

# THE MAHĀYĀNA MAHĀPARINIRVĀṆA-SŪTRA

## The Text & its Transmission

### I INTRODUCTION

Although the textual study of Mahāyāna sūtras has made gradual progress over the past few decades, there are a number of major sutras of considerable importance for an understanding of the development of Mahāyāna doctrinally and socially which still remain rather neglected in the West, such as the *Tathāgata-guhyaka*, the *Samādhi-rāja*, and the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa*. Of these, the *Mahāyāna Mahā-parinirvāṇa-sūtra* (hereafter MPNS), when not casually dismissed as a Hinduizing aberration, until recently has attracted interest almost solely as a source for studies of the so-called “Buddha-nature” or *tathāgata-garbha* doctrine. Moreover, the value of such studies has often been compromised by an uncritical, synchronic use of the text, completely ignoring the problems of stratification and interpolation which I shall highlight in this paper.<sup>1</sup>

Yet the significance of the MPNS goes well beyond that restricted topic, despite its interest to many. For example, when utilized to the fullest, the available textual materials for the MPNS allow unique insights into the creation, development & transmission of Mahāyāna texts in general. Additionally, I believe that the composition of the main elements of the MPNS can be reliably dated to a narrow period from the middle decades to the end years of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, when read in conjunction with the small group of associated texts (the *Mahāmegha-sūtra*, *Mahā-bherī-sūtra* and the *Āṅgulimāliya-sūtra*), due to the specific mention in them of the Sātavāhana ruler Gautamīputra Sātakarṇi in conjunction with the timetable of a dire eschatological prophesy. There would also seem to be biographical details of a certain individual who may have been the founder or author of the MPNS “movement”. In sum, this situation seems to be virtually unique among all Mahāyāna sutras and, if properly understood, should have far-reaching ramifications for the study of the early Mahāyāna movements, for the MPNS may now be taken as a fixed reference point for constructing a relative chronology for many other early Mahāyāna sutras, though with the usual caveats concerning interpolated material.

It is therefore gratifying to note that this situation is beginning to change a little. Two recent, similarly-titled studies of the MPNS by Japanese scholars will have come to the attention of some scholars outside of Japan – namely, the *Nehangyō no Kenkyū* (A Study of the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra*) by Dr Masahiro Shimoda (1997)

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<sup>1</sup> This is a corrected and revised version of a paper of the same title presented in July 2010 at the Second International Workshop on the Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra held at Munich University.

and the *Daijō Nehangyō no Kenkyū* (A Study of the *Mahāyāna Nirvāṇa-sūtra*) by Dr Ryōkō Mochizuki (1988). The former work of immense scholarship presents a socio-textual study of the rise and development of the MPNS group of devotees documenting their changing doctrines, while the latter, in no less detail, focusses on the controversial phenomenon of the *icchāntika* (the “damned”) in the MPNS and its social background. Both of these works have detailed English summaries for Western scholars who cannot read Japanese, but one hopes that full English translations may eventually become available, especially in the case of Shimoda’s study, though I often come to differing conclusions to him about key aspects of the MPNS. Apart from the MPNS, Dr Takayasu Suzuki has published several valuable papers concerning aspects of the other members of the small group of texts closely related to the MPNS, mainly in Japanese which again prevents a wider readership from appreciating his important insights.

As far as the MPNS text itself is concerned, the few surviving Sanskrit fragments of the MPNS, found in Central Asia long ago in the days of Stein and Hoernle, have been edited several times over the years, most recently by Dr Hiromi Habata (2007, 2009) who has painstakingly produced the most reliable editions of these fragments. Dr Habata is also currently collating all the significant Tibetan editions of the MPNS to be the basis of a modern text-critical edition.

Apart from these works, the academic study of the MPNS is being promoted through a series of international workshops, the first of which was successfully concluded in June 2009 at Stanford University and the second at the Ludwig-Maximilians Universität in Munich 2010.<sup>2</sup>

Work on a number of translations into English of the MPNS are underway which will eventually supplant the sadly unreliable, though pioneering, attempt by Dr Kōshō Yamamoto (1973-75). The entire Chinese “long” version of the MPNS done by Dharmakṣema is currently being translated by Dr Mark Blum, while I am working on parallel translations of both the Faxian and the Dharmakṣema versions, in addition to the Tibetan text, as a basis for textual studies on the formation and stratification of the MPNS. Because this is a task of considerable complexity which will take several years more to complete, I am persuaded that there may be some small help to others if I were to publish several papers as interim reports, this being the first, dealing with various aspects of my findings to date.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For the programme of presentations, see: [www.indologie.uni\\_muenchen.de/personen/4\\_mitarbeiter/habata/workshop.pdf](http://www.indologie.uni_muenchen.de/personen/4_mitarbeiter/habata/workshop.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> I plan an initial set of four studies on the MPNS and related sūtras. Apart from this, the first installment, I am currently preparing a second paper with the working title "Who Compiled the MPNS, Where & When? ~ A Study of the Geographical And Historical Origins of the MPNS", a third to deal with the sources of the MPNS and the development of its key concepts such as the *tathāgata-garbha* doctrine and the *icchāntikas*, and finally a study tracing the many textual and conceptual parallels between the MPNS and the early scriptural writings of the messianic Jesus movement which hint at possible oral or textual links between South Indian Buddhism and the Eastern Mediterranean Jewish world channelled through the thriving East-West maritime trade routes.

## THE TEXTS

There are three Chinese versions of the MPNS, two in Tibetan, and an increasing number of identified Sanskrit fragments.<sup>4</sup> The first two Chinese translations will be discussed in detail in this paper.

### A. CHINESE

1) **The *Dabannihuan jing*** 大般泥洹經, (T 376, 6 *juan*), translated in 417/8 CE under the Eastern Qin (東秦) by Buddhahadra (佛陀跋陀羅), Faxian (法顯), and/or Baoyün (寶雲).

2) **The *Dabanniepan jing*** 大般涅槃經 (T 374, 40 *juan*), under the Northern Liang (北涼) by Dharmakṣema (曇無讖). This version is also called the “Northern Edition”. See below for the dating problems.

3) ***Da banniepan jing*** 大般涅槃經 (T 375, 36 *juan*), produced under the Liu Song (劉宋) by Jñānabhadra (慧嚴), Huining (慧寧), Huiguan (慧觀), Xie Lingyun (謝靈運) et al. This 6<sup>th</sup> century “translation” is actually a secondary redaction, based upon the previous Dharmakṣema version with some material added from the Buddhahadra translation, known also as the “Southern Edition”.

### B. TIBETAN

#### 1) *'Phag-pa theg-pa chen-po mya-ngan-las-'das-pa'i mdo*

This is a early 9<sup>th</sup> century translation from the Sanskrit, made by Jinamitra, Jñānagarbha and Devacandra. The exact date of translation is not known, but all these translators were active at the same period as Ye-shes sDe & dPal-brTsegs. It is listed as the 79<sup>th</sup> Sutra entry in the Lhan-dkar-ma Catalogue.

The main editions include:

Peking (Kangxi/Qianlong) Kanjur: Otani Edition vol. 31, No. 788 (1-156b8)

Cone Kanjur: No. 761 (*mdo mang, tha 1b1-169a5*)

Derge (sDe dge) Kanjur: No. 120 (*mdo sde, tha 1b1-151a4*)

Narthing (sNar thang) Kanjur: No. 107 (*mdo-sde, nya 1-231b5*)

London MS Kanjur: No. 123 (*mdo-sde, wa 43b4-239b1*)

Tokyo (Kawaguchi) MS Kanjur: No. 179 (*mdo sde, wa 40b6-231a8*)

Stog (sTog) Palace MS Kanjur: No. 179 (*mdo sde, wa 44b2-251a3*)

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<sup>4</sup> There is also a fragment in Sogdian, a secondary translation from the latter part of Dharmakṣema's Chinese version.

## 2) *Theg-pa chen-po Mya-ngan-las-'das-pa'i mdo*

This is a translation of the Chinese “Northern Edition” by Dharmakṣema, done by Wang Phan-zhun,<sup>5</sup> Dge-ba'i blos-gros, and Rgya-mtsho'i sde. It is found in all the Kanjur editions, such as Peking (Otani Edition) Vol 30, No. 787 and Derge No 119 (*mdo-sde, nya & ta*), just before the previous version. The date of translation is unknown, but as it is listed in the lHan-dkar-ma Catalogue (as item 248), it is probably pre-842 CE.<sup>6</sup>

### C. SANSKRIT MSS FRAGS

There have now been identified a total of 35 Sanskrit *poṭhi* fragments from Central Asia, derived from 23 distinct folios, remnants of three different manuscripts, found at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the small oasis of Khādaliq, 100 kilometres east of Khotan and conserved in the British Library and in the St Petersburg Petrovsky Collection.<sup>7</sup> With the recent flow of manuscripts coming out of the old Greater Gandhāra region and elsewhere, there is also a slight possibility that more fragments may yet come to light from other sites. Apart from these Central Asian fragments, there is one complete folio conserved at Koyasan in Japan, bringing the total number of fragments to 36 parts of 24 folios. Although it is traditionally said to have been transcribed by the Japanese monk Kūkai while he was in Chang'an, the true origin of this folio is unclear, whether it is a genuine folio from a Central Asian copy of the sūtra or else created in China as a one-off sample. Additionally, there is also a paragraph-long quotation contained in the *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga-vyākhyā*. No other Sanskrit quotations are known from other surviving Indic sources.

The primary source for study of these Central Asian fragments must now be the several text-critical editions and related papers by Habata (2007, 2009). Details of these publications and the earlier editions of some of the same fragments by Bongard-Levin (1986), Matsuda (1988), Thomas (1916), Watanabe (1909) and Yuyama (1981) will be found in the Bibliography below.

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<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to establish the correct form of this individual's name, as it also appears as Wang Pham-zhum (sTog palace) Wang Phab-shun (Qianlong) and Wang Phan-shun (Derge).

<sup>6</sup> This version is not normally considered to be worth much attention by textual scholars since it is a secondary translation. However, this may under-estimate its value, since close inspection reveals that it differs somewhat to the current text of the "Northern Edition", perhaps being based on an earlier version, with some omissions and differences in wording. This suggests that the current version of the "Northern Edition" had been revised or otherwise altered prior to the official Tang texts and the first printed editions. Incidentally, it is noteworthy that this is the version generally preferred for citation by native Tibetan scholar-monks in the past.

<sup>7</sup> Fascinating details of the discovery of many of these fragments may be found in Sir Aurel Stein's *Serindia ~ Detailed Report of Explorations in Central Asia and Westernmost China* vol I pp154-163 (Oxford 1921).

This paper comprises two parts, the first dealing with the origins and translation history of the two Chinese versions, and the second examining aspects of the complex textual and linguistic features of all three recensions of the MPNS.

## II THE PROVENANCE & TRANSLATION OF THE CHINESE MPNS TEXTS

I will begin here by reviewing the information concerning the provenance and translation of the two Chinese versions to be found in the early catalogues and biographical records, namely, the *Chu Sanzang Jiji* (出三藏記集 T2145) by Sengyou c515, which incorporates valuable information from Dao'an's (道安) lost catalogue; the *Zhongjing Mulü* (眾經目錄 T2146) by Fajing *et al.* c594; and the *Lidai Sanbao ji* (歷代三寶紀 T2034) by Fei Changfang *et al.* c597. Of these three catalogues, that by Sengyou is generally considered to be the most reliable and meticulous, while it is recognized that Fei Changfang's work is sometimes marred by dubious data, especially that concerning attributions. The later catalogues generally add little more beyond merely recycling material from these early works: thus they can generally be disregarded here as they add little or no new information.

In addition to these three catalogues, though derived in part from Sengyou's work, the relevant monastic biographical records in the *Gaoseng Zhuan* (高僧傳 T2059) by Huijiao c530 are a valuable source of additional information. Prior to Sengyou and Huijiao, there were four earlier catalogues, in addition to Dao'an's lost work (finished 374): i) the *Weishilü* (c419), started by Shi Daoliu and completed by Zhu Daozu, ii) the *Wu Catalogue* by Daozhu (c419), iii) the *Jin Catalogue*, and iv) the *Liang Catalogue* (compiled in the Gansu area). These are thought to be the sources for some of Huijiao's material not derived from Sengyou, which especially adds weight to Huijiao's account of Dharmakṣema since these lost catalogues were more or less contemporaneous with his translation activities.

### I. FAXIAN'S *DABANNIHUAN-JING* (大般泥洹經)

The catalogue and biographical records dealing with the version commonly attributed to Faxian are reasonably straightforward.

#### A. Catalogue Entries

- i) CSJ: "The *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, six *juan*, published (出)<sup>8</sup> by Shi Faxian."<sup>9</sup>
- ii) ZM: "The *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, six *juan*. This covers the first portion of ten *juan* in [Dharmakṣema's] *Dabanniepan-jing* to the end of the chapter on 'The Questions of the Great Congregation', translated by the *śramaṇa* Faxian in the [Western] Jin during the Yixi era (405-19)."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Note that the term "*chu*" (出) denotes the whole range of activities involved in the production of a translation, from the initial oral translation, transcription, polishing, collation to the final revision. See Chen (2004) p255 and Chen (2005 *passim*) for an extensive study of this frequently misunderstood term.

<sup>9</sup> 釋法顯出大般泥洹經 六卷. (T2145 p14a06)

<sup>10</sup> 大般泥洹經 六卷 是大般涅槃經前分十卷盡大眾問品、晉義熙年沙門法顯譯。(T2146 p119c25)

- iii) LSJ: “The *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, six *juan*. Published (出) at the Daochang Temple, [built] by the Minister of Works Xieshi, in the Yixi 13th year (417/8). An old catalogue states, ‘Translated by Buddhahadra, taken down in writing by Baoyün. This is equivalent to the first ten *juan* of the Large Version down to the chapter on “The Questions of the Great Congregation”’. See Daozu’s catalogue. Also in 10 *juan*.”<sup>11</sup>

## B. Biography

The biography of Faxian, including his fourteen year-long journey (401-414 CE) to and around India and his subsequent translation activities, is well-known, so need not be repeated here in detail. However, relevant to our consideration of his exemplar of the MPNS is the brief mention in his travelogue recounting how he got hold of a copy of the text, where he states simply that he “obtained the *Vaipulya-Mahā-parinirvāṇa-sutra* in one volume (卷), approximately five thousand *gāthās* in length” in Pāṭaliputra, in addition to a copy of the *Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya*.<sup>12</sup> Some important, additional information can be gleaned from the CSJ which reproduces a old colophon (經後記) to this translation of the MPNS:

“At Pāṭaliputra in Magadhā, in the Devarāja Monastery (*saṅghārāma*), by the King Aśoka Stūpa, the *upāsaka* Kālasena (伽羅先) saw Shi Faxian, a practitioner from the land of Jin who had travelled from afar to this land to seek the Dharma. He was profoundly moved by this person and thus made for him a copy of this *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, the secret treasury of the Tathāgata (如來祕藏). He asked him to circulate this *sūtra* in the land of Jin, that all beings may achieve a *dharmakāya* equal to that of the Tathāgata. On the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the 10<sup>th</sup> month of 13<sup>th</sup> year of the Yixi era (417/8 CE) translation of this Extensive (*vaipulya*) *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* commenced at the Daochang Monastery (道場寺) founded by Xie Shi, and it was corrected and completed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> month of the 14<sup>th</sup> year. The *dhyāna*-master Buddhahadra took the *hu* book (胡本) in his hands and Baoyün transmitted the translation<sup>13</sup>. At that time, there were more than two-hundred and fifty people in attendance.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> 大般泥洹經六卷。義熙十三年於謝司空公謝石道場寺出。舊錄云。覺賢出、寶雲筆受。是大本前分十卷大眾問品。見道祖錄。或十卷。(T 2034 p071 b07)

<sup>12</sup> 又得一卷方等般泥洹經、可五千偈。(T2085 p864b27)

<sup>13</sup> The term “*hu* book” (胡本) refers to Indic texts, usually written in *poṭhi* format on palm leaves. It has been suggested that “*hu*” may sometimes refer to books written in *kharoṣṭhi* script, but this is not the case here where a *brāhmī* script is certain due to the provenance of Faxian's exemplar and for other reasons which will become apparent in the latter part of this paper.

<sup>14</sup> 摩竭提。巴連弗邑。阿育王塔。天王精舍。優婆塞伽羅先見晉土道人釋法顯遠遊此土 為求法故。深感其人、即為寫此大般泥洹經、如來祕藏。願令此經流布晉土。一

The key point to note here is that a copy of the MPNS was made for Faxian in Pāṭaliputra, by a lay-follower (*upāsaka*) whose name might be reconstructed as Kālasena. Based on the date of his departure from China and the information Faxian gives concerning his movements in India, we know that Faxian arrived in Central India in 406 CE and lived in Pāṭaliputra for three years from 407. His meeting with the lay-follower Kālasena seems to have happened soon after his arrival there, as Faxian states that he then commenced his studies of Sanskrit soon after that incident. Based on this, we may establish a *terminus ad quem* for Faxian’s exemplar of the MPNS as 407 CE, though, as I hope to demonstrate later in this paper, Faxian’s MS was probably considerably older than this.

### C. Observations

Although there is no doubt that a manuscript of the MPNS was obtained by Faxian in Pāṭaliputra and brought back with him to China, his role in the translation of this text is somewhat ambiguous despite the present-day assumption that Faxian was the translator of the 6 *juan* version of the MPNS. Though it is true that the CSJ and the ZM credit Faxian with this translation, this attribution is not clearly supported by the erstwhile colophon and the note in the LSJ, apparently based on information given in Daozu’s catalogue. While it confirms that it was Faxian who procured a copy of the MPNS, it does not clearly indicate that Faxian was actually involved in the translation, but only mentions the involvement of Buddhahadra and his long-term assistant Baoyün. It seems that in later generations, everybody assumed that Faxian had a hand in the translation simply because he had brought the MS back from India. One might also wonder why this colophon is no longer found in printed editions of this translation. Was it detached from its rightful place because it did not mention Faxian?

Furthermore, one should also take into consideration the fact that Faxian would have been quite busy with other work precisely at the time as he is supposed to have been doing this translation of the MPNS. One of Faxian’s reasons for going to India was to get a complete copy of the authentic Vinaya. When he was in Pāṭaliputra, he made a copy of the Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya which he brought back with him. According to the colophon to the translation of this Vinaya, it was at the Daochang Monastery that he worked on the “publication” (出) of this text in conjunction with Buddhahadra from the 11<sup>th</sup> month of 12<sup>th</sup> year of the Yixi era (416 CE) until the 2<sup>nd</sup> month of the 14<sup>th</sup> year (418 CE).<sup>15</sup> In other words, the four months during which the MPNS was being translated lands right in the middle of this

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切眾生悉成平等如來法身。義熙十三年十月一日。於謝司空石所立道場寺。出此方等大般泥洹經。至十四年正月二日校定盡訖。禪師佛大跋陀手執胡本。寶雲傳譯。于時坐有二百五十人。[T 2145 p60b03]

<sup>15</sup> 法顯於摩竭提國巴連弗邑阿育王塔南天王精舍、寫得梵本還揚州。以晉義熙十二年歲在丙辰十一月於鬪場寺出之、至十四年二月末都訖。共禪師譯梵本為秦焉。故記之。[T 1425 p548b04-5]



period. Unless he was taking a break from translating this Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya, would it then be unreasonable to suppose that Faxian would have given priority to the translation of this Vinaya text – the very reason for his journey to India in the first place ?

On the other hand, it seems significant that Baoyün, Buddhabhadra’s trusted collaborator, is not mentioned as a participant in this concurrent Vinaya translation – what was *he* doing during this period ? Though not so well-known as some of the other Chinese scholar-monks involved in the translation work done in this period of intense textual productivity, Baoyün (375-449 CE) was highly respected in his time and would have been quite capable of translating a text like the MPNS supervised by Buddhabhadra. A short biographical notice given in the CSJ (also reproduced in Huijiao’s *Gaoseng-zhuan*) relates that Baoyün too went to India around the same time as Faxian (c401 CE) and travelled around the land, visiting the noted pilgrimage sites. He presumably studied Sanskrit, but is also said to have learnt a number of the colloquial Indian languages. The duration of his stay in India is not specified, but upon his return to Chang-an, he joined Buddhabhadra’s entourage.

When Buddhabhadra was made unwelcome in Chang-an, having clashed with Chinese followers of Kumārajīva because of his strict views on monastic morality, and moved to the Daochang Monastery in the south, Baoyün followed him there. The CSJ mentions that Baoyün ably conducted his own translation of some texts, such as a new version of the *Sukhāvati-vyūha*, thus: “[Baoyün] constantly took the foreign (*hu*) texts in his hands and delivered oral translations into Chinese”.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, it is recorded that he extensively collaborated with Buddhabhadra as co-translator and redactor.<sup>17</sup> I shall return to this matter later in this paper when discussing the nature and quality of this translation of the MPNS.

## II. DHARMAKṢEMA’S DABANNIEPAN-JING (大般涅槃經)

If the situation regarding the provenance and translation of the MPNS attributed to Faxian is reasonably straight-forward, the same cannot be said for the version produced by Dharmakṣema, for we encounter contradictions and problems at every turn. Hence, because of the complexity of information surrounding this version of the MPNS, it will be necessary to look at the various records concerning Dharmakṣema and his work in greater detail than was required for Faxian above. Moreover, I believe that certain unflattering features of Dharmakṣema’s character may also shed light on the vexed question of the additional material found in his extended 40 *juan* version of the MPNS.

### A. Catalogue Entries

- i) CSJ: “The *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, 36 *juan*, published by Dharmakṣema.”  
CSJ also adds a note “Published on the 23rd day of the 10th month of the

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<sup>16</sup> 常手執胡本口宣晉語。[T 2154 p113a20]

<sup>17</sup> 晚出諸經。多雲所譯。[T 2154 p113a19]

- 10th year of the Xuanshi era of the spurious king of Hexi, Juqu Mengxun.”<sup>18</sup>
- ii) ZM: “The *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, 40 *juan*, translated by Dharmakṣema, together with Huisong and others in Guzang during the reign of the Northern Liang Juqu Mengxun.”<sup>19</sup>
- iii) LSJ: “The *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, 40 *juan*. Publication commenced in 3<sup>rd</sup> year of the Xuanshi era (413 CE) in Guzang and completed in the 10<sup>th</sup> year (421). In total, this *sutra* comprises 35,000 *gāthās*. In the Liang version it would amount to a bit short of 1,000,000 words. What has been translated at present comprises precisely 10,000 and some *gāthās* and is just the first of three parts. See the Zhu Daozu and the Liang Catalogues.”<sup>20</sup>

Thus, the basic fact that this translation was done by Dharmakṣema while he lived in Guzang under the patronage of Juqu Mengxun seems beyond dispute, as these simple entries in the catalogues show, but we shall also need to look judiciously at other records to establish other important details.

## B. Prefaces

Unlike the previous Buddhahadra translation of the MPNS which has no surviving preface, there are actually two prefaces relating to Dharmakṣema’s translation. One was the official preface penned by Daolang, a colleague of Dharmakṣema, found at the beginning of all printed versions of this version of the MPNS, though it should be noted that curiously the CSJ has a fuller version, while the Sutra itself has only the first portion of the CSJ text. The second preface is by the ever prolific writer, Anonymous – though Chen (2004 pp251-53) hypothesizes that it was composed by Huisong, another one of Dharmakṣema’s assistants. Additionally, it is noted by some scholars that this may not have been a preface to the *sūtra* itself, but merely to a commentary on it. Nevertheless, this anonymous preface is only recorded in catalogues such as the CSJ and not appended to any extant printed text.

### 1. Daolang’s Preface (道朗作)

This preface transmits only a few bare facts about Dharmakṣema and the text of the MPNS, so it does not have great value as source for textual or historical information. We are told that Dharmakṣema was a native of Central India of brahmin stock, that he travelled in order to spread the Dharma and reached

<sup>18</sup> 曇摩識出大般涅槃經三十六卷。[T 2154 p14a05 and 偽河西王沮渠蒙遜玄始十年十月二十三日譯出[T 2154 p11b11] Note however that the size of the translation given here as 36 *juan* is incorrect for the original "Northern Edition" which is actually 40 *juan* as stated in all the other records. It is the revised "Southern Edition" that is 36 *juan* in length.

<sup>19</sup> 大般涅槃經四十卷。北涼沮渠蒙遜世沙門曇無讖共慧嵩等於姑臧譯。[T 2146 p115a09]

<sup>20</sup> 大般涅槃經四十卷。玄始三年於姑臧出。至十年方訖。此經凡有三萬五千偈於涼減百萬。言、今所譯者三萬餘偈。三分始一耳。見竺道祖、涼錄。[T 2034 p84a19]

Dunhuang where he stayed for several years. When the King of Hexi, Juqu Mengxun was expanding his territory, he “pacified” Dunhuang and at that time “Dharmakṣema along with this text arrived from afar” (斯經與識自遠而至) in Guzang. After Dharmakṣema arrived in Guzang, Mengxun requested him to translate the sūtra on the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of the 10<sup>th</sup> month of the 10<sup>th</sup> year of Xuanshi era (421 CE) when Jupiter was in the house of *Daliang* (以玄始十年歲次大梁十月二十三日). Dharmakṣema then “took the Sanskrit text in his hand and orally translated it into the language of Qin (識手執梵文口宣秦言)”.

This preface then states that “what is presently translated is just the first third of more than 30,000 ślokas”, as repeated in the LSJ catalogue listing given above.<sup>21</sup> Based on teachings given in the MPNS itself, Daolang goes on to explain that this loss of text was predicted by the Buddha to occur during the final 80 year-long period immediately prior to the final disappearance of the authentic Dharma.<sup>22</sup>

## 2. The Anonymous Preface (未詳作者)

The status of this Preface is subject to debate: apart from the possibility that it was merely the preface to some commentary on the MPNS, some scholars also believe it is not even authentic, though Chen (2004 p252) argues vigorously that it is genuine and contains valuable data on Dharmakṣema. He also suggests that its most likely author was another of Dharmakṣema’s Chinese associates, Huisong.

The Preface opens by writing of the monk Zhimeng, whom I shall discuss below, stating, “The first ten *juan* of this *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* has five chapters (*parivarta*). The *hu* (胡) text was brought from India by Zhimeng, a practitioner from the east, who was staying for a while in Gaochang (高昌)”.<sup>23</sup> It then introduces Dharmakṣema as a gifted and experienced monk who was travelling in order to

<sup>21</sup> For “śloka”, a unit of thirty-two syllables which is the standard Indian method of measuring textual length, the Chinese always has “偈” which more usually translates “gāthā”. Moreover, the number of ślokas given here as 35,000 (or just 30,000 elsewhere) seems to be erroneous ~ the usual length given for this lost mega-archetype is actually 25,000 ślokas.

<sup>22</sup> 天竺沙門曇摩識者。中天竺人婆羅門種。天懷秀拔領鑒明邃。機辯清勝內外兼綜。將乘運流化先至燉煌。停止數載。大沮渠河西王者。至德潛著建隆王業。雖形處萬機。每思弘大道。為法城壑。會開定西夏斯經。與識自遠而至。自非至感先期。孰有若茲之遇哉。識既達此。以玄始十年歲次大梁十月二十三日。河西王勸請令譯。識手執梵文口宣秦言。其人神情既銳。而為法殷重。臨譯敬慎殆無遺隱。搜研本正務存經旨。唯恨胡本分離殘缺未備耳。余以庸淺豫遭斯運。夙夜感戢欣遇良深。聊試標位敘其宗格。豈謂必然闕其宏要者哉。此經梵本正文三萬五千偈。於此方言數減百萬言。今數出者一萬餘偈。如來去世。後人不量愚淺。抄略此經分作數分。隨意增損雜以世語。緣使違失本正。如乳之投水下。章言雖然猶勝餘經。足滿千倍。佛涅槃後初四十年。此經於閩浮提宣通流布。大明於世。四十年後隱沒於地。至正法欲滅餘八十年。乃得行世。雨大法雨。自是以後尋復隱沒。至于千載像教之末。雖有此經。人情薄淡無心敬信。遂使群邪競辯曠塞玄路。當知遺法將滅之相。[T 2145 pp59c28-60a09]

spread the Dharma. He “first resided in Dunhuang”, but after the King of Hexi (Mengxun) pacified (定) Dunhuang and met him, he was invited to come to the capital Guzang and take up residence at the imperial park, presumably in the palace chapel, known from other sources to have been located there, which was used as a translation bureau. The Preface goes on to state that,

“[Mengxun] sent an envoy to Gaochang to get hold of this *hu* text and commanded Dharmakṣema to translate (譯出) it. The first part of this *sūtra* has five chapters (*parivarta*). The following chapters from the sixth onwards had long existed in Dunhuang, so Dharmakṣema ‘published’ them (出). Subsequently, [Dharmakṣema], knowing that [the *sūtra*] was still incomplete, began searching for and soliciting [the missing portion]. There was a *hu* practitioner who opportunely sent in [this missing portion] of this *sūtra*. The [full] *hu* text has a total of 25,000 *gāthās*. With the addition of this *hu* text which arrived later, we think that it should be virtually complete.”<sup>24</sup>

### C. Biographies

In addition to the above textual notices, there is also a fair amount of detailed biographical material available for Dharmakṣema. We may consider three sources which give an account of Dharmakṣema’s career: a biographical notice recorded in the CSJ; the monastic biography in the *Gaoseng Zhuan*, which has utilized some elements of the previous CSJ account, but which nevertheless differs in some key respects and adds new details from other sources; and thirdly, a secular source, the *Wei Shu*.

#### 1. Account Given in the *Chu Sanzang Jiji*

As this account is rather lengthy,<sup>25</sup> I present here a summary, translating directly from the CSJ when it deals with things specifically relevant to the text itself of the MPNS.

Dharmakṣema was a native of Central India, born of brahmin stock. When he was six years old, Dharmakṣema lost his father. His mother supported the family as a weaver of fine woollen blankets or perhaps carpets.<sup>26</sup> One day a popular and wealthy monk, Dharmayaśas, was in the area. Impressed by his prosperity and

<sup>23</sup> The Chinese name for Kharakoja near Turfan on the northern route of the Silk Road. At this time, the Turfan area was a commandery of the Northern Liang, nominally under Juqu Mengxun's control.

