

*Janice J. Nattier  
and  
Charles S. Prebish*

MAHĀSĀMĠHIKA  
ORIGINS: THE  
BEGINNINGS OF  
BUDDHIST  
SECTARIANISM

I. INTRODUCTION

During the past thirty years, there has been a considerable interest on the part of scholars writing on Buddhism in the early Indian Buddhist councils in general and the Buddhist sectarian movement in particular.<sup>1</sup> Prior to that time, it was generally accepted as traditional in Buddhology that the great schism separating the Mahāsāṃghika and Sthavira nikāyas of early Indian Buddhism occurred at the famous council held at Vaiśālī in 100 A.N. (after nirvāṇa), and that the issue of separation was the famous *daśa-vastūni* (ten points) of illicit monastic behavior. Of course other scholars had by this time recognized the importance of Mahādeva's innocuous five theses regarding the status of the arhant for the sectarian movement, but no real resolution of the problem presented itself. Hofinger's well known *Etude sur la concile de Vaiśālī*, published in 1946, demonstrated quite clearly that, in fact, the notorious schism had nothing at all to do with the Vaiśālī council. Nowhere, in any of the Vinaya council

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., M. Hofinger, *Etude sur le concile de Vaiśālā* (Louvain: Bureaux de Muséon, 1946); Paul Demiéville, "À propos du concile de Vaiśālī," *T'oung Pao* 40 (1951): 239-96; André Bareau, *Les Premiers Conciles bouddhiques* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955); and Nalinaksha Dutt, "The Second Buddhist Council," *Indian Historical Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (March 1959): 45-56.

## *Mahāsāṃghika Origins*

accounts that Hofinger presents so meticulously, is such a schism mentioned. Rather, perfect concord was seemingly reestablished. It was not until 1955 that we were presented with a reasonable solution to the problem, included as one of the major theses of André Bareau's *Les Premiers Conciles bouddhiques*. We should note, however, that a similar thesis was hinted at but not developed by Pachow in 1951.<sup>2</sup> Bareau maintains that yet another council, held in Pāṭaliputra under the Nandin ruler Mahāpadma, convened in 137 A.N., resulting in the great schism and precipitated by the above mentioned Mahādeva's five theses. Bareau's hypothesis was arrived at through the very careful and thorough study of all the source materials, as we have come to expect from this great scholar's work, and his proved itself to be a very persuasive one, gaining further acceptance among scholars as each year passes.

It was in this context that one of the writers of this article, in seeking to summarize the results of this vast amount of research, especially since the majority of it has been written in French, presented "A Review of Scholarship on the Buddhist Councils,"<sup>3</sup> accepting (after much checking as well as independent research) the tenets of Bareau and Hofinger. Nevertheless, as is often the case in the study of early Indian Buddhism, our hypotheses and tentative conclusions need to be constantly reevaluated. The following pages are presented as a reevaluation of the sectarian issue, and present several new interpretations of the traditional materials. We maintain the following positions in this regard. First, that Mahādeva has nothing to do with the primary schism between the Mahāsāṃghikas and Sthaviras, emerging in a historical period considerably later than previously supposed, and taking his place in the sectarian movement by instigating an internal schism within the already existing Mahāsāṃghika school. Second, that the sole cause of the initial schism in Buddhist history pertained to matters of Vinaya, but rather than representing a reaction of orthodox Buddhists to Mahāsāṃghika laxity, as maintained by both Bareau and Demiéville,<sup>4</sup> represents a reaction on the part of the future Mahāsāṃghikas to unwarranted expansion of the root Vinaya text on the part of the future Sthaviras

<sup>2</sup> W. Pachow, "A Comparative Study of the Prātimokṣa," *Sino-Indian Studies* 4, no. 2 (1951): 53.

<sup>3</sup> Charles S. Prebish, "A Review of Scholarship on the Buddhist Councils," *Journal of Asian Studies* 33, no. 2 (February 1974): 239-54.

<sup>4</sup> Demiéville maintains laxity inherent in the future Mahāsāṃghikas at the time of the council of Vaiśālī, while Bareau maintains that the laxity did not emerge until after the proceedings. Thus they make somewhat differing arguments with regard to disciplinary laxity.

## History of Religions

(who, in so doing, ultimately provoked the schism they were so diligently seeking to avert). Finally, that the date proposed by Bareau for the schism (137 A.N.) is arrived at in less than certain terms, and that 116 A.N. is a significantly more reasonable date to maintain.

Traditional accounts give a wide variety of reasons for the schism which separated the Mahāsāṃghikas from the Sthaviras. In summary, they are the following:

1. *Dīpavaṃsa* (Theravādin): The schism was provoked by the ten "lax practices" (*dasavattūni*) of a group called the Vajjiputtaka monks, who are in this source identified with the future Mahāsāṃghikas. In reaction to their condemnation at the Vaiśālī council by the rest of the Buddhist community, these monks held a "countercouncil" and established the Mahāsāṃghika sect.

2. *Samayabhedoparacanacakra* of Vasumitra (Sarvāstivādin): The schism was instigated by a monk named Mahādeva who propounded five heretical theses. The dissent over these points resulted in a division between the Mahāsāṃghikas, who accepted them, and the Sthaviras, who did not.

3. *Nikāyabhedavibhaṅgavyākhyāna* of Bhavya (includes the traditions of three different schools): (a) *Sthavira tradition* (according to Tāranātha, but Bareau considers this to be of Kashmiri Sarvāstivādin origin):<sup>5</sup> The schism was due to "various points of controversy," which are not specified in this account. (b) *Mahāsāṃghika tradition*: This account merely lists the eighteen schools according to their sectarian affiliations and does not give reasons for any of the divisions. (c) *Sammītiya tradition*: The schism resulted from the activities of a monk named Bhadra (or "a good monk") who demonstrated magical powers and advocated the five heretical theses.

4. *Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā-śāstra* (Sarvāstivādin): The schism was brought about by Mahādeva, a merchant's son, who committed several heinous crimes and afterwards joined the Buddhist monastic order in hopes of eradicating his sins. As a monk, he propounded the five heretical theses, which provoked a schism between the Mahāsāṃghikas, who accepted his views, and the Sarvāstivādins (not the Sthaviras, as in the other sources), who did not.

5. *San louen huan yi* of Ki-tsang (based on the earlier work of Paramārtha, which has survived only in fragments; a Mahāyāna

<sup>5</sup> André Bareau, *