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An Enquiry into the Origin of the Mahāsāṃghika Buddhology

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Many scholars wonder how and why the Mahāsāṃghikas could have conceived a transcendental concept of the Buddha two or three hundred years after the *parinirvāṇa* when the memory of Śākyamuni was still fresh. At the same time the Sthaviravādins still upheld a concept of human Buddha although they contributed to the Buddha many superhuman qualities. So what are the sources the Mahāsāṃghikas relied upon for such a concept of the Buddha? This is the subject of enquiry of this paper.

The Mahāsāṃghikas religious philosophy was based more on faith than reason and accepted whatever was said by the Buddha, or more precisely, whatever was taught in the *Nikāyas* and the *Āgamas* according to Vasumitra.¹ As a result, they developed the concept of a transcendental (*lokottara*) Buddha based on the superhuman qualities of the Buddha recorded in these early Buddhist *sūtras*.²

In the case of the Mahāsāṃghikas, unlike the Sarvāstivādins, there is not many literature left for us to make a comprehensive study of their concept of the Buddha. There are only three texts available, namely the *Mahāvastu*, the *Lokānuvartanasūtra* and Vasumitra's treatise on the doctrines of early Indian Buddhist schools. Scholars have already confirmed the first two works as belonging to the Mahāsāṃghika or its sub-sect, the Lokottaravāda.³ The concept of the Buddha of the Mahāsāṃghikas as presented in these three works is of notable significance. The Buddha is thoroughly idealized to the extent that the historical Buddha is looked upon only as a manifestation, and it is the omnipotent and omniscient aspects of the Buddha that is meaningful to them.

As the Mahāsāṃghikas were faithful followers, they believed in every word of the Buddha and interpreted the passages associated with miracles in the early *sūtras* in an idealistic way. There is a good example in the *Vibhāṣā* that shows clearly how the Mahāsāṃghikas interpreted such passages in the early *sūtras*. In both the *Samyuktāgama* and the *Anguttaranikāya*, there is a passage that asserts that although the Tathāgata was born in the world and abided in the world, he was not defiled by the worldly *dharmas*.⁴ The Mahāsāṃghikas understood and interpreted this passage idealistically, claiming that the Buddha is pure without any defilements (*āsrava dharmas*), and this includes his *rūpakāya*, the physical body.⁵ However, the

Sarvāstivādins interpreted the same passage differently. According to them, the phrase ‘the Tathāgata was born in the world and abided in the world’ meant that the *rūpakāya* appearing in the world was impure, while ‘he was not defiled by the world’ referred to the pure *dharmakāya*.⁶ Reading this passage in context, we can understand that the Buddha proclaimed this since he had eradicated *āsravas*, the causes for rebirth in this world.⁷ Hence, that the Tathāgata was pure purported to an ethical sense not a physical sense. In the *Vibhāṣā* one finds this very same passage three times, and the idea conjoined with the Mahāsāṃghika argument. This is a typical specimen of the Mahāsāṃghika exegesis of the early *sūtras*.⁸ There are many pieces of evidence found in the early *sūtras* to support the assertion that the Mahāsāṃghikas interpreted the canonical passages in an idealistic way.

The most prominent evidence for the origin of Mahāsāṃghika Buddhology is the *Acchariyābbhūtasutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya* which is also found in the Chinese *Madhyamāgama* with a similar title, but with additional descriptions of miracles. The Pāli *sutta* provides exclusively the description of twenty miracles that occurred between the Bodhisattva’s descent from Tuṣita heaven and the time of his birth on earth, while its Chinese counterpart mentions twenty-three miracles, only ten of them occurring after the Buddha’s birth.⁹ The terms used to describe the Buddha in these two versions are also different. The Pāli *sutta* uses the term Bodhisattva implying that he was not yet enlightened, while the Chinese version uses the term ‘World Honoured One’ (Bhagavat), probably indicating that his appearance on earth was only a manifestation. These descriptions concerning the birth of the Buddha are congruent in both versions although the *sūtra* was transmitted in two different traditions, namely the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna. This fact in itself suggests the antiquity of such depiction.

The story of the Buddha’s birth in the above *sūtra* is as follows. The Buddha descended into his mother’s womb from Tuṣita heaven and resided there for exactly ten months without being sullied and smeared by impurities. Right after his birth, he took seven steps and declared that he was the foremost in the world and that this was his last birth. A great immeasurable light illuminated the world, lighting up the darkest place where the sun and moon cannot penetrate. The ten thousandfold world system shook, quaked and trembled. The last two natural events occurred twice, at the time of the Buddha’s descent from the Tuṣita heaven and at the time of his birth. In the entire process, the Buddha is described as fully aware and mindful of what was taking place. This account of the story shows clearly that the Buddha was considered a transcendental being.