<sup>24</sup> 此大涅槃經。初十卷有五品。其胡本是東方道人智猛從天竺將來。暫憩高昌。有天竺沙門曇無讖。廣學博見道俗兼綜。遊方觀化先在燉煌。河西王宿植洪業素心冥契。契應王公躬統士眾。西定燉煌。會遇其人。神解悟識。請迎詣州安止內苑。遣使高昌取此胡本。命讖譯出。此經初分唯有五品。次六品已後。其本久在燉煌。讖因出經。下際知部黨不足。尋訪募餘殘。有胡道人。應期送到此經。胡本都二萬五千偈。後來胡本想亦近具足。 [CSJ T p60a11-20]

<sup>25</sup> T 2145 pp102c21- 103b20.

fame, Dharmakṣema's mother had the ten year-old taken on as a pupil. Throughout his youth, Dharmakṣema studied the mainstream Buddhist scriptures, and showed great promise as he was gifted with considerable powers of memory and eloquence. On the other hand, he seems to have taken an early interest in the use of magic and spells (*vidyā*), competing with other boys in challenges.<sup>27</sup>

Later he is said to have met an aged, white-haired old meditation master, who worsted Dharmakṣema in a heated debate that lasted over ten weeks. Finally, asking the old man if he had some book that gave him such knowledge, “the *dhyāna* master gave him a book written on bark of the *Parinirvāṇa-sūtra*” (禪師即授以樹皮涅槃經本). Study of this text brought about his sudden conversion to Mahāyāna. He then studied Mahāyāna and by the age of twenty he is said to have memorized a phenomenal amount of scripture, but he also continued his interest in magic and quasi-tantric practices, to the extent that he was famed as a great *vidyā-mantra* master (大呪師) or thaumaturge.

Around this time, his younger brother accidentally killed the favourite elephant of the local king and was executed for this. Though the king had forbidden anybody to mourn or bury the corpse on pain of death, Dharmakṣema defied this order and buried the body of his brother. After he had been interrogated by the king about his disobedience, the king was impressed by Dharmakṣema's audacity and took him on as a court chaplain. The account here, corroborated later by the *Gaoseng Zhuan* version, suggests that Dharmakṣema maintained his position there for a while using a combination of flattery and magical tricks. Eventually, this king grew tired of him, but rather than leaving quietly, we are told that Dharmakṣema resorted to unscrupulous magic and blackmail, by causing a drought, in an attempt to retain his court position. When his trickery came to light, he fled and made his way to Kucha, taking with him “his copy of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* containing the first portion of the text in twelve *juan*, together with the *Bodhisattva-śīla-sūtra* and the *Bodhisattva-śīla* root text” (乃齋大涅槃經本前分十二卷并菩薩戒經菩薩戒本奔龜茲).<sup>28</sup>

After a brief stay in Kucha, Dharmakṣema eventually arrived in Guzang and stayed in a way-station inn there. An anecdote dating to this period shows a somewhat less than respectful attitude towards the MPNS, even though the story presumably originated with Dharmakṣema himself. While he was staying at this inn, he decided to use the text as a pillow, purportedly to prevent its theft. Each night for the following three nights, a voice was heard coming from the ground

<sup>26</sup> It seems that during this period (and earlier), widows and other unsupported women were often provided with paid textile work such as spinning or weaving by the state. This is, for example, recommended in Kauṭilya's *Artha-śāstra* (2.23.2).

<sup>27</sup> This reported knowledge of magic and spells is interesting, considering that Dharmakṣema's training at this time was entirely Mainstream-based.

<sup>28</sup> Some catalogue annotations state that this *Bodhisattva-śīla-sūtra* was actually the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi* (or at least the Chapter on Śīla therein which seems to have circulated separately at times) from the *Yogācāra-bhūmi-śāstra*.

asking why he was using the sacred word of the Buddha as a pillow. The voice stopped calling out to him when he eventually placed the book high on a shelf, from where none could lift it, let alone steal it.

The King of Northern Liang, Juqu Mengxun came to hear reports about Dharmakṣema and went to see him. Mengxun was presumably impressed by Dharmakṣema and commanded him to translate the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* and other texts. Dharmakṣema refused, because, quite reasonably, his knowledge of Chinese was insufficient at this stage of his career. Instead, he applied himself to three years study of Chinese (學語三年) and only then began his translation work with a team of Chinese collaborators, headed by Huisong (慧嵩) and Daolang (道朗), starting with the part of the *Mahā-parinirvāṇa-sūtra* in his possession. Subsequently, he translated a very sizable amount of material, more than twenty works, including much of the *Mahāsaṃnipāta* Collection, the *Mahā-megha-sūtra*, the *Ākāśa-garbha-sūtra*, the *Sāgara-nāga-rāja-sūtra*, the *Suvarṇa-prabhāsa-sūtra*, and the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi*, as well as a number of texts on morality-ethics (*śīla*) for bodhisattvas and lay-followers.

Once ensconced in the imperial chapel, Dharmakṣema seems to have consolidated his position both as imperial chaplain and court adviser, with Juqu highly esteeming the prophetic abilities, regarded as infallible by his contemporaries, attributed to Dharmakṣema. He also continued to use his thaumaturgic skills to retain Juqu's reliance upon him, once reportedly exorcising the city of a host of plague-bearing demons.

At some stage he found that his copy of the MPNS was incomplete and returned west to his homeland to look for the missing portion. While he was there, his mother died, apparently necessitating a longer stay than planned. During his return journey he passed through Khotan and got a copy of the missing *sūtra* text there (後於于闐更得經本). He eventually returned to Guzang after an absence of over two years. He then translated this new material, and with this continuation of the MPNS, his translation came to a total of thirty-six *jūan* (續為三十六卷焉).

By the late 420s, the emperor of the neighbouring state of Wei, Tuoba Tao (拓拔燾), had heard of Dharmakṣema's magical and prophetic abilities, and, as Juqu's liege lord, demanded that Dharmakṣema be handed over to him. It is reported that Juqu was very reluctant to do so, as Dharmakṣema was a valued asset to his Northern Liang state. Coincidentally, we are told, around this time Dharmakṣema suddenly learnt from a foreign monk that the version of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* he had earlier translated was still incomplete, so he insisted on leaving Guzang for another trip in search of further parts of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*. According to this account, Mengxun apparently thought that Dharmakṣema might be planning to defect to another ruler and did not want lose his talents. He therefore sent assassins after Dharmakṣema who killed him on the road some forty *li* from Guzang in early 433. When he was murdered, Dharmakṣema was forty-nine years old.

## 2. Account Given In Huijiao's *Gaoseng Zhuan*

Fortunately for the length of this paper the GSZ<sup>29</sup> incorporates and repeats much of the above account of Dharmakṣema's life, so we need not reproduce its contents in detail here, but just note the points where they differ from the CSJ version.

The account of Dharmakṣema's childhood and formative years given in the GSZ is identical to that in the CSJ, except it is silent over the details about Dharmakṣema's attempted blackmail using *vidyās* to stop the rain from falling. This may be because the GSZ is a collection of pious monastic biographies and thus omits such unflattering incidents. Instead, we are given the impression that Dharmakṣema left peaceably by mutual consent, first going to Kashmir (乃辭往屬賓),<sup>30</sup> and then journeying eastwards to Kucha (龜茲), where he found that most of the people there studied Hīnayāna, as is well-known, and had no interest in a radical Mahāyāna text like the MPNS (彼國多學小乘、不信涅槃).

The ensuing details about Dharmakṣema's involvement with Juqu Mengxun and his translation work closely follow those given in the CSJ, except we are told that he had only obtained the middle portion of the MPNS (經本中分) in Khotan on his return journey from India. Later he is said to have sent a emissary back to Khotan to get the latter portion for him (後又遣使于闐尋得後分). The GSZ then mentions that these two additional parts yielded thirty-three *juan* when translated (於是續譯為三十三卷).<sup>31</sup> It also states that the translation was commenced in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of the Xuanshi era (玄始三年初就翻譯) and was completed on the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of the 10<sup>th</sup> month of the 10<sup>th</sup> year of the Xuanshi era (玄始十年十月二十三日三裘方竟), that is to say from 414/5 until 421 CE.

Though not of great importance for the textual history of the MPNS, the GSZ concludes its biography of Dharmakṣema by giving more details about the events leading up to his assassination. So determined was he to secure Dharmakṣema for himself, the Wei emperor Tuoba Tao even threaten to invade Northern Liang to take Dharmakṣema by force. Late in 432, Juqu Mengxun met with Li Shun (李順), the emissary of Tuoba Tao, who relayed to Mengxun his master's displeasure. What happened next is unclear, for the GSZ account is a little reticent here with the details, perhaps for uncomfortable, contemporary political reasons. According to the GSZ, Mengxun merely expressed to Li Shun his refusal to hand over Dharmakṣema. But then, as in the CSJ account, Mengxun decided on his own initiative to kill Dharmakṣema, supposedly fearing that Dharmakṣema was about to desert him, on the pretext of looking for further missing material from the MPNS.

<sup>29</sup> T 2059 pp335c16-337b16.

<sup>30</sup> The Chinese text here has 屬賓 (*jibin*), which at that time often designated a larger area than just Kashmir, and included Gandhāra. See Chen 2004 p226 for details.

<sup>31</sup> This number of *juan*, thirty-three, is puzzling since only thirty *juan* were needed to supplement the earlier ten *juan*, to make the total of forty *juan* that comprise the finished "Northern Edition". A scribal error may be the most reasonable explanation.

After Dharmakṣema had been murdered, the GSZ, probably with some satisfaction, records that Juqu Mengxun bitterly regretted his actions and was plagued by visions of demons all around him “even in broad daylight” until his own sudden death a two months later in March 433.<sup>32</sup>

### 3. Account Given In The *Wei Shu*

However, in contrast to the two preceding monastic biographies of Dharmakṣema, the secular *Wei Shu* (魏書) presents a very different story. Though no information whatsoever is given in it concerning Dharmakṣema’s translation work, it paints a quite different, rather lurid picture of his other activities.

In the *Wei Shu*, Dharmakṣema is described as a Kashmiri monk (罽賓沙門). It relates that he had stayed at the court of the Shanshan (鄯善)<sup>33</sup> ruler, claiming to have skills in using spirits to cure illnesses and an ability to increase the fertility of women (能使鬼治病，令婦人多子). However, while staying there, Dharmakṣema also seduced (私通) a sister of the king of Shanshan. When this was discovered, he fled to Liangzhou, Mengxun’s territory, where he was welcomed, hypocritically it is implied, as a “holy man” (聖人). In addition to his skills as a thaumaturge (方術), the *Wei Annals* relate that Dharmakṣema knew of sexual techniques (男女交接之術) which he taught secretly to women, including many of the female relatives of Mengxun himself (蒙遜諸女子婦皆往受法).

The *Wei Shu* suggests that it was especially for access to these sexual techniques that Tuoba Tao wanted Dharmakṣema to be sent to him forthwith -- quite apart from his other reputed abilities of prophecy and magic. When Juqu Mengxun refused to hand him over, it was at that last meeting with Li Shun, mentioned above in the GSZ, that Li Shun revealed Dharmakṣema’s sexual activities to Mengxun. Presumably many knew about them, except Mengxun himself! The two conspired together, and in exchange for a bribe, Li Shun gave his assent to Mengxun to have Dharmakṣema killed (順受蒙遜金，聽其殺之). Then, contrary to the assassination account in the GSZ, Mengxun then had Dharmakṣema tortured and publicly executed (拷訊殺之). Unfortunately for Li Shun, Tuoba Tao eventually found out about Li Shun’s corrupt double-dealing and he too was executed a few years later.

### III. ZHIMENG’S *BANNIEPAN-JING* (般涅槃經)

For reasons that will become apparent, a third translation of the MPNS needs to be considered, that attributed to Zhimeng (智猛) which most unfortunately has not survived, before we can properly evaluate the above bibliographical and biographical information concerning Dharmakṣema.

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<sup>32</sup> T 2059 p335c16

<sup>33</sup> Shanshan was an independent kingdom encompassing part of the southern route of the Silk Road to the west of Dunhuang.



## A. Catalogues

- 1) CSJ: “The *Nirvāṇa-sūtra*, twenty *juan*, published by Shi Zhimeng.”<sup>34</sup>
- 2) ZM: “The *Parinirvāṇa-sūtra*, twenty *juan*, translated by *śramaṇa* Zhimeng in Liangzhou during the Yuanjia era (424-453).”<sup>35</sup>
- 3) LSJ “The *Parinirvāṇa-sūtra*, twenty *juan*, during the reign of Song Wendi, Shi Zhimeng of Yongzhou journeyed to the Western Regions, examining different *sūtras*. He brought back with him the Sanskrit book from India and travelled back through the Jade Gate to Liangzhou where he translated it. In the 14<sup>th</sup> year of the Yuanjia era (437/8), it reached Luoyang. It is the same as Faxian’s [text]. See the Song and Qi catalogues.”<sup>36</sup>

## B. Biography

### 1) Zhimeng’s Travelogue (智猛遊外國傳)

There are several short biographical resources for Zhimeng, including a travelogue he wrote in his old age. This too has unfortunately been lost, but Sengyou quotes a small part of it in his CSJ, where Zhimeng relates how he obtained a copy of the MPNS in Pāṭaliputra, thus:

“Zhimeng’s Record states: Next, in Pāṭaliputra, there lived a brahmin. The members of his family clan were extremely numerous. By nature, he was intelligent, and he cleaved to the Mahāyāna for refuge. He had an extensive collection of texts and there was nothing that he had not fully comprehended. At his house there was a silver *stūpa*, eight *chi* (c240 cm) in length and breadth and three *zhang* (c990 cm) in height, with a silver statue some three *chi* (c90 cm) in height in each of the four niches. He also had many Mahāyāna sutras, worshipping them with various kinds of offerings. He asked Zhimeng, ‘Where do you come from?’

[Zhimeng] replied, ‘From China (秦地)’.

Then he asked, ‘Do people study the Mahāyāna in China?’

[Zhimeng] replied, ‘Everybody studies the Mahāyāna’.

[The brahmin] was amazed and spoke in praise, saying, ‘How amazing!’

Those who are not bodhisattvas should go there to be converted!’

Zhimeng went to his house and obtained a copy of the *hu* text of the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra*. Upon returning to Liangzhou he published it in twenty *juan*.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> 釋智猛出泥洹經二十卷。[T 2145 p 14a06]

<sup>35</sup> 般涅槃經二十卷。宋元嘉年沙門智猛於涼州譯。[T 2146 p119c25]

<sup>36</sup> 般泥洹經二十卷。宋文帝世、雍州沙門釋智猛遊歷西域、尋訪異經。從天竺國、齋梵本來。道經玉門。於涼州譯。元嘉十四年流至楊都。與法顯同。見宋齊錄。[T 2034 p85a07-08]

<sup>37</sup> 智猛傳云。次華氏邑有婆羅門。氏族甚多。其稟性敏悟、歸心大乘、博攬眾典、無不通達。家有銀塔、縱廣八高三丈、四龕銀像高三尺餘。多有大乘經。種種供養。婆羅門問猛言。“從何來”。答言。“秦地來”。又問。“秦地有大乘學不”。即答。“皆大乘學”。

## 2) *Chu Sanzang Jiji Biography* (智猛法師傳)

According to Sengyou's biographical record of Zhimeng,<sup>38</sup> he was born in Yongzhou (雍州), located in present-day Hunan. Becoming a monk at an early age, he was diligent and talented. The sight of foreign monks impressed him and awoke in him the desire to seek out Mahāyāna texts in the Western lands. He set out from Chang'an in 404, in a party of fifteen monks. As ever, the journey westwards proved harsh and fraught with dangers, beset with extremes of temperatures. En route they passed through Shanshan and Kucha before reaching Khotan.<sup>39</sup> When the group reached the Congling mountain ranges, nine of the group gave up and went back. Eventually, Zhimeng and the other surviving members reached Kashmir. From there Zhimeng seems to have travelled eastwards to heartlands of Buddhist India, visiting the famous sights along the way. Eventually he reached Pāṭaliputra, Aśoka's old capital, where there lived an illustrious brahmin. It is not clear whether this brahmin was the same person as the one Faxian met, but since the name is different – it is difficult to reconstruct the Indic form – he may have been the son or another relative in the same household. The account which follows concerning Zhimeng's meeting with the brahmin is very similar to that just given by Sengyou earlier in the CSJ, thus:

“There was a very learned brahmin called \*Rayasena > Rājasena (羅閱宗 *la-jyat-tsəwŋ*) who, with all his family, spread the Dharma. He was respected and honoured by the king, and had constructed a silver *stūpa* which was three *zhang* (c990 cm) in height. The *śramaṇa* Faxian had previously obtained a copy of the six *juan Nirvāṇa-sūtra* from this household.

When he saw Zhimeng, he asked, ‘Do people study the Mahāyāna in China?’. [Zhimeng] replied, ‘They all study the Mahāyāna’.

Luoyue was delighted and said in praise, ‘How amazing! Those who are not bodhisattvas should go there to be converted!’.

Zhimeng went to this house and obtained a copy of the *hu* text of the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra*, together with a copy of the *Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya* and some other *hu* sutra texts. He vowed that he would circulate these upon his return [to China].”<sup>40</sup>

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其乃驚愕雅歎云。“希有、將非菩薩往化耶”。智猛即就其家得泥洹胡本。還於涼州出得二十卷。[T 2145 p60b14-b23]

<sup>38</sup> T 2145 p113b03-c14

<sup>39</sup> This is improbable since Shanshan and Khotan are located along the Southern Route of the Silk Road, while Kucha is on the Northern Route, unless the travelling party doubled back on its route.

<sup>40</sup> 後至華氏城。是阿育王舊都。有大智婆羅門名羅閱宗舉族弘法。王所欽重。造純銀塔高三丈。沙門法顯先於其家已得六卷泥洹。及見猛問云。秦地有大乘學不。答曰。悉大乘學。羅閱驚歎曰。希有希有。將非菩薩往化耶。猛就其家得泥洹胡本一部。又尋得摩訶僧祇律一部及餘經胡本。誓願流通於是便反。[T 2145 p113c04]

Zhimeng eventually left India during 424 CE, or at the beginning of 425 at the latest. On the return journey, four of his companions died along the way, so only Zhimeng and a certain Tanzuan (曇纂) made it back to Liangzhou. He translated (譯出) the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra* in twenty *juan*. Later, in 437, he went to Sichuan, where he died around 454 CE.

Later catalogues and monastic biographical sources, including the GSZ, give virtually identical accounts of Zhimeng's life and connection with the MPNS, except the well-respected later *Kaiyuan Shijiao Lü* (compiled 730 CE) additionally notes that Zhimeng translated his copy of the MPNS during the Chenghe era (承和年), a period covering 433-439 CE, although this may be a little late, unless we take the first year as the date his translation was completed. Earlier we noted that the LSJ states that Zhimeng's translation reached Chang'an in 437/8 CE, perhaps even brought there by Zhimeng himself as he passed through en route to Sichuan, so the above mention of the Chenghe era may have been influenced by this date.

### 3) *Sui Shu* record of Zhimeng and Dharmakṣema (隋書-經籍志)

Apart from the above accounts concerning Zhimeng, there is also a brief mention of Zhimeng in the "Bibliographical Monographs" section of the *Sui Shi* (隋書 581-617). Although it contains a few errors, the record does nevertheless have some value since it gives an alternative account of Dharmakṣema and Zhimeng's copy of the MPNS to the Anonymous Preface recorded above. We are told that Zhimeng journeyed westwards during the Yuanxi (元熙 c419-420) era and reached Pāṭaliputra where he obtained copies of the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra* and the *Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya*. He returned east to Gaochang (Kharaqoja) where he translated the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra* in twenty *juan*. Later, the *śramaṇa* Dharmakṣema arrived in Hexi (河西) also bringing with him a copy of the *hu* text. Juqu Mengxun send an emissary to Gaochang to get Zhimeng's copy because he wanted to have it compared with Dharmakṣema's copy.<sup>41</sup> However, Mengxun had been overthrown before the emissary returned. According to the *Sui Shu*, Zhimeng's manuscript first arrived in Chang'an during in the 10<sup>th</sup> year of the Hongshi era (弘始 - 13/02/408 to 31/01 409), where it was (supposedly) translated into a 30 *juan* text.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> In fact, Dharmakṣema seems to have had a copy of the Buddhahadra-Faxian translation to hand since his translation frequently "borrows" renderings from that translation and uses them as his own. Could the idea that that Mengxun wanted to see a copy of Zhimeng's text be a garbled or concealed version of a request to see the Buddhahadra-Faxian version?

<sup>42</sup> 初，晉元熙中，新豐沙門智猛，策杖西行，到華氏城，得《泥洹經》及《僧祇律》，東至高昌，譯《泥洹》為二十卷。後有天竺沙門曇摩羅識復齋胡本，來至河西。沮渠蒙遜遣使至高昌取猛本，欲相參驗，未還而蒙遜破滅。姚萇弘始十年，猛本始至長安，譯為三十卷。 [*Sui Shu*, *juan* 35]

However, as Chen (2004)<sup>43</sup> points out there are several errors here, mainly concerning dates:

- Zhimeng set out for India in 404, not 419/20. Here the era name “Yuanxi” must be an error for “Yixi”, due to their partial similarity.
- Zhimeng had only just arrived in India around 408 and did not leave until 424/5, so it is impossible that a copy of his text of the MPNS was available in Chang'an in 408/9.
- Juqu Mengxun died in 433 and his regime was overthrown by the Northern Wei in 439.
- It is unlikely, as Chen very reasonably supposes, that Zhimeng’s text was translated twice, once in Gaochang and then later in Chang'an.

Additionally, although Chen does not mention this, a 30 *juan* version of the MPNS, as reported here, is quite inconceivable, since such dimensions would not fit the structure of the text. One must assume a misunderstanding or a misreading has occurred.

### C. Observations

This is the sum of the information about Zhimeng and his copy of the MPNS, which omits much that we would like to know. For one thing, Zhimeng spent the best part of twenty years in India, one of the longest sojourns there for a Chinese monk, only surpassed later by Yijing in the Tang era. By the end of his stay there, it is reasonable to assume that he had become quite fluent in Sanskrit and several Prakrits or local languages and so potentially might have become one of the greatest Chinese translators. And yet, apart from his attributed translation of the MPNS and one other text, both of which are lost, he seems to have done no other translation work whatsoever. How can one explain such an extraordinary situation? Although we shall never know the true reason, I suspect it has to do with matters of influence and patronage, as well as the under-current of complex political and polemical factors, not unconnected with the famous Daosheng controversy about the status of the *icchantikas*.

Zhimeng probably left China in his early twenties and did not get back to even the fringes of China until he was in his forties. He then seems to have stayed at the commandery of Kharaqoja (Gaochang) near Turfan, at the outer reaches of the illegitimate Northern Liang kingdom. Meanwhile, in Guzang itself, the Northern Liang capital, Dharmakṣema was well ensconced in the palace grounds with his own team of trusted collaborators, headed by Daolang and Huisong. One can surmise that there would have been little opportunity, let alone welcome for Zhimeng to join this group – certainly there is no hint from the available records that he ever resided in Guzang. He apparently moved from Kharaqoja soon after the deaths of Dharmakṣema and Juqu Mengxun, just prior to the overthrow of the Northern Liang

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<sup>43</sup> Chen 2004, p231 n38.

hegemony, and made his way to Sichuan by 437 CE, by then an old man in his sixties.

However, I see no reason why he could not have done a translation, even single-handedly, of the MPNS while he was living in Kharaqoja, using the text he was given in Pāṭaliputra. Moreover, though this may seem trivial these days, it is mentioned that Zhimeng vowed to the brahmin that he would transmit and circulate the MPNS when he got back home (誓願流通於是便反). If he had failed to do that, Zhimeng would have broken his vow and, more importantly, have deprived the brahmin of the considerable merit (*puṇya*) of being the donor of the text. To a devout monk like Zhimeng, these factors would doubtlessly been significant.

One puzzling element of the catalogue remarks concerning his translation concerns the putative size of his version of the MPNS, which is consistently given as twenty *juan*. Given the manner in which the later catalogues rely upon Sengyou, he (or perhaps his earlier sources), seems to be the source of this notion. The problem is simply that a “twenty *juan*” MPNS makes little sense in terms of the extant MPNS with regards the internal divisions and content of the text, whether as the short Buddhahadra version or as the longer forty *juan* Dharmakṣema version.

Given that Zhimeng obtained his text of the MPNS from the very same household as Faxian, one would expect Zhimeng’s copy to have been similar in some respects, if not identical, to Faxian’s own copy. Indeed, it is specified by the LSJ that Zhimeng’s version was “the same as Faxian’s”, though plausibly we should understand this to mean that it covered the same extent of text, down to the end of the chapter on “The Questions of the Congregation”, rather than being exactly identical. The importance of this nuance will become clearer later in this paper, but I am inclined to think that the number “twenty” is actually an error for either “twelve” or perhaps even just “ten” *juan*.<sup>44</sup>

#### IV. Evaluation Of the Dharmakṣema & Zhimeng Data

Now we return to a discussion of the information concerning Dharmakṣema and his translation of the MPNS, which I had to defer until Zhimeng and his copy of the text had been introduced. This set of complex documentary material needs to be analyzed and evaluated carefully, since a number of key points are problematic or contradictory.

In agreement with the catalogue entries, all the other documents concur that Dharmakṣema was residing in Guzang, Juqu Mengxun’s capital of Liangzhou, at the time he translated the MPNS. Consequently, for our purposes here, we only need to consider two aspects in detail: 1) the origin of the MPNS text used by Dharmakṣema, and 2) the date of the translation – at least when it was commenced, if not concluded.

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<sup>44</sup> In old manuscript copies of such catalogues, “twenty” is often abbreviated as “廿” and not in full with two characters as “二十”. It is then easy to see how misreadings can occur between this form of “twenty” (廿) and “ten” (十), especially if the “ten” was hurriedly written, perhaps in a context where there were other genuine “twenty” (廿) numbers.

## 1. The Provenance of Dharmakṣema's MPNS text

The version of the MPNS extends to forty *juan* in the unrevised "Northern Edition" or thirty-six in the redacted "Southern Edition".<sup>45</sup> Of this text, the first ten *juan* are equivalent in extent and overall content to the Buddhābhādra and the Indic Tibetan version, so there can be little doubt that these first ten *juan* are based on an Indic source.<sup>46</sup> Let us first consider the various accounts given above concerning the provenance of this part of the MPNS. In summary we find the following:

- Daolang merely states that Dharmakṣema arrived "from afar" along with the text.
- The Anonymous Preface states that Zhimeng's Indian copy was used by Dharmakṣema for first 10 *juan*.
- The biographical notice given by Sengyou, duplicated in the GSZ, relates that Dharmakṣema was given a **bark** manuscript by an aged meditation master, which he brought with him to Guzang together with two other texts, on morality-ethics (*śīla*) for bodhisattvas.

Considering these three accounts, we can see that Daolang is not especially helpful, although he does imply that Dharmakṣema arrived in Guzang with a copy of the MPNS in his possession. This is supported by Sengyou's account which states that Dharmakṣema was given a copy of the text while he was still in India. But, Sengyou also specifies that this was written "on bark", rather than the more common palm leaves or paper. In fact, this mention of a bark manuscript is unique throughout all catalogues and monastic biographies. Needless to say, the "bark" mentioned here would have been from birch trees, used a writing material solely in NW India, especially the Gandhāra-Kashmir region. This is extremely significant, since we know that the MPNS was transmitted to Kashmir in the closing stages of its compilation.<sup>47</sup> In other words, if Sengyou's account is true, then we know that Dharmakṣema brought with him a recension from the greater Kashmiri area.

On the other hand, there is the account given in the Anonymous Preface. In his stimulating study of the dating for Dharmakṣema's activities, proposing *inter alia*

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<sup>45</sup> Confusion may arise when looking at catalogues which were later redacted, substituting "thirty-six" for the correct, older "forty" *juan*, since the revised "Southern" version supplanted the older, unrevised version in popularity.

<sup>46</sup> When the CSJ Biography states that it comprised twelve *juan* rather than ten, we can either presume an error or a change in division into *juan*, or perhaps includes the two other works he brought from India.

<sup>47</sup> This is mentioned as part of a prophesy found in all versions of the MPNS in Ch17, which even survives in a surviving Sanskrit folio. The sutra states, "Then, after the bodhisattva-mahāsattvas of the south (*dakṣiṇa-patha*) know of the destruction of the authentic Dharma, **it will proceed towards Kashmir . . .**" (*kaśmīrāṃ praviśya* [Habata 2007a SF22, Matsuda 1988 A06], F: 來詣罽賓 [T376 p895a17], D:當至罽賓 [T374 p422b22], *kha-che yul-du song-nas* [Q: p142b7, D: p138a6].

a revised date for his arrival in Guzang, Chen relies in part on the authenticity of this Anonymous Preface for his proof. As far as the dating element of Chen's argument is concerned, I find his hypothesis quite convincing. However, from point of view of the MPNS as a text, this Preface seems rather suspect overall. This will become clearer a little later, when we consider its account of the provenance of the latter portions of the MPNS. Here, however, we are concerned with its claim that Dharmakṣema used a manuscript brought back from India by Zhimeng.

Chen establishes that it is likely that Dharmakṣema started his translation work on the MPNS in the 10<sup>th</sup> month of 421 CE, in agreement with Daolang's Preface, also corroborated by an extrapolated date from the CSJ based on Mengxun's conquest of Dunhuang. Indeed, this date seems utterly plausible: who better to have known when the translation started than Daolang himself since he was a central member of the team? However, this immediately creates a problem since we know Zhimeng only left India in 424 or early 425 CE. Given the distances involved, it would have taken Zhimeng the best part of a year to get back to the borders of China, probably not reaching Kharaqoja (Gaochang) until sometime in 426 CE at the earliest. Then a journey from Kharaqoja onwards to Guzang would have taken yet more months. So the earliest time by which news could have arrived in Guzang about the existence of a new manuscript of the MPNS would have been around five years later than the 421 CE date.

To work around this problem, Chen ingeniously proposes that Dharmakṣema did begin the translation in 412 CE, but first used later parts of the MPNS which were on hand. But, as I shall argue in the next section, this too is really very improbable. At best, Dharmakṣema may have tried to obtain a copy of Zhimeng's manuscript for the purposes of comparison – Mengxun sending an emissary on his behalf – but, even allowing for the confused dating, the *Sui Shu* states that it never arrived in Guzang.<sup>48</sup>

So, on balance, the conclusion we must draw from the above data is that Dharmakṣema did indeed bring a copy of the MPNS with him from India, equivalent to his first ten *juan* of translation, in the form of a birch-bark manuscript originating in NW India. This was the first text he began to translate, as he would have been quite familiar with its contents and had it immediately to hand.

