



ON THE ESCHATOLOGY OF THE MAHÂPARINIRVÂᅇA-SÛTRA AND RELATED MATTERS

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by
Stephen Hodge

INTRODUCTION

I should like to thank Dr Kate Crosby for inviting me here to give a short lecture on one aspect of the MPNS [Mahaparinirvana Sutra], and I would also like to welcome Dr Masahiro Shimoda and Dr Tony Page for, if it were not for them, I would probably not be here today talking on this subject. Though I knew a little of the MPNS many years ago, I obtained a copy of Dr Shimoda's translation of the first part of the Tibetan version of the MPNS 1994 which I read with interest. My deeper involvement with the MPNS began some eight years ago, when Dr Page contacted me and tentatively enquired whether I could help him with a few passages from the MPNS he needed to have clarified. If only I had known what I was letting myself in for! Eventually, it dawned on me that the only way I would get any peace would be for me to translate the whole text for him. And what an eye-opener that turned out to be! Though I had some idea about the general contents of the MPNS, that was mainly through whispered hints about the heretical content of this virtually taboo text. Yet what I found was an extremely rich and complex text that has as much claim to authenticity and orthodoxy as any other Mahayana sutra. There is material in this sutra for everybody – the early history of Mahayana and its bodhisattva proponents, intriguing social information concerning the state of the Saᅇgha at that time, and naturally the doctrinal content, aspects of which Dr Page introduced here a few weeks ago.

Given that the MPNS is such a complex text, I should like to take up just one theme that runs through much of this sutra – the way the compilers of this sÛtra seem to have perceived the causes and the implications of the decline of the Dharma, that is, what one might, as I have done here, term the “eschatology of the MPNS”. I believe this may provide an important key to understanding the entire sÛtra, though some of my conclusions are necessarily based on circumstantial evidence. One might also remark here, in passing, that the prominence of the concept in the MPNS that the scriptural Dharma is, as we shall see, decidedly impermanent stands out in stark contrast to the recurrent idea in the sÛtra of the permanence of Buddha.

Of course, it is well known that the decline of the Dharma is mentioned in general terms in a number of sÛtras, not confined to Mahayana sources, including some forming part of the Ekottara-âgama. The topic also arises in various editions of the Vinaya, such as the Theravâdin Cullavagga, in the context of the admission of women as nuns to the Saᅇgha. Among Mahâyâna sÛtras, we might mention the Vajracchedika and the Sad-dharma-puᅇᅇarika – concerns about the decay of the Dharma are especially mentioned the latter. These texts also introduce a definite time period for the duration of the sad-dharma – normally 500 years.

CAUSES

So, is the decline and disappearance of the sad-dharma inevitable, something that just happens, or are there specific causes that also act as warning signs? Looking at all the sÛtras that mention the

decline of the Dharma, it would seem that the decline is primarily caused by human agency. The MPNS itself tells us that there are seven signs or causes, though only one – the disappearance of the MPNS itself -- is specifically mentioned. The others are said to be well-known to the wise. Jan Nattier in “Once Upon a Future Time” conveniently summarizes the main reasons given in earlier texts. These are:

- ◆ A lack of reverence towards various elements of the Buddhist tradition
- ◆ A lack of meditational diligence
- ◆ Carelessness in transmission of the Dharma
- ◆ Divisions within the Saṅgha
- ◆ The emergence of a counterfeit Dharma
- ◆ Involvement with worldly affairs

It is noteworthy that another reason often given for the decline of the Dharma, the admission of women to the Saṅgha, is not mentioned, even though women are mentioned at times in rather uncomplimentary terms. This may give us a hint concerning the sectarian affiliation of the MPNS circle, since that specific reason is never mentioned in extant Mṅgh sources. But apart from that cause, all the other reasons are mentioned, though not enumerated, throughout the MPNS. The two items with which the MPNS is particularly concerned with and attacks repeatedly are the counterfeit distorted Dharma and the corrupt involvement with worldly affairs. Indeed, it often links the two, mentioning a length those lax monks who amend their Vinaya so that it seems that Buddha had actually sanctioned the wrong-doing in which they indulge.