The first half of the *Nālakasutta* of the *Suttanipāta* is perhaps a forerunner of this story and serves as a basis for the ideas developed in the *Acchariyābbhūtasutta*, for most scholars think that the *Suttanipāta* contains some of the earliest *suttas*.¹⁰ In the beginning, the *Nālakasutta* mentions that at the birth of the Buddha, gods were delighted and danced happily in heaven.¹¹ Upon perceiving this, the seer Asita inquired about the reason for their happiness, and the gods replied that an incomparable being, the best among all, was born in the country of the Śākya in Lumbini garden. He would cause the wheel of the Dhamma to turn for the benefit and happiness of beings.

In the *Nālakasutta*, there is an important statement saying that the Buddha's birth on earth was for the definite purpose of liberating sentient beings. If we trace further the sources of the above statement, it can be found in both the Chinese translation of the *Samyuktāgama* and the Pāli *Anguttaranikāya*. In one passage, the Buddha instructed thus: "Monks, were not three states found existing in the world, the Tathāgata would not arise in the world, an arahant rightly enlightened; nor would the dhamma-discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata be shown in the world. What are the three states? Birth, decay and death... But since these three states are found, therefore, the Tathāgata does arise in the world, an arahant rightly enlightened, and the dhamma-discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata is shown in the world."¹² This passage suggests that the advent of the Buddha in the world is not accidental like that of the ordinary sentient beings driven by *karma*, but possesses a clear aim to benefit suffering beings. This is significant because the assertion is put in the mouth of the Buddha himself, whereas in both the *Nālakasutta* and the *Acchariyābbhūtasutta*, the statement is said to have been spoken by the gods and Ānanda respectively. The *Nālakasutta* may have drawn its notion concerning the birth of the Buddha from this passage in the *Anguttaranikāya* or the *Samyuktāgama*.

This simple description of the birth of the Buddha in the *Nālakasutta* contains the fundamental ideas which are the sources for the compilation of the *Acchariyābbhūtasutta* that the birth of the Buddha on earth was a wondrous event with the definite purpose of liberating sentient beings. The *Acchariyābbhūtasutta* represents an advanced form of the depiction of the Buddha's birth with detailed descriptions of it as a wondrous event. This depiction is further applied to all the other six past Buddhas in the *Mahāpadānasutta* of the *Dīghanikāya* for all the miracles about Gautama's birth in the *Acchariyābbhūtasutta* are found in the former *sutta* in exactly the same format and style. The story of Gautama Buddha's descent into his

mother's womb from Tuṣita heaven has become a formula in the *Mahāpadānasutta*. This *sutta* explains that it is in the nature of things (*dhammatā*) that all Buddhas in their last birth descend into the wombs of their mothers from the Tuṣita heaven.¹³ All the other miracles accompanying the birth of a Buddha are also said to be in the nature of things.

This analysis concerning the Buddha's birth suggests that there are at least four stages for its development. The passage quoted above from the *Samyuktāgama* and the *Anguttaranikāya* does not suggest anything mysterious about the rise of the Tathāgata in the world, but it does provide a source of ideas for later developments. This is the first stage of the birth depiction. The *Nālakasutta* represents perhaps the second stage of the birth depiction. The birth of the Buddha is already considered as a wonderful event here. This form of depiction is fully developed in the *Acchariyābbhūtasutta* which contains the entire episode of Gautama's birth replete with all miracles. This I would suggest to be considered the third stage. At the fourth stage, the story of the Buddha's birth finally became a theory in the *Mahāpadānasutta*, subsequently applied to all Buddhas. All Buddhist traditions transmitted this theory in their literature, and up to the present time, both the Mahāyāna and the Theravāda traditions concur on it. Thus, these developments of the theory concerning the Buddha's birth must take place before the split of Buddhism into different schools. It is thus evident that in early Buddhism, the faithful had already idealised the Buddha and considered the birth of the Buddha on earth not as an ordinary event, but as an atypical event (*adbhuta*). The purpose of his birth is clear, that is to become enlightened "for the benefit and happiness of all sentient beings". However, before the enlightenment, the aspirant was deemed a Bodhisattva in Theravāda Buddhism.

Thus from such ideas and theories found in early scriptures the Mahāsāṃghikas asserted that all Buddhas are supramundane (*lokottara*).¹⁴ The *Acchariyābbhūtasutta* provides some vital statements that served as repositories of the transcendental Buddha of the Mahāsāṃghikas. We further compare these statements with passages found in the *Lokānuvartanasūtra*, the Mahāvasu and Vasumutra's treatise.