## 2. The Long Version of the MPNS

It is common knowledge that the MPNS comes in two lengths. First, there is the normative “short” version available to us through the Buddhahadra translation of Faxian's manuscript, the Tibetan translation of Jinamitra and Devacandra, and at least one of Central Asian Sanskrit manuscripts for which fragments of the colophon survive. Secondly there is a longer text, solely known

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<sup>48</sup> It should be noted that Dharmakṣema and his Chinese team did somehow obtain a copy of the translation of the Faxian text done by Buddhahadra, since there are many passages that have obviously been taken word-for-word from that translation.

through Dharmakṣema's forty *juan* translation, later re-issued in c453 CE as the redacted version in thirty-six *juan* known as the "Southern Edition".<sup>49</sup>

We can now turn to a consideration of this controversial portion of the MPNS, that is, the block of thirty *juan*, from the eleventh to the fortieth in the Northern Edition. Information about the manner in which Dharmakṣema came to possess the later textual material is found in only the Anonymous Preface and Sengyou's Biographical Note (reproduced in the GSZ). Daolang is again silent on this key textual matter, only commenting that the text available to them was a fraction of a far larger version purportedly comprising 25,000 or 30,000 *ślokas*. Of these two sources, Sengyou's account again seems the more plausible. To recap, he states that Dharmakṣema was told by a foreign monk that the text he had in Guzang was incomplete. Consequently, Dharmakṣema went back to India explicitly to find the missing portion, but it was not until he passed through Khotan on his return trip that he located the missing portion and brought this back with him for translation, after an absence of over two years.

Finally, Sengyou says, this portion, together with what had already been translated, made up a work of thirty-six *juan*. However, this figure is a little misleading since the version produced by Dharmakṣema in Guzang actually ran to forty *juan* in length. But I do not think this is significant: what seems to have happened here in Sengyou's text is merely that "thirty-six" has been substituted for "forty" at a later date, since the thirty-six *juan* Southern Edition eclipsed the forty *juan* Northern Edition in popularity and all but supplanted it – one notes, for example, that the famous carved sutras at Fangshan only include the Southern Edition.

The account of events given in the Anonymous Preface is rather more convoluted. Here, we are first told that Dharmakṣema knew that the MPNS he had in Guzang was incomplete, lacking the text after the 5<sup>th</sup> Chapter (*parivarta*). But then it turns out that text covering the 6<sup>th</sup> Chapter onwards had been available "for a long time", so Dharmakṣema was able to use that. Then, stating that the MPNS was still incomplete, Dharmakṣema next organized a search for the additional missing material, but apparently failed to find anything. Then, conveniently, a foreign monk sends along to Guzang this very same missing text. The author of the Anonymous Preface seems to imply that the arrival of this extra textual material was quite unexpected, stating that it arrived "opportunistically", yet we should recollect here that the GSZ states Dharmakṣema had sent an emissary to Khotan to get another missing part of the text, so this may simply be another version of that account.

On the other hand, the claim that part of the missing text of the MPNS had been lying around for a long time in Dunhuang seems improbable. No hint is given of the size of this portion is given, but one wonders why it had remained unnoticed

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<sup>49</sup> Though the redacted "Southern Edition" of the MPNS is only thirty-six *juan* in length, this does not mean that any content has been omitted – it is just that the *juan* length and divisions were altered.



by anybody else until then despite the flourishing efforts to translate new Buddhist text in many parts of China at that time. Moreover, around this time a controversy had arisen involving the monk Daosheng (道生), a one-time member of Kumārajīva's circle. Despite the evidence of the Buddhahadra version of the MPNS to the contrary, Daosheng believed that even the *icchantikas* were capable of attaining Buddhahood. This debate eventually became so heated that Daosheng was expelled from his monastic community in the southern capital, Jiankang. Since Daosheng's opinion is explicitly endorsed by parts of the MPNS subsequent to the first ten *juan* of Dharmakṣema's initial translation, one might suppose that this extra portion in Dunhuang would have come to the attention of the many monks who passed through there. As it was, Daosheng had to wait until around 430 CE when Dharmakṣema's completed translation finally arrived in Jiankang and vindicated him.

Though the statement in the Anonymous Preface that a further segment of the missing text was dispatched by an unnamed foreign monk, whether actually expected by Dharmakṣema or not, seems quite plausible, nevertheless I think we must disregard the idea in the Anonymous Preface that Dharmakṣema initially used material out of sequence from Dunhuang, and instead accept Sengyou's report that Dharmakṣema brought a birch-bark text of the MPNS with him from India and that it was this manuscript that he used. It should be noted that the account given in the Anonymous Preface almost seems designed to distance Dharmakṣema from any direct contact or involvement with the origins of the text. Had some doubts already been expressed about the authenticity or authorship of his MPNS material ?

As far as the date all this extra material was finally translated is concerned, regardless of its true provenance, I believe Chen is correct when he deduces that the translation of the now "complete" MPNS was finished around 428 CE, contrary to the mistaken statement in the GSZ that it was finished in 421 CE (the true starting date), having been begun in 414/5 CE. Chen's argument is further corroborated by the fact, just mentioned above, that the forty *juan* version of the MPNS arrived in Jiankang in 430, as this allows a suitable amount of time (2 years) for it to have been brought down from Liangzhou. If it had truly been completed in 421 CE as the GSZ suggests, it would have been circulated in both Chang'an and Jiankang long before 430 CE and Daosheng would never have had to face accusations of heresy !

### 3. Authenticity of Dharmakṣema's "Long Version"

Although not relevant to this paper which only deals with the common, Indic core part of the MPNS found in the six *juan* version, the Tibetan translation and the Sanskrit manuscript fragments, I would like to assess briefly the status of the latter part of the MPNS we have just been discussing found only in Dharmakṣema's long version.

One frequently comes across statements in some quarters that the six *juan* Buddhahadra version of the MPNS is "incomplete", thus suggesting that it is somewhat defective or inferior in content, in contrast to the superior "complete"

version by Dharmakṣema, a manner of speaking which can be traced right back to Dharmakṣema himself. This Sino-centric approach implies that the common or core part of the MPNS and the later material both have an equally respectable genealogy taking us back several hundred years to some anonymous teacher or small group of Mahāyāna practitioners who compiled and transmitted them over many generations before they reached China via Central Asia. While this is clearly true in the case of the core part of the MPNS (that equivalent to the six *juan* Buddhahadra version), I do not think that this can be said of Dharmakṣema's later material.

On the other hand, it seems to be tacitly accepted by many critical scholars that this part of the text is, at best, of Central Asian origin – indeed, there are some who believe that no underlying Sanskrit version ever existed, the whole thing having been written in Chinese from the start. I would not go so far to assert that such is the case, for such would have required a fairly extensive conspiracy involving Daolang, Huisong and many others to conceal the deception, but circumstantial evidence tends to suggest that there is little likelihood that this material did actually originate in any Indian Buddhist community. In other words, it must be assumed that it was composed in somewhere Central Asia. But I shall go even further than this: I suspect that this material was actually manufactured by Dharmakṣema himself somewhere during his absence from Guzang, or else, at best, “commissioned” by him for his own reasons. This, in my view, considerably reduces the value of this material, despite the high esteem in which it was held amongst Chinese Buddhists in the past and apparently by some scholars in the present.

For the sake of brevity, I shall summarize here a number of facts which cumulatively do lead one to conclude, as I have suggested, that Dharmakṣema's extra material is spurious to the Indian MPNS tradition:

- There are Sanskrit fragments of 24 folios which survive, all apart from the Koyasan folio, found in Central Asia. The text of the MPNS covered by these fragments occurs fairly evenly distributed throughout the core version. That is to say, *nothing* has been found corresponding to Dharmakṣema's additional material, for even if this material was not of Indian origin, one might have expected some fragmentary Central Asian traces of it to have turned up. In other words, this suggests that Dharmakṣema's later text did not even circulate in parts of Central Asia such as Khotan where there were considerable holdings of Mahāyāna texts.
- It is curious that only Dharmakṣema seems to have known that the “short” form of the MPNS had missing parts. Faxian's circle around the Daochang Monastery, including Buddhahadra, did not seem to know anything about a original version of MPNS exceeding 30,000 *ślokas*. Even at the height of the Daosheng controversy, nobody was aware that any additional material existed until they saw Dharmakṣema's translation.

- Yijing (635-713) mentions that only the “short” version of the MPNS could be found in India. He relates that the complete “large” version was supposed to comprise some 25,000 *ślokas*, which if translated would equal about sixty *juan* in Chinese. He says that he examined copies of the MPNS, looking for this “large” version, but all he could find were copies of the standard “short” text, that ended with the “Questions of the Great Congregation” Chapter, comprising approximately 4000 *ślokas*.<sup>50</sup>
- The Tibetans only translated the “short” version of the MPNS from an Indic Sanskrit text. If a genuine Sanskrit text of the “large” version had been available anywhere, it is improbable that they would have just passed over such an important work, given that Dharmakṣema’s Chinese version was considered worthy of translation by them.
- There are no extant quotations from Dharmakṣema’s extension to be found in any works of Indic origin – though this is not so surprising, since even the core MNPS itself is rarely quoted, if at ever.

#### 4. Dharmakṣema as potential author of MPNS material

If, as it seems, this additional “missing” material was fairly new at the time of its translation, then obviously it must also have had an author living around that time, and yet most modern scholars seem a little hesitant to suggest Dharmakṣema as the author, even though this seems quite an obvious conclusion. A review of Dharmakṣema’s career as a monk indicates that he had both the necessary personal traits for creating this material and also a motive.

So what can be deduced about Dharmakṣema from the information we have about him? It seems likely that Dharmakṣema was born into a family with some connections, as employees, to the royal palace. Apart from his widowed mother doing the textile work often given by the state to widows, his younger brother was an elephant-keeper. This suggests that Dharmakṣema was familiar with the workings of royal courts from his childhood. Certainly, his mother apparently wanted him to have a career that could bring material comfort and a degree of influence for her son, since it was she who enrolled him as a pupil of the visiting monk, Dharmayaśas. It was not his sanctity or learning that appealed to her, but his material wealth (豐於利養). In other words, Dharmakṣema probably did not have a vocation for the holy life, hardly surprising given his young age when he was adopted by Dharmayaśas, but at the same time he was outstanding in his aptitude for memorizing the scriptures. This, I suggest, was one formative element of his character: a highly intelligent young man from a family which had been reduced to poverty. Like many gifted people in the same position, he probably chafed at the perceived stupidity of unworthy social superiors, so he used his intelligence and

<sup>50</sup> 其大數有二十五千頌。翻譯可成六十餘卷。檢其全部、竟而不獲、但得初大眾問品、一夾有四千餘頌。[T2066 p4a02]

even trickery to fulfil his ambitions. This trait is confirmed by the several anecdotes recorded in his biography concerning his dealings with the unnamed Indian king and later with Juqu Mengxun.

In addition to his intelligence, Dharmakṣema acquired another useful skill for social advancement: the use of spells (*vidyā*) and magic (呪術). At a time long before the fully developed tantras had emerged and become accepted as a part of Buddhist practice, he was devoting time and effort in the mastery of *vidyā* and mantras from his childhood onwards. It is not clear where or from whom he learnt the use of such spells, but he became so adept with them that he was eventually famed as a great thaumaturge (大呪師) in parts of Central Asia. But, at that period, *vidyās* and mantras were part of mundane lore, not yet used for spiritual development. Apart from healing, their primary purpose was for gaining power and wealth. This tends to demonstrate another aspect of Dharmakṣema's character: a desire for control or influence and material well-being. Linked to this, we must consider the scurrilous stories about Dharmakṣema's knowledge of erotic techniques and his sexual exploits recounted in the *Wei Shu*. As Chen (2004)<sup>51</sup> points out, these may be fabrications for reasons more connected with Wei court politics than fact, but I am inclined to think they contain some grain of truth. In any case, one imagines that Dharmakṣema must have at least left himself vulnerable in some way to such allegations by his behaviour. As we well know, similar incidents are recorded throughout history in many lands of the trusted, but secretly disdainful, advisor or chaplain using his position to seduce wives and daughters in the court, often as a form of revenge against masters deemed by them to be unworthy.

After he had lost his position with the Indian king, and hurriedly escaped from Shanshan (if the *Wei Shu* is correct), Dharmakṣema finds a new patron in the guise of Juqu Mengxun, a ruthless semi-barbarian ruler. Again he finds himself a role in the royal court as a trusted adviser, whose seemingly infallible powers of prediction made Mengxun dependent upon him. This time, presumably, he is determined not to lose his royal patronage. Not unconnected to these activities is the nature of the MPNS, the first text Dharmakṣema may have translated. Apart from the well-known doctrines of the permanence of the Buddha, the universality of the *buddha-dhātu* and the decadence of the Saṅgha, it must not be forgotten that the MPNS is an eschatological text – a feature it shares with the *Mahā-megha-sūtra* which Dharmakṣema also translated. It predicts that the last decades of the Dharma will coincide with its brief reappearance and circulation, a era that will herald great social upheaval, natural disasters and spiritual corruption. Mengxun must have been aware of this aspect of the sutra, perhaps kindly brought to his attention by Dharmakṣema himself. As a person with access to knowledge about this impending cataclysm, combined with his existing reputation for prophesy, this would have made Dharmakṣema a most valuable member of Mengxun's court.

But at the same time, Dharmakṣema was certain to have been painfully aware of the capricious nature of rulers from past experience and observation. He

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<sup>51</sup> Chen 2004 p229 n32

would have needed to maintain Mengxun's interest and support by any means available, if he were to avoid an repeat of the abrupt and rancorous dismissal which had happened to him at least once before. I suggest that the "discovery" that his early ten *juan* version of the MPNS was missing additional material is linked to this. Is it not plausible that Dharmakṣema held out to Mengxun the tempting idea that there could be more text of the MPNS available somewhere, containing who knows what secrets not yet accessible to anybody else in China? This would then explain the composition of the later parts of the MPNS, written either by Dharmakṣema during his two year absence from Liangzhou or commissioned by him in Khotan. If this were the case, then it would also explain the strange coincidence of Mengxun's secret discussions about Dharmakṣema's fate with Tuoba Tao's emissary Li Shun and Dharmakṣema's sudden and insistent announcement he had to go off travelling to the west again, since he had conveniently just discovered that there was still more text missing he needed to obtain.

Now, all this may be doing Dharmakṣema an injustice, but the overall scenario does seem to fit what we can deduce about his character and abilities. He certainly had the motive, the opportunity and the capability of producing many pages of additional text.<sup>52</sup> He really seems to be the most obvious candidate for the author of all the later material in the MPNS.

But whatever the truth of this hypothesis, we must not lose sight of Dharmakṣema's immense ability as a translator. Judging by his surviving corpus of translations, both in terms of volume and quality, we can safely say that Dharmakṣema was one of the greatest Indian translators who worked in China. With his team, he produced at least 130 *juan* in translation of nineteen texts, including much of the lengthy *Mahāsaṃnipāta* Collection in just over ten years of activity. If his life had not been cut so short, he assuredly would have rivalled such foreign translators as Kumārajīva, Dharmarakṣa and other luminaries in the history of Chinese Buddhism.

## GENERAL SUMMARY

At the end of this rather lengthy discussion, we are in a position to determine the provenance of the three manuscripts of the MPNS and the dates when each was secured by Faxian, Dharmakṣema and Zhimeng respectively. From those dates we can also extrapolate a plausible dating for the manuscripts themselves. This can be summarized as follows:

- Faxian gives details of his itinerary and the lengths of time involved for each stage of his journey. From these dates, we can calculate that Faxian was in Pāṭāliputra from 407 onwards and, moreover, he tells us that he got his

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<sup>52</sup> It should be noted that the latter part of Dharmakṣema's version of the MPNS is quite different in doctrinal affiliation from the core Indic portion. Additionally, by comparison, it seems quite pedestrian in style and content. Overall, it seems quite second-rate in quality, which is what we might expect if Dharmakṣema produced it in a hurry.

copy of the MPNS manuscript shortly after he arrived there. Therefore, the translation of Faxian's manuscript represents a state of the text as it could be found in Pāṭaliputra by 407 at the latest. However, there is internal textual evidence that suggests this version of the text was considerably older – possibly by as much as fifty years (c350) or more.

- Dharmakṣema died in 433 when he was forty-nine. He is said to have been given the birch-bark MPNS in his youth, around the age of twenty, which yields a date of c405. It is reasonable to assume that this manuscript was already old then, an apparently treasured text belonging to an old man, so I suggest that it might have been at least twenty years old by the time it was given to Dharmakṣema. So Dharmakṣema's copy should represent the state of the text as it was found in North West India (Kashmir ~ Gandhāra) around 375 or even a little earlier.

- In the case of Zhimeng, we only know that his round-trip was from 404 until 424, without any details of his itinerary, so it is difficult to pinpoint when he was given his copy. However, although it seems that Zhimeng obtained his copy from the same household in Pāṭaliputra as Faxian, he must have met the brahmin some while after Faxian who was there in 407. Perhaps some date between 410 and 420 would be appropriate. The reason for this supposition is because Zhimeng's copy was obviously different to that given to Faxian. That is to say, Faxian's copy of the MPNS only amounted to six *juan* in length when translated, while Zhimeng's is reported to have been twenty *juan*. Even if, as I believe, there is an error in that figure and it should be just ten or twelve, there still is obviously a difference in size and therefore in content, even though it ended at the same point (the "Questions of the Great Congregation" Chapter) as did Faxian's manuscript. In other words, Zhimeng's version clearly contained a different state of the text to that of Faxian. This is quite significant as I hope to demonstrate later in this paper.

### III THE EVOLUTION OF A TEXT

Having extrapolated *termini ad quem* for the Sanskrit manuscripts underlying the Chinese translations from the previous data, I shall eventually propose a tentative stemmatic relationship for all the available versions – Chinese, Tibetan and Sanskrit -- but this must wait until we have considered the development of the MPNS. So let us first turn to the origins of the MPNS and the manner in which it seems to have developed, as far as can be determined from the internal textual evidence.

#### 1. Dating of the MPNS

As I have discussed elsewhere, the available data overwhelmingly point to a South Indian origin for the MPNS, with the area of the lower Kṛṣṇa River centred around Amarāvati as the most likely birthplace of the MPNS.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, I also proposed the reign of Gautamīputra Sātakarṇi, the Sātavāhana king, as the period during which its core text began to take shape. Revised dating for Gautamīputra, now widely accepted, raises the dates of his reign to either c48-71 CE or 60–85CE.<sup>54</sup> I set out in detail there my reasons for dating much of the core text of the MPNS to c50 CE for convenience as a median date, so I shall not repeat my argument here, save to say that this date seems compelling, based, among other things, on a reading of the eschatological statements to be found in the later parts of the MPNS itself and the closely connected *Mahā-megha-sūtra* and *Mahā-bherihāraka-sūtra* concerning the onset of the final forty (or eighty year) period before the final disappearance of the Dharma, stated specifically in the *Mahā-megha-sūtra* to commence with the reign of Gautamīputra Sātakarṇi.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, this

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<sup>53</sup> "On the Eschatology of the Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra", delivered at SOAS as a supporting item during the 2007 Numata Lecture Series delivered by Dr Masahiro Shimoda. Since this paper was produced at a much earlier stage in my researches, I have altered my views on key points concerning the dating and the provenance of the MPNS ~ I now believe that the MPNS is i) primarily a product of the coastal Andhra region of east India and ii) was compiled between c50-130CE at the latest. Consequently, I am currently preparing a revised version of that paper to include much new and additional data which will form my second paper in the current series

<sup>54</sup> Seeley and Cribb favour the earlier regnal dates, while Bhandare proposes a slightly later period. See Shimada (2005) pp76-82, and (2006) pp126-7 for details.

<sup>55</sup> 南天竺地有大國王。名娑多婆呵那。法垂欲滅餘四十年。[T387 p1099c23-4], *lho-phyogs-kyi rgyud-du | mkhar-gyi rgyal-po rgyud-pa gso-ba ces-bya-ba 'byung-bar-'gyur-te | de'i tshes lo brgyad-cu-na dam-pa'i chos nub-par-'gyur-ba'i lhag-ma-tsam lus-pa'i dus-la bab-pa de'i tshes | . . .* [D232 p87a5-6]: "there will arise a great king (T: a *koṭṭa-rāja*) called Sātāvāhana (T: *rgyud-pa gso-ba, kula-patiṭhāpana-karasa*, "restorer of the clan") in the South. At that time, when there only remains 40 years (T: 80 years) before the disappearance of the *sad-dharma* . . .". Gautamīputra Sātakarṇi is uniquely known from the Naśik Inscription of the Queen Mother Balaśrī as *Sātāvāhana-kula-yasa patiṭhāpana-karasa* "he who restored the glory of the Satavahana clan".

kind of eschatological material with a “timetable” is not mentioned until Chapter 09, which belongs to the third stage version of the MPNS (see below) according to my analysis of the textual stratification, hence the portion of text prior to that chapter must have been compiled in stages, even earlier than the reign of Gautamīputra by at least several decades.

These new dates for the core text of the MPNS are quite significant since they shift the origins of this text from the later Mahāyāna period of the Gupta era, as commonly proposed by previous scholars, to the mid-Sātāvāhana and early Kuṣaṇa period when Mahāyāna was at an early stage of development. In any case, a dating for the MPNS prior to the early Gupta Dynasty is necessitated by the complex stratification of the text, which would have required a far greater period of time to accrue than that allowed by the mere hundred years-odd interval between 4<sup>th</sup> century CE and the Chinese translations at the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

Furthermore, this has profound implications for the dating of the Mahāyāna movement as a whole, given the particular level of doctrinal sophistication and assumptions we see in the MPNS. At the same time, the MPNS also mentions a number of other well-known Mahāyāna sutras by name, such as the *Sad-dharma-puṇḍarīka*, the *Mahā-prajñāpāramitā* (= the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*), the *Tathāgata-guhyaka-nirdeśa*, and the *Śūrāṅgama-samādhi*, as well as borrowing almost verbatim from other texts such as the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*, so we must conclude that they in turn pre-date the MPNS, they too being thus rather older than popularly estimated.

Given that the origins of the MPNS seems to be far older than previously assumed, it would be fruitful to retrieve earlier states of the text than those of the three extant versions. Is this possible and, if so, how may we do this ?

## 2. Methodology

First, it can be safely assumed that these two Chinese translations and the Tibetan version<sup>56</sup> are descended from a common ancestor or archetype. This may be demonstrated, for example, by the defective passage in Chapter 03, noted by Habata, found in all three recensions which preserves evidence of an early scribal error in the archetype.<sup>57</sup> Thus, given that all three extant versions of the MPNS derive from a single ancestor, we ought to have sufficient textual resources to extrapolate earlier states of the MPNS.

In general terms, the process is fairly straightforward and widely understood by textual critics. With the MPNS, this first involves stripping away all additions specific to just one of these three textual lineages and extracting the core material shared by all three texts. Sometimes it happens that additions are shared by two of the three texts and this usually indicates a stemmatic relationship, as we find often in the case of text shared by F and T, arising from a hyparchetype, that is, secondary to the shared archetype.

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<sup>56</sup> The Sanskrit fragments need not be considered separately here since they are closely connected stemmatically to the Tibetan version.

<sup>57</sup> See Habata 2007b and 2007a p56 for details.



When we have tentatively isolated the *overall* shared text, we find within it numerous variants, some clearly unintentional in origin, but many more that are intentional changes to the text. A portion of unintentional variants will have occurred during the transmission of the Indic text of the MPNS, prior to its translation into Chinese or Tibetan, largely through well-known types of scribal error, but other interesting errors seem to have arisen during the translation process, especially in the case of the two Chinese versions. These must often be due to misreadings of the script or at other times perhaps due to aural errors. All these variants need to be evaluated to establish original readings.

Finally, success in our attempts to establish as much of the archetype as can plausibly be retrieved requires an intimate knowledge of these texts and an appreciation of their idiosyncracies. In the course of my researches to date, I have found the following hierarchy of reading guide-lines to be fruitful:<sup>58</sup>

- F & D & T is *prima facie* an original reading
- F & D contra T is likely an original reading<sup>59</sup>
- F & T contra D should be given weight
- D & T contra F should be given careful consideration
- Unparalleled readings normally to be discarded as accretions

It should be noted that these guidelines cannot always be applied mechanically – for example, there are certain unusual textual features exhibited by F and T that must be taken into consideration, as will become clear later in this paper. Additionally, there are passages in each text which mutually differ, where we must either select the most viable reading based on context and usage or, failing that, retain all three as potential candidates.

When we arrive by these means at the archetype, to a greater or lesser degree of success, we are confronted with the earliest state of the text to which we can have access by means of textual criticism. This archetype is very significant since it marks the point immediately prior to the moment when the original MPNS group lost control of the text, and this retrieved archetype in turn gives us some clues about the nature of this group and how they used the MPNS.

Even with some success in restoring the archetype, it remains obvious that this state of the text itself is highly stratified, the result of a complex process of accretion and interpolation at every level carried out in the creation of this work. However, beyond a simple outline here of the key stages I believe were involved in creation and development of the MPNS prior to the archetype, any more detailed demonstration of this aspect of the work's history lies well beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, it ought be possible to disentangle the elements used to create this archetype in broad terms if sufficient sensitivity and experience is applied to

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<sup>58</sup> In nearly all cases, S aligns closely with T, so here is not factored in.

<sup>59</sup> But the possibility of contamination F > D, which is not uncommon, must be ruled out.

the task, yet, at the same time, it seems that recovery of the *Ur-text* for the MPNS is not feasible, for as we whittle away the textual strata like layers of an onion, we eventually are left with virtually nothing. Hence, the idea of an *Ur-text* for the MPNS may be almost meaningless.

### 3. How did the MPNS grow ?

Here, I shall begin by outlining in brief my understanding of the creation and initial phases of the MPNS text, in order to contextualize the process of interpolation and other textual features.<sup>60</sup>

After the passing of the Buddha from this world, the act of taking refuge in the Buddha, as part of the threefold refuge-taking ritual, must soon have become problematic: in what way could the Buddha be now considered a refuge if he were no longer alive in the world ? A number of strategies to deal with this conundrum arose, including the veneration of *caityas*, but among these one radical solution to this problem was proposed by some members of the Mahāsāṅghika school or sub-schools. According to them the solution was simple: the Buddha had never really died, since his mundane physical body was illusory, while, in his essence, he was actually unchanging (*nitya*) and eternal (*śāśvata*). In other words, some Buddhists began to adopt a docetic view of the Buddha.

The kernel from which the MPNS grew was a short sutra proposing precisely this view: the permanence (*nitya*) of the Buddha. As such, this older work need not even be viewed as fully Mahāyānic in nature – at most it may just have been a member of that grey area of texts, a “proto-Mahāyāna” work. A while later, this short sutra was taken up as a foundation upon which another unified block of text, in two chapters (Chapters 05 & 06), was superimposed, expounding doctrinal elaborations to the kernel sutra, by somebody, possibly the individual who is the object of the prophecies recounted in the *Mahā-megha-sūtra* and the *Mahābherihāraka-sūtra*, whom I discuss elsewhere.<sup>61</sup> In those prophecies this person’s real name is indicated obliquely to have been Gautama.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, I believe that this “Gautama” individual also lies behind the persona of the young bodhisattva “Mahā-kāśyapasagotra” who acts as interlocutor in much of the MPN|S from Ch 05 onwards, and that that bodhisattva is the mouthpiece for this reformist Gautama’s teachings. He evidently had a small band of devoted followers and it is to them I attribute the ensuing stages in the development of the MPNS.

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<sup>60</sup> For convenience, this discussion will refer to the chapter divisions found in F, although these are not original and, in the case of the later chapters after Ch 08 are somewhat arbitrary and potentially misleading.

<sup>61</sup> See Footnote 52 above.

<sup>62</sup> "One who bears the same name as the Buddha": This is mentioned several times in the MMS and MBhS, for example: *de bzhin gshegs pa dang ming 'thun pa'i kye'u de . . .* [MMS Q dzu 205a6]; *de bzhin gshegs pa dang ming 'thun pa'i dge slong du 'gyur-ba . . .* [MMS Q dzu 206b1]; *nga'i ming 'chang ba'i dge slong zhig* [MBhS Q tshu p129a6], 比丘持我名 [T270 p299a18] and several other places in these texts.

The precise manner and sequence in which the original small core work was augmented is speculative to a degree, but I think it plausible that many parts of the later MPNS were composed by this Gautama and some by his followers following his teachings, in conjunction with the use of other, extraneous, material that was modified for the purpose. Without going into a detailed analysis here, I suggest that overall the MPNS grew as follows, while allowing for extra material to be interpolated at various times:

### **Pre-existing Kernel Sutra**

- Chapter 01 & the ending of Ch 02 & Ch 03 & Ch 04 (minus the last part) & Chapter 18 (minus the parts involving the “Mahā-kāśyapa” bodhisattva). Note that the dialogue in Ch 03 between Cunda and Mañjuśrī seems suspiciously intrusive, perhaps added during Phase Two.

### **Phase One**

- Chapter 02 inserted and Ch 01 also augmented.
- Insertion of Chapters 05 and 06, introducing the “Mahā-kāśyapa” bodhisattva, immediately after Ch 04, with a bridging dialogue added. The “stitch-marks” towards the end of Ch 04 are very obvious. These two chapters form a conceptual pair and share the same unusual term “*skandha*” as part of their titles.<sup>63</sup> They may have circulated independently prior to inclusion in the MPNS.
- Chapter 18 was possibly expanded at the same time with dialogue involving the “Mahā-kāśyapa” bodhisattva. Note the first mention of the *icchāntikas* originally occurred here, although now placed at the end of the extant versions, after lengthy disquisitions on the *icchāntikas* had been added later in what now form earlier portions of the sūtra.<sup>64</sup>

### **Phase Two**

- Insertion of Chapters 07 and 08, though not necessarily at the same time. The notion that Ch 07 was once a *parīḍana* chapter is perhaps unwarranted as it does not have all the usual features one associates with such. Its significance lies elsewhere.

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<sup>63</sup> The long list of questions in Ch 04 was added in stages as the MPNS expanded. At this point, the only questions posed would have been those relevant to the content of these two chapters.

<sup>64</sup> This was understood neither by both Shimoda (1997) nor Mochizuki (1988) when writing on the *icchāntika* term as though the first textual mention of the term in the extant sūtra directly corresponds to its oldest use chronologically, thus reducing the value of their observations about this puzzling term. A similar problem also besets Seishi Karashima's paper on the meaning of the term (Karashima 2007) which is unfortunately compounded by a failure to notice that the Tibetan version of the MPNS is a conflated text.

### Phase Three onwards

- Centred around an earlier, possibly independent, version of Chapter 13 (the verse portion), the remaining chapters may have eventually been combined together and circulated as a separate work, as suggested below.
- The precise sequence for the composition and addition of the remaining chapters is unclear, but they may be grouped into blocks comprising Chs 09 & 10; Chs 11 & 12; Ch 13; Ch 14; Chs 15 & 16; and Ch 17. On doctrinal and terminological grounds, Ch 10 seems to presuppose the prior existence of Ch 13. Also, note that Ch17 is especially piecemeal.