But although the idea that the sad-dharma would decline and become corrupted existed previously, what does seem to be new in our text is a profound sense of crisis and an awareness of the extreme shortness of time now available before end of sad-dharma. Not only is this looming disaster discussed in the MPNS, but it is also mentioned in a cluster of related texts which concern inter alia the tathāgata-garbha – such as the Mahāmegha-sūtra, Aṅgulimāla-sūtra, Mahābherihāraka-sūtra, which taken together help us build up a picture of these events.

What they have in common is a basic timetable for the demise of the sad-dharma. Thus, it is said that sūtras will circulate for 40 years after parinirvāṇa, then disappear for a period and then re-emerge during the last 80 years prior to the demise of the sad-dharma. For example, the MPNS itself says,

“Noble son, when eighty years remain at the tail-end of my authentic Dharma, when the authentic Dharma is about to fade away, this great Mahā-parinirvāṇa-sūtra will emerge again in the Jambu continent. After the rain of the authentic Dharma has fallen for forty years, it will fade away.”

Note how the MPNS -- and the situation is similar with the other related sūtras – states that the sad-dharma is not even expected to last intact to the end of that 80 year period !But although this warning that the sad-dharma would fade away during this final 80 years is stated in the Mahāmegha-sutra, thought to slightly pre-date the complete MPNS, and in the earliest strata of the MPNS itself, the time that would elapse between the Buddha’s parinirvāṇa and the final 80 years at the tail-end of the sad-dharma is not yet specified. This all changes with the later strata of the MPNS, the Aṅgulimāla-sūtra and the Mahābherihāraka-sūtra. Now we are told quite specifically the duration of time from parinirvāṇa to the demise of the sad-dharma: 700 years. Thus, the MPNS says:

“Noble son, seven hundred years after my passing, the teachings of the Buddha will be shattered and corrupted by Māra, the Evil One.”

To me, this has the feel of a specific timetable, perhaps in the nature of an ex post facto prophesy. So let's run with this idea for a while and see what it might imply. Now, the precise dates of the Buddha's parinirvâṇa are not known. Several traditional dates may be calculated according to the Western calendar, but we have no way of knowing which of these, if any, was accepted by the compilers of the MPNS. But let us assume they thought the parinirvâṇa was around 480 BCE, give or take a few years. By the simple addition of the above 700 years, we then know that the demise of the sad-dharma was scheduled to occur sometime around 220 CE. Is this date significant in any way? I shall defer an answer to this, because I should first like to consider the geographical data that these texts provide.

GEOGRAPHY

Interestingly, not only does the MPNS and its related texts mention a fairly specific timetable for the demise of the sad-dharma, but they also give us some fairly specific clues about their original home. Typically, we read in the MPNS:

"Similarly, noble son, this Mahâyâna Parinirvâṇa-sûtra will be circulated in the South when the authentic Dharma wanes after my passing into parinirvâṇa. Then, because it is liable to be drowned in the rain of non-Dharmic heterodox teachings, the bodhisattvas who protect it in the South will take this sûtra to Kashmir and it will then sink into the ground. Thereupon all the extensive Mahâyâna sûtras will also perish. Alas, this age will portend the destruction of the Dharma and the rain of non-Dharma will fill the world. All the bodhisattvas, the heroes among humans, who cultivate the nurturing rain of the Tathâgata's kindness will also disappear."

Basically the same scenario is mentioned in the Aṅgulimâla-sûtra and the Mahâbherihâraka-sûtra. Thus, these sûtras circulated first in the South – though we may reasonably assume that this is a covert way of stating that they were compiled in the South. Then the situation in the South became unfavourable so the faithful bodhisattvas take the sûtras to the north, to Kashmir – although it is a point of great interest that the Aṅgulimâla-sûtra also mentions the port of Bharukaccha and Vindhya Range as recipients of these Mahâyâna texts.

So first, what, one might ask, do they mean by the "South" – this covers quite a large area. Now, the term used here is actually dakṣiṇâ-patha – luckily attested in one of the few surviving Sanskrit fragments of the MPNS. Through the course of Indian history, the area defined as the dakṣiṇâ-patha gradually expands from a relatively small region just south of the central Indian kingdoms, but in the decades immediately prior to 220 CE, the date our prediction yields, the dakṣiṇâ-patha is the Deccan. Indeed, the modern name is actually derived from dakṣiṇâ-patha via the Prakrit form.

