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Mahāyāna: A Study and Translation of the
Rāṣṭrapālaparipṛcchā-sūtra*

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A Review of *Bodhisattvas of the Forest and the Formation of the Mahāyāna: A Study and Translation of the Rāṣṭrapālapariṣcchā-sūtra*

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Bodhisattvas of the Forest and the Formation of the Mahāyāna: A Study and Translation of the Rāṣṭrapālapariṣcchā-sūtra. By Daniel Boucher. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008, xxiii + 287 pages, ISBN 978-0-8248-2881-3 (cloth), US \$54.00.

One of the most difficult problems in the study of Indian Buddhism is the origin of Mahāyāna Buddhism. It would seem that some time after the Aśokan expansion of Buddhism in the mid-third century BCE, a loosely related network of movements began to crystallize around the idea of following the bodhisattva path to complete awakening. Given the complex and diverse contents of the first Mahāyāna sutras translated into Chinese in the late-second century CE, we can be certain of the fact that these movements had reached a rather advanced stage of development by this time. But exactly what happened between these two points is largely unknown: we have very little idea of when and why the new movements emerged, or even how they developed after the second century CE.

Because of the complete absence of Mahāyāna in the inscripational record before the fourth or fifth century CE, all speculation about the early history of the movement(s) depends on the extant literature.

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Unfortunately, however, the early Mahāyāna sutras are not exactly helpful in this regard. By setting these discourses in a fictitious past, one in which the legendary figure of Śākyamuni is accompanied by a host of seemingly fictitious bodhisattvas, the composers ensured—probably intentionally—that they were erased from the historical record. Unlike the earlier canonical discourses preserved in various languages (such as Pāli), which depict numerous historical persons in a pre-Aśokan setting, all we have in the early Mahāyāna sutras is a rather confused record of the authors' beliefs, aspirations and fears.

This situation does not promise much in the way of historical reconstruction and, as Daniel Boucher points out in this excellent translation and study of the *Rāṣṭrapālapariṣcchā Sūtra*, the study of early Mahāyāna Buddhism is in need of some fresh thinking and “methodological direction” (xi). This he provides by paying close attention to the variations between the different versions of the text, especially the early Chinese translation of Dharmarakṣa and the Sanskrit edition of probably the sixth century; by situating the text much more firmly in the Indian Buddhist context; and by considering the processes by means of which the text was transmitted to China. Such an approach to the study of Mahāyāna sutra literature creates a much more illuminating picture of the early bodhisattva movements in India and beyond.

The study begins by situating the *Rāṣṭrapāla* in the Indian Buddhist context. Chapters one and two of Part one (Asceticism and the Glorification of the Buddha's body: The Indian Text of the *Rāṣṭrapālapariṣcchā-sūtra*) consider the myth of Śākyamuni's career as a bodhisattva, with the first chapter (The Physiognomy of Virtue) showing that the *Rāṣṭrapāla*'s glorification of Śākyamuni's supernatural body follows a conventional theme, one that is also found in a number of important early Mahāyāna texts. The notion that early Mahāyāna

developed from mainstream Buddhism is taken further in chapter two (Former Life Narratives and the Bodhisattva Career), with Boucher noting that the *Rāṣṭrapāla* refers to no less than fifty *Jātakas*, the implication being that early Mahāyāna “did not distinguish itself—contrary to many scholarly claims—by depreciating the centrality of Śākyamuni in favor of other buddhas, but in fact fully participated in and contributed to his apotheosis” (22).

The evidence cited from the *Rāṣṭrapāla*—including its sections on the Bodhisattva’s excessive generosity, in particular the story of the Bodhisattva’s past life as Sudaṃṣṭra (Viśvantara, Pāli Vessantara)—situates this early Mahāyāna text well within the Buddhist mainstream. For, as Boucher notes, from the third century BCE onwards, the myth of Śākyamuni as a bodhisattva is recorded in numerous texts (such as the Pāli *Jātakas* and *Apadāna*), and is depicted in sculpture at sites as far apart as Sāñcī and Amarāvātī (21). There is little difference between this imaginary world and the emerging Mahāyāna of the *Rāṣṭrapāla*. Indeed, most of Dharmarakṣa’s third-century CE translation of the text is taken up with a past-life story of Śākyamuni (as prince Puṇyaraśmi during the age of the previous Buddha Siddhārthabuddhi), which differs little in content from post-canonical Pāli texts such as the *Buddhavaṃsa*. Boucher claims, however, that rather than the Mahāyāna literature developing earlier themes of the mainstream, it:

is much more likely that... both the Pāli hagiographic literature and early Mahāyāna *sūtras* arose from a shared nexus of innovations in the Buddhist tradition. Both genres may well represent parallel developments with different trajectories, and it is not at all inconceivable that these genres could have arisen in close proximity to each other in time and place. (21)