We should mention here that there is evidence suggesting that the evolved MPNS was treated in some way as two distinct works during an early phase of its history, perhaps immediately after Phase Three above. Both within the MPNS and elsewhere, there is mention of a *\*Tathāgata-nitya-sūtra* and a *\*Tathāgata-garbha-sūtra*.<sup>65</sup> In the case of the MPNS, these titles are obviously self referential – presumably the *Tathāgata-nitya-sūtra* denoted the first part of the current MPNS, comprising the chapters down to Ch 08 and Ch 18, because of its primary subject matter, while all or some segments of Chs 09 to 17 (centred on Ch 13 which concerns the *tathāgata-garbha*) formed the *Tathāgata-garbha-sūtra*.<sup>66</sup>

Though further analysis is required, I speculate that this first part of the MPNS, the *Tathāgata-nitya-sūtra*, was intended for a general and open use, while the second part of the extant MPNS, then known as the *Tathāgata-garbha-sūtra*, was initially circulated privately within a very restricted circle of followers or “initiates”, who also viewed to this portion as its “*uttara-tantra*” because of its radical contents.<sup>67</sup> There are several allusions to this state of affairs in the MPNS, as for example when the Buddha speaks of the manner in which a teacher of grammar, or a physician, similarly holds back advanced knowledge until his pupil has mastered the basic requirements. This advanced knowledge of the latter MPNS is often characterized as “secret” (*guhya*) or as “culminatory teaching” (*uttara-tantra*). I intend to discuss this in the projected third paper in this series with reference to the use of the term “*ātman*”, which was the original word used in this part of the MPNS, and its subsequent replacement first by *buddha-dhātu* and then *tathāgata-garbha*.

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<sup>65</sup> MBhS: 復得如是如來常住及有如來藏經 [T 270, p295a10 ], *de-bzhin-gshegs-pa rtag-pa-nyid dang | de-bzhin-gshegs-pa'i snying-po yod-pa-nyid-kyi mdo-sde snying-po-can-gyi le'u* (= “*garbha-parivarta/pariccheda*”). (Q: Mdo tshu p107a5-6)

<sup>66</sup> This should also dispel the common, but mistaken, notion that the MPNS refers to the short “*Tathāgata-garbha-sūtra*”, the composition of which must actually postdate the MPNS.

<sup>67</sup> There is also reference to the contents of an “*uttarottara-tantra*” in one interpolated note only found in the Tibetan version, which has not been transmitted to us. See pp57-8 for further information about this.

#### 4. Textual Additions

Overall, the flow of the text within each chapter encompassed by the Kernel Sutra and the Phase One expansion seems fairly “smooth” or unified in composition, although there are obviously various short interpolations and some longer intrusive passages. This cannot be said of most of the following “chapters”, which often seem to have been built-up piecemeal from blocks both small and large. Thus Ch 08 (Phase Two) comprises three major segments placed back-to-back,<sup>68</sup> while the remainder of the MPNS is made up of further free-standing blocks of text varying in length, juxtaposed with often little continuity of content and further littered with interpolations of varying types and sizes.<sup>69</sup> I suspect that many of these discrete text blocks originated as records of teachings given by the above-mentioned Gautama on different occasions of his career, which may account for the noticeable repetition of certain material in the MPNS, albeit with a degree of variation in content.

While it would be useful to separate these major component segments for an understanding of the growth of the MPNS, the complexity and scale of this requires a book-length treatment.<sup>70</sup> Here I propose to discuss only the various shorter additions and variations that are encountered throughout the three extant versions, some of which must date back to their presumed hyparchetype. Before examining these in detail, I would like to make some general observations about this editorial process which I believe are relevant to the history of the MPNS and its group of proponents, and for the development of Mahāyāna sutra in general.

As I have indicated, the retrieved common ancestor or hyparchetype of the MPNS shows evidence of stratification, which reflects its manner of compilation, together with considerable expansion and interpolation within each stratum. This presumed hyparchetype is quite extensive, making up between 80% (Dharmakṣema) to 95% (Faxian) of each recension,<sup>71</sup> implying that a considerable amount of editorial work had already been done on the MPNS before the hyparchetype diverged into the ancestors of the three extant recensions. While it would be difficult to determine with certainty the exact amount of time that elapsed from

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<sup>68</sup> These three blocks comprise i) the Four Modes of Discourse, ii) the Buddha's manifestation in accordance with the world (*lokānuvṛtti*), ii) description of Nirvāṇa by 100+ synonyms for *mokṣa*.

<sup>69</sup> It should be remembered here that the so-called "chapter" divisions after Chapter 08 (actually the 4th *parivarta* ~ T: *le'u bzhi-pa*) adopted from F, are illusory and potentially misleading. I stress that I only use them here for convenience of reference. They are absent from D and T, as well as the Sanskrit text as far as we can see, and were thus unlikely to have been part of the original text, though perhaps some kind of topic heading was present interlinearly in some mss. From the current Ch 09 down to Ch 18 in D and T, we are actually confronted with a unbroken mass of text !

<sup>70</sup> I plan to do this in the final published version of my translations.

<sup>71</sup> This high ratio of archetype to additions in F confirms that this version represents an old or very conservative text. The text of T is more difficult to quantify in this manner since, as will be seen below, it is a conflated text which often duplicates material from its constituent sources.

when the “kernel” sutra was adopted and augmented to form that hyparchetype, it may surprisingly have been as little as forty years, purely because of the limitations imposed by the adoption of an eschatological timetable involving that just that figure.

Several things may be deduced from the considerable extent of the shared material comprising the core text of the MPNS. We can safely assume that the circulation or even knowledge of the MPNS must have been very restricted, confined to a small group of people residing in close geographical proximity who controlled the growth of the text – otherwise the amount of shared material would have been proportionately less. In other words, each time extra material was written into the MPNS, the group was able to ensure that prior versions of the sutra were taken out of circulation and replaced with the newer version. Logistically, this must imply a very small number of copies available to an equally small number of individuals – somebody may even have known where each copy was to be found.

It has been suggested that the MPNS involved oral transmission in its early phases, but the evidence of the text does not support this – *in toto* the MPNS was a written text from start to finish, although some parts in the latter part of the text may have initially existed in an oral form, possibly derived from sermons or lectures, before they were incorporated into the MPNS.<sup>72</sup> The written transmission of the MPNS can be deduced from the numerous *non sequiturs* found throughout the sutra. In the case of an orally transmitted text, the person making an addition always has the *whole* text in view, as it were, via their memory, so interpolations tend to be better incorporated with less obvious “weld-marks”, contradictions or other signs. On the other hand, when somebody intentionally inserts an interpolation into a written text, they tend to be focussed on their interpolation and do not have the whole text in view. In such cases, some kind of hiatus is usually evident at the beginning and the end of the interpolated passage, as well as the occurrence of contradictions and other inconsistencies *vis à vis* the background text. This phenomenon is extremely well-attested throughout all early religious and philosophical literature, from the Mediterranean to China, and such is exactly the situation we find in the MPNS.

We may also assume that the books containing the hyparchetype of the MPNS, and even the later recensions, were owned by individuals or a closed group, rather than a monastery. The text was *their* property and consequently they were free to modify the text as they pleased. Once a text was eventually admitted a monastic library collection, it would become difficult to augment it in any way.

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<sup>72</sup> The various exemplar stories, which range from almost bare-bones in F to quite elaborate versions in T, may also have been more dependent on oral transmission than other parts of the MPNS, the user of the text being expected to elaborate the stories as he or she saw fit. Also, although the evidence points to a written transmission of the text of the MPNS, that is not to say that it was not memorized in entirety on occasion for use as in oral performance by certain preachers and others. There is also statements in the MPNS that encourage the memorization of the text, but greater emphasis is laid upon copying it oneself or commissioning others to make copies for distribution. (See Q 85a2-3 and parallels in F & D)

Knowing the proprietary mentality of many librarians, it is unlikely that the vast number of marginalia or interlinear glosses and rubrics one can identify in the MPNS could have been jotted down on the very pages of the sutra without complaint.<sup>73</sup>

After having passed through a period of great authorial activity and heavy pastoral use, the archetype of the MPNS evidently passed out of the control of the group that produced it. It is most probable that geographical distance and isolation was the primary reason for this. We know from the MPNS itself that the sutra was taken to Kashmir at some stage, either having already been finalized in Andhra or in a state just prior to this. From Kashmir it would have been gradually transmitted to other interested parties elsewhere. If the likely Mahāsāṅghika roots of the MPNS can be confirmed, then we would expect the text to have made its way to the four main centres of this school outside of the Amarāvātī region in Andhra: i) Western India between Karle and Naśik, ii) Kashmir-Gandhāra, iii) Mathurā and iv) Pāṭaliputra, all areas known through epigraphical and other evidence to have been Mahāsāṅghika strongholds (See Fig 02). Corroborating this, we have seen that Dharmakṣema's manuscript must have originated in the Gandhāra-Kashmir region, while Faxian's was obtained in Pāṭaliputra, and the manuscript for Zhimeng's version may have come from yet a third location before its availability in Pāṭaliputra.

The MPNS would still have been the focus of active interest and pastoral use since each extant recension shows further independent expansion, with Dharmakṣema's version of the Gandhāra-Kashmiri recension showing the greatest amount of new material, both as interpolation and also as rewritten text. However, by the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, interest in the MPNS seems to have waned. Ultimately, a standardized, library copy was produced, the immediate ancestor to the Central Asian Sanskrit fragments, the Tibetan translation and the quotation in the *Ratnagoṭra-vibhāga*, after which time virtually no more changes of any significance were made to the text – as we can see from the Tibetan translation of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, which represents the latest state of the text available to us, very little new material had been added in more than 400 years. When this standardized text was finalized, the MPNS was no longer part of a vital, living transmissional lineage – even if copies of the physical text were still made. In effect, the MPNS movement was dead in India by then, perhaps having lost its appeal due to the failure of its eschatological message and the harshness of its damnation of the *icchantikas*.

## 5. Two Categories Of Interpolations

The sheer range of interpolated elements bear witness to a high degree of earlier interest and involvement with the text of the MPNS: from whole paragraphs or more inserted into existing text blocks to various shorter comments, glosses and

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<sup>73</sup> These glosses and headings were later incorporated into the body of the text, mistaken by uninformed scribes as corrections, perhaps especially as library editions were being produced.

so forth at sentence level. It should be noted that elements which may now be identified as interpolations fall into two broad categories: the intentional and the unintentional. That is to say, intentional interpolations are those which were consciously inserted into the body of the text during the compositional or compilation phase by the author-compilers, whereas the unintentional interpolations were originally scholia, that is, marginal or interlinear annotations of various kinds or rubrics inserted as an incremental and cumulative process into the text during the transmissional phase by copyists, who mistakenly took them to be textual corrections. Though the latter group of interpolations may distort the intended meaning of the text on occasion, they can also be quite informative and significant since they give vital clues concerning ideological changes in the MPNS, as I shall mention later.

### A. Intentional Interpolations

As mentioned above, the intentional interpolations are often quite extensive in size, so I shall not cover them here in any detail due to considerations of space. However, the types of intentional interpolations in all versions of the MPNS cover the usual range of material found in most ancient manuscript traditions throughout the world – we see everything from very minor interpolations to those which have profound doctrinal implications. Some of these features have also been observed in the development of the *Ugradatta-paripṛcchā* and discussed by Jan Nattier (2003) in her study and translation of that text.<sup>74</sup>

At the lower end of importance, we have, for example, the same expansion of epithets and completion of lists. The “*tathāgata*” often becomes the “*tathāgata arhat samyak-saṃbuddha*” or a “*bodhisattva*” becomes a “*bodhisattva-mahāsattva*”. When addressing an interlocutor, we often find the Buddha liberally inserting a vocative “*kulaputra*” where other versions do not. Likewise, we find “*bhagavan*” often added to the words of his audience. Where one text just has “*kleśas*”, another will list the three major *kleśas* of lust, hatred and stupidity. And so on.

Many interpolations at this level we find in the two Chinese versions are obviously just simple clarifications or stylistic embellishments that do not add any significant meaning. However, there is one stylistic change throughout the Chinese translations of the MPNS, intended to be helpful for their readers, which actually conceals important data that we can only derive from the Tibetan version or occasionally from the Sanskrit fragments. That is to say, the habit of naming or specifying the speaker of every piece of dialogue, rather like one does in a drama script. This may seem to be a trivial matter, but for analysis of the textual structure it is a disaster ! Fortunately, as we may assume that the Tibetan translation reflects accurately the true situation of the underlying Sanskrit text, we find that interlocutors are only named in certain chapters, while for the rest of the sutra the text would have just given “*āha*” or similar as appropriate. The significance of this

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<sup>74</sup> Nattier (2003). The whole of her Chapter 3 "Methodological Considerations" (pp48-72) is very relevant to my study of the MPNS textual tradition.



becomes evident when we examine the distribution pattern of named interlocutors in the Tibetan version, from which we see that the name of the various interlocutors are given throughout Chapters 01 to 08 (partially) with exception of Ch 07, just two or three times in Ch 13 and in Ch 18. In contrast, the interlocutor is *never* named in a large of part of Ch 08, nor in Chapters 07, 09, 10, 11, 12, 13 (overall), 14, 15, 16 and 17. As it happens, this minor stylistic feature is actually quite crucial in distinguishing textual strata in the MPNS. Based solely on that piece of data, we can determine with a high degree of certainty that the authors of each these two groups of chapters were different. Similarly, we can also surmise that Chapter 18 is closely linked with the oldest strata of the MPNS as it resumes the earlier naming pattern, which is very significant as, for example, that chapter contains the first mention and definition of the *icchāntikas*.

We should note here in passing that the division and allocation of dialogue in short exchanges is sometimes problematic. In such cases, we normally find that F and D concur, while T (and S) diverges from them, although elsewhere F may differ from D and T or sometimes all three differ, as in the case of the important segment towards the end of Chapter 05 where the Buddha is asked to explain the “*dharmatā*” of Buddhas. A satisfactory resolution of these differences is obviously vital for an understanding of the true authorial intentions.

Apart from these short elaborations and stylistic additions, we also find the insertions of small elucidations or explanations. These are more common in the text of D, such as the explanation of “*e-kāra*” in Chapter 04 (T: 376c11-17) involving the similarity of the three dots of that *akṣara* with the three eyes of Maheśvara.<sup>75</sup>

Another group of additions we find interpolated into the texts of the MPNS may be described as contextual additions, such as the addition of details, based on previous parallel descriptions, specifying the type and quantity of offerings brought along by the various representative groups of beings in Chapter 01, in the text block beginning with the *garuḍas* down to the Gods of the Winds<sup>76</sup> – in the case of F and D, the representative beings are just named and numbered, while T has the interpolations presumably derived from one of the components of its conflated source, the v text.<sup>77</sup>

In this group of additions we might also mention passages interpolated at a suitable juncture, which often seem to promote a particular agenda. In such instances, one is faced with conscious tampering with the content of the text rather than more innocuous “improvements”. These are often found in D, such as the several lengthy passages concerning aspects of generosity (*dāna*), presumably disguised pleas to encourage patrons to donate to the Saṅgha, with the MPNS group as intended beneficiaries. The unity of their underlying theme suggests that these passages were composed and inserted by the same individual in the Kashmiri-

<sup>75</sup> A few of these elucidatory additions may be been inserted by Dharmakṣema himself, but the majority seem to be integral to his base text.

<sup>76</sup> Q pp11b6-13a4, D pp11a5-12b3; F p855b20-c04; D p 368c20-369a09

<sup>77</sup> See below pp68-9 for an explanation of the stemmatic sigla used here.

Gandhāra region. Examples of these can be found in Ch 03 (372a03-b03) and Ch 08 (390b25-c15 and 395c10-396a06).

Finally, there is another very significant type of intentional interpolation: that which involves some kind of doctrinal exegesis or correction. As an example of this, there is the following, often though misguidedly quoted, passage found in Ch04 which is obviously an interpolation, since it is a *non sequitur* at the juncture of its occurrence. A failure to realize that this is actually a later interpolation will result in a seriously distorted understanding of the authorial intent of Ch04 and the following Ch05, by the identification of concepts such as “self” with the Buddha, as stated here, which were not originally present at this stage of the development of the MPNS.

**F:** 佛者是我義、法身是常義、泥洹是樂義、假名諸法是淨義。

[T 862a13-14]

The Buddha is the meaning of ‘self’, the *dharma-kāya* is the meaning of ‘permanent’, *nirvāṇa* is the meaning of ‘bliss’, and the meaning of ‘purity’ is denoted by dharmas.

**D:** 我者即是佛義、常者是法身義、樂者是涅槃義、淨者是法義。 [T 377b21-22]

‘Self’ signifies the Buddha, ‘permanence’ signifies the *dharma-kāya*, ‘bliss’ signifies *nirvāṇa*, and ‘purity’ signifies the Dharma.

**T:** de la bdag ces bya ba ni sangs rgyas zhes bya ba'i don to || rtag ces bya ba ni chos kyi sku zhes bya ba'i don to || bde zhes bya ba ni mya ngan las 'das pa zhes bya ba'i don to || sdug ces bya ba ni chos kyi tshig bla dags so || [Q 32b4-5]

In this instance, ‘self’ (*ātman*) signifies the Buddha, ‘permanent’ signifies the *dharma-kāya*, ‘blissful’ signifies *nirvāṇa* and ‘pure’ is a synonym for the Dharma.

Indeed, as found here and elsewhere in the MPNS, I have found strong indications that one is looking at an exegetical interpolation wherever the definitional pattern “. . . zhes bya ba'i don” or “. . . kyi tshig bla dags” occurs.

But there is one example of this type of interpolation which is so significant for the developmental history of the MPNS it really deserves a study of its own, although it might better be described as an alteration rather than an interpolation. In comparing the variant readings found in the three extant versions, we note that the use and distribution of the terms “*buddha-dhātu*”, “*tathāgata-dhātu*” and “*tathāgata-garbha*” are quite erratic and puzzling. It transpires that the reason for

many of these variants lies in an imperfect process of annotation, substitution and over-writing of occurrences of the original term “*ātman*” – not surprisingly, Chapter 13 lies at the heart of this revision.

To summarize, it seems that the term “*ātman*” was used throughout most of Chapter 13, except in some segments in the latter part of the chapter which seem to be later additions. Traces of this use have not entirely been eliminated and can still be seen incongruously dotted around that chapter. For example, Mahā-kāśyapa-sagoṭra’s opening question in that chapter concerns the presence of the *ātman* in all beings.<sup>78</sup> This question and its answer are confused by the intrusion of glosses in F and T. In the ensuing dialogue and parables, the term “*ātman*” again appears sporadically and then later there is a long series of objections raised by this bodhisattva in which the word “*ātman*” is again used consistently. This pattern continues throughout the remainder of this chapter and can be seen, of course, elsewhere in the MPNS.

One can surmise that the revolutionary use of the term “*ātman*” in a positive sense in a Buddhist environment was too problematic and so a lexical substitute was sought. In place of “*ātman*” it seems that the next term used was “*dhātu*”, as we can see from the long verse segment in the middle of the chapter. This was then expanded to “*buddha-dhātu*”, either as a clarification or to set it off from “*dharma-dhātu*”. But then this term also became a liability, leaving adherents of the doctrine open to the serious charges of claiming super-human qualities (*uttara-manuṣya-dharma*), as we can see from the discussions in Chapter 10.<sup>79</sup> A final attempt at terminological respectability is seen with the introduction of “*tathāgata-garbha*”. The text of the MPNS was revised several times to take account of the new terminology, but on each occasion the task was not carried out systematically so we can see the traces of the previous terms throughout the MPNS, both by examining each version singly and also by comparing them against each other. At times this substitution process was done intentionally, but on other occasions we can demonstrate that the new terms must have been written as interlinear notes above “*ātman*”, as with the opening question of Chapter as mentioned above, and then inserted into the body-text, side by side with the previous “*ātman*”.<sup>80</sup>

## **B. Unintentional Interpolations**

This interesting class of interpolation largely comprises a variety of short phrases or words originally written as annotations outside of the body text, which were incorporated by copyists who did not understand the text properly. This would have happened during at later stage, when the MPNS was still revered but no longer used on a day-to-day basis by devotees exposed to the oral exegesis passed from master to disciple in a living transmission, who would have been able to distinguish sutra text from commentary. Fortunately for textual historians, these

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<sup>78</sup> See p53 below for details.

<sup>79</sup> For this, and other reasons, Chapter 10 must post-date Chapter 13 in compilation.

<sup>80</sup> See p53 et seq for examples.

copyists were anxious not to wilfully omit any of the text, so they incorporated, as best as they could, everything they read on the leaves of their exemplar, even when the resultant text drifted from the original intent, or became garbled on occasion as we see with the Tibetan version.

Normally, these types of extra-textual annotations are termed “scholia”, the kind of glosses, exegetical comments and rubrics also known as “marginalia”, though I believe the available evidence from the position of their insertion into the body text points, in fact, to them having been interlinear in origin. Although later Indian *poṭhi* tend to have large margins all around the body of the text, where annotations and corrections can easily be jotted down, this does not seem to have been the case with earlier manuscripts. Those that have been discovered, almost always in fragmentary form, usually have rather narrow margins but generous interlinear spacing -- though many of these manuscript fragments are Central Asian in origin, there is no reason to suppose that they did not follow contemporaneous Indian practice.<sup>81</sup> If true in the case of MPNS manuscripts in India, this would account for the sometimes curious or illogical placing of interpolations into the body text.

Some of these interpolated scholia are quite easy to detect in cases where there are discrepancies between the three extant versions of the MPNS, while others need to be identified contextually, as for example when they interrupt the flow of the text or are obvious non sequiturs. But in either case, there are very many of these, indicating intense usage of the MPNS during one phase of its history. These ought to be carefully isolated from the body text of the MPNS, as they tend to confuse the presumed intentions of the founding author-compilers, especially in the case of the Tibetan version. We classify these interpolations into three broad categories as follows:

### 1) Exegetical additions & remarks

This category, for understandable reasons, forms the largest group. Again, these range in extent from a whole sentence to a phrase or word. Those occurring at sentence length tend to be readily identifiable since they often occur only in the Tibetan text. The probable source of these additions will be discussed below in Section 08. The following are typical examples of additions which plausibly began as interlinear or marginal comments.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> See for example the Spitzer Ms (Eli Franco, 2002 and 2004), found in Turfan in 1906 and paleographically dated to the late Kuṣaṇa era.

<sup>82</sup> I hope the reader does not become too confused, but in the various lemmata (and their translations) quoted hereafter, I have retained my simple textual mark-up system to deal with textual additions and variants in the three versions. I have used the following:

A) In text from T, <xxx> (with **green type**) indicates extra interpolated material of various kinds only found in T.

B) In the Chinese text of F and D, [  x x x ] (with single underlining and a smaller font size ) has a similar function regarding additions and interpolations.

C) **Red bold text** in F and T highlights textual content *only* they share.

1. Exegetical comment, *non-sequitur* in immediate context:

**T:** <ya mtshan can dgu bcu rtsa drug dang | **tshigs su bcad pa** bzhi bcu rtsa lnga la yang de bzhin du rgyas par sbyar ro> [T only] [Q 29b8]  
“<The same applies in detail to the ninety-six heterodox teachers and the forty-five **verses**.>”

This comment also contains a script error: “*tshigs-su-bcad-pa*” for “*gāthā*” (verse) makes little sense here and should probably be corrected to “*śāttha*”, a Prakrit reading of “*śāstra*” (treatise).<sup>83</sup>

2. This two similar, consecutive exegetical remarks, giving instructions for the benefit of the users, perhaps preachers, of the MPNS.

**T:** <de bzhin du thams cad la yang sbyar bar bya ste | 'dir dkar po'i phyogs kyis thabs dang sbyar ro> || <nyan thos kyi theg pa'i yang dag par ldan pa'i mdo'i rnam par dbye ba yang 'dir sbyar bar bya'o> || [Q 52a4]

**S:** <evam sarva prayoktavyaṃ śukla-pakṣeṇa vidhiḥ kāryā : <śrāvakānena saṃprayukte sūtra-vibhāgaḥ iha kāryāḥ> ||

“<Thus, these [examples] should also be extended throughout. Here they construed with the positive aspects.> <You should also use them, in this instance, to differentiate this sūtra from those associated with the Śrāvaka-yāna.>

3. This passage seems to contain both intentional and unintentional additions. Apart from the various other differences with F and D I shall not discuss here, the “*de-lta-bu-dag-gi dus-na*” and “*dge-slong*” seem to be intentional additions, while “*slob-dpon-du gyur-pa*” (“who are *ācāryas*”) ought to be understood as an interpolated qualifying gloss on “*tshul khrims dang ldan pa*” (= *śīlavat* – “who maintain the moral code”). I would also interpret the longer “*lam du 'gro ba na*” (“when they travel on the highways”) as an exegetical remark.

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D) **Blue bold text** in D and T highlights their textual content *only* they share.

E) Text unmarked in any way indicates content common to all three versions.

F) Double underling and bolding is used when appropriate to indicate words and phrases of interest.

NB: I have also tried to indicate parallels between F & T and D & T with the use of contrasting fonts, so if any reader wishes to print out a copy of this Paper, but does not have access to a colour printer, I can send them a monochrome version if they contact me.

<sup>83</sup> These script errors and Prakritisms are discussed in detail below.

F: 我聽與彼...等[不]受具戒能護法者以爲伴侶。[T 867a24-26]  
“I permit them to have as companions **those who can protect the Dharma**, ... who have [not] accepted the precepts.”

D: 是故我今聽持戒人[依諸白衣]持刀杖者以爲伴侶。[T 384b07-8]  
“I therefore now permit people who uphold the precepts [to rely upon white-robed (laymen)] **who bear weapons** as companions.”

T: <de lta bu dag gi dus na> <dge slong> tshul khirms dang ldan pa <slob dpon du gyur pa> rnams <lam du 'gro ba na> **rang gi srog bsrung ba'i phyir mtshon cha lag na thogs pa dag** dang 'gro bar ngas gnang ngo || [Q 49b4-5]  
“<**In such times**>, I permit those <monks> who maintain the moral code <**who are ācāryas**> to travel in the company of **those who are armed with weapons**, <**when they travel on the highways**>, **in order to safeguard their lives.**”

4. The following example is a simple exegetical comment:

F: Not found

D: 貪婬瞋恚愚癡[覆心]不知[佛性]。[T 408b01]  
“Lustful attachment, hatred and stupidity [envelop their minds], so they do not know [the *buddha-dhātu*].”

T: <bdag gi nyes pa'i stobs dang> | 'dod chags dang | zhe sdang dang | gti mug gis mi shes pas ... [Q 108a4]  
“Because they are ignorant due to <**the power of their faults**>, attachment, hatred and stupidity ...”

5. The following passage found in Chapter 07 contains interpolations which cause significant problems of interpretation. I shall deal with it at some length as it well illustrates potential pitfalls that beset the unwary.

F: 是經名爲大般泥洹。初語，亦善，中語，亦善，後語亦善，善義，善味，淳一，滿，淨，金剛寶藏。[我今]當說。[T 867c16-18]  
“This sūtra is called the ‘*Mahāparinirvāṇa*’. It is auspicious in the beginning, auspicious in the middle and auspicious in the conclusion, it is meaningful, skilfully phrased, which is unique, perfect and pure; **it is an adamantine treasury**, which I shall now expound.”

D: 是經名爲大般涅槃。上語亦善，中語亦善，下語亦善，義味[深  
邃其文]亦善，純備具足，清淨，梵行，金剛寶藏，滿足，無缺。[汝  
今善聽，我今當說]。[善男子]，所言大者名之爲常。

[T 385a04-7]

“This sūtra is called the ‘*Mahāparinirvāṇa*’. It is auspicious in the beginning, auspicious in the middle and auspicious in the conclusion, it is meaningful, skilfully phrased, which is unique, pure, the holy conduct, an adamantine treasury, perfect and not deficient. You should listen carefully, for I shall now expound it. Noble sons, the word ‘great’ denotes ‘permanent’.”

T: mdo 'di ni yongs su mya ngan las 'das pa chen po zhes bya ste |  
[tshangs par spyod pa] | thog mar dge ba | bar du dge ba | tha mar  
dge ba | don bzang po | tshig 'bru bzang po | ma 'dres pa | yongs su  
rdzogs pa | yongs su dag pa | [yongs su byang ba] | rdo rje lta bu'i  
gter dang [che bar grags pa] yin no || [Q 51b1-2]

“This sūtra is called the ‘*Mahā-parinirvāṇa*’. It is the holy conduct, auspicious in the beginning, auspicious in the middle and auspicious in the conclusion, it is meaningful, skilfully phrased, unique, perfect, pure and cleansed/complete. It is designated a diamond-like treasury and as ‘great’.

S: mahā-parinirvāṇaṃ nāma idaṃ sūtram ādau kalyāṇaṃ madhye kalyāṇaṃ  
paryavasāne kalyāṇaṃ svārthaṃ suvyañjanaṃ kevalaṃ | paripūrṇaṃ parisuddhaṃ  
brahma-caryaṃ | mahān iti vajrākāra-nityākhyā ||

“This sūtra is called the ‘*Mahāparinirvāṇa*’. It is auspicious in the beginning, auspicious in the middle and auspicious in the conclusion, it is meaningful, skilfully phrased, which is unique, perfect, pure and the holy conduct. ‘Great’ is a term for diamond-like permanence.”

As the reader will see, there are several variations in this segment as it is rendered by each of the texts. As usual, F presents the simplest version and is likely to be closest to the original. It has the shorter traditional list of nine qualities ascribed to the Buddha’s Dharma and gives them in the standard sequence, though “*brahmacarya*”, which normally concludes the list, seems to have been accidentally omitted.<sup>84</sup> On the other hand, D and T have expanded the list with a tenth quality “*paryavadāta*” and do included “*brahmacarya*”, though the sequence is disturbed in both D and T which suggests some degree of textual corruption. The list of the qualities in the Skt version duplicates that in F though with the inclusion of

<sup>84</sup> For the standard list in Pāli, we have set pieces like "so dhammaṃ deseti ādi-kalyāṇaṃ majhe-kalyāṇaṃ pariyosāna-kalyāṇaṃ sātthaṃ sabyañjanaṃ kevala-paripuṇṇaṃ parisuddhaṃ brahmacariyaṃ pakāseti", to which Sanskrit-based lists add "paryavadāta" as the penultimate item before "brahmacarya".

“*brahmacarya*” as we would expect and the omission of the “*paryavadāta*” found in D and T.