HISTORY

We are now beginning to build up the outlines of the historical and geographical circumstances surrounding this group of texts. But there is still more that we can reasonably deduce. What was going on in the Deccan around the 2nd century CE? It was, of course, the location of the Úâtavâhana kingdom – for which reason, they often described as Lords of Dakṣiṇâpatha (dakṣiṇâpatha -pati). The Úâtavâhanas were originally feudatories of the Mauryan Empire but gained their independence after the death of Aśoka around 232 BCE. As the early history of this dynasty is unclear, it is normally dated from around 40 BCE and lasted until 220 CE when their territory disintegrated into a number of smaller kingdoms. The Úâtavâhanas were generally outstanding rulers who patronized literature and architecture. They were also notable patrons of Buddhism, especially the female members of the royal family, and were responsible for the construction of the caves at Karli, the beginning of the Ajantâ complex and the stûpa at Amaravati. It is also noteworthy that women, from members of the royal family downwards, enjoyed a high

degree of participation in social and political life. Overall, their rule may be characterized as a period of great prosperity, a time when trade was flourishing, with extensive links to the other great polity of that era, the Kuṣaṇa Empire to the north.

It seems reasonable from the chronological data alone to deduce that the MPNS was formed during the Úâtavâhana era. The Mahâmegha-sûtra, which is a precursor to the MPNS itself, mentions a Úâtavâhana king who was the “restorer of the lineage” and this must be none other than Gautamîputra Úâtakarṇi (r106-130 CE), for that is exactly what he was famed for doing. Curiously, if we add the final 80 years at the tail-end of the sad-dharma to the end of Gautamîputra’s reign, we arrive at 210 CE – which virtually coincides with the accepted final years of the Úâtavâhana dynasty ! So if the chronological data provided is intended to be meaningful, as it seems to be, we may assume with a reasonable degree of certainty that the MPNS cluster of texts were largely compiled during the latter half of the Úâtavâhana era, perhaps from the around 100CE down to 220CE.

SECTARIAN AFFILIATION

As we now have found evidence which localizes the MPNS in time and place, is there any evidence of the sectarian affiliation of the promulgators of the MPNS ? In fact, having determined the dating and region where the MPNS was likely to have been compiled, it is not difficult to arrive at a conclusion concerning this matter too. It is well known from archeological evidence that the Mahâsaṅghikas were probably the major representatives of Buddhism throughout Úâtavâhana territory, with large concentrations of monastic establishments being found in the area around Karli to the west and around Amaravatî to the east along the River Krishna.

There is also some doctrinal evidence which implicitly points to a Mahâsaṅghika connection – if not with the root Mahâsaṅghika group, then certainly with one or other of its various sub-sects. There is not enough time today to go into this evidence in detail, but one might note the concept of the transcendental nature of the Buddha, the idea that his earthly manifestations are upâya-kâyas. Indeed, one might expect a sûtra stressing these doctrines to have been compiled around this time since schools such as the Mahîûāsaka, the Sarvâstivâda, and even representatives of the Theravâda school were beginning to make inroads into territory adjacent to that occupied by the Mahâsaṅghikas, for it is well known that the position of these schools on such matters is diametrically opposed to those espoused in the MPNS. The position we may associate with Mahîûāsakas, the Sarvâstivâdins and Theravâdins is most vehemently opposed in the MPNS and its related sûtras – these texts repeatedly state that their manner of understanding and interpreting the nature of the Buddha and his life are utter distortions of the facts and are no more than the work of Mâra and his human followers which contribute in no small way to the decline of the sad-dharma. The MPNS goes so far as to say that its opponents were guilty of systematically rewriting sûtras to accommodate their heretical views. Apart from doctrinal positions in the MPNS we can identify with the Mahâsaṅghikas, there are also some hints of similarities in Vinaya matters. Additionally, the 6th CE scholar-monk, Paramârtha, who took up residence as a leading translator in China also states that sûtras teaching tathâgata-garbha were revered by the Mahâsaṅghikas.