The notion of “parallel developments” does not fit the historical record, however. The myth of Śākyamuni’s bodhisattva career must have arisen by at least the early third century BCE, since Aśoka’s Nigali Sagar edict records his enlargement of the *stūpa* of the former Buddha Konākamana.² This is surely much earlier than the period when aspiring Bodhisattvas began to compose new Mahāyāna sutras. Moreover, the apotheosis of the Buddha was surely a standard belief of the Indian Buddhist mainstream, since the distinction between the liberation of the Buddha and the *arhat* was a general feature of Indian Buddhism. If so, bodhisattva ideas of the early Mahāyāna literature can hardly have been a development parallel to the developed myth of Śākyamuni, but must rather have developed from it.

Further conceptual overlap between the *Rāṣṭrapāla* and the Buddhist mainstream is indicated by its complete lack of doctrinal innovation (a feature shared by other early Mahāyāna sutras such as the *Ratnarāśi* [73]). As Boucher points out, the bodhisattva composers of such texts “would have been entirely sympathetic with, if not intimately cognizant of, any number of passages preserved in, say, the *Sutta-nipāta*” (73). If almost “nothing about the *Rāṣṭrapāla* can be called revolutionary,” if the “practices it advocates are all quite standard fare,” and if the word Hīnayāna does not occur and the word Mahāyāna only appears in the later Sanskrit edition, in what sense can the *Rāṣṭrapāla* be classified as ‘Mahāyāna’? (74) The text’s only major difference is that rather than merely praising the myth of Śākyamuni’s Bodhisattva career, the composers of the text modelled their own spiritual path on it: “[F]or the authors of the *Rāṣṭrapāla*, contemporary bodhisattvas were called to emulate the extraordinary sacrifices of Vessantara by way of the ascetic life of a wilderness dweller...” (29).

² For a discussion of this edict and its importance for dating Pāli texts such as the *Mahāpadāna Sutta*, see p.194ff of Alexander Wynne, “The Buddha’s skill in means and the genesis of the five aggregate teaching,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 20, 2 (2010): 194–216.

But even this emulation of the bodhisattva path by a few was probably not very controversial. As Boucher points out, Buddhist monks in modern Theravāda countries have been known to imagine themselves as bodhisattvas following the path to complete awakening; it is hardly surprising that this happened at a much earlier date (75). What is surprising is that when it did happen in ancient India, the bodhisattva ideal was expressed by composing new discourses (*sūtra*) of the Buddha. Even if most of the *Rāṣṭrapāla*'s content is very close to the *Buddhavaṃsa*, the form of the two texts is entirely different: whereas the latter is a verse text that does not resemble any Pāli sutta, the former is a prose discourse presented as *buddhavacana*.

The composition of new sutras would have been highly controversial; so serious, in fact, that it could even have prompted a schism.³ The fact that numerous Mahāyāna sutras adopt very defensive attitudes on the issue of their authenticity—including the later Sanskrit version of the *Rāṣṭrapāla* (72)—suggest that this was no minor matter. Even if Schopen perhaps overstated the matter by imagining the early Mahāyāna as a series of individual book-cults, he was surely correct to place the Sūtras at the heart of the movement.⁴ Without the written word there would have been no such thing as Mahāyāna Buddhism.⁵ The importance of these bodhisattva sutras in determining a Mahāyāna identity it not lost on Boucher, who notes that being a Mahāyānist must have “involved participation within a self-identified bodhisattva network that accepted the authority of at least a certain number of Mahāyāna sūtras” (77).

³ This possibility has recently been considered by Joseph Walser in *Nāgārjuna in Context, Mahayana Buddhism and Early Indian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005): 95ff.

⁴ See Gregory Schopen, “The Phrase ‘*sa prthivīpradeśaḥ caityabhūto bhavet*’ in the *Vajracchedikā*: Notes on the Cult of the Book in Mahāyāna,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 17 (1975): 147–81. On Schopen’s thesis see Boucher, p. 42.

⁵ See Richard Gombrich, “How the Mahāyāna Began,” *The Buddhist Forum*, vol. 1, ed. T. Skorupski, (London: University of London [SOAS], 1990): 21–30.