More importantly, one should note the material interpolated towards the end of each version, where actually there seems to be two distinct interpolations. That we are dealing with two interpolations may be seen from the different location of the first item, the term “adamantine treasury” in its various guises.<sup>85</sup> Even though it is found in all three versions, it is likely that the original version of the MPNS did not include this epithet, though it seems a reasonable enough term to apply to the MPNS.<sup>86</sup> The reason we can deduce this is from the fact that it is placed somewhat differently in each translation, noting in particular that in D it occurs in the midst of the traditional sequence of qualities. In other words, it began as a floating gloss, eventually inserted into the body text according to the scribes' best guess.

I surmise that the sequence of events was something like this: at some early stage in the life of the MPNS, somebody incorporated “adamantine treasury” (*vajrākara*) into the text, resulting in the textual state we see now in F. Elsewhere, the forerunner of D's version still transmitted the original version of the text, without “*vajrākara*”, but the owner of the D lineage manuscript must have seen a copy of the newer, revised version now including with the term “adamantine treasury” and so jotted that down as an interlinear or in the margins of his or her text. When later this manuscript needed to be recopied, a scribe inserted the marginal phrase as best as he could, evidently thinking that it belonged in the position we now find it is D's version.

Thus, this first interpolation does not present much difficulty, but it provides the key to a better solution to the kind of problems we encounter with T and S when we realize that it was originally a distinct and separate interpolation as

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<sup>85</sup> Although Habata (Habata 2007 p70) may have accurately transcribed the reading in the Skt fragment as “*vajrākāra*”, thus paralleling T “*rdo-rje lta-bu*” (“like a diamond”), this is an error and should read “*vajrākara*” as will be seen below. The situation has been made more complicated by “*gter*” in T, which leads Habata to conclude that “*nitya*” (permanent) in the Skt text should be amended to account for “*nidhi*”. Moreover, although I have translated the term “*vajrākara*”, which underlies the Chinese versions, as “adamantine treasury” to better reflect the nuances of the Chinese and Tibetan translations, it could be better rendered more literally as “diamond mine”. Indeed, this may well have been the original intention, since the idea of a diamond mine would have been very familiar to the authors of the MPNS based, as I believe, in the Dhānyakaṭaka region of coastal Andhra Pradesh because that region was famed for the many mines producing diamonds of the very highest quality known as far away as Rome.

<sup>86</sup> Although “diamond treasury/mine” (*vajrākara*) may well be a suitable epithet to eulogize the MPNS, it is not found anywhere else in the entire text. I have a suspicion that it was actually a stray rubric in origin, reading “*vajra-kāya*”, as this would be a short form of the name for the previous chapter (*Vajrābhedya-kāya*) just ending a couple of lines up. An interlinear or marginal rubric indicating that chapter just ended could easily have been incorporated at random, assumed to have been an omission ~ exactly the situation we seem to find.



witnessed by F and D. Some time after the addition of “*vajrākara*” to manuscripts in both the F and D lineages, a second interpolation was inserted into manuscripts of the D lineage only. Whether this too began as a marginal gloss or not, it is now found in the body text of D (and T & S) as “the term ‘great’ (*mahā*) [denotes] ‘permanent’ (*nitya*)” (所言大者名之爲常).

This does not present any major difficulties as it appears in D, being simply an exegetical gloss in the standard format of “x means y”, presumably understood as a gloss on the “*mahā*” of the title of the MPNS. We might reconstruct the underlying Skt here as “*mahān iti nityākhyā*”. The difficulty arose when the ancestral text of S and T was created through conflation.<sup>87</sup> The scribe who created that version had two distinct lemma to integrate into his new text: “adamantine treasury” (*vajrākara*) and “the word ‘great’ denotes ‘permanent’” (*mahan iti nityākhyā*). What he concocted was the text we find in S, “‘great’ is a term for a diamond-like permanence” (*mahān iti vajrākara-nityākhyā*), mangled in T as “it is renowned as a diamond-like treasury and as great” (*rdo-rje lta-bu'i gter dang che-bar grags-pa yin-no*), both of which would undoubtedly have come as a big surprise to the earliest authors of the MPNS. Habata reasonably accounts for the reading “*rdo-rje lta-bu'i gter*” by assuming the underlying manuscript for T read “*mahān iti vajrākāra-nidhyākhyā*”), although this is actually a misinterpretation which read the correct “*nitya*” (permanent) wrongly as “*nidhi*” (treasury).

However, although using the extant Skt text, I have suggested that the term underlying this second interpolation as found in D was “*mahān iti nityākhyā*”, there is evidence that this too has been misread due to an erroneous word division. If we were to write the phrase without word divisions as it would have been seen in a Sanskrit manuscript, we would probably have “*mahānitinityākhyā*”, or better perhaps “*mahānityākhyā*”, assuming the “-n iti” to be a spurious dittography somehow generated at a later date when the “*vajrākara*” was inserted. In other words, the interpolation originally should have been read as “Great Permanence”, as a title, instead of “the term ‘great’ (*mahā*) [denotes] ‘permanent’ (*nitya*)”. This is confirmed by the occurrence of exactly the same expression in Ch08, for which a corresponding Skt fragment fortuitously survives: “*mahā-parinirvāṇaṃ iti mahā-nityākhyātam*” (T: *yongs-su-mya-ngan-las-'das-pa chen-po ni rtag-pa chen-po zhes bya ste*) – “[Listen to] the Mahāparinirvāṇa, called the Great Permanence!”.<sup>88</sup> Incidentally, this provides corroboration for my contention that part of the MPNS was originally known by an alternative name, specifically the “*Tathāgata-nitya-sūtra*” as discussed earlier in this paper.<sup>89</sup>

6. Again, there are several interpolations in the following example, but the occurrence again of the phrase “*rtag-pa chen-po zhes-bya-ste*” (*mahānitya*) is

<sup>87</sup> This is explained in detail below from p59 *et seq.*

<sup>88</sup> It should be noted that “*ākhyā*”, like “*nāma*” and “*saṃjñā*”, is used to cite proper nouns. See Tubb (2007) p32.

<sup>89</sup> See p36 above for details.

noteworthy in view of the identical addition just found in the previous example, here presumably intended as a gloss on “’*di-la*” (“herein” = the MPNS). Contextually, this expression seems to be used as a synonym for the MPNS itself, thus corroborating my view that it was a variant of an alternative title for the older parts of the MPNS, prior to the addition of the later material dealing with the *buddha-dhātu / tathāgata-garbha*. “All great deeds” (*bya-ba chen-po thams-cad*: S: \**sarva-mahā-kārya*) might be read as a gloss on “great miracles” (*cho-'phrul chen-po*: S: \**mahā-pratihārya*).

**F:** 菩薩摩訶薩住是功德。悉能隨類種種變化自在無畏。

[T872a08-09]

“Bodhisattva-mahāsattvas who abide in these qualities can all display various kinds of manifestations, in accordance with the type [of being], freely and without fear.”

**D:** 若有菩薩摩訶薩安住如是大般涅槃。能示如是神通變化而無所畏。 [T 390a09-10]

“Bodhisattva-mahāsattvas who abide in this *Mahā-parinirvāṇa* are able to display such miracles and manifestations without any fear.”

**T:** 'di la gnas pa'i byang chub sems dpa' sems dpa' chen po ni <[bya ba chen po thams cad dang](#)> cho 'phrul chen po dang | mi 'jigs pa la pas na <[rtag pa chen po zhes bya ste](#)> | <[ji ltar byed ces 'dri bar mi bya'o](#)> || [Q 66b1-2]

“Because bodhisattva-mahāsattvas who dwell herein are established in <[all great deeds](#)>, great miracles and fearlessness, <[it is called ‘great permanence’](#)>, <[but you should not ask how they do that](#)>.”

## 2) Scholia

The category of interpolated scholia noting synonyms or other glosses, often using a scholastic style, is well represented throughout the MPNS, illustrated by the following examples.

7. An unambiguous example of this category of interpolation is found in an extended segment, largely shared by F and T, but almost completely missing from D, glossing in a typical scholastic manner the word “*saṃnicaya*” found in an *udāna* verse just quoted in the text. This segment was interpolated immediately prior to an explanation of the verse given by the Buddha which must have formed part of the original text.

F: 佛告迦葉。積者聚積義。 [T 872b22-23]

The Buddha said to Kāśyapa, “ ‘Gathered’ means ‘accumulated’.”

D: 佛言迦葉。夫積聚者名曰財寶。 [T 391b11-12]

The Buddha said to Kāśyapa, “The ‘gathered stores’ refers to wealth and precious things.”

T: *de la rin po che la sogs pa ni* “*bsags*” *pa'o* || [Q 68a8-b2]

“Therein, ‘stores’ (*nicaya*) [refers to] precious things.”

F: not found

D: not found

T: <“yongs” shes bya ba ni phrad kyi bye brag gi tha tshig go> ||  
<‘*saṃ*’ is a type of lexical prefix (*upasarga*)><sup>90</sup>

F: 受取增益義。

“ ‘Collected together’ (*saṃ*) signifies intensification.”

D: not found

T: “yongs” *shes bya ba ni bsdus pa'i don te* <*dir rdzas bzang po bsgrubs pa'i tha tshig go*> ||

“ ‘Gathered’ (*saṃ*) means ‘collected together’ (\**saṃgraha*), <here signifying the acquisition of good things>.” [Note the secondary gloss here]

F: 藏者庫藏義。

“ ‘Wealth’ signifies ‘stores’.”

D: not found

T: “*bsags pa*” *zhes bya ba dang* | “*nor*” *zhes bya ba ni don gcig go* ||

“ ‘Stores’ and ‘wealth’ are synonyms.”

8. This example is found in Chapter 05, the main topic of which is the Buddha’s “indestructible body” (*abheda-kāya*) and the manner in which it was attained. The *dharma-kāya* is mentioned, but it seems a distinctly secondary consideration. For that reason I suggest that the occurrence of “*dharmakāya*” here was originally an interlinear gloss on “*abheda-kāya*”, inserted at an early stage since it is found in all three versions. From the presence of an “and” (*dang*) in T, as though the two terms refer to two distinct things, it would seem that they were found in apposition in the Skt base-text, which D also corroborates.

F: 得此金剛不壞法身。 [T 867a12]

“I have acquired this adamant, indestructible *dharmakāya*.”

<sup>90</sup> Although T “*yongs*-[*su*]” is used predominantly for Skt “*pari-*”, it is also found occasionally, as here, used for “*saṃ-*”, guaranteed here because the gloss explicates the term “*saṃnicaya*” just used in a well-attested *udāna*.

D: 成就法身不可壞身。 [T 384a17-18]

“[I] have accomplished a dharma-kāya, an indestructible body.”

T: *mi shigs pa'i sku dang chos kyi sku brnyes par gyur to* || [Q 49a5]

“[I] have acquired an indestructible body and the dharma-kāya.”

9. The gloss here is only found in T and elucidates the preceding “*shin tu yongs su mthar thug pa*” (\**atyanta-niṣṭhā*). Note that the syntactical interpretation in F and D differs to that in T.

F: 所以者何。如來之性究竟說故。 [T 889b17]

“Why is that ? Because it teaches that the *tathāgata-dhātu* is the ultimate state.”

D: 何以故。究竟善說有佛性故。 [T 415a02]

“Why ? Because it teaches well the existence of the *buddha-dhātu* conclusively.”

T: *ci'i phyir zhe na | 'di las de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po shin tu yongs su mthar thug pa gsal bar bstan pa'i phyir te | <mchog tu mthar phyin pa gang yin pa de ni rgyu zhes bya'o>* || [Q 123b7]

“Why ? Because *tathāgata-garbha*, the utterly fundamental state (\**atyanta-niṣṭhā*), is clearly taught in it. <The ‘ultimate fundamental state’ is the ‘casual basis’ (hetu).>”

10. The following example, only found in T, is also very clearly a scholastic gloss. Additionally, the entire passage in which it is embedded only occurs in T. The first word “*lcags*” (*ayas*) is quoted in a preceding *udāna* verse, but it is not clear to me what the second term “*mdo-lcags*” represents as it is a *hapax legomen* in the Kanjur, but I suspect it is an attempt to render “*loha*” which normally is just “*lcags*” as used for “*ayas*” as here.

T: *yang bka' stsal pa | rigs kyi bu de ltar khyod de bzhin gshegs pa rnams med par 'gyur ba'i 'du shes su lta bas snying mi dgar ma byed cig | <lcags dang mdo lcags zhes bya ba ni don tha dad pa ma yin te>* | *lcags mer 'bar ba las grangs par gyur pa bzhin du de bzhin gshegs pa rnams med par 'gyur ba'i gnas med do* || [Q 58b6-7]

Again he spoke, “Noble son, thus you should be not troubled with thoughts that the Tathāgatas become non-existent. <‘ayas’ (iron) and ‘loha’ (iron) have the same referent> Just as iron which has become cold after it has been smelted in a fire, likewise it never the case that the Tathāgatas become non-existent.” [Ch 08]

11. As I mentioned above, the various recensions of the MPNS show traces of terminological upheaval, moving from “*ātman*” to “*tathāgata-garbha*”. As many of these ought be classified as glosses, unintentionally interpolated, I have deferred treatment of illustrative passages until now.<sup>91</sup>

A simple gloss of “*dhātu*” on “*ātman*”:

F: 若使各有如來性者 . . . [T 883c16]

“If we suppose that each one has *buddha-dhātu*, . . .”

D: 若我常者 . . . [T408a03]

“If the *ātman* was unchanging, . . .”

T: gal te bdag <sems can gyi> khams de rtag pa lags na | . . . [Q 107b1]

“If that *ātman*, the *sattva-dhātu*, were unchanging, . . .”

We may reconstruct the original text as the simple “If the *ātman* were unchanging . . .” as presented by D. Traces of the “*ātman*” are also to be seen in T which has both “*bdag*” (Pkt: *atta* “self”) and “*sems-can*” (Pkt: *satta* – “being”), with the latter of these probably derived from a misreading of Pkt: *~m atta* > *satta*, an unintended duplication due to conflation. This “*atta/ātman*” was then glossed with “*dhātu*”, subsequently inserted into the body text of the distant ancestor of F and T. Then later it completely supplants “*ātman*” in F and has also been expanded to “*buddha-dhātu*”. This may seem a bit complicated, so for greater clarity we may reconstruct the process leading to these variants thus:

D: *atta* = *nitya* . . . (= the original underlying form)

F: *atta*<sup>*dhātu*</sup> = *nitya* > *dhātu* = *nitya* > *buddha-dhātu* = *nitya* > ***buddha-dhātu[n] ity*** . . .

T: *atta* = *nitya* & *atta*<sup>*dhātu*</sup> = *nitya* > *satta-dhātu* = *nitya* ~ ***atta satta-dhātu*** = *nitya* . . .

Note that here, as we may observe elsewhere (eg. Ex 5 above), “*nitya*” is liable to be lost, as in F here, being construed as “*ity/iti*”.

12. Insertion of two glosses on “*ātman*” in the response to the question posed by Mahākāśyapasagotra:

F: [迦葉菩薩復白佛言]。世尊。[如來有]我。二十五有為有為無。

<sup>91</sup> Though it is more difficult to demonstrate, it seems likely that many of these interlinear glosses using “*buddha-dhātu*” or “*tathāgata-garbha*” were inserted into the texts as overwriting an original “*ātman*”, as though they were corrections --- which, of course, in a sense they were.

<The bodhisattva Kāśyapa said to the Buddha>, “Blessed One, <the Tathāgata has a self.> Do those in the twenty-five modes of existence have a self or not ?”

D: 世尊。二十五有有我不耶

“Blessed One, do those in the twenty-five modes of existence have a self or do they not ?”

T: bcom ldan 'das ci lags | srid pa nyi shu rtsa lnga la bdag mchis shes bgyi'am ma mchis shes bgyi ||

“Blessed One, do those of the twenty-five modes of existence have a self (*ātman*) or not ?”

F: 真實我者是如來性。當知一切眾生悉有。 [T 883b15]

“The true self is the *tathāgata-dhātu*. You should know that all beings have it, . . .”

D: 我者即是如來藏義。一切眾生悉有佛性。 [T 407b09-10]

“The self signifies the *tathāgata-garbha*. All beings have the *buddha-dhātu*.”

T: bdag ces bya ba ni de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po'i don to || sangs rgyas kyi khams ni sems can thams cad la yod mod kyi | . . . [Q 105b5]

“‘*Ātman*’ means ‘*tathāgata-garbha*’. The *buddha-dhātu* is indeed present in all beings, . . .”

A direct translation from the Tibetan version is misleading. Looking at the question eliciting this answer, it is clear that the sutra here (and throughout this segment) was originally speaking *only* in terms of the “*ātman*”, so the text would first have simply read “*The self is indeed present within all beings*”, which then acquired the interlinear gloss “*buddha-dhātu*” At an early stage this gloss was incorporated into the body text, as in F, resulting in “*The self is the buddha-dhātu and it is indeed present within all beings*”. Finally, the second interlinear gloss, “*tathāgata-garbha*”, found its way into the text as in D and T. Again, for greater clarity, we may reconstruct the stages leading to these variants thus:

- 1: *atta* is present in all beings . . . (= the original underlying form)
- 2: *atta*<sup>*buddha-dhātu*</sup> is present in all beings (with interlinear gloss)
- 3: *atta* [is] *buddha-dhātu* is present in all beings (= **state of F base ms**)
- 4: *atta* [is] *buddha-dhātu* <sup>means '*tathāgata-garbha*'</sup> is present in all beings (with interlinear gloss)
- 5: *atta* means *tathāgata-garbha*; *buddha-dhātu* is present in all beings (= **state of D & T base ms**)

### 3) Rubrics and Headings

We may class another type of unintentional interpolation as headings or rubrics, originally inserted for the benefit of the reader when attempting to navigate the manuscript. Given the lack of modern typographical refinements, a solid mass of text in a long text must have presented pre-modern readers, or better still, users, of manuscripts with difficulties in determining textual boundaries. These rubrics, as the term implies, were one of the few means available for someone to find their way around a text with any convenience or ease. Rubrics, in some form or other, are found in many manuscripts in all languages from the ancient Eurasian world. It would not be surprising therefore to find the same practice adopted with Buddhist manuscripts, and I believe we have evidence of their use in the case of the MPNS.

Often interpolated headings came to be embedded into sentences, making their presence less obvious or difficult to recognize. The following case, found in this line in the verse portion of Ch 13, seems to be a good candidate for an embedded heading:

#### Example 01

T: *bdud rtsi rtag pa khams* <*kyi dbyings*> || [Q 110a4]

“That unchanging nectar is the *dhātu* <**of the *dhātu***>”

Here, in effect, we have the term “*dhātu*” reduplicated --- once with “*khams*” and secondly with “*dbyings*”. Though “*khams*” has several attested Sanskrit equivalents, contextually here it must be “*dhātu*”, while “*dbyings*” can only equate with “*dhātu*”. The three versions of the MPNS are very difficult to correlate in this verse segment, but F or D definitely do not have a duplication of “*dhātu*” hereabouts. We must conclude that the second “*dhātu*”, which the Tibetan translation team valiantly fudged with “*dbyings*”, was originally an interlinear rubric or heading for the subject matter of the ensuing block of verses.

An alternative possibility here, in light of our discussion above concerning the over-writing of “*ātman*”, is that the first “*dhātu*” (T: *khams*) was actually an over-written “*ātman*” in one manuscript tradition, but while the second “*dhātu*” was initially just an interlinear gloss in another manuscript lineage, so that at the time of the conflation, the T base manuscript ended up with a duplication of “*dhātu*” and retained both.

Dotted around the MPNS, especially in the latter portion are short questions, often only found in T, though sometimes in F and T, as with the following examples:

### Example 02

T only: *gsol pa | de ci lta bu lags* | [Q 130a8]

He asked, “How is that ?”

### Example 03

T only: *bka' stsal pa | ji lta snang* | [Q 144a3]

He said, “As it appears.”

### Example 04

F: 迦葉白佛。其義云何。 [T 889c23]

Kāśyapa said to the Buddha, “What does this signify ?”

T: *gsol pa | de ji lta bu lags* | [Q 125a5]

He asked, “In what way ?”

These questions are both stylistically incongruent and also have a particular pattern of distribution, so I am inclined to suggest that these too are interpolated rubrics, originally marking the commencement of important doctrinal explanations as an aid to the user of the text.

In the following two examples there are several noteworthy interpolations. In the first, I suggest that the opening phrase in T, “*pham-pa'i chos bzhi zhes-bya-ba ni*”, phrased as a citation, may be viewed as an interpolated section heading. Then “*zhes rgyud phyi-ma'i yang phyi-ma gzhung rdzogs pa las*”, also in T only, is a note indicating that the preceding statement of the Buddha is a quotation from “*the additional culminatory teachings (uttarottara-tantra) of the completed text (grantha)*”, possibly from a section therein, as “*skabs-nas*” (*kaṇḍe*) suggests, dealing with false claims of superhuman attainments (*uttari-manuṣya-dharma*).

On occasion, the MPNS clearly refers to itself (or at least parts) as an “*uttara-tantra*”, as in the following example (no 6), but the term “*uttarottara*” here is puzzling since it seems to refer to additional textual material related to the MPNS. The gloss here cannot not refer to a later part of the MPNS nor even to a part of the extended Dharmakṣema version, since there is nothing equivalent to the quoted sentence. However, in conjunction with the subject matter, the use of “*gzhung*” (*grantha*) here provides a clue to the identity of this “*uttarottara-tantra*”: it must correspond to the *Uttarottara-tantra-grantha* found attached to the Mūla-sarvāstivādin Vinaya or something similar belonging to another school, for there indeed there are discussions about *uttari-manuṣya-dharma*.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> This possibility was kindly suggested by Prof Paul Harrison in private communication.



### Example 05

F: 復說一一不度猶如析石、說過人法者無間等上。

“Additionally he says, ‘[one who has committed] any one of the *pārajikas* is like a shattered stone, but the claim of superhuman attainments is a heinous fault.’”

D: 何以故。我常說言、四波羅夷若犯一者猶如析石[不可還合]。若有自說得過人法、是則名為犯波羅夷。

“Why? I have ever said that a person who transgresses just one **of the four *pārajikas*** is like a shattered stone and cannot be put together again. If somebody claims to have superhuman qualities, it is said that they have committed a *pārajika*.”

T: <pham pa'i chos bzhi zhes bya ba ni> bcom ldan 'das kyis gsungs pa <rnam pa bzhi car lta ci smos te> | pham pa bzhi'i nang nas pham pa gang yang rung ba zhig byung na yang rdo chag pa'i 'phro bzhin du 'gyur ro <zhes rgyud phyi ma'i yang phyi ma gzhung rdzogs pa las> mi'i chos las bla mar gyur pa'i <skabs nas> gsungs pa yin no || [Q 98b5-6]

“But, <**regarding the four defeats**>, I have said <**in the section (*kaṇḍa*)**> regarding the superhuman qualities <**from the additional culminatory teachings (*uttarottara-tantra*) of the completed text**>: ‘Though just one of the four defeats has occurred, <**let alone all four**> then [you] will become like the shattered remnants of a stone.’”

This example of an interpolated rubric provides a very important clue to the development of the MPNS and corroborates my view discussed previously that the original teachers of the MPNS made use of it in two sections: a public, open part dealing with the permanence of the Buddha, and a section secret or restricted part dealing with the *ātman / buddha-dhātu / tathāgata-garbha* which possibly extends from Ch09 to 17 in the extant version. Here, the MPNS quotes from itself and refers to that part as the \**Tathāgata-garbha Uttara-tantra* (*de-bzhin gshegs-pa'i snying-po'i rgyud phyi-ma*) --- the Tibetan here to be construed with “*rgyud phyi-ma*” in apposition to “*tathāgata-garbha*”. The MPNS is quite explicit elsewhere that “*uttara-tantra*” teachings, whether concerning medical science, grammar or itself, are only to be revealed to those who have mastered the basic teachings first.

### Example 06

F: 然後教學此摩訶衍般泥洹經。[令知衆生有]如來性是常住法。

[T: 893c28-29]

“... and then he teaches them this *Mahāyāna Parinirvāṇa-sūtra*, which causes beings to know that there is a *tathāgata-dhātu* which is a permanently abiding entity.”

D: 然後教學如來祕藏。[爲其子故]說如來常。如來如是說大乘典  
大涅槃經。 [T 420c12-14]

“... and then he teaches them the *tathāgata-garbha* and expounds the  
permanence of the Tathāgata for his children. In this manner, the Tathāgata  
teaches the Mahāyāna *Mahā-nirvāṇa-sūtra*, ...”

T: <*dge slong rnams la*> <*de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po'i rgyud phyi ma las*> *de*  
*bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po rtag go zhes ston par mdzad de | de ltar de bzhin*  
*gshegs pas yongs su mya ngan las 'das pa chen po'i mdo chen po bstan pa ...* [Q  
138a5]

“[The Tathāgata reveals] that the *tathāgata-garbha* is permanent, <**in the  
*Tathāgata-garbha Uttara-tantra***> <**to the monks**> ... this *Mahā-*  
*parinirvāṇa mahā-sūtra* which the Tathāgata thus teaches.”

The use of short rubrics to mark the beginning of significant segments of  
text may also be the explanation for another puzzle. It is well known that the  
Buddhabhadra-Faxian translation has chapter breaks not found in the other two  
versions which overall seem to retain the original chapter breaks and titles. If this  
habit of rubricizing manuscripts was fairly common, we might see these as the  
origin of those extra chapter divisions and titles in Buddhabhadra-Faxian’s version.  
This seems quite reasonable in view of the huge swathe of text that would otherwise  
confront a reader from the end of Chapter 08 onwards. One possible example of  
this is the following from the beginning of Chapter 05, only found in T:

#### Example 07

T: *rigs kyi bu'am rigs kyi bu mo* <***tshē ring po dag***> *gzhi gsum ma gtogs pa*  
*dang ...* [Q 37b1]

“O noble sons and daughters, <**long-lived ones**> ! If you have any  
uncertainties, misgivings or doubts about matters concerning the three  
grounds ...

The addition of “*tshē ring-po dag*” (Pkt: \**dīghâyukā*) – “Long-lived [Ones]” -- is only  
found in T, apparently understood as a plural vocative qualifying the “noble sons or  
daughters, although if “*dīrghâyukā*” is indeed the underlying term, this epithet is  
normally used of the gods. This is not entirely implausible here, but we should note  
this attribute is used nowhere else in the MPNS and that the title for this chapter in  
the Buddhabhadra-Faxian version is 長壽品 (“Long Life”) rather than “\**Ahimsā-*  
*skandha*” as in T and D. I am thus inclined to view this interpolation as the traces of  
a topic rubric, adopted by F as a chapter title.

In contrast to interpolated additions, one might wonder if there are cases of  
omissions in any of the versions, whether what seems like an interpolation in one

version may instead hide an omission elsewhere. In fact these seem to be remarkably few and are primarily located in T, rather than F or D – though these may have understandably occurred by accident when the ancestor of the T base manuscript was created by conflation. On the other hand, there are three or four cases that are clear-cut omissions and these occur in F & T against D, which gives us recensional and stemmatic clues, most notably the significant omission mid-sentence at F 881b10 and Q 98b4 where D 404b05-09 has preserved the missing lines.

What we do note is that the Chinese versions typically seem to paraphrase a little when it suits them stylistically, but it would be a mistake to think that the shorter phrasing of passages in the Buddhahadra-Faxian translation is a result of paraphrase. Instead, I believe that we are encountering here an earlier state of the MPNS. For example, F often just gives the bare bones of an example-story, which D & T expand with a lot of details. This fluidity of content suggests that these stories were probably initially semi-oral, intended to be used when preaching. The bare-bones version is merely a memory aid, as seen in the summaries of the *avadānas* and *jātakas* in the neglected Bairam Ali manuscript (Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya 2000) or the Gāndhārī *avādāna* fragments (Lenz & Glass 2003), to be expanded as desired. This would account for the differing degrees of detail with these stories/parables found in D and T. This would also corroborate my hypothesis that the MPNS was intended for use by the group's preachers who would expand the text appropriately as the situation demanded.

## 8. Textual Conflation

During the very early stages of its development, when the copies of the MPNS in circulation were limited in number and held within the close confines of the group of its origin, the process of replacing older copies of the sutra, as revised versions became available, was evidently straightforward. This updating of manuscripts must have been done periodically with many Mahāyāna sutras, including the MPNS, during their infancy, although the exact logistics of the process are a matter of speculation. Nevertheless, this apparent process tends to confirm the view of recent scholars that early Mahāyāna sutras were produced in isolation by small groups structured hierarchically around a charismatic leader or *ācārya*.<sup>93</sup> In fact, the MPNS corroborates this and several times refers quite explicitly to confraternities (*gaṇa*) of practitioners of the MPNS doctrines, led by an *ācārya* or *dharma-kāthika*, with supportive lay-followers in the background. Such a structure would facilitate the issue of new versions which would then become the current “standard” text, although one wonders how this appearance of new material would have been rationalized, unless it was the case that only a few trusted devotees had direct access to the written text anyway. In the case of the MPNS, I suspect that substantial portions of additional text were based on the notes, exegetical lectures

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<sup>93</sup> See Silk (1994) pp18-22 for further discussion of the diversity of the early Mahāyānas, each developing around a single text or small group of texts.

or even *ad hoc* advice given by the group leader<sup>94</sup> – one may discern a distinctly commentorial flavour in the second part of the sutra beginning with Chapter 08. In some respects, the latter part of the MPNS might be viewed as an anthology of teachings

As mentioned above, it seems likely that the MPNS at a certain early stage was divided into two parts: a “public” portion, the *Tathāgata-nitya-sūtra* (or sometimes *Mahā-nitya-sūtra*), and a quasi-secret or “private” continuation (*uttara-tantra*), the *Tathāgata-garbha-sūtra*. It seems that the cumulative addition of lengthy blocks of text, each with their associated interpolations, which can be detected in the reconstructed archetype, are mainly concentrated within the second “private” part of the MPNS, so this would have further facilitated the tight control of manuscript copies by the group’s leaders. However, these two parts of the MPNS were eventually combined and circulated as single text; the most obvious time when this might have occurred was around the time that the MPNS was taken to the Kashmir region, probably soon after the death of Gautama, the group’s leader.<sup>95</sup>

From there, copies of the MPNS were circulated more widely, eventually reaching mutually remote daughter-groups, each with their own leaders.<sup>96</sup> The ancestors of the three extant recensions originated within such secondary groups, as these second-generation teachers undoubtedly added their own annotations, additions or even alterations to the content due to changes in doctrinal emphasis and exegesis. Indeed, we can deduce that the MPNS was still the object of quite intense use and discussion in this mid-period, judging by the number of further interpolations and changes we can identify in the translations.