So, to sum up what we have been able to deduce so far: there are strong grounds based on textual evidence that the MPNS, or a major portion of it, together with related texts were compiled in the Deccan during the second half of the 2nd century CE, in a Mahâsaṅghika environment, probably in one of their centres along the western coastal region such as Karli, or perhaps, though less likely, the Amaravatî-Dhanyakaṭaka region. But is there anything more we can glean about the historical origins of the MPNS ? Surprisingly, there is – though these findings are somewhat circumstantial, though they are quite intriguing in their implications.

SARVA-SATTVA-PRIYA-DARÚANA

Throughout the many pages of MPNS, only three or four other sūtras are specifically mentioned by name. One of them is the Sad-dharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra, demonstrating that the contents this seminal Mahâyâna sūtra were known to and valued by the compilers of the MPMS. Among the numerous dramatis personae of this sūtra, the name of a future bodhisattva, Sarva-sattva-priya-darúana, is given some prominence, with details of his future career mentioned. It is therefore interesting to note that a close variant of this same name, Sarva-loka-priya-darúana, appears in the Mahâmegha-sūtra and Mahâbherihâraka-sūtra, as well as another variant in the Aṅgulimâla-sūtra – though in a rather different context in the case of the latter sūtra.

Combining the information given in the Mahâmegha-sūtra and Mahâbherihâraka-sūtra, we can build up some important and telling biographical details about this individual. The Buddha prophesies that a charismatic youth named Sarva-loka-priya-darúana will be born in Saurâṣṭra, during the reign of a Úâtavâhana king, who we have identified as Gautamîputra Úâtakarṇi, when the Dharma will soon begin to decline. He will engage in the ascetic practice of the dhutas, uphold the precepts, purge miscreant monks from his monastery, guard the sad-dharma and widely preach the words of the Buddha – especially the Mahâyâna as represented by this particular sūtra.

It seems not unreasonable to assume that we are dealing with an actual individual who was very important in the MPNS lineage – possibly even its founder – who assumed for himself or, more likely, was given by his followers, the sobriquet “Sarva-loka-priya-darúana”. The name itself is very significant. The first occurrence of its parallel form in the Lotus Sūtra is given in a prophesy about the future spiritual career of no less a person than Gautamî, the aunt of the Buddha. In future ages, it is she who will become Sarva-sattva-priya-darúana and in that form will take on the role of Mahâkâûyapa for a future Buddha – presiding over the cremation of that Buddha, acting as his heir and protector of the sad-dharma. I would suggest that the close variant of this name with its links to Mahâprâjapatî Gautamî from the Lotus Sūtra would have appealed to a teacher – or his devout followers – wishing to get the ear of one specific Úâtavâhana king – Gautamîputra Úâtakarṇi. In case anybody has not realized it, the first part of this king’s name is a matronymic – he was the first of the Úâtavâhanas to adopt this style of appellation. What better way to gain the support of a king than to establish this kind of link with his mother ?

In passing, the connection with Saurâṣṭra is especially noteworthy, as this area has always been a major Jain stronghold. Though there is not time to digress here, one can discern a number of elements in the MPNS cluster of texts that could have been influenced by the Jains or to attract converts from them, such as the strictures against meat-eating and even aspects of the tathâgata-garbha doctrine itself.

The importance of this individual in the MPNS cluster of texts is corroborated by the appearance of another variant of the name in the Aṅgulimâla-sūtra. But there the name is not linked to a reforming protector of the sad-dharma, but is given as the original name of Aṅgulimâla himself. Yet despite his terrible reputation, in this sūtra Aṅgulimâla is presented as the central bodhisattva protagonist whose knowledge of the true meaning of every aspect of the Dharma and Vinaya surpasses that of all other disciples such as Maudgalyâna, Upâli, Pûrṇa and Úâriputra – though significantly Mahâkâûyapa is not mentioned. And being a sūtra concerned with the tathâgata-garbha, Aṅgulimâla is also an expert on that doctrine which he expounds at length on various occasions in the sūtra.