Boucher does not make much of sutra composition in determining early Mahāyāna identity. Instead, he focuses on a different, but just as important, factor in the differentiation of bodhisattva groups from the Buddhist mainstream: the text's ascetic orientation. This is discussed in chapters three and four, which develop Paul Harrison's thesis of a strong ascetic tendency in the emerging Mahāyāna.⁶ Chapter three (Wilderness Dwelling and the Ascetic Disciplines) highlights the text's concern with the ascetic practices (*dhutaḡuṇas*) and wilderness-dwelling (40), an orientation that Boucher notes is prominent in a number of important early Mahāyāna texts, including the *Ratnarāṣī*, *Kāśyapaḡparivarta*, and *Ugraparipḡcchā*, as well as "a sizable number of additional passages in Mahāyāna sūtra literature, especially in the *Mahāratnakūṭa* collection." All of these texts, according to Boucher, fall within a subgenre of "texts espousing wilderness dwelling for the monastic bodhisattva" (53).

This depiction of an early bodhisattva movement emerging firmly within the mainstream, albeit on its ascetic edges, is entirely plausible. It was not just that some of the forest ascetics imagined themselves as bodhisattvas like Śākyamuni, or that other believed they could contact buddhas of the present located in distant cosmic regions. On their own, these ideas could easily have fizzle out into nothing, without making any significant impact on the mainstream's ongoing changes and transformations. But by situating themselves on the ascetic fringe, and composing new sutras in the old style, the bodhisattva movements created the possibility that their legacy might endure and make a difference. The reasons why the bodhisattvas eventually did make a major difference, and ultimately transformed the mainstream in their image, are largely unknown. But Boucher's comparison of Dharmarakṣa's text with the later Sanskrit version suggests some of the

⁶ See Paul Harrison, "Searching for the Origins of the Mahāyāna: What are We Looking For?" *The Eastern Buddhist*, New Series 28, 1 (Spring 1995).

ways in which this might have happened.

In a section of chapter six entitled “Mistranslation and Missed Translation,” Boucher notes that the translation of Dharmarakṣa lacks about fifty percent of the later Sanskrit text, including the “invective aimed at arrogant and greedy monks who usher in the imminent destruction of the Dharma” (108). This critique indicates that the ascetic transmitters of the text had become increasingly critical of the monastic mainstream. By the time of the later Sanskrit version of the text, it seems that the transmitters of the *Rāṣṭrapāla* had become fractious disciplinarians pitted against a “new type of social institution with considerable economic clout” (68). In chapter four (Profit and Honor: A Critique of Sedentary Monasticism), Boucher cites evidence from central Asia and medieval Sri Lanka, and also draws upon Schopen’s studies of the *Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya*, to paint a picture of a “fully institutionalized, permanently housed, landed monastery” (68). The relaxation in monastic standards this would have entailed clearly troubled the transmitters of the *Rāṣṭrapāla*, a fact which explains the later Sanskrit text’s reactionary sentiments:

The *Rāṣṭrapāla* is in many ways a Puritan tract. Its authors were clearly disillusioned with what the institution of Buddhist monasticism had become in their day. Like the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century reformers in the Church of England, they championed an ascetic vision, a return to the righteous times of the first disciples. Sharp-tongued and curmudgeonly, the authors of the *Rāṣṭrapāla* set out to defend the Buddha’s Dharma against the tide of monastic laxity and wantonness to which they saw it succumbing. (64)

This scenario of tension within the Indian Buddhist *sangha* is easy to imagine. But there was perhaps more to it than just an internal debate. Boucher notes that the important changes between

Dharmarakṣa's translation and the later Sanskrit edition can be placed "roughly between 270 and 550 C.E., corresponding approximately to the north Indian Gupta period" (109). This is a crucial piece of information, for it was in this period that a revitalized, theistic Brahminism was patronized by the Guptas. For a long time prior to this Brahminism had been relatively marginalized, or at least not privileged, in the north: apart from the short-lived Śuṅga dynasty, post-Mauryan northern India was dominated by invading Greeks, Scythians, Parthians and Kuṣāṇas, all of whom patronized the Buddhist *sangha*. But the Brahminic community never went away, and the fact that Buddhist authorities in this period began to compose in Sanskrit, the sacred language of the Brahmins, shows their growing cultural influence.