According to the *Acchariyābbhūtasutta*, first the Bodhisattva was fully aware and mindful of all events taking place at his birth. Second, the bodhisattva was not sullied and smeared by impurities when he was born. Third, his mother could see him in her womb just as seeing a gem in her hand. The *Lokānuvartanasūtra* states that the Bodhisattva was not born from the sexual union of father and mother and his body was magically produced, like an illusion.¹⁵ Fourth, the Bodhisattva's mother gave

birth while standing. According to Vasumitra, the Mahāsāṃghikas asserted that all Bodhisattvas are born from the right side when they come out from their mothers' wombs. Fifth, the Bodhisattva took seven steps and spoke right after his birth. The *Lokānuvartanasūtra* explicitly states that it is in conformity with the ways of the world that the Buddha made such a show when he was born and uttered the words: "In the whole world no-one surpasses me! I shall deliver men of the ten directions!"¹⁶ This suggests that adherents held that these events could not happen for an ordinary man, but only to a person who was enlightened and who displayed them purposely. It is more than probable that from these ideas the compilers of both the *Mahāvastu* and the *Lokānuvartanasūtra* explained that every act of the Buddha on earth was similarly to a display for the welfare and happiness of men.¹⁷ The Buddha followed the ways of the world just as much as he followed the transcendental ways. He made a show of standing, walking, sitting and lying down, but he was never tired. He washed his feet and body, though there was no dirt; he cleansed his mouth, though it smelled like a lotus. He ate though he was not hungry, and so forth. These things, the compilers explain, are all due to his being an embodiment of the effects of good actions. Thus, foundations have been set in early Buddhism, and it was the Mahāsāṃghikas who thoroughly idealised the Buddha and asserted that he had become enlightened eons ago.

Apart from the above major evidence, there are another six passages supporting the above theory concerning the origin of the Mahāsāṃghikas Buddhology. First, the *Lokānuvartanasūtra* states that "even if the thunderbolts of the ten directions are combined together to make one sound, it cannot shake one hair of the Buddha because he makes a show of entering into the *samādhi* of no sound."¹⁸ A similar story is found in the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*. The Buddha told the visitor Pukkusa that once, while he was in meditation, the falling rain began to beat and splash, and the lightning flashed forth, and the thunderbolts crashed; and two peasant brothers and four oxen were killed, but he did not hear a sound.¹⁹ There are some striking similarities in the two descriptions of the Buddha's *samādhi*: first, the Buddha is in *samādhi*, second, the thunderbolts, and third, the Buddha heard no sound at all. It seems obvious that the description in the *Lokānuvartanasūtra* is based on the passage in the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*.

Second, the Mahāsāṃghikas asserted that the length of the Buddha's life is limitless.²⁰ In fact, the long life span of the Buddha seems to have been considered by the early compilers of the *Nikāyas* and the *Āgamas*. In all versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, it is stated that the Buddha deliberately gave up the remainder

of his life at the request of Māra, but if he so wished, he could have lived for a *kalpa* or to the end of a *kalpa*.²¹ Since a *kalpa* is an extremely long time, the Mahāsāṃghikas naturally held that the life span of the Buddha is limitless.²² This also supports the assertion that the transcendental conception of the Buddha took root in the minds of the Buddhists at a very early date.

Third, according to Vasumitra, the Mahāsāṃghikas asserted that in all that has been expounded by the World-honoured One, there is nothing which is not in conformity with the truth (*ayathārtha*).²³ In the *Aṅguttara*, Bhikkhu Uttara said to Sakka, “Even so, O King, whatsoever be well spoken, all that is the word of the Exalted One, Arahant, the fully Awakened One, wholly based thereon is both what we and others say.”²⁴ Thus according to this statement, whatever is well spoken are the words of the Buddha and whatever the Buddha spoke must have been well spoken. The early Buddhists already thought that all the statements of the Buddha were well spoken. The Mahāsāṃghikas would naturally interpret this passage as meaning that all the words of the Buddha represent the exposition of the Dharma. This is very important to the Mahāsāṃghikas because it is based on such statements in the early *sūtras* that they held every single word of the Buddha as being the truth. The Mahāsāṃghikas’ attitude regarding the words of the Buddha was thus one of the main reasons for their concept of a transcendental Buddha.