However, this Sarva-sattva-priya-darúana is not mentioned by name in the MPNS, although I believe that he is actually present there too. At the beginning of Ch 5 of the sūtra, a mysterious young bodhisattva is suddenly introduced. Strangely, he is never actually named, but is always

mentioned only by the odd epithet “Mahâ-kâúyapa-eka-gotra” -- ‘he who is of the same lineage as Mahâkâúyapa’. This person is therefore a kind of bodhisattva substitute for Mahâkâúyapa and, though not named as such, I suspect that he is none other than our friend Sarva-sattva-priya-darúana, who as we have seen, was viewed precisely as a future bodhisattva who would take on the role of Mahâkâúyapa. Virtually 90% of the remaining text of the MPNS involves this person as the untiring interlocutor who by his questioning draws out of the Buddha a wealth of teachings concerning the permanence of the Buddha, the importance of preserving the authentic Vinaya, the need to purge the Saṅgha of miscreant monks, the importance of upholding and promulgating the MPNS, and most of all the tathâgata-garbha doctrines. Is it possible that we are hearing the actual voice of a historical individual, called Sarva-sattva-priya-darúana by his devoted followers, his words transformed into a sūtra format to ensure the preservation and dissemination of his teachings ?

TATHÂGATA-GARBHA

Returning to the main theme of this talk, the eschatology of the MPNS, we need now to consider two doctrines for which the MPNS is justly renowned: the tathâgata-garbha and the icchantika. First, let us consider in outline the tathâgata-garbha doctrine and one possible eschatological role it played. Unless we explain the “demise of the Dharma” scenario as a very clever upâya, then we really should take the compilers at their word and believe that they really meant what they said – that they were convinced they were living in the last decades of the sad-dharma, after which time all the Mahâyâna sūtras would sink into the ground and all bodhisattvas would disappear, leaving no hope of guidance.

This sense of foreboding seems to have been brewing for some time even before the MPNS group of texts were compiled. The material wealth generated through the prosperity of the Kuṣaṇa and Úâtavâhana eras did not fail to touch the lives of monks and nuns, but the generous donations made in good faith ultimately had a tragic corrupting influence on many members of the Saṅgha. One must stress that apart from the doctrinal innovations that scholars have noted, the vehement attacks on monastic laxity found in many early Mahâyâna sūtras are just as significant. It seems clear that these problems with monastic discipline particularly exercised the minds of those who compiled the MPNS. Page after page rails against those who “own servants, keep cattle and horses and all manner of inappropriate objects”, who engaged in a wide range of improper occupations including farming, various forms of divination, smithing, or the making of parasols, shoes, sesame-leaf fans, water containers, pictures and sculptures. In fact, everything but the practice of the Dharma !

In addition to the falling standards within the Saṅgha, there were perceived misinterpretations of the very Dharma itself from the perspective of the compilers of the MPNS. We have already noted their hostility to the reductionist positions associated with the Mahîúasakas, Sarvâstivâdins and Theravâdins, but additionally, the teachings on the novel form of emptiness espoused by Nâgârjuna and his ilk are particularly singled out for criticism, since they were considered to be extremely pernicious and destructive both to the individuals who adopt them and to others – they are described as moths falling to their deaths in the lamp-flame – since they lead to the denial of the true nature of the Buddha and of the tathâgata-garbha.

All in all, things must have seemed rather dire to some members of the Saṅgha. But if the sad-dharma was truly on the verge of extinction what could be done while something remained ? In the spirit of true bodhisattvas, was there any way in which large numbers of people could be saved or extricated from the on-coming disaster before it was really too late ? A number of innovative practices and doctrines seem to have been developed in response to this crisis. Prior to the MPNS, there was a sudden burgeoning of short sūtras that promised rebirth in various Pure Lands

through the simple means of virtuous conduct and recollection of the particular Buddhas who were masters of these Pure Lands, such as Amitâbha and Akṣobhya. The innate power of those Buddhas' vows ensured that the devotee would be guaranteed a place in a world where the path to liberation would not be hampered by the troublesome features of this world. Closely allied to these texts were the new meditation texts such as the Pratyutpanna-sarva-buddha-sammukhāvasthita-samâdhi-sûtra which allowed one to make direct contact with Buddhas through visualization and meditation.