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<sup>94</sup> As an example of this kind of *ad hoc* advice, we find in Ch 08, following the well-known absolute prohibition of meat-eating, that the Buddha is asked the practical question of what a monk or nun should do if they receive alms-food mixed with meat. The following sensible advice is then put into his mouth: "They should separate out the meat by washing it with water and then they may eat it." D: 當以水洗令與肉別然後乃食 [T374 p386c8-9, with identical content in F & T] Then there is no transgression of the Vinaya. This surely is a difficulty that the early proponents of the MPNS must have encountered and thus needed urgent advice about dealing with such situations.

<sup>95</sup> There are strong hints in the MMS and MBhS that this Gautama was actually murdered by an angry mob of monastic opponents, echoed in the *avadāna* concerning Bhagadatta and Buddhadatta in Chapter 04 of the MPNS. If true, this would furnish one reason for the MPNS group to remove themselves to Kashmir.

<sup>96</sup> If the devotees of the MPNS were indeed affiliated to the Mahāsāṅghika sect or, more probably, one of its sub-schools, one would expect these daughter-groups to have been located in close proximity to existing Mahāsāṅghika centres outside of the eastern *dakṣiṇā-patha* (the Andhra region). Based on epigraphic and other evidence, their major centres, apart from the Krishna River valley region of Andhra on the coastal plains, were located in i) Great Gandhara (inc Kashmir), ii) around Pāṭaliputra, iii) Mathurā and iv) the western region south of the Vindhya from Bharukaccha down to Karle. Though such centres were located on the major trade-routes across India, contact between these MPNS groups was probably only sporadic, due to the great distances involved.

As these early divergent recensions emerged, we find unmistakable textual evidence in our extant versions of something extremely interesting, hitherto only hypothesized (at best) by some scholars. So far we have accounted for cumulative additions to the archetype, but now something different happened: full-scale conflation of texts on several occasions.<sup>97</sup> Actually, this is a fairly predictable outcome to the expanded geographical range for copies of the MPNS. Although these daughter-groups must often have been quite isolated from each other, there was apparently occasional contact between some of them. Thus, somehow or other, one group would get sight of the now divergent version of the MPNS used by another, distant group. So what happened next? As I hypothesize above, when the MPNS was still being compiled in eastern Andhra or even for a little time after its arrival in Kashmir, the originating group presumably retained enough control over the sutra for them simply to replace old for new, but eventually this would have ceased to be practicable since both of these manuscripts, the incoming version and the host group's version, would each have contained considerable amounts of unique – potentially significant – additions absent in the other, which the host group were reluctant to discard. Naturally, knowing how Buddhists throughout the ages have always wanted the fullest or “complete” version of any given sutra, such a group did the most obvious thing: they merged or conflated the incoming text with their own.

If an annotated “master” copy was the personal property of the group's *ācārya*, it would surely have been a prized heirloom, to be passed on to other members of his groups (*gaṇa*).<sup>98</sup> On the rare occasions when an outside version of

<sup>97</sup> See Schopen (1978) pp pp4-27 for some very pertinent observations. Apart from evidence of conflation, much of what he concludes with reference to the Gilgit *Bhaiṣajya-guru* mss seems equally applicable to the MPNS, especially the "recasting into standardized sūtra phraseology", and the "making explicit in one redaction what is implicit in the other" which we also see repeatedly in the three versions of the MPNS. See also Nattier (2003) pp53-53 for a discussion of similar redactional features she found in the versions of the *Ugra-paripṛcchā*.

<sup>98</sup> Walser (2005) pp139-147 discusses the application of monastic law to the inheritance of texts. Granted that difficulties may have arisen in monasteries where the Mahāyāna followers were in a minority, there must also have been some way around these regulations if they were actually applicable in the case of communities where copies of the MPNS was found. It seems from internal evidence that some method of transmitting the MPNS must have been available to its proponents – for example, commissioning copies is mentioned. There is also the evidence of the very text itself: it clearly was heavily annotated and amended, then must have been passed on to other sympathizers. One should also remember that the MPNS and the related texts imply two events that have some bearing on this matter: first, the proponents of the teachings of the MPNS and the monastic reform it envisages were ejected from their home monasteries at some stage and went to live in less hospitable regions, and secondly, the proponents of the MPNS uprooted themselves from their monastic homeland in the South and took these texts with them to the Greater Gandhāra region. Note also that all three manuscripts of the MPNS that the Chinese pilgrims obtained were owned by individuals – none of them were copies of library exemplars. On the other hand, the base manuscript for the Tibetan translation was

the sutra was encountered, it would be reasonable to assume that the group's own copy would have been taken as the base text, into which material from the incoming version was integrated. Thus the copyist had the two exemplars before him and created a new, third version, incorporating the incoming "foreign" material into his base text, while taking care not to omit anything – sometimes going so far as to duplicate whole clauses or sentences, one from each exemplar, that were basically identical except for a slight difference in wording, the reasons for which will become evident later in this paper.<sup>99</sup>

The implications of this phenomenon are very important for an understanding of the manner in which Mahāyāna sutras have come down to us, even if we know little of the specifics involved. For example, were we to know how frequently a new, merged text was produced, we might be better able to calculate the rate of growth or even age of some Mahāyāna sutras. But at best we can only make informed guesses about these matters. My impression is that such conflations or merges were quite rare – **though in the case of the MPNS, the recension underlying T is quite unequivocally a merged text**, likewise the D recension also shows some signs that it is a conflation, while the F recension does not exhibit any evidence of this at all.<sup>100</sup> Perhaps we are looking at an event which took place once every couple of teaching generations at most. Naturally, some additional copies of the new version would then have been manufactured and circulated and the two "older" versions of the sutra would have been respectfully discarded and lost from sight forever.<sup>101</sup>

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probably a standardized monastic copy, as were the Central Asian Sanskrit texts.

<sup>99</sup> I think it is fair to say that textual study of Mahāyāna sūtras is, unsurprisingly, still in its infancy. Given that this is the case, I am certain that scholars researching this field will gain many insights from the great range of methodologies, analytical techniques and results available for Bible Studies, both for the Tanakh and the New Testament. It is, therefore, interesting to note a similar situation involving conflation outside the Buddhist sphere. Within the field of Gospel Studies, there has long been debate, quite heated at times, concerning the relationship between the three Synoptic Gospels. Here, though the likely textual relationships are not quite the same as the versions of the MPNS, there are also three texts which share much material in common, though the direction of the borrowing has not been settled to everybody's satisfaction. Recently some scholars have revived and improved the so-called Griesbach Hypothesis and argue that the Markan Gospel is a synthesis or conflation of the other two Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The textual evidence these scholars use closely parallels the situation I find with the relationship between the conflated Tibetan version and the two Chinese versions. For those working in the world of Buddhist scholarship, I have included a few relevant books I have found useful or thought-provoking in the Bibliography in the hope that Buddhist Studies may become a little less insular.

<sup>100</sup> We are, of course, discussing here evidence of earlier conflation in the Indic source manuscripts, but it should be noted that the Chinese D translation is contaminated throughout by readings from the Buddhahadra translation.

<sup>101</sup> Or perhaps given as a well-intentioned gift to visiting Chinese monks such as Faxian! Alternatively, one must account for the phenomenon noted by Stein when he uncovered the manuscript fragments at Khadaliq – he found them intentionally placed around the

In this way, the number of distinct recensions available within India would gradually have been reduced, while the copies of the sutra in use would have been more contaminated and homogeneous, through the process known as “levelling”.<sup>102</sup> As far as I am aware, the possibility of actually demonstrating this situation with Mahāyāna sutric literature is unique, due to the clues we can fortuitously derive from the conflated nature of the Tibetan translation. Nevertheless, this state of affairs may be applicable to many other Mahāyāna sutra, but a definitive answer would require intense scrutiny of those texts for which multiple Chinese translations survive, a onerous task only a few scholars currently seem prepared to undertake.

Having discussed the phenomenon at length, it might be useful at this juncture to look at a handful of examples to demonstrate the evidence for these merged or conflated texts – although instances occur throughout the T version of the MPNS with great frequency. I hope that the handful of short, self-explanatory examples presented here are sufficient to illustrate convincingly the results of the conflation process in the case of T – as mentioned above (see Note 80), the highlighted elements in F and D correspond to similarly marked text in T demonstrating the presence of conflated material, while recensionally unique readings set off within brackets (square [F & D] or angle [T & S]). Note that in the Tibetan text, the angle-bracketed elements must, for the most part, derive from material unique to the “incoming” recension, a cousin text of D, although a lesser amount could conceivably have been interpolated somewhat later into the conflated text, although I believe that this final conflated text of the MPNS was transmitted in a fixed, relatively stable manner. The reader may find it helpful to refer to my Stemma (see section below) for relationship between the components of T’s recension.

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temple, by the locations of the shrines, as small, discrete bundles of folios that had been deliberately vertically cut in half (or third). In other words, these manuscripts fragments of the MPNS and other sūtras had been procured by visitors to the oasis *solely* for the purpose of using them as offerings, not as literary works. Given the location of the Khadaliq Oasis on the main caravan route out of Khotan, known as a major library centre in Central Asia, I wonder whether there was some kind of trade there to dispose of old, worn out manuscripts to devout merchants. This may also explain why there are no complete mss of the MPNS, but instead fragments of three separate, very incomplete manuscripts. It is not that the remaining folios of the MPNS have been lost in the harsh desert sands, but they were never there in the first place. This information prompted horrified cries of disbelief from some members of the Munich Workshop when I first mention it there, but one might also recollect the similar fate of Sanskrit texts in China where they were cut up into small pieces for amulets, or worse from our scholarly point of view.

<sup>102</sup> This phenomenon is also well-attested and recognized in later mss exemplars of the New Testament, whereby each Gospel tends to be contaminated by harmonizing readings from the others.

### Example 01

F: 所以者何。越五戒故。 [T882b09]

“Why is that ? [Because] **they infringe the five precepts.**”

D: 如是[比丘]不應親近[供養恭敬]。 [T406a03-04]

“You **should not frequent**, make offering to or honour **such [monks].**”

T: de ltar de lta bu dag dang yang bsten par mi bya na bslab pa'i gzhi lnga'i nyes pa byed pa <de dag lta la bsten du ga la rung> || [Q 102b2-3]

“Thus, if **one should not have any dealings which such people**, <then how less appropriate is it to have dealings with> **those who commit the offences of the five bases of training !**”

Note that this pattern of alternate readings, F: 所以者何 “*katham*” and D: 如是 “*tathā*”, as we see here, is for some reason common throughout the Chinese texts. There is a possibility of the kind of script misreading as I describe in the last section of this paper.

### Example 02

F: 正法則滅。 [T882c27]

“**the authentic Dharma will perish**”

D: 斷滅正法。 [T406b28]

“**causing the extinction of the authentic Dharma**”

T: dam pa'i chos nub par byed cing dam pa'i chos mi snang bar byed par 'gyur te | [Q 104a2]

“This **brings about the decline of the authentic Dharma** and **causes the extinction of the authentic Dharma.**”

### Example 03

F: 佛告迦葉。[究竟]解脫非如虛空。 [T875b12]

The Buddha said to Kāśyapa, “[Ultimate] **liberation is not like space**”.

D: 佛告迦葉。[善男子]、是事不然。 [T396a22]

The Buddha said to Kāśyapa, “<Noble son>, it is not like that”.

T: bka' stsal pa | de lta ma yin te | thar pa ni nam mkha'i khams dang 'dra ba ma yin no || [Q 79b6]

“[The Blessed One] answered, “**No, it is not so. Liberation is not like the element of space.**”



#### Example 04

F: 復次善男子。譬如明月一切衆生皆悉愛樂。 [T891a08-09]

“Moreover, noble son, for example, the shining moon **is delightful to all** beings, . . .”

D: 復次善男子。譬如明月衆生樂見。是故稱月[號爲樂見]。

[T417a10-11]

“Moreover, noble son, for example, the shining moon is **beautiful to behold** for people, **hence the moon is said** <to be beautiful to behold>.”

T: dper na zla ba ni sems can thams cad kyí yíd du 'ong zhíng blta na sdug pa yin pas na de'i phyir ming zla ba zhes bya bya'o || [Q 128b8]

“For example, because the moon is **pleasing** and **beautiful to behold** to **all** beings, **it is called ‘the moon’**.”

#### Example 05

F: 如是[衆生]聞諸契經及諸三昧 . . .

Similarly, people who **have heard** the various sūtras and meditative concentrations, . . .

D: 學大乘者雖修契經一切諸定 . . .

Those who train in the Mahāyāna . . . although they **cultivate** all the sūtras and *samādhis*, . . .

T: de bzhin du theg pa chen po pa rnam kyis kyang mdo sde dang ting nge 'dzin thams cad thos shing bsgoms nas . . .

Similarly, those who follow the Mahāyāna, having **heard** and **cultivated** all the sūtras and meditative concentrations, . . .

S: *evam eva mahāyānīyānāṃ sarvva-sūtra-samādhīn śrutvā bhāvayitvā* |

Similarly, those who follow the Mahāyāna, having **heard** and **cultivated** all the sūtras and meditative concentrations, . . .

#### Example 06

F: 是等衆生生天[人]中。[必得發心爲菩提因]。是故我說犯四重禁  
及無間業[皆得發心]爲菩提因。 [T 893b14-16]

“

**These people will be born amongst the gods and humans** <and will definitely generate the intention, forming the cause of awakening>. Hence I say that even **those who have committed the four grave offences and**

**the heinous deeds of immediate retribution** <will all generate the intention,> forming the cause of awakening.”

D: 犯四重禁及無間罪臨命終時、念[是大乘大涅槃經]、雖墮地獄  
[畜生餓鬼天上]人中。[如是經典亦為是人]作菩提因。除一闍提。  
[T 419c24-27]

“  
**If those who have committed the four grave offences and the heinous deeds of immediate retribution** recollect <this Mahāyāna Mahā-nirvāṇa-sūtra> **at the end of their lives on the verge of death**, then even though they are reborn **in the hells**, <the animal or hungry ghost states, among the gods above> **or amongst humans**, <this sūtra will also for these people> create the cause of awakening, **with the exception of the icchantikas.**”

T: pham pa byed byed pa rnam dang | mtshams med pa byed byed pa rnam 'chi ba'i tshes dran pa ma brjed pa'i <'bras bus> lha'i 'jig rten du skye bar 'gyur te | de nas pham pa byed byed pa dang | mtshams med pa byed byed pa yang dran pa ma brjed pa'i 'bras bus sems can dmyal ba'am | mi'i 'jig rten du byang chub kyi rgyur 'gyur te | 'dod chen pa ni ma gtogs so ||  
[Q 136a2-a3]

“  
Similarly, **those who have committed the downfalls and perpetrate the heinous deeds of immediate retribution** may, as a result of <an unailing> **recollection at the time of death**, **be born in the world of the gods**, and **then those who have committed the downfalls and perpetrate the heinous deeds of immediate retribution** will form the cause of awakening **in the hells or the human realm as a result of** <an unailing> **recollection, with the exception of the icchantikas.**”

#### Example 07

F: 廣說如來真實之性、[非法憍慢]皆悉消滅。[又復憂者]名為大憂、於如來藏慧命根斷、[著]無我說。當知是等名為大憂。是故說憂。  
[T888a26-39]

“**It expounds the true nature of the Tathāgata** (*tathāgata-dhātu*), and it vanquishes all who are immorally arrogant. Furthermore, Ū [signifies] **great misery** for those who **sever their life-root** of insight regarding the *tathāgata-garbha* and are attached to the teaching of no-self. You should know that these [people] are said to be extremely miserable. Hence I teach Ū.”

D: 若有誹謗、當知是人與牛無別。[復次優者是人名爲]無慧 正念、誹謗如來微密祕藏。當知是人甚可憐愍。[遠離如來祕密之藏]、說無我法。是故名優。 [T 413b13-16]

“If anybody **rejects** [this sūtra], you should know that **there is no difference between that person and a cow**. Moreover, Ū [signifies that] this person is said to be devoid of insight and attention and **rejects** the sublime secret *tathāgata-garbha*-[sūtra]. You should know that **this person** is extremely pitiful, for they are far distant from the secret *tathāgata-garbha*, expounding the non-self teachings. Hence it is Ū.”

T: <mdo sde> 'dī las de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po bstan pa spong bar byed pa gang yin pa de dag ni ba lang dang 'dra ste | <dper na> drin du mi gzo ba <bdag gis> bdag gsad par sems pa de dag mchog tu mya ngan du bya ba de bzhin du de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po spangs nas | bdag med pa ston pa'i sems can gang yin pa de dag ni mchog tu mya ngan du bya ba yin par rig par bya'o || de bas na ū zhes bya'o || [Q 119b7-120a1]

“**Those who reject the teaching** given in <this sūtra> **concerning the tathāgata-garbha are just like cattle**. <For example>, just as **ungrateful** people who intend to **commit suicide** will cause <themselves> **extreme misery**, similarly you should know **those people who reject** the *tathāgata-garbha* and teach no-self cause themselves extreme misery. Hence, it is Ū.”

Even with this tiny handful of examples, I believe the reality of a conflated merge of two sources is now indisputably obvious. These are far from isolated occurrences – some degree of textual duplication in the above manner can be detected in every paragraph throughout the Tibetan translation of the MPNS.

Now, in the above examples, the results of this duplication due to subtle variations in the source texts are not too drastic, but that is not always the case. Indeed, the resultant text as reflected in T is quite garbled at times, distorting the presumed underlying authorial intent which we may reconstruct from either F or D. It would seem that the copyist tried to create something he thought was meaningful from the two sources, by taking words or phrases and rewriting the text at random in order to integrate both sets of material – resulting in a veritable “word salad”. This phenomenon is not infrequent in T and must have rather serious implications for anybody relying on T to set up hypotheses concerning doctrine or any other aspect of the sutra, a problem which is further complicated by the incorporation of interlinear glosses and headings. The following two examples should suffice to illustrate the consequences well enough.

## Examples 07

F: 戒[無麁細]當[堅固]持、爲佛性故。若言九部[不]說[衆生皆]有佛性、又方等經亦說非我、是爲誹謗九部契經。 [T882a01-04]

“One should <firmly> uphold the moral code, <with no distinction between light and grave offences>, on account of the *buddha-dhātu*. If one were to say that the nine branches of scriptures do not state that <all beings> have *buddha-dhātu*, and moreover that the Extensive [Sūtras] too expound not-self, then this would be a denigration of the sūtras of the nine branches of scriptures.”

D: [若不]護持禁戒、云何當得[見於佛性]? [一切衆生 雖]有佛性。[要因持戒然後乃見。因見佛性]得成阿耨多羅三藐三菩提。九部經中無方等經、是故不說有佛性也。[經雖不說當知實有。若作是說。當知是人真我弟子]。 [T405a19-23]

“[If one does not] maintain the moral code, how will one come [to perceive *buddha-dhātu*]? [Although all beings] have *buddha-dhātu*, [it is necessary to first uphold the moral code and then one will later perceive it. As a result of perceiving *buddha-dhātu*], one will attain the supreme and perfect awakening. The Extensive [Sūtras] are not included among the nine branches of scriptures, therefore they do not mention the existence of *buddha-dhātu*. [Even though these sūtras do not mention it, you should know it truly exists. You should know that those people who speak thus are my true disciples]”.

T: ji zhig bzung ste tshul khirms srung zhe na | sangs rgyas kyi khams yod la gsung rab yan lag dgu'i tshul gyis sangs rgyas su 'gyur ba'i <rtog pa gcig pus> sems can thams cad la sangs rgyas kyi khams yod do zhes bya ba dang | shin tu rgyas pa las bdag med pa'i <mchog yod do> zhes smra ba ni gsung rab yan lag dgu'i tshul gyis mdo sde spong ba <ma> yin no || <gzhan du na ni de ltar 'gyur ro> || [Q 100b4-5]

“With reference to what does one safeguard the moral code? While the *buddha-dhātu* does exist, neither the statement that ‘the *buddha-dhātu* is present in all beings’, [uttered] <with the sole intention (*ekena kalpena*) that> one will become awakened (*buddha*) according to the principles of the nine branches of scriptures, nor the statement that ‘<the supremacy of> the non-existence of self is found in the Extensive [sūtras]’, amount to the rejection of the sutras (*sūtra-pratikṣepa*) according to the principles of the nine branches of the scriptures, <but [to claim] anything else would>.”

The original, simple form of the text underlying the versions may plausibly be reconstructed thus:

“You should uphold the moral code, on account of the *buddha-dhātu*. If you say that the nine-fold scriptures do not teach that all beings have *buddha-dhātu*, but teach no-self <so also the *vaitulya-sūtras*> this is a rejection of the nine-fold scriptures.”

Note also the mention of the “*vaitulya sūtras*” (方等經), contextually likely to be an early interpolation, even at the stage of the F base-manuscript. Through an incremental accretion of comments culminating in the conflation underlying T, we can see how the text became increasingly garbled and eventually arrived at the confused mess presented by T.

## 9. Provisional Stemma

Having discovered that T is based upon a conflated text formed from the merging of two older texts, it has been possible to devise a tentative stemma that takes into consideration the textual evidence of the three extant versions. To elucidate this, I shall now discuss the complex relationship between the three extant versions and their relative value, so the reader will now find it useful to refer to the appended Stemma Diagram at the end of this Paper.

If one takes the time to compare minutely the text of two Chinese versions (F & D) with the Tibetan translation (T), one can see that the latter was based on a recension that combined i) a text ( $\kappa$ ) related to the base text ( $\lambda$ ) of F and ii) one ( $\iota$ ) related slightly more distantly in terms of content to the base text of D ( $\mu$ ). That is to say, we can relate this pair of texts recensionally to the Faxian and Dharmakṣema versions, but at the same time we must recognize that those source texts were closer to the hyparchetype ( $\gamma$ ) for that branch of the stemma. In other words,  $\lambda$  (F) later acquired its own unique additions amounting to approximately 10% of the whole text in F, while  $\mu$  (D) was augmented to a greater extent with other additions or even outright alterations, amounting to over 25% of the extant text in D. This may be because  $\mu$  (D) is itself the result of another merge between  $\zeta$  and  $\eta$ , thus combining the accumulated additions going back to  $\beta$  and  $\delta$  respectively.<sup>103</sup>

We can also establish that  $\lambda$ , the base text of F, and the affiliated merge component  $\kappa$  are closely related as they share certain tell-tale textual features carried over into the merged text ( $\nu$ ) as represented by the Tibetan translation. The situation with D is more complicated, as it seems that the ancestor of Dharmakṣema’s Kashmiri manuscript ( $\mu$ ) is not directly related to the other component of the merged version. Instead there was a stemmatic split in the D hyparchetype ( $\delta$ ), with one branch ( $\eta$ ) forming a partial ancestor to D and another ( $\theta$ ) forming the ancestor of the merge component ( $\iota$ ).

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<sup>103</sup> I believe traces of a conflation can be detected in D, but these are naturally more difficult to detect since there is no "control" text for that part of the stemma. At best, the signs of a conflation can only be seen where there are adjacent duplications of content in D, as we also see more readily in T.

When we analyze T, there are four categories of text therein: i) material shared by both F and D, ii) material only found in F, iii) material only found in D, and iv) material in neither F nor D. Once it was created, the conflated text (v) seems to have quite stable, so I am inclined to think that this last set of readings derives primarily from ι rather than κ, since the text of F (λ) – going back to its hyparchetype – must preserve a more conservative or older state than D (ι), for reasons I shall give later in this paper. But this is not to say that some types of additions did not derive from κ – that seems the probable source of a number of interlinear headings. Finally, I also assume that the places where the various hyparchetypes were developed were geographically located at some distance from each other within India, as I shall now discuss.

## 10. Dating & Location Of MPNS Merges

Having thus established that texts of the MPNS were merged and conflated on at least two occasions, it would be useful if we could possibly pinpoint when and where this happened. One clue that may help us narrow down the date when the conflation which produced the ancestor of all the Central Asian fragments and the version underlying the Tibetan translation is the quotation from the MPNS found in the *Ratna-gotra-vibhāga-vyākhyā*,<sup>104</sup> which also derives from this specific conflation.<sup>105</sup> We know that the Chinese translation of the RGVV, containing this passage, was done around 508-515CE, thus establishing an absolute *terminus ad quem* for that text. However, given that the *Laṅkāvatara-sūtra* (LAS) was apparently unknown to the authors of the RGVV, Takasaki Jikido believes that the compilation of the RGVV must predate 433CE when the first translation of the LAS was produced in China.<sup>106</sup> As the LAS would have been available in India for some decades before that first Chinese translation, we might tentatively date the RGVV to c400-410, which would give a revised *terminus ad quem* for the conflated MPNS to c400.

Such a date seems entirely plausible when taken in conjunction with the dates proposed for the MPNS manuscripts obtained by Dharmakṣema, Faxian and Zhimeng in Part I of this paper – namely, around 350 for Faxian, 375 for Dharmakṣema and 410 for Zhimeng. Since neither Faxian’s nor Dharmakṣema’s text of the MPNS derives from the merged version underlying the Tibetan translation, it follows that it was simply not available to them. If we suppose that the merged version had been produced during the first decades of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, it must have taken a little while to replace the older versions such as we see with the Faxian and Dharmakṣema exemplars. But what about Zhimeng’s manuscript, obtained in

<sup>104</sup> RGV ed Johnston (1950) 74.22-75.11, parallel to MPNS Q33b4-34a2 etc.

<sup>105</sup> The Sanskrit text quoted in the RGVV is very close to the Tibetan translation of the MPNS, though not quite identical.

<sup>106</sup> Takasaki 1966 p53, 56. It should also be noted that a *terminus ad quem* for the LAS can be raised by about 75 years since it is reported in the catalogues that Dharmakṣema also made a translation of the LAS although this is now lost.

Pāṭaliputra from the same household as Faxian got his ? Obviously it is difficult to come to any definite conclusions about Zhimeng’s copy as his translation no longer survives, but I think that the meagre evidence we do possess points to a strong possibility that it was actually a copy of revised, conflated text. As we saw above, the length of Zhimeng’s translation is always given as twenty *juan*, but this figure must be an error for just ten or perhaps twelve *juan*. This is clearly much longer than the amount of Chinese text that Faxian’s manuscript yielded, although Zhimeng’s translation is said to have covered the same extent in terms of chapters as Faxian’s. In other words, we might say that Zhimeng’s copy was “the same as but different to” Faxian’s manuscript. Indeed, if Zhimeng had been given an identical copy of the MPNS, is it likely that he would have bothered to translate it ? So this leads us to conclude that Zhimeng got a copy of the new, conflated version of the MPNS which had very recently arrived in Pāṭaliputra – at the household of a devout lay-follower renowned for his extensive collection of Mahāyāna sutra. Therefore, on the basis of the RGVV evidence and the dates for Zhimeng’s sojourn in Pāṭaliputra, we may surmise that this conflated version of the MPNS was created some time between 400 and 410CE, but outside of the Pāṭaliputra area.

Finally, we can also make an informed guess about the provenance of the conflated MPNS which went on to become the standardized library copy of this sutra. Although there is no space here to elaborate, there is good internal evidence that the MPNS first saw the light of day within a Mahāsāṅghika milieu, as mentioned earlier. Considering the five major Mahāsāṅghika centres of eastern Andhra, the western coastal area south of Bharukaccha, Kashmir-Gandhāra, Mathurā and Pāṭaliputra (See Fig 01 at end), I think we can rule out all of them for obvious reasons except Mathurā and the Bharukaccha area. Of these two remaining candidates, Mathurā seems more appealing to pinpoint as the place where the conlating merge was carried out, due to its central location upon the junction of major transcontinental highways.<sup>107</sup> It is also sufficiently distant from Kashmir-Gandhāra and Pāṭaliputra, accounting for the initial unavailability of the merged text within those two areas. There is also a textual hint that Mathurā was connected with the MPNS group of sutras, since Mathurā is specifically mentioned in an example-story in the MMS.<sup>108</sup> In my Stemma, I have referred to the Zhi-meng copy as the “Mathurā” manuscript purely as a matter of convenience, though, as I hope to have shown here, perhaps with some justification.

## 11. Language of the MPNS

The textual situation of the MPNS as a whole is complex enough just with the additions and confluations described above, but this complexity is exponentially

<sup>107</sup> We might also note that Damsteegt (1978) hypothesizes that the transposition of Buddhist Prakrit texts into some form of Sanskrit was first undertaken in Mathurā. This is an intriguing possibility in view of the Sanskritization of the text of the MPNS around this period. See next section for details of this.

<sup>108</sup> MBhS Q *tshu* p98b1-4, T270 p292c13.

compounded by the question of the languages we must assume underlie the extant versions.

It is now commonly accepted that the original language of the early Mahāyāna sutras was some form of Prakrit (MIA language), rather than Sanskrit or even BHS. Convincing evidence for this has been identified by a number of scholars, usually by means of retroversion of words in the early Chinese translations of Mahāyāna texts.<sup>109</sup> If my proposed dating for the initial formation of the MPNS is correct, then we should assume that it too must have been written in a Prakrit dialect rather than Sanskrit, even were corroborative evidence entirely lacking.<sup>110</sup> But, in fact, using the same techniques of retroversion and other evidence, we can show that such must have been the case with the MPNS, at least down to the time of the archetype ( $\alpha$ ) of the text, if not later. In other words, the two main recensional lineages of  $\beta$  and  $\gamma$  were necessarily still transmitted in a Prakrit dialect at the time of their separation.

To summarize my conclusions in brief, I believe the following hypothesis best accounts for the textual evidence. The language of the base manuscript ( $v$ ) for the Tibetan translation was very similar to that found in the Central Asian Sanskrit fragments,<sup>111</sup> that is, Sanskrit in terms of overall phonetic structure, orthography and morphology, but with not infrequent traces of a MIA language, especially in the verse segments.<sup>112</sup> Likewise, we can assume from internal evidence that the base

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<sup>109</sup> Recent discoveries of Gāndhārī manuscripts have also confirmed that at least some early Mahāyāna sutras were available in that MIA language, though not necessarily first composed in it. See Allon & Salomon, "New Evidence for Mahāyāna in Early Gandhāra", *The Eastern Buddhist*, 41/1 (2010) pp1-22 and Harry Falk & Seishi Karashima, "A First-century Prajñāpāramitā manuscript from Gandhāra" ARIRIAB No 15 pp19-62.