Fourth, according to the *Lokānuvartanasūtra*, the body of the Buddha being like gold, could not get dirty, and being like a diamond it was also supremely pure. His feet were like lotuses as to which dust would not cleave, and the Buddha had the mark of supreme taste.²⁵ All such things remind us of three of the thirty-two major marks of the Buddha described in the early *sūtras*. (1) The complexion of the Buddha’s body resembles the colour of gold, (2) his skin is so smooth that no dust cleaves to his body and (3) the Buddha’s taste is supremely keen. The links between the description of the *Lokānuvartanasūtra* and three of the thirty-two major marks are clear: gold, purity and taste. The various attributes of the Buddha found in the *Lokānuvartanasūtra* are perhaps developed along the line of the thirty-two major marks.

Fifth, the *Lokānuvartanasūtra* states that the Buddha knew the *dharmas* of innumerable other Buddhas in other Buddha-lands (*Buddhakṣetra*) of the ten directions.²⁶ In the *Samyutta*, it is said that the Buddha knew much more than what he taught to his disciples, and he compared what he had actually taught to the leaves held in his hand in comparison to the leaves in the forest.²⁷ The *Samyutta* already suggests that the knowledge of the Buddha is immeasurable. The Mahāsāṃghikas, on this basis,

interpreted the knowledge of the Buddha as being omniscience.

Sixth, according to Vasumitra, the Mahāsāṃghikas asserted that the power of the Tathāgata is also limitless.²⁸ This is perhaps a general statement based on the miracles of the Buddha described in the early *sūtras* such as the miracles through which he converted the three Kāśyapa brothers right after his enlightenment, and the bandit Aṅgulimālya.²⁹

All these pieces of evidence suggest that the Mahāsāṃghikas were a group of followers with resolute faith. As Vasumitra's treatise attributes to the Mahāsāṃghikas the assertion that every word of the Buddha is the preaching of the Dharma, this seems to be a clear indication that the Mahāsāṃghikas accepted every word in the *Nikāyas* and the *Āgamas* as the true sayings of the Buddha himself. Thus, with such belief, they had developed a transcendental concept of the Buddha on the basis of the superhuman qualities of the Buddha described in the early *sūtras*. Hence, two aspects of the concept of the Buddha of the Mahāsāṃghikas can be identified: the true Buddha who is omniscient and omnipotent, and the manifested forms through which he liberates sentient beings with skilful means. Śākyamuni was considered but one of these forms. The true Buddha supports the manifested forms that can appear in the worlds of the ten directions. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the former aspect was developed and divided into the concept of the *dharmakāya* and the concept of the *saṃbhogakāya* while the latter aspect was developed into the concept of *nirmāṇakāya*. Thus, the Mahāsāṃghikas are also the originators of the idea of the *nirmāṇakāya*.

WORKS CITED

Abbreviations

* Indication of a reconstructed Sanskrit title from an ancient Chinese translation of Buddhist text whenever the original Sanskrit is lost.

T Taisho Tripiṭaka.

tr Translation

PTS Pali Text Society

Primary

**Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā-śāstra*. There three Chinese translations:

Mahāvibhāṣāśāstra, T27, No.1545, tr. Xuanzang. *Abhidharmavibhāṣāśāstra*,

T28, No.1546, tr. Buddhavarman, Daotai. *Vibhāṣāśāstra*, T28, No.1547, tr.

Saṅghabhūti (or Saṅghabhadrā?), Dharmanandin, Buddharakṣa.

Āṅguttaranikāya, Vol. II, IV, V, Oxford: PTS.

Dīghanikāya, Vol.II, Oxford: PTS.

**Lokānuvartanasūtra*. tr. Lokakṣema, T17, No.807. There is also a Tibetan translation.

**Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*. There are four Chinese translations of the Hīnayāna version: No.1, tr. Buddhayasas, 19a-b; No.5, tr. Baifazhu, 168a-b; No.6, translator lost, 183c-184a; and No.7, tr. Faxian, 198a-b.

Majjhimanikāya, Vol.I, III, Oxford: PTS.

**Samayabhedavyūhacakra*, by Vasumitra. There are three Chinese translations: T49, No.2031, tr. Xuanzang, T49, No.2032 & No.2033, tr. Paramārtha.

Samyuttanikāya, Vol.III, V, Oxford: PTS.

Suttanipāta, Oxford: PTS.

Udāna, Oxford: PTS.

Secondary

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Woodward, F. L. (tr.) *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, Vol.V, Oxford: PTS, 1995.

¹ The Mahāsāṃghikas asserted that all the words of the Buddha preach the Dharma and there is nothing which is not in conformity with the truth. Vasumitra’s *Samayabhedavyūhacakra* T49, 15b.