The originators of the MPNS group of texts adopted a different strategy. I would argue that the tathâgata-garbha doctrine was promoted precisely as a means to save as many people as possible in a short time. Put simply, this doctrine teaches that Buddhahood already lies within all beings as an innate spiritual nature. This spiritual nature is concealed by ignorance and multitudes of afflictive factors – the kleúas – and needs to be awakened and revealed. The presence of this nature implies that all beings, in theory, may awaken to Buddhahood quite rapidly, if only they would recognize the presence of that nature within themselves. The role of the MPNS itself is not only to inform people about this innate spiritual nature, but also to act as a trigger which engenders the necessary willingness in people to uncover their inherent Buddhahood, provided they listen to the sûtra with open-mindedness, faith and confidence in its veracity. In other words, as fitting for a teaching designed for that time of crisis as the demise of the sad-dharma neared, the MPNS itself claims to have a salvific role due to its own numinous power as the last teachings of the Buddha before his parinirvâṇa. Interestingly, the slightly later Aṅgulimâla-sûtra takes this even further and links the inherent salvific power of these tathâgata-garbha teachings with Úâkyamuni's previous vows to save all beings and to bring about their rebirth in Pure Lands.

THE ICCHANTIKAS

So far, the message of the MPNS seems extremely positive, offering hope all beings in the last days before the demise of the sad-dharma. But there is an important caveat. It was recognized that there were sadly some people beyond help, who are excluded from this message of hope: a group of people collectively known as the icchantikas – the “extremists”. In the later strata of the text, the MPNS fulminates stridently against these people, repeating statements like “apart from icchantikas, the cause of enlightenment will become present in everybody” or “even those who commit the downfalls or perpetrate the heinous deeds and those who believe that the generation of the aspiration to enlightenment to be unnecessary will be established in the cause of enlightenment – apart from icchantikas who are like death”.

So who were these people that the MPNS calls “virulent serpents”? This question is succinctly answered thus – “any person, no matter whether they are a monk, a nun, a lay-man or lay-woman, who rejects this sûtra with abusive words, and does not even ask for forgiveness afterwards, has entered the icchantika path Those who have no concern about the fearful even though they know that they are entering a fearful situation, who neither uphold what is conducive to the authentic Dharma nor strive to promulgate the authentic Dharma, and who tolerate what is not praiseworthy regarding that, have also entered the icchantika path”.

And make no mistake about this – the fate of the icchantikas is indeed terrifying, for the sûtra says, “the cause of enlightenment will not be and cannot possibly be engendered in icchantikas”, “they resemble burnt seeds because they have extinguished their wholesome roots”, “the icchantika has no seed and there is no possibility of him having any thought of confessing and begging for forgiveness”. In other words, the MPNS is quite emphatic in its view that these icchantikas will never awaken the potential of their tathâgata-garbha, never achieve liberation and never become Buddhas throughout all eternity.

CONCLUSION

There is one final twist to the story. As we have seen, the sad-dharma and the bodhisattvas who uphold it were predicted to disappear around 220CE, if our calculations are correct. It seems likely that the MPNS was circulated as the final life-belt for the sinking raft of the Dharma – those who had ears to hear had this last opportunity to save themselves. But what then? No more authentic Dharma, no more true teachers and no hint here of future Buddha-saviours to come in this corner of saṃsāra. In fact, there is this chilling passage in the MPNS:

“Who do not see the goal? It is the icchantikas who will not see the goal, for they will not see the goal as long as cyclic existence lasts. I have summarized and taught the significance of this, but you should fear what is extremely fearful! Supposing that all beings in unison were to become fully awakened to supreme and perfect enlightenment, then even if it were possible for the sinful icchantikas to become fully awakened to supreme and perfect enlightenment, they would not see the goal. In that manner, you, o hero, should understand things !

“Whose goal does not end in failure? The Tathâgata’s goal does not end in failure. When all beings who dwell in the cycle of existence have become fully awakened to supreme and perfect enlightenment, then the Tathâgata’s goal will not have ended in failure and then, having passed into parinirvâṇa eternally, the Buddha will become impermanent, like the flame of a lamp whose wick has been consumed.”

