

**„What is Mahāyāna?
And what are Mahāyāna scriptures?“
(Part II)**

– Symposium at EKŌ–Haus der Japanischen Kultur,
April 1st to 3rd, 2016 –

Stimulated by new archaeological findings as well as by a more rigid philologically oriented way of reading epigraphical and traditional texts, during the last few decennia a large range of doubts has been cast on older pictures and models of what Mahāyāna is. There have especially been objections against several of them originating from early 20th century Japanese descriptions that, as a consequence, have entered western university curricula and introductions of East Asian Buddhism. Among them is the well-known opinion that Mahāyāna was *the* Buddhism per se of the Bodhisattva, that it was the Buddhism of the *prajñāpāramitā* teaching, that it was the Buddhism of the laity, the great number, or of a certain majority, thereby often reproducing Japanese self-perceptions and self-interpretations of the 19th and 20th centuries. Some scholars would think that Mahāyāna is that strand of Buddhism that puts all its strength into the unfolding of *bodhicitta* and aiming at “becoming a Buddha”, while others may think that it might best be marked by a resolution of the bodhisattva to immolate himself in favour of any creature in need. Also part of the older picture was the idea that whatever is not Mahāyāna could be correctly termed „Hinayāna“, thinking that this would be essentially the same as the Theravada school and the whole of South Asian Buddhism altogether. In this way, centuries of an extraordinarily multifaceted, multi-branched, and inhomogeneous history of Buddhisms, highly diversified not only in rituality, but also in doctrine, have often been faded out, embezzled, or covered over by specific Mahāyāna informed domestic kinds of rhetoric. Often the most influential schools whose *Vinaya* we do still possess are not mentioned in all possible detail regarding their sometimes considerable *doctrinal* differences, and descriptions of teachings that lie concealed under the surface of their names rarely go beyond a few pithy theses. Seen from Japan and from Japanese currents of philosophy in the last century, the many-voiced history of early Indian and Southern Asiatic Buddhisms fallaciously appears as something that was in many ways surpassed and excelled by “Mahāyāna”. Diagnoses as those by Gregory Schopen that Indian epigraphic sources down to the 5th century A.D. remain silent of the existence of a “school” called “Mahāyāna” can be an irritation and even a nuisance to those who are

accustomed to develop their idea of “Mahāyāna” one-sidedly from reading the scriptures of their own traditions, as if these texts could be used innocuously as primary sources for the reconstruction of the history of early „Mahāyāna“.

Very often the question what can be reliably acknowledged as criteria for a text to belong to the “Mahāyāna”—or even to a “Mahāyāna movement”—is not subjected to any kind of methodological doubt, because it seems too unambiguous a question what exactly it is that would stringently identify „Mahāyāna“ as such. How do we know that a scripture to which a traditional „Mahāyāna“ title is attributed by colophon, dedication, or preface solemnly declaring it to be so, is indeed „Mahāyāna“? And how are we able to still identify a text that fails to be accompanied by those paraphernalia as „Mahāyāna“? How does a responsible catalogue of „Mahāyāna“ scriptures materialize?

Our symposium should make a just try to assess, on the present stage of knowledge, those new theses, in part themselves polemical, that have put those older pictures to the test, doubted them, attacked them fundamentally, or even entirely destroyed them. Among them there is also the suggestion that „Mahāyāna“ could have been kind of a rebellious or insurgent movement inside the very domain of the old mainstream monastic orders and “schools”, whose adherents might have scattered their fresh new “pamphlets” among their fellow monks. Or what about the idea of an originally more peripherous appearance of the Mahāyānists, of inhabitants of the forests (Daniel Boucher), of renegades, who were discontented and seeking for a new and better Buddhist profile for themselves? It might seem to us today that Mahāyāna could have been a kind of highly ambitious, committed, and possibly ecstatic “Cluniac” or “Cistercian” ascetic reform that was more or less unsuccessful in South Asia, but totally victorious in China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and Tibet.

We should also examine the thesis that early Mahāyāna is in essence a Buddhism of pure lands with their respective Buddhas reigning in them, a Buddhism cosmologically augmented in a well-nigh explosive way, especially promoting the Buddha Amitābha, and going together with distinctive rites of calling the Buddhas’ names and of deep devotion; that it is a Buddhism of an intensified and complicated visionality, entertaining rich new imagery and mythologies, increasing greatly the number and kinds of contemplations, *samādhis*, and yogic exercises; that it is a Buddhism of highly demanding intellectuality and speculative power, of an ever more complex scholasticism and art of argumentation finding no equal in the older Indian mainstream groups. And we should also consider Mahāyāna as being that strand of Buddhism that has like no other informed the translation enterprise into Chinese and later into Tibetan, thereby also forming a paradigm even for us today in our meditations on the possibilities and impossibilities of responsible translations into the Western systems and canons of speech.

Participants and speakers are heartily invited to expand this brief list of hints and indications according to their own fields of research, interest, and study. The fundamental question what “Mahāyāna” is on the whole of its history has, under the hands of a younger generation of scholars, been brought to sway and stagger to such a degree, and at the same time been counterbalanced with impressive fresh antitheses, that we find it highly productive to put this question into the center of this conference.