds of pages in length, and must have been composed by diverse authors often separated from each other by centuries, they demonstrate a remarkable consistency in their philosophical message. The central religio-philosophical thrust of the entire corpus is the *bodhisattva*'s quest to attain the perfection of wisdom by realizing that all *dharma*s lack inherent existence, or are empty (*sūnya*) of an essence (*svabhāva*). As philosophically radical as this message may have been, its form of presentation was in many ways quite conservative. A wide-ranging strategy of legitimation employed by these sūtras is the use of dialogue in order to preserve the appearance that they capture 'oral moments' of historical discourses as found in mainstream Indian Buddhist sūtras. Related to this strategy is the depiction of the Buddha as giving sermons and engaging in discussions and debates with his disciples, rather than teaching through magical displays of cosmic visions as found in some less conservative Mahāyāna sūtras such as the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and *Lotus Sūtras*. Moreover, we find important figures from the mainstream tradition such as Śāriputra and Subhūti discussing and debating with the Buddha and *bodhisattvas* on the finer points of the Mahāyāna perfection of wisdom.⁷¹ I suggest that employing these traditional characters as the mouth-pieces for the Prajñāpāramitā cushions the impact of its otherwise radical philosophy and further demonstrates the conservatism of these Mahāyāna sūtras.

Finally, given that the message of the Perfection of Wisdom developed, expanded, contracted and was rephrased numerous times for over a millennium, using the same dialogical style with the same familiar characters, such stylistic conservatism combined with philosophical innovation should be viewed as one particular ideological posture in relation

⁷⁰ MacQueen, 'Inspired Speech in Early Mahāyāna Buddhism II': p. 62.

⁷¹ In their pieces in this volume, Black, Crothers, and Nichols also address the use of these traditional Buddhist figures to establish authority.

to a spectrum of religious orientations existing (both synchronically and diachronically) within Indian Buddhism.

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