² The term “early Buddhist sūtras” indicates the *sūtras* in the Pāli *Nikāyas* and the Chinese *Āgamas*. I have discussed the human and superhuman aspects of the Buddha in the first chapter ‘the concept of the Buddha in early Buddhism’ in my book *The Concept of the Buddha*.

³ Harrison, ‘Sanskrit Fragments of a Lokottaravādin Tradition.’ 1982, 213.

⁴ T1, No.1, 28b12, *Āṅguttaranikāya* ii, 37, and *Samyuttanikāya* iii, 140.

⁵ T27, No.1545, 229a; 391c-392a; 871c.

⁶ T27, No.1545, 229a; 391c-392a; 871c.

⁷ T2. No.99, 28b12.

⁸ Dutt also thinks that the Mahāsāṃghika concept of the Buddha may well be based on the utterances found in the *Nikāyas*, such as “I am the all-conqueror, I am omniscient, I am untouched by all worldly objects. I am perfect in this world; I am a teacher incomparable; I am the only enlightened, tranquilized and have extinguished everything” in the *Majjhimanikāya*. See Dutt, *Buddhist Sects in India*, 71. The quotation is from *Majjhimanikāya* i, 171.

⁹ *Majjhimanikāya* iii, 118-124. T1, No.26, 469c-471c.

¹⁰ Scholars like V. Fausböll think that the *Suttanipāta* belongs to the oldest strata of Buddhist literature. Fausböll considers that the greater part of the Mahāvagga, and nearly the whole of the Aṭṭhakavagga are very old. He has arrived at this conclusion from two reasons, first from the language, and secondly from the contents. See Fausböll, *The Suttanipāta, A Collections of Discourses*, p.xi. Thus the *Nālakasutta* perhaps falls into the later stage of development.

¹¹ The *Suttanipāta*, verses 679-698.

¹² *Āṅguttaranikāya* v, 144; T99, 95c, 199c. The English translation is adopted with a few changes from Woodward, *Gradual Sayings*, v, 99. The Chinese translation mentions the three states as old age, illness and death, in contrast with the Pāli version: birth, decay and death.

¹³ *Dīghanikāya* ii, 12-15.

¹⁴ Masuda, (tr.) ‘Origin and Doctrines of Early Indian Buddhist Schools.’ P.18.

¹⁵ T17, No.807, 751c.

¹⁶ T17, No.807, 751c.

¹⁷ The *Mahāvastu*, i, 167-70, the *Lokānuvartanasūtra*, T17, No.807, 751c-752a.

¹⁸ T17, No.807, 752b line 24-26.

¹⁹ *Dīghanikāya* ii, 130-133. In the four Chinese translations of the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, this incident is also found, T1, No.1, 19a-b; No.5, 168a-b; No.6, 183c-184a; and No.7, 198a-b.

²⁰ Masuda, *op. cit.*, 20.

²¹ T01, 15c; T05165a; T06, 180b; T1451, 387c; the *Divyāvadāna*, 201; *Dīghanikāya* ii, 103; *Samyuttanikāya* v, 259; *Āṅguttaranikāya* iv, 309; the *Udāna*, vi, 62. According to the *Vibhāṣā*, (T1545, 657b) there are two explanations about the Buddha’s giving up his life span. The first one is that the Buddha gave up one third of his life because the life span of the Buddha is hundred twenty years. The second is that the Buddha gave up one fifth of his life because the life span of the Buddha is a hundred years. This of course is a rational explanation of the Sarvāstivādins.

²² The term *kalpa* is the longest period of time in the Indian cosmology. It is an age, the life cycle of a world, or a universe, an unimaginably long period of time. According to Monier Williams, a *kalpa* is a fabulous period of time. It is a day of Brahma or one thousand Yugas, a period of four thousand, three hundred and twenty millions of years of mortals, measuring the duration of the world. A month of Brahma is supposed to contain thirty such Kalpas. According to the *Mahābhārata*, twelve months of Brahma constitute his year, and one hundred such years his lifetime; fifty years of Brahma’ are supposed to have elapsed, and we are now in the *svetavārāha-kalpa* of the fifty-first; at the end of a *kalpa* the world is annihilated. The Buddhists are not in agreement on the length of a *kalpa*, except for it being an immeasurably long period of time. See Williams, (ed.) *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 262c.

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- ²³ Masuda, *op. cit.*, 19.
- ²⁴ *Āṅguttaranikāya* iv, 163-4. The translation is adapted from *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, IV, 112.
- ²⁵ T807, 752a-b.
- ²⁶ T807, 752b.
- ²⁷ *Saṃyuttanikāya* v, 437.
- ²⁸ Masuda, *op. cit.*, 19.
- ²⁹ *Majjhimanikāya* ii, 99.