Even if the socio-religious change initiated by the Guptas did not immediately impinge upon Indian Buddhism, the *sangha* must have been aware of the major competition it now faced for patronage. This would have exacerbated tensions between the monastic mainstream and fringe bodhisattva groups. It is easy to imagine that the bodhisattvas became more critical of lax monastic standards which, they believed, would lead to dwindling support, as the monastics neglected their basic spiritual and pastoral duties. If the bodhisattva groups transmitting texts such as the *Rāṣṭrapāla* became more vociferous, a backlash from the mainstream was bound to occur.

A fraught situation such as this explains why the later Sanskrit edition of the text includes numerous references to the *Jātakas* and the Buddha's supernatural body: clearly the Bodhisattvas were under pressure to prove their orthodoxy. The fact that these elements are not found in Dharmarakṣa's translation might be taken to weaken Boucher's argument of a close relationship between the mainstream and the emergent Mahāyāna of the *Rāṣṭrapāla*. But Boucher is almost certainly correct in concluding that:

The Indic text underlying Dharmarakṣa's translation would appear then to represent something of a frame on which the warp of the eulogies for the Buddha's glorified body was interwoven with the woof of references to his former exertions as the wilderness faction of a later Mahāyāna fraternity bolstered its claims for authority and made a place for itself in a contentious socioreligious environment. (109)

As Buddhist monasticism developed apace, and became firmly embedded in the socio-economic life of ancient India, and as external circumstances began to turn against the Buddhist community, one form of ascetic reaction to this was in the form of various bodhisattva movements which attempted to return to original ideals in the most radical way possible: by emulating the lengthy and arduous career of Śākyamuni himself.

Although we still lack precise information on the dates and geographical locations of the early bodhisattva groups, as well as details about the individuals who comprised them, Boucher's study helps us better understand the ideological and social forces involved during this period. It also goes some way towards explaining the transmission of Mahāyāna to China. Boucher notes that Mahāyāna sutras are prominent among the early Indian texts translated into Chinese, and given his account of events in India, it is quite possible that this was **because**

China held out the prospect of a religious and economic haven many found lacking in their homelands. When the Mahāyāna does begin to appear on the scene in Indian Buddhist inscriptions, roughly around the fourth or fifth century, the Mainstream schools increasingly cease to be found epigraphically as recipients of substantial patronage. And, as if to confirm this hypothesis, the first large compendia of Mainstream *āgama* and *vinaya* texts are translated in China at about the same time,

suggesting the possibility of a reversal of fortunes between these groups. (83–84)

Boucher’s study of Dharmarakṣa’s work as a translator in Part two (Indian Buddhism Through a Chinese Lens: Dharmarakṣa’s Translation of the *Rāṣṭrapālapariṣcchā-sūtra*) also shows that he worked with a Kharoṣṭhī manuscript that had been transmitted through a Gāndhārī-speaking environment. This does not mean that the text was composed in the region of Greater Gandhāra, however, and so we are no nearer to establishing the geographical origin of the *Rāṣṭrapāla*, even if we can suppose that “its earliest visible success was found only on the fringes of the Indian Buddhist world and beyond” (107).

With this translation and study of the *Rāṣṭrapāla*, Daniel Boucher has added considerably to our understanding of Indian Buddhism in its ‘Middle Period’, from the first through sixth centuries CE. It is to be hoped that the methodological direction set by studies such as this—and, it should be noted, Jan Nattier’s similar treatment of the *Ugrapariṣcchā Sūtra*⁷—will be replicated across the entire spectrum of early Mahāyāna literature. For the time being, we are now in a much better position to understand why and how the bodhisattva movements emerged and developed in India.

It is finally worth noting that this study allows us to appreciate just how unusual the Perfection of Wisdom tradition was in the world of Indian Buddhism. For the concern with this final bodhisattva ‘perfection’ (of wisdom, *prajñā*) surely indicates that some bodhisattvas were interested in achieving this, which in turn implies that some bodhisattvas wished to realize complete awakening (*samyak-sambodhi*) in the here and now. This stands in sharp contrast with the ascetic concern to emulate the arduous path of Śākyamuni (as in ascetic texts such as the

⁷ Jan Nattier, *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to the Inquiry of Ugra (Ugrapariṣcchā-sūtra)*. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2003.

Rāṣṭrapāla) and the visionary concern to contact other buddhas of the present (as in the *Pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthitasamādhī Sūtra*). It also differs from the general goal of the mainstream, which was to realize the *nirvana* of the *arhat*. Was there really a bodhisattva movement focused on realizing the perfect wisdom that effects full awakening? This question is now much easier to conceptualise, given the vivid account of the early bodhisattva movements contained in this important book.