<sup>110</sup> Apart from the specialists working on this aspect of the formation of Mahāyāna, there seems to be a popular assumption that these early Mahāyāna sūtras were written in India using the Gandharā Prakrit, but this is hardly likely to have been the case. No doubt some, of local composition, may have been written in Gāndhārī, but the majority probably made use of other regional Prakrits. On the other hand, there is evidence that these may well have undergone a secondary transcription into Gāndhārī, using the *kharoṣṭhi* script, as they entered that region. Given the high degree of certainty that the MPNS group of texts originated in the eastern coastal area of Andhra, they would have probably used an eastern dialect, but not the Mahāraṣṭrī dialect widely used within the Sātavāhana empire. To preempt my later discussion of this, for the MPNS, the evidence of retroversion points to a kind of Prakrit that resembled Pāli in many, but not all, phonological features. Retroversion works best in the case of the MPNS with single words, so we cannot say much about the morphological features of its Prakrit.

<sup>111</sup> See Habata (2007a) pp lvi-lxxv concerning the phonology and morphology of the Central Asian fragments. The features she observes in the language of the fragments that parallel aspects of the Niya Prakrit are not entirely surprising as it is recognized that the Niya Prakrit is related to the Prakrit of Gandhāra, from whence it is probable that the intermediate ancestor of the underlying Sanskrit manuscript of T originated.

<sup>112</sup> It is possible that the base text for the Tibetan translation was itself Central Asian in origin, partly in view of the colophon which knows of the idea that the extant MPNS was part of a longer work. This information may have originated with the similar claims of



manuscript ( $\mu$ ) for D was similarly written in Sanskrit, again with some remnant elements of a MIA language. But, as I shall show shortly, this was not the case with the base manuscript ( $\lambda$ ) for F, which must have completely retained the earlier MIA language – and by that I mean something akin to Pāli, though with some phonological differences, rather than an early BHS. In other words, the Faxian-Buddhabhadra translation was based on an earlier Prakrit, not Sanskrit, text.

If earlier states of the MPNS were written in a Prakrit dialect, while the underlying language of two of our extant versions could basically be characterized as quasi-Sanskrit, then necessarily the text of the MPNS must have been converted from Prakrit to Sanskrit on at least one occasion. One clue which may help us pinpoint when this transposition occurred may be found in the verse segments. Within the MPNS, there are several chapters containing extended verse passages. We can classify these into two groups: those which are doctrinally or exegetically “significant” and thus important for the message of the MPNS and those which are relatively “insignificant”. The “significant” ones include the block of verses found in the middle of Ch 13 dealing with the *buddha-dhātu*, the versified list of questions found early in Ch 05 and the *udāna*-style verses found dotted around the MPNS in several places, but especially in Ch 18. Verse sequences which one might consider less important are chiefly the verses of supplication or praise, found primarily in Chapters 03, 04 and 18.

What is immediately noticable when we compare these two categories of verses is that the “significant” ones are recognizably similar in the two Chinese and Tibetan translations, whereas the “insignificant” verse segments exhibit major divergences between D & T and F, to the extent that they sometimes seem to have no common basis whatsoever. We may conclude two things from this. First, the similarity of the “insignificant” verses in the D and T recensions indicate that these verses took shape at the time of the hyparchetype  $\delta$ , then being transmitted into the conflated base manuscript of D ( $\mu$ ) via  $\eta$  and into the conflated base manuscript of T ( $\nu$ ) via  $\theta$ .<sup>113</sup> Even allowing for stylistic idiosyncracies, there is no reason to suppose that the rendering of these verses in the F recension does not represent the content of the underlying Prakrit.<sup>114</sup> In other words, F preserves the original content of these verses, while in many cases those in D and T must have been rewritten previously. The most plausible explanation for this feature is that the original verses were largely discarded as part of the transposition process, which thus must have been done around the time of the hyparchetype  $\delta$ . If this was the

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Dharmakṣema.

<sup>113</sup> At the time of the conflation which produced  $\nu$ , we must assume that the Prakrit text of  $\kappa$  was also Sanskritized at the same time to bring it into line with  $\iota$ , but here again the Prakrit verses were discarded in favour of the reworked Sanskrit verses from the earlier  $\theta$ .

<sup>114</sup> If they were able to adequately translate Prakrit verses found elsewhere in the MPNS, there is no reason to suppose that the Buddhabhadra team replaced any of these verses with their own compositions for any supposed linguistic difficulties. Indeed, the verse portion found in the middle of Chapter 13 lapses into prose in D and T after a while, while F continues on in verse for several pages more.

case, then one might conclude that the redactor, even though understanding the language well enough, found the task of converting the original Prakrit verses in Sanskrit too onerous because of problems he would have encountered with the metre. Nevertheless, in the case of the “significant” verses, where we find overall similarity in all the versions, we must assume that the extra effort involved on the part of the redactor was unavoidable because of the essential nature of their content to the MPNS.

For these reasons, we can place the occasion of Sanskritization of the MPNS in the relative chronology of the stemma with reasonable confidence, though an absolute dating for this event is completely speculative. Additionally, though it depends upon further research to confirm the likelihood, there are some hints in the present text of D that parts of that recensional lineage of the MPNS were also transposed into Sanskrit on a subsequent, separate occasion, when the text of ζ was being integrated into the already Sanskritized text of η. That is to say, the text of ζ may still have been transmitted in the original MIA language and thus needed to be transposed to produce μ, the ancestor of D.

## **12. The Prakrit Basis of the Buddhahadra-Faxian Text**

### **A. Overview**

I have suggested that the base manuscript used by the Buddhahadra team was still transmitted largely in the MIA we can assume was the medium for the text of the MPNS from the time of its composition. This can be demonstrated repeatedly by the well-known technique of retroversion which is often necessary to reconcile major variations we note throughout the text of the Buddhahadra-Faxian translation. That is to say, where D and T are in agreement and F presents something apparently quite different, we should not immediately conclude we are faced with a recensional difference. By reconstructing the likely term underlying the Tibetan and the Chinese versions into Sanskrit, and then converting this to a generalized Prakrit phonology -- I find that that of Pāli usually works well -- it often becomes possible to establish some common ground between D & T and F, although one must additionally be alert to the possibility of some degree of the type of script misreadings and confusions I describe later. In other words, it becomes apparent that these variants could only have arisen if the base manuscript of F used a Prakrit as its medium. Needless to say, we can only detect Prakritisms in F when it diverges from D and T. Moreover, it should be noted that in many, but not all, such cases, it seems that the rendering in found in F is incorrect, as will be seen in several of the examples below at the end of this Paper.

There is still much work to be done with this reconstruction of the MIA basis of the MPNS, as I cannot claim to have resolved any more than a fraction of the potential Prakrit words occurring in F which we can probably deduce by this method. However, through a certain degree of experience, I have been able to refine the phonology and orthography of the language we should expect to find underlying the Buddhahadra-Faxian version. Although the typical features of Pāli

are useful as a rough starting point, the MIA language that seems to have been used differs in some key details despite overall similarities. For example, while “*kṣa*” becomes “*kkha*” in Pāli, the MPNS language often has “*ccha*” and the treatment of “*r*” differs, while de-gemination and the disregard of *anusvara*, especially after a long vowel, is widespread, in common with epigraphical Prakrit, as will be seen in some of the following examples. Other features include a weakening of aspirates, such as *bh* > *b* > *v*, a blurred distinction between voiced and unvoiced sounds (*krta* > *kata* > *gata*), and a transposition of “*r*” and “*l*” as, for example, when F consistently has “*sāra*” (solid, firm) for “*sāla*” (the *Sāla* tree). We cannot always determine the source of these features, as they may either be a genuine phonological feature of the text or may be oral in origin at the time of translation in China.

It is difficult to draw any conclusions regarding *vibhakti* and other inflections of this MIA at present, as I have mainly worked at the level of individual words until now, although one can assume that the well-attested decay and conflation of nominal *vibhaktis* are responsible for many of the syntactical variants found among our witnesses. However, one interesting fact has become clear: the underlying MPNS Prakrit shows none of the distinctive signs of Gāndhārī nor the use of the *kharoṣṭhī* script at all.<sup>115</sup> If anything, I have found the phonology of South Indian epigraphical Prakrit, as described by Mehendale (1948), to share many features with the forms necessitated through retroversion.<sup>116</sup>

I have assumed that the presence of an MIA underlying F – with traces in D and T – is due to the actual written use of such a language for the compilation of the MPNS, but it might be argued, as Boucher (1998) has done, that such discernable Prakrit features are actually an artefact of the oral-aural process of translation. I concede that in some cases this may be a plausible explanation, but overall I think that this is an unlikely explanation here. There are a number of cogent reasons why we must instead accept the existence of a MIA language document through several phases of the stemma, given the widespread use of Prakrits now accepted during the early period at which the MPNS seems to have been compiled – we may note that the *varṇa-patha* used as the basis of the exegesis of the *akṣaras* in Chapter 14 presuppose a Prakrit basis rather than Sanskrit – such as the use of “*ñāna*” for “*jñāna*” and the “*ḷa*” in F instead of the “*kṣa*” in D and T.

However, if these Prakritisms were a result of the vagaries of an orally conducted translation process within the Buddhābhadrā team, we must wonder why the same phenomenon is not apparent to any similar extent in other work

<sup>115</sup> On the other hand, it is noteworthy that another text belonging to the MPNS group, the *Mahāmegha-sūtra*, does show signs of having passed through *kharoṣṭhī* script at some stage due to script confusions specific to that writing system. This will be discussed in the projected second Paper in this series. Note also that the *Mahāmegha-sūtra* was translated by Dharmakṣema, so it is possible he was literate in that script too.

<sup>116</sup> The observations of Damsteegt (1978) concerning the relationship between early epigraphical Sanskrit and Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit are especially pertinent – a similar relationship may obtain between early epigraphical Prakrits (apart from Pāli) and early Mahāyāna texts such as the MPNS.

produced by that team. We have several translations of texts of considerable length such as a version of the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* and the *Mahāsāṅghika-vinaya* – for both of which we have extant portions of Sanskrit – which we may use to “quality-control” the team’s work. Yet, as far as I have been able to ascertain, these other translations do not exhibit anything approaching the range and quantity of Prakritisms as we find in their version of the MPNS. In which case, we must wonder what went wrong with their rendering of the MPNS. It would make more sense if this text was entirely written in a Prakrit, possibly a dialect less familiar to them, combined with an unhelpful orthography that disregarded *anusvaras*, long vowels and gemination, which caused them difficulties at the moment of translation. This becomes more understandable when we note that they may also have had difficulties just reading the manuscript – after all, the many script confusions must have originated either with the copyists in India or with the translation team.

Other reasons that tilt the balance in favour of a *written* Prakrit text may be seen within the text preserved by the Sanskrit fragments, since these too show a number of MIA features, as described by Habata.<sup>117</sup> As I have shown earlier, I believe that the antecedent of these Sanskrit fragments was a product of the transposition of a heavily Prakrit text into the usual quasi-Sanskrit or BHS. Habata notes similarities between these MIA features and the language of the Niya documents, but it would be worthwhile to examine whether these are also found in the South Indian Prakrit. Even if they do turn out to be closer to the North-Western~Niya dialect, this does not rule out an earlier South Indian origin as these features may be simply be a result of contamination or local scribal habits, since manuscripts of the MPNS obviously passed through and were copied in those regions. Indeed, the situation with the language of the various versions of the MPNS is probably quite complex – in the course of my research, I have also noted a few phonological features which are more typical of the North-West in Dharmakṣema’s versions, as one might expect.

## **B. Examples**

Some of the most common Prakrit features encountered in the MPNS are illustrated by the following examples:

### **Example 01**

As this was the word that first alerted me to the possibility of a Prakrit substrate to the Buddhahadra-Faxian translation, it seems fitting that this short selection of examples should commence with the complexity surrounding the various mentions of the personal name “Meṇḍaka”.

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<sup>117</sup> See Habata 2007, Introduction p55 (lv) etc.

**F:** 彌羅耆羅 = \*mji-la-kfji-la (later given as 羊頭) [F 880c04, 899b06]

**D:** 羴羴德 = “ram-virtue” [D 403b16,427c28]

**T:** *lug-dpal* = “ram-noble” [Q 96a3, 155b8]

The actual form of this well-known brahmin’s name is *Meṇḍaka* “*meṇḍa + ka*”, that is, “ram” + “-ka” suffix. Each version above understands the first element correctly as “ram”, but have been misled by an evident distortion of the suffix due to voicing and other changes. The transcribed version of the name in F can be retroverted to *meḷagira*. I suggest the following changes to the standard form of the name leads to that underlying the transcription in F: *meṇḍaka* > *meṇḍaga* > *meḍaga* > *meḷaga* > understood as *meḷagga* (= Skt \**meṇḍa+agra*) > *meḷagira* with an epenthetic *i*,<sup>118</sup> regardless of whether each of these stages actually occurred in the texts. We should note features of the underlying Prakrit here, such as the typical voicing of *ka* and the denasalizing or loss of the *anusvara*.

However, the second element of the name seems to have been read differently in the case of D (德) and T (*dpal*), and the other, translated occurrence of the name in F (頭). What has happened here and can we reconcile these three versions? The most obvious word which would unite D and T is *śrī* (= *śiri*), in which case the translated version of the name in F must have read *śiri* > *śira* (head) – this confusion was not uncommon as is attested elsewhere. The final piece of the puzzle is how to reconcile a “*g*” in F’s transcription and the “*ś*” for “*śira*” in the other three versions. The answer is quite simple: in the Brahmi script of the period, these two *akṣaras* – “*g*” and “*ś*” – are among the most frequently confused due to their great similarity.

### Example 02

**F:** 百葉 = \**sata-paṇṇa* > \**śata-parṇa* (“hundred-leaved”) [F 874c13]

**D:** 七葉 = \**sapta-parṇa* (“seven-leaved”) [D 377b01]

**T:** *sap-ta par-na* = *sapta-parṇa* (“seven-leaved”) [Q 147a8]

The reading in F has de-gemination (*sata* > *satta*) and change of palatal “*śa*” to dental “*sa*” – both common features of many Prakrits. These features are necessitated in retroversions throughout F. Note that while F here presupposes the dental “*sa*” for “*śa*”, in the previous example the script misreading must be derived

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<sup>118</sup> Occasionally one finds 羅 used in transcriptions for “*ḍa*”, but that is unlikely to be the case here since F uses 荼 for “*ḍa*” and 羅 for “*ḷa*” as demonstrated by the equivalents found in the *varṇa-patha* in Chapter 14.

from a “śa”. This may indicate, predictably enough, that the text of the MPNS passed through various Pkt zones, each with differing phonologies in this instance.

### Example 03

F: 平等性 = \**sama-dhātu* (“sameness of *dhātu*”) [F 886a01]

T: *yang-dag-pa'i kham*s = *samyag-dhātu* (“true *dhātu*”) [Q 113a6]

The confusion between *sama* and *sammā* (Skt: *samyak*) is very common in F. This presupposes a disregard for vowel length and gemination. The reading in F is contextually viable, if not probable.

### Example 04

F: 糗糧 = \**āmisa* [*āmiṣa*] (“provisions”) [F 865b09]

T: *brdzun-pa* = *mṛṣā* (“a lie, falsehood”) [Q 44a2]

Contextually, T conserves the expected reading. Note that in Pāḷi we would have *āmisa* and *musā* respectively, but the treatment of “ṛ” is the Pkt underlying the MPNS is not certain. (Cf. example 10 below)

### Example 05

F: 主制 = \**bhaṭṭa-kāraka* (“impositions of master”) [F 873b05]

T: *g.yos-byed-pa* = *bhakta-kāraka* (“a cook”) [Q 71a8]

Here *kāraka* has been interpreted differently due to the differing reading of the first element: F: *bhaṭṭa-kāraka* > *bhatta-kāraka* > T: *bhakta-kāraka*

### Example 06

F: 師 = \**satthā* [F 876b03]

D: 最尊最勝 = \**śreṣṭha* [D 397a27]

T: *ston-pa* = *śāstā* (*śāstr*) [Q 82b3]

This illustrates an error that would have occurred when D was being calqued into Sanskrit, reading *satthā* (*śāstā*) as though it were *setṭha* > *śreṣṭha*. Contextually, FT conserve the expected reading, as in *śāstā devānāṃ ca manuṣyānāṃ ca*.

### Example 07

F: 四種功德 = \*cattāri-'ttha 'ti [F 888c05]  
“the four types of virtues”

D: 在在處處 = \*yatra tiṣṭhati (= yattha tiṭṭhati) [D 414a04]  
“in various places”

T: *don bzhi po rnam*s = *catvāry-arthāḥ iti* [Q 121a3]  
“the four aims”

To reconcile FT with D, one must retrovert to a Prakrit phrase which is subject to both script misreading and incorrect word division. Confusions of “ti” with “ri” and “ya” with “ca” are not uncommon.

### Example 08

F: 疾得免衆苦 輪迴生死惑 [F 884c14]  
“will swiftly eliminate the mass of sufferings  
and confusions of the cycle of life and death (*samsāra*).”

D: 亦名正遍見 故爲佛所稱 [D 409c24]  
“It is also called the ‘universal view’,  
hence it is praised by the Buddha.”

T: *kun tu spyan yang de yis nges par 'byung ||*  
*<lam 'di> bde bar gshegs pas bsngags pa ste ||* [Q 110b8]  
“Even the All-seeing are released by it.  
This path is commended by the Sugata”

This example illustrates how far F can apparently deviate due to a different reading of the underlying text. DT would have read *samanta-ca*kṣu / *samanta-ca*kkhu (“all-seeing”) against *samsāra-du*kkha (the sufferings of *samsāra*) in F. To account for this variation in F, we again must assume a series of three common script-misreadings, based on a Prakrit text: *ma* > *sa*, *ta* > *ra*, *ca* > *du*. The apparent elision of *anusvāra* in *samam*ta is also common in F’s underlying Prakrit orthography. Note also that here, as elsewhere “kṣ” is often “kkh” in the underlying Prakrit.

### Example 09

F: 常不欲與犯戒者爭。 [F 867c01]  
“Constantly he does not desire to dispute (*vigraham* > *vinaye*) with those who transgress the precepts.”

D: 善學戒律不近破戒。 [D 384c14]

“[he] trains in the *vinaya* and shuns those who transgress the precepts.”

T: 'dul ba la slob par byed do || tshul khrims 'chal pa ni . . . spangs la

[Q 50b7]

“[Thus] he trains in the *vinaya*, shunning immoral wrong-doers (*duḥśīla*), . . .”

S: *vinaye* śikṣate | kṣepaṃ kṛtvā duḥśīlaḥ . . .

“He trains in the *vinaya*. Shunning the immoral, . . .”

Apart from the manifestly different syntactical understanding in F, here we have *icchate* (desires) in F for \**sicchate* [= *śikṣate*] (“trains in”) as underlying D & T and extant in S – this is an instance where “*cch*” > “*kṣ*”. Note also the misreading of *vigahe* (*vigrahaṃ*) for *vinaye* in F.

#### Example 10

F: 甘露法食 = \**anna-amata* (*anna-amṛta*) [F 868b26]

“ambrosia (*amṛta*) food”

T: 'bras-chan zhim-po = *anna-mṛṣṭaṃ* [Q 54a2]

“clean / pure food”

There is confirmation elsewhere that F’s Prakrit reads *amata* for *amṛta*, so the variant reading here must be \**amata* > [a]maṭa > [a]maṭṭa > \**mṛṣṭa* – note that Pāli has the alternative forms *maṭṭa* and *maṭṭha* for *mṛṣṭa*. There is evidence elsewhere in the MPNS that the underlying Prakrit used dentals for retroflexes on occasion. Moreover, *sandhi* would not have been observed between *anna* + *amata* – certainly a long vowel would not have been generated by the juncture of the two vowels here.

#### Example 11

F: 漸漸長大 (also 漸漸增) [F 883c08]

“as they gradually grow up” = \**pavuddhaṃ*

T: *gsal-bar-gyur-ba* [Q 107a3]

“is clever/perspicacious” = \**paṭutvaṃ* (cf Skt here)



There seems to have been a reading in F here of “vu” for “tu”, presupposing a Prakrit environment which allowed *pavudham* [S: *pravṛddham*] (“grown [up]”), instead of *paṭutvaṃ* (“sharpness, perspicacity”).

### Example 12

As mentioned above, the well-known confusion between *yāna* and *jñāna*, arising from a hypothetical *\*jāna*, which occurs in a number of early Mahāyāna sutras is also found throughout the MPNS. Given that the MPNS was originally of South Indian composition, we must suppose that this confusion arose outside that area, since the MIA in that area had “*ñā*” for “*jñā*”. This can be ascertained in Chapter 14, where the head-word for “*ñā*” was “*ñāṇa*”. Generally speaking, when this variant occurs, *yāna* is found in F and *jñāna* in D, suggesting that D was influenced by some local Gāndhārā-Kashmiri phonological feature, as one might predict.<sup>119</sup>

D: 三寶平等相 常有大智性 [D 409c21]  
 “The Three Jewels are identical in character:  
 they ever have the nature of ***mahā-jñāna***”

T: thub pa chen po rtag tu yang ||  
 gzhi gsum po ni mnyam pa nyid || [Q 110b7]  
 “O **Great Sage**, forever identical  
 are the three grounds (*samatā*)”

To uncover the variant reading here, we must first correct a Tibetan script error in T where “*thub-pa chen-po*” (= *mahā-muni*) is surely a misreading of “*theg-pa chen-po*” (Mahāyāna).<sup>120</sup> Thereupon, the familiar *mahā-yāna* > *mahā-jñāna* contrast becomes apparent. It is noteworthy that this lemma is not found in F, but as noted above, this ambivalence is found elsewhere in all three witnesses.

### Example 13

F: 布薩者[長養]二種義。 [F 869b26]  
 “‘**Posa**’: [to nurture] has two senses” = *\*posa 'ti* (nourishing)

T: *gnyi-ga'i don-las* *gso-bar-byed-pa* [Q 56b6]

<sup>119</sup> In addition to Karashima (1993) cited above, Boucher (1998) p491 also discusses this phenomenon.

<sup>120</sup> Before the adoption of xylographic printing, Tibetan manuscripts were, of course, transmitted in hand-written form. Because perhaps of the vast amounts of text to be copied out, there is extensive evidence that the scribes used a semi-cursive script for speed in which a *tsheg* is written with a small vertical stroke as seen in normal *dbu-med* script. An *dbu-med* “ga” then is easy to mistake for a final *~b + tsheg*, with the vowel sign “e” of “*theg*” possibly wrongly associated with the line above.

“because it **nurtures** in both senses” = \**puṣyati*.

In contrast to \**puṣyati* in T, F’s exemplar probably read *posati*, interpreted as the citational form *posa ’ti* (= *posa iti*). We should also note from F’s transliteration that the underlying manuscript used “*sa*” for “*ṣa*”, as would be expected for many Pkts. The “布薩” (“nourishes”) seems to be a gloss on the “長養”, presumably added for the Chinese reader by the translators.

#### Example 14

F: 智慧自在 [F 864c05]

“will be master of *jñāna*” = *jānissaro bhavissati*

D: 善知宿命 [D 381b18]

“will know well former lives” = *jāti-smaro bhaviṣyati*

T: *tshe-rabs dran-par-'gyur* [Q 41b6]

“will recollect former lives” = *jāti-smaro bhaviṣyati*

This variant occurs several times in Chapter 05 – F is likely to be a misreading: the “recollection of former lives” is well-attested and contextually appropriate. The reading in F involves a script-error of “*ni* for “*ti*”, but this must be based on a Prakrit reading. The Pāli form of *jāti-smara* is *jātissara* – and F would have read something very similar, but understood it as *jānissara* = *jāna* + *issara* (*jñāna* + *īśvara*). This example again illustrates well how the witnesses can ultimately be reconciled, even when superficially incompatible.

#### Example 15

There are a number of occasions where a combination of a script misreading and a faulty word-break, based on a Prakrit reading, produce significant variants. The following examples illustrates a misreading of considerable importance, sometimes with a gloss which has additionally been interpolated in error.

A .

F: 言是常是衆生是解脫。 [F 865b04]

“saying that this is permanence, this is a **being** (*satta*) or this is liberation”

T: *de dag . . . rtag go snyam du 'dzin cing **bdag** gi ni thar pa yin no snyam du yang 'dzin la* [Q 43b7]

“they consider that . . . [it] . . . is permanent or else consider that what relates to a **self** is liberation”

Though their syntactical understanding differs somewhat, both F and T list three terms: *nitya*, F: *sattva* / T: *ātman* and *mokṣa*. It is possible to reconcile the variation of *ātman* and *sattva* if we first retrovert to Prakrit forms: *atta* and *satta*. To understand what has happened here, and in the many other similar variants, involves a particular feature prevalent in some orthographies where a word ending in an *anusvara* is followed by a superfluous “m”, thus, for example, we have “*teṣāṃm*” for “*teṣāṃ*”, “*cittāmm*” for “*cittāṃ*” and so forth.<sup>121</sup> With 是衆生, F presupposes “*idaṃ satta*”, but this would have been frequently written with little or no spacing, using this extra “m”, as “*idaṃmatta*”, resulting in “*idaṃ satta*”, with the common script misreading of “m” as “s”. Here it is F that has “*satta*”, but in other instances the situation is reversed with “*atta*” preserved in F and transformed into “*satta*” (*sattva*) in D and T. It is quite significant for understanding the development of the MPNS conceptual terminology that the “*atta*” form usually seems to be the original term used.

This is corroborated by further examples:

B. F: 世間衆生皆言有我 [F 887b25]  
 “Mundane people (*laukikāḥ*) all say there is an *ātman*.”

D: 非聖凡夫有衆生性皆說有我 [D 412b15-6]  
 “Non-*ārya* ordinary people have *sattva-dhātu*, they all say there is an *ātman*.”

T: 'jig rten pa rnam la yang *sems can* gyi *khams* <*gang zag*> gzhag pa mchis lags [Q 117b3]  
 “There are also claims made concerning *sattva-dhātu*, <*a pudgala*> among mundane [people] (*laukikāḥ*).”

The simplest textual state is found in F, with only a mention of “*ātman*”. D has “*sattva-dhātu*” (from \*~*ṃm* *atta dhātu*), with “*dhātu*” as an intrusive gloss and additionally a duplicated “*ātman*”, a rare trace of a merge-conflation in that transmissional lineage. By the time the MPNS text had reached the state we find in T, it had been expanded again with the inclusion of an additional gloss, “*pudgala*”.

C. F: 若當衆生有[如來]性... [F 883c15]  
 “If *sattva* do have [*tathāgata*] *dhātu*...”

D: 若我性常... [D 407c29]  
 “If the *ātman dhātu* is permanent, ...”

<sup>121</sup> See Habata (2007a) Intro p55 for a description of this orthographic feature.

**T:** *gal te sems can gyi khams rtag pa lags na . . .* [Q 107a5]  
 “If the sattva-dhātu is permanent, . . .”

The original form of this lemma must have been “If the *atta* is permanent”, where the *atta* (*ātman*) was later given the interlinear gloss *dhātu*. This was interpolated at an early stage of transmission, since it is present in all three witnesses. Then, as in the previous examples, the form *~ṃm atta* is must have been misread as *~ṃ satta*, resulting in “beings” in F and T. This process seems to be predictable in the MPNS, so although a term “*sattva-dhātu*” does exist, it was probably not intended in the MPNS and ought not be read thus.

There is an additional problem in F with the loss of “*nitya*”, as happens elsewhere in the text of F. Further research is needed as I am not certain how to account for it, but several tentative scenarios are plausible. For example, the text might have originally had something like “*attanityāha*”, which can be divided in two ways: “*atta nitya āha*” (“says the *atta* is permanent”) or “*attan ity āha*” which is just a form of citing “*atta*”. On the other hand, there is also the possibility that some kind of script misreading was involved, such as those I discuss at the end of this paper. One common misreading involves “*ni*” and “*ti*” both ways; misreading “*ti*” for “*ni*” in F would open up other possible readings that could result in this loss of “*nitya*”. However, not to digress further, the likely sequence of textual alterations may be reconstructed as follows:

*atta* = *nitya* (original form)  
*atta* <sup>*dhātu*</sup> = *nitya* (interlinear interpolation)  
*atta-dhātu* = *nitya* (interpolated form = D)  
*satta-dhātu* = *nitya* (misread “*satta*” form = T)  
*satta* = *dhātu* > *satta* = *tathāgata-dhātu* (misread “*satta*” + defective reading = F)

### Example 16

Though less common, there are also some traces of an earlier Prakrit phase to be found in D. For example:

**D:** 又復<sub>嚙</sub>者... 即是如來。 [D 413a11]  
 “Moreover, ‘ak-kāra’ . . . is the Tathāgata.”

**T:** yi-ge zhes bya ba ni de bzhin gshegs pa'i don to || [T 118b7]  
 “‘Akṣara’ signifies the Tathāgata.”

This lemma is from Chapter 14 which deals with the nature and mnemonic use of the *akṣaras*. Parts of this chapter are difficult to construe since problems have arisen via the conflation process and undigested Prakrit. In this instance, part of the exegesis of the ambivalent word *akṣara*, T has chosen to translation *akṣara* (phoneme / imperishable) as *yi-ge* (phoneme). But on the other hand, D has

“Moreover, [the letter] ‘ak’ (𑖀 = \* ʔak) . . . is the Tathāgata” – in other words, D could only have got this reading if the manuscript read *ak-kāra* (“the letter *ak*”) in error for *akkhara* > *akṣara*.

### Example 17

In many Prakrits, *mahyaṃ* is also used for the genitive form. This seems to have been the case with the earlier language of the MPNS, since it explains a particular variant that occurs several times.

**D:** 以是義故。大乘妙典真佛所說。 [D 417c28]

“Therefore, this wondrous scripture of the Mahāyāna was truly uttered by the Buddha.”

**T:** *de bas na nga'i bstan pa ni sangs rgyas kyis gsungs pa zhes bya'o* || [Q 131b4]

“Therefore, what I have taught is said to be spoken by the Buddha.”

In contrast to a presumed *mahyaṃ* (“my”) underlying *nga'i* in T, D has read *mahāyāna* (大乘). This may be an aural problem, but nevertheless it presupposes a Prakrit genitive understanding of *mahyaṃ* in the background of T and D.

### Example 18

**F:** 呵責己身 = “reviling one’s body” [F 854b12]

**D:** 呵責家法 = “reviling household-[life]” [D 367a28]

**T:** *khyim gyi gnas la smod pa* = “reviling house-dwelling” [T 7a3]

It is unclear which reading is preferable here. F presupposes *kāya* (body) and DT *gaha* > *gr̥ha* (house), with voicing and a script misreading – the normal change in MIAs is from unvoiced to voiced sounds, so theoretically F should be the older reading.

### Example 19

Finally, the last consonant of the *varṇa-patha* in Chapter 14 differs in F and DT. If the language of the earlier text of the MPNS was Prakrit, then the *akṣara* given in F conforms to expectations with a “*la*” (羅) [F 888c13] rather than the “*kṣa*” of D (𑖀𑖎) [D 414a15] and T [Q 121a8], since the conjunct “*kṣa*” is not found in Prakrits.

## 13. Script Misreadings

There remains one final hurdle of considerable import lying in wait as we attempt to comprehend the extant texts. In the above process of retroversion, we inevitably come to the conclusion that many lexical variants arose at each stage of

the transmission of the MPNS as a result of transcriptional and reading errors, due to semi-homographs in the scripts used, and were transmitted cumulatively. We can detect a number of such variants in the translations of D and T, but they are especially common in the case of the F version. There may be two aspects to this problem: i) actual errors in the text, introduced by the scribes themselves over the years as the MPNS was repeatedly copied, and ii) errors in reading (or hearing) at the time the text was translated. However, we should note that when a script-based lexical variant or error is identified, there is no way of determining with any certainty where responsibility for the fault lies, though it may be significant that the vast majority of cases occur in connection with manuscript of the MPNS obtained by Faxian.<sup>122</sup>

How can we account for this situation? Several possible explanations come to mind. First, we might be inclined to conclude that these reading errors were made by members of the Buddhahadra translation team, compounded by the inherent difficulties in understanding the Prakrit language of their text.<sup>123</sup> But how plausible is this? We know from the catalogue entries we examined earlier that it was Buddhahadra who read the text out aloud and made the preliminary oral translation.<sup>124</sup> How could he have been unable to read just this particular manuscript fluently, when no similar difficulties can be detected in other major translations attributed to him, such as the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* or the *Mahāsāṅghika-vinaya*? Thus, as this script problem only seems to have arisen with the MPNS translation, it is probably safe to conclude that members of the translation team were not responsible for misreading or mishearing the text in most cases. If this is true, then the problem must have been inherent in that particular copy of the MPNS.

There are several possible reasons for this, but we should recollect that there are good grounds for believing that the manuscript Faxian obtained in Pāṭaliputra was based on an old exemplar – that is, one written in Prakrit with an older, less familiar script-type. It seems from the accounts of Faxian’s encounter with the layman who owned a copy of the MPNS that it was transcribed for him – probably a scribe was employed to do it for him – but the chances are that many misreadings were introduced at this stage. If we doubt that somebody could carelessly misread so many *akṣaras*, we would do well to remember that examples of badly copied manuscripts are easily found. For example, the scribe who copied the manuscript of *Abhisamacārika* confused over sixty simple and conjunct *akṣaras*, sometimes with a

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<sup>122</sup> It is true that many of these variants in F are actually errors, but we must exercise a degree of caution as there will be occasions when F has preserved the correct reading and the misreading lies with the other recensions.

<sup>123</sup> Although we can identify these script-based variants in the translation, we are only aware of their existence because we can cross-refer with the other two translations – even though we might presume them to be errors, they always make sense contextually.

<sup>124</sup> 覺賢出。寶雲筆受 [T 2034 p71 b07] and 佛大跋陀手執胡本。寶雲傳譯。[T 2145 p60b03]

three-way or four-way confusion.<sup>125</sup> In other words, the miswriting and misreading of *akṣaras* was the norm, not the exception !

Apart from the confusions found solely in F, there are also a number of script-based errors common to both F and T, which indicates that this problem was quite old and inherent in that textual lineage. It may be the case that there were originally even more misreadings in the κ component of the v conflation, but were corrected by the redactor at that time. All in all, this tells us something about the quality of most manuscripts within the transmission of the MPNS – they were badly written, embellished with swathes of interlinear notes and rubrics and possibly badly worn through long personal use.<sup>126</sup> We should not for a moment imagine that they were neat, clean library exemplars – generally they would have been working copies, hard working ones at that !<sup>127</sup> On the other hand, the text of the recension represented by D suffers far less from such script errors, so one must assume a better quality manuscript, prepared with care by an informed copyist. Likewise, in the case of the ancestor of T (v), those portions we can identify with the Prakrit κ component have most of the misreadings, while the text from the Sanskritized ι component is generally free from these errors.

It is now widely accepted that many early Mahāyāna sutras were channelled through the Gāndhārī language on their way to China or at least have the typical misreadings which point to the use of *kharoṣṭhī* script in the base manuscripts, but it is noteworthy that all the homographs or semi-homographs required to account for lexical variants in our text are indicative of a Brahmī script similar to the late Kūṣaṇa or early Gupta scripts conveniently tabulated by Sander (1968).<sup>128</sup> Just as we can detect no clear traces of Gāndhārī as the substrate MIA language of the MPNS, similarly there are absolutely no signs that the MPNS was ever written with *kharoṣṭhī* script.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> See the table produced by Yasuo Matsunami (2008) pp17-26. Similarly, Kragh (2006) pp57-8 notes eighty-six distinct pairs of misread *akṣaras* in the handful of manuscripts used in his edition of a short segment of the *Prasannapada*, a mere 23 pages of the Vaidya ed ! Similar numbers have been recorded for a number of other major texts, such as the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* and so forth.

<sup>126</sup> Though the manuscript in Fig 04 is not even Buddhist and is damaged, it well illustrates what a working manuscript can look like: note the masses of marginal and interlinear notes. I believe the early mss of the MPNS would often not have looked too dissimilar too this after a few years of use.

<sup>127</sup> In sharp contrast to this situation, the mss fragments of the MPNS found by Stein at Khadaliq look as though they are clean ex-library copies, with no signs of marginalia or rubrics, despite their poor state of preservation.

<sup>128</sup> It should not be assumed that all the script misreadings are contemporaneous. The various script errors I have noted throughout the MPNS are certain to have arisen at different times, in different regions. through the idiosyncracies of different script forms – the early Kuṣaṇa scripts are not the same as the later Gupta ones.

<sup>129</sup> Habata (2007a) does discuss features of the language of the MPNS Skt fragments from Central Asia and discerns a number of features she compares with the Prakrit found in the Niya Documents. This does not have much bearing upon the original Prakrit of the MPNS,

Apart from misreadings generated by the semi-homographs, whether as simple *akṣaras* or as conjuncts, other misreadings would also have involved defective or idiosyncratic orthography. I have detected signs of the following orthographic habits:

- the *anusvara* was omitted in many cases,
- double consonants were often written singly
- long vowels were frequently not marked (especially *a > ā*).
- rules of *sandhi* are not observed
- omission of *avagraha*

Apart from these, a subscript *vigraha*, as found in older *brāhmī* scripts, allows the possibility of a misreading as an *u*, so in some situations an *~an* or *~ad* could look like *anu~°*, with potentially serious changes of meaning.

Of possible major syntactic significance would also be the omission of an *avagraha* which should mark the elision of an initial vowel, often “*a*”, at a word boundary. If this is not marked, then the two words involved will be read as a compound, resulting in a considerable difference of meaning. This may well account for some of the striking syntactical variations we often encounter in F and D.

I also suspect that the habit of writing *~ṃm* before vowels (at word junctions) found in some orthographies was probably present in some exemplars of the MPNS. On occasion, this orthographic feature will easily have been misread as *°~ṃ s~°*, as I suggest above, for example, as the source for the “*atta*” / “*satta*” contrast often encountered throughout the MPNS versions.

I append a table of the *akṣara* confusions identified so far, with a selection of illustrative examples, at the end of this paper as an appendix, but to illustrate the serious repercussions that such apparently trivial script reading errors can cause, I shall discuss just one example here. As many readers will be aware, the origin and meaning of the term “*icchantika*” has been discussed inconclusively for many years. Recently, it has been suggested that “*icchantika*” signifies “one who claims [he is an *arhat*]” or similar, on the basis of the use of “*dod-pa*” in the Tibetan translation of an important passages in Ch17 of the MPNS, given that “*dod-pa*” is frequently used to translate Sankrit “*icchatī*” in the sense of “claims, maintains” as well as “desires”. (Karashima 2007). However, the significance of the variant readings in the Chinese versions has been overlooked and undue reliance has been placed upon the badly conflated and misleading Tibetan version, with what are, in my view, grave consequences for this hypothesis concerning the meaning of “*icchantika*”. That is to

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since such features would have arisen through the linguistic habits of the scribes in Central Asia who copied those fragments, although it should be mentioned that Niya Prakrit is thought to derive from Gāndhārī Prakrit.



say, although the original meaning of “*icchantika*” may or may have been “one who claims [he is an *arhat*]”, this passage from the MPNS cannot be used to substantiate that hypothesis. Without quoting the entire passage, which would then involve explaining other complex variants, a couple of the relevant lemmata extracted from there will suffice to illustrate the misreading in the Tibetan version:

F: 有似阿羅漢一闍提而行惡業 <snip> 似一闍提阿羅漢而行慈心。

[F 892c09-10]

“There are *icchantikas* who **resemble** arhats and engage in evil deeds. There are arhats who **resemble** *icchantikas* and engage in kindly thoughts.”

D: 如阿羅漢[不]行生死險惡之道 <snip> [不欲修習]如阿羅漢勤修

慈心。 [D 419a04-06]

“They do not travel the dangerous path of *samsāra* **like** an arhat <snip> they have no desire to cultivate a kindly mind **like** an arhat who assiduously cultivates it.”

T: 'dod chen pa long ba <gcig bu> dgra bcom pa yin par 'dod pa ni lam mi bzad pa chen por 'gro <'dod do> || <snip> byams pa dang ldan pa'i dgra bcom pa yin par 'dod la . . . [Q 133b8]

“A <**solitary**>, blind *icchantika* who **deems** [himself] to be an arhat <**wanting to**> travel a very perilous road. He is **thought to be** a kindly arhat . . .”

As always, the key to this problem is to reconcile the various readings in F: 似, D: 如 and T: 'dod-pa, given that they are all likely to have started out from a single archetype with the same reading, by finding Sanskrit or Prakrit equivalents that will account for the subsequent disparities. The underlying term in the case of F and D is not hard to identify: it must be the uninflected affix “-vat”, used to imply *likeness or resemblance*, that is, “like, similar to, resembling” and so forth. But, obviously, this will not do for the Tibetan “*dod-pa*”. However, if we look at other Sanskrit words which “*dod-pa*” translates, we find that “*mata*” is also of common occurrence, a noun often used in compounds with a range of meanings that include “believed, imagined, supposed”; “regarded or considered as”; “desired, intended”. Thus, “*mata*”, perhaps in the sense of “regarded/considered as” would be a plausible basis contextually for T: “*dod-pa*”. But we are still left with the disparity between the two suffixed words: “*mata*” and “-vat”.<sup>130</sup>

<sup>130</sup> The occurrence of “*gro 'dod-do*” in T is red-herring and not relevant to this discussion – it is grammatically a quite different construction, certainly equivalent to “*gantu-kāma*” (“wanting to travel, wishing to travel”), with no obvious parallel in F or D. It may, however, suggest the start of an explanation of why F alone has 惡業 (evil *kamma*), as it is possible that there is a well-hidden parallel to this in T, via another misreading: F: *kamma* > T: -*kāma* – although the intended reading here must await further consideration.

However, once one is alert to the possibility of script confusions and misreadings, a solution which reconciles these two variants can be found by considering what an early reader would have seen in the manuscripts – the sources for F and D with “*arhatvat*”, while T’s source apparently having “*arhatmat*[a]”. To give some idea of this, we may take samples of the ligatures from the Spitzer Ms (Franco 2004), dating from the late Kuṣaṇa period, for “-*tva*” and “-*tma*”. We can then see immediately that there would have been very little to distinguish the forms of the two ligatures *in situ* within a manuscript, which may have not even been written as well as the examples from the Spitzer Ms anyway.<sup>131</sup>



Fig 01: Akṣara ligature comparison Spitzer ms (Franco 2004)

Applying this insight, it is obvious that F and D have preserved the correct underlying form “-*vat*”. In other words, by disregarding the Chinese versions and relying solely on the evidence of T, an unsupported hypothesis has been proposed for the meaning of “*icchantika*” by wrongly retroverting the “*’dod-pa*” to “*icchatī*”. So, whatever the true meaning of “*icchantika*” might be, sadly it is not found here.<sup>132</sup>

Finally, one should not assume that all variant readings derive from these kinds of script misreadings. I have found some variants that may have arisen through the mis-hearing of similar sounding words, particularly in the Chinese translation *milieu*, as discussed by Boucher (1998). I shall not extend this paper to discuss this source of variants, except to note one very important reading that may have been aural in origin at some stage of transmission and then enshrined in writing: the frequent exchange of *yāna* for *jñāna* (= *jāna*), found not only in F and T but also in D, which indicates that it was a pervasive error. This confusion may be the result of the homophonic form *jāna* found in many Prakrits, to be interpreted either as *jāna* or *yāna* by the listener or reader according to the context, as suggested by Karashima.<sup>133</sup> When this happens, it is normally difficult to determine which was the intended reading, but, on occasion, the distinction actually makes quite a difference, as we see in Example 12 above.

<sup>131</sup> It is also significant for the dating of the MPNS itself to note that this particular confusion would have become unlikely by the time early Gupta-style (c3rd CE) scripts came into use since the shape of “*ma*” had changed by then. See Table 14 in Sander (1968) for the relevant ligatures.

<sup>132</sup> In fact, I too have a hypothesis concerning the source and meaning of “*icchantika*”, which I shall present in the projected third Paper in this series.

<sup>133</sup> See Karashima (1993).

## IV CONCLUSION

Although this paper is intended as an interim report of work in progress, I hope to have shown to some degree the complexity of the MPNS textual tradition as reflected through the three extant versions. It may also highlight the need for greater caution than hitherto when quoting passages from the MPNS to establish or corroborate particular scholarly hypotheses: without due care to matters of stratification (which I have barely touched upon here) and interpolation, as well as the frequent infelicities of language and script, it is all too easy to be misled by the text.

I think we can now also make some preliminary judgements about the relative value of the three versions we have available. Because of its conflated nature, the Tibetan version has frequent duplications and garbled passages resulting from valiant attempts to preserve the text from both of its separate sources. One may say that T is the *least* accurate representation of the MPNS if we are concerned with establishing the authorial intention, though it is of great value in other respects.

Of the two Chinese versions, D is more straightforward and seems to transmit accurately much of the hyparchetype, but its value is diminished somewhat by the large number of intrusive passages and, worse still for divining authorial intention, the not infrequent cases where the text has been completely re-written at some stage of its transmission with the substitution of entirely new passages.

The state of the text transmitted by F seems to be, in principle, the closest to the hyparchetype, or even earlier states of the text, despite the presence of some interpolations. The drawback with F lies, as we have seen, in the serious difficulties that were encountered by the translators in dealing with a text using an early MIA language, compounded with orthographic confusions arising from similarities of *akṣaras* in the carelessly written or unfamiliar version of the script we must assume was used. These difficulties have often resulted in portions of text that apparently deviate considerably from the parallel parts of D and T, though in many cases we may be able to restore the underlying text by the careful use of retroversion.

Though some of the findings I present in this paper are incomplete or perhaps a trifle too speculative for the liking of some cautious souls, I hope that aspects of my researches presented here will be of use to others, not only those doggedly researching and translating this neglected, yet extremely important early Mahāyāna sutra, but also those working with other early Mahāyāna texts which may, upon closer examination, present similar features.

## APPENDIX

### I. SCRIPT CONFUSIONS ATTESTED IN MPNS<sup>134</sup>

KA	~	TA	( <i>kalyāna kataṃ ~ tatta ṇa kataṃ</i> ) {Ch17}; ( <i>tathā ~ katham</i> ) {Ch13}
GA	~	ŚA	( <i>gāthā ~ sātha [= śāstra]</i> ) {Ch04}
CA	~	DU	( <i>cakkhu ~ dukkha</i> ) {Ch13}
ṬI	~	LI	( <i>koṭiyam ~ kaliyāna</i> ) {Ch13 combi ms p18}
ṬU	~	VU	( <i>paṭutvam ~ pavuddham [= pa√vṛdh°]</i> ) {Ch13}
ṬṬHA	~	ÑÑA	( <i>anaṭṭhaka ~ arañña</i> ) {Ch 06}
ṆA	~	RA	( <i>khīṇa ~ khīra or kṣīṇa ~ kṣīra</i> ) {Ch17}
ṆA	~	SA	( <i>trāṇa ~ trāsa</i> ) {Ch08}
ṄO	~	LO	( <i>kuśaṇa ~ kuśalo</i> ) [in MMS, but probably also MPNS]
ṄHA	~	LYĀ	( <i>kaṇha ~ kalyāṇa</i> ) {ch 17}
ṄHI	~	ṬṬI	( <i>tunhi ~ tuṭṭi</i> ) [or <i>ṢṆI ~ ṢṬI ~ tuṣṇi ~ tuṣṭi</i> ] {Ch10}
TTA	~	RYA	(* <i>matta ~ ārya</i> ) {Ch04} {uncertain}
TTA	~	NĀ	( <i>amitta ~ asinā</i> ) {Ch05}
TTV	~	BHA	( <i>aśubha ~ *atattva</i> ) (Ch04) {? uncertain}
TV	~	TMA	( <i>arhatvat ~ arhatmat[a]</i> ) (Ch17)
TYA	~	DYA	( <i>vaidya ~ caitya</i> ) {Ch07} (aural ? Skt-based error)
TRA	~	HA	( <i>mātra ~ mahā</i> ) {Ch03} (D = Skt based)
DA	~	RA	( <i>modana ~ māraṇa</i> ) {Ch05}
DHA	~	PU	( <i>dhañña ~ puñña or dhanya ~ puṇya</i> )
DHŪ	~	PRA	( <i>dhūta ~ prānta</i> ) {Ch06}
NA	~	RA	( <i>anaṭṭhaka ~ arañña</i> ) {Ch06}; ( <i>jarā ~ jana 'ti</i> ) {Ch14};
NA	~	TA	( <i>kanaka ~ kataka</i> ), ( <i>samatā ~ sāsana</i> ) {Ch11 etc};
NTA	~	RA	( <i>samanta ~ saṃsāra</i> [with elision of <i>anusvāra</i> ]) {Ch13}
NTA	~	TTA	( <i>manta ~ satta</i> ) [ <i>mantra ~ sattva</i> ] {Ch14}
NTA	~	NU	( <i>ananta ~ anu . . .</i> ) {Ch04},
NDA	~	HA	( <i>vandana ~ mohana</i> ) {Ch04}
NDHA	~	ṄYA	( [ <i>jñ</i> ]āna-andha ~ aranya) {Ch07}
BA	~	CA	( <i>bala ~ cala</i> ) {Ch18}
BHYĀ	~	DYĀ	( <i>antarikabhya ~ antarikād ya[kṣa]</i> ) {Ch}
MA	~	SA	(note <i>satta-dhātu ~ --m atta-dhātu</i> ); ( <i>suta [śruta] ~ mūla</i> )
MA	~	CA	(in Māra's mantra Ch01), (DT: <i>amala ~ F: acala</i> ) {Ch07}
MA	~	DYA	( <i>vimati ~ vidyate</i> )
MA	~	THĀ	( <i>kāma ~ kathā</i> ) {Ch 06}
YA	~	CA	( <i>yatthā ~ cattāri</i> ) {Ch08}
RI	~	TI	( <i>cattāri ~ yathā ti</i> [ <i>ṭṭhanti</i> ]) {Ch08 ?}
RNA	~	RYĀ	( <i>nirnāna ~ niryāṇa</i> ) {Ch13}

<sup>134</sup> Note although each pair is only listed once, these misreadings can often work both ways. Also each example given may include a second misreading apart from the listed pair of *akṣaras*.

LA	~	TA	( <i>suta</i> [śruta] ~ <i>mūla</i> ) (Ch09)
LA	~	YA	( <i>kāla</i> ~ <i>kāya</i> ) {Ch 17}
LĀ	~	ŚA	( <i>velā</i> ~ <i>vaśaṃ</i> )
LL	~	ṆṆ	( <i>valla</i> ~ <i>paṇṇa</i> )
VA	~	CA	( <i>vaidya</i> ~ <i>caitya</i> ) {Ch07}, ( <i>cara</i> ~ <i>vara</i> ) {Ch18}
VA	~	PA	( <i>valla</i> ~ <i>paṇṇa</i> )
LYA	~	TTA	( <i>kalyāṇa kataṃ</i> ~ <i>tatta ṇa kataṃ</i> ) {Ch17}
SRA	~	PĀ	( <i>upāya</i> ~ <i>āsraya</i> ) {Ch08}
HA	~	RU	(in Māra's mantra) {Ch08}

NB: At an early stage of my research, before I realized their significance, I also found evidence for misreadings involving **K ~ N**, **TRA ~ TTU** and **Y ~ BH**, which are each quite predictable, but due to an oversight the textual occurrences in the MPNS are currently mislaid.

## 2. SHORT SELECTION OF MISREADINGS (retroverted as stem forms)

1. F: 離諸疑惑, D: Ø, T: 'bral bar 'gyur ba mi **srid pa** ~ vimati ≠ vidyate (Ch 09) F ≠ T
2. F: 方便說解脫, D: 解脫喻如幻化, T: Ø ~ māyā+vat ≠ upāya+vat? F ≠ D
3. F: 滿, D: 光明, T: **snang-ba** ~ pūrṇa ≠ prabhā -- pra = pū / rṇ = bhā (not Pkt) (Ch09 and others?) F ≠ DT
4. F: 如二, D: 如野田毒蛇 ~ yathā ahi ≠ yathā dvi ~ hi ≠ dvi. F ≠ DT
5. F: 已得正法離諸狐疑, D: Ø, T: chos de thob nas 'bral mi **srid pa** ~ vimati ≠ vidyate. (Ch09)
6. F: 汝等默然, D: 知足之行諸佛所讚, T: **cang mi smra ba** ni sangs rgyas kyis bsngags so ~ (tuṅhi ≠ tutṭi) (or better ṢṆ ≠ ṢṬ ~ tuṅṇi ≠ tuṣṭi) (Ch10) FT ≠ D
7. F: 差降, D: 差, T: mi-bzad-pa ~ visama ≠ viṣama. (Ch10) FD ≠ T
8. F: 繫縛衆生, D: 自縛手足, T: bdag-nyid 'ching-ba ~ satta-bandhana ≠ atta-bandhana (Ch10) F ≠ DT
9. F: 大乘 ≠ D: 大智慧, T: ye-shes che ~ mahāyāna ≠ mahājñāna (Ch13 et al) F ≠ DT
10. F: 汝等隨行, D: 佛所稱, T: bde-bar-gshegs-pas **bsngags-pa** ~ anugama ≠ anuśaṃsa (Ch13) F ≠ DT
11. F: 於摩訶衍歡喜 = mahāyāne modana-[yoktavya], D: 大施, T: **dga'-bar** gyis-shig = mahā-dāna ≠ modāna ≠ modana (Ch14) FT ≠ D
12. F: 離種種想, D: 三事即是涅槃, T: gzhi gsum **tha-dad-pa med-pa** ~ nirnāna ≠ nirvāṇa (Skt-based misreading) (Ch13) FT ≠ D
14. F: 是爲最吉安, D: 云何...得於安慰, T: **ji-ltar** dbugs ni phyin-par-'gyur ~ tathā ≠ kathaṃ (Ch13) F ≠ DT
15. F: Ø, D: 菩薩所行具足成辦, T: byang chub sems dpa' rnam kyis **mchog gi mthar thug pa** ~ cara ≠ vara. (Ch18) D ≠ T
16. F: 嬰兒 ~ bāla, D: 大力 ~ bala, T: g.yo ~ cala. (Ch18) F ≠ D ≠ T

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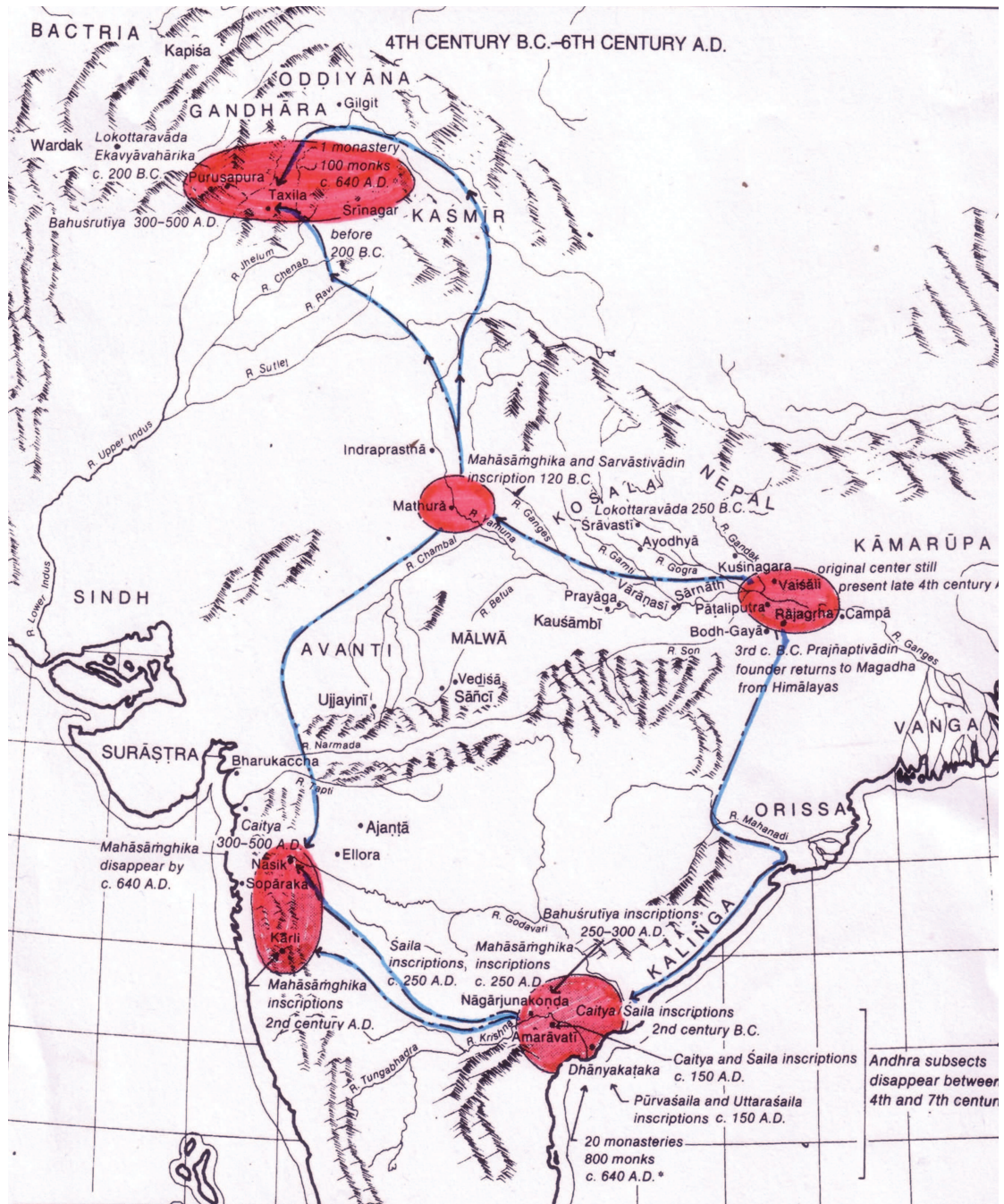


Fig 02: MAP OF MAIN MAHĀSĀṆGHĪKA CENTRES

NB: Blue lines only show hypothetical routes for spread of early Mahāsāṅghikas ~ the MPNS would probably have been transmitted outwards from the Andhra region (Dhānyakāṭaka area), via the Eastern centres (See p32 and p50).  
 [adapted from Crystal Mirror, Dharma Publications]



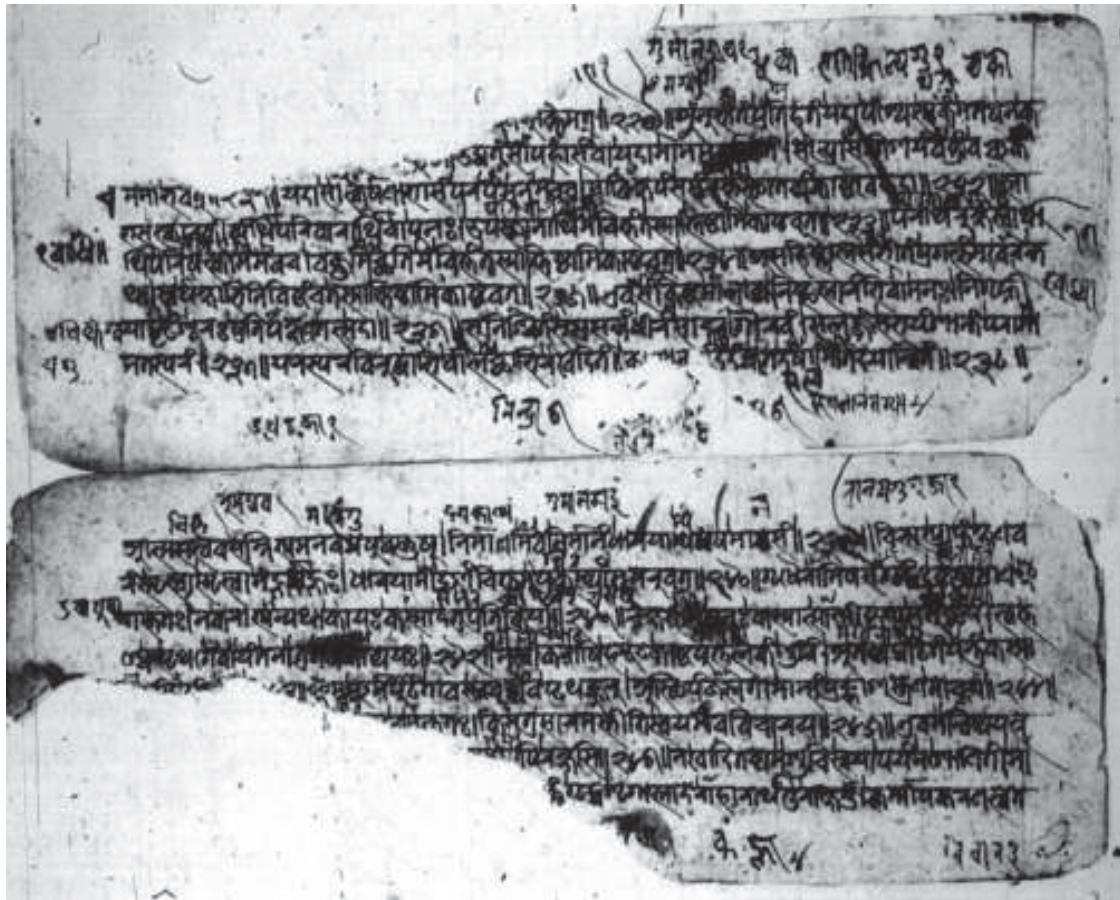


Fig 04: A typical “working” ms with marginalia and interlinear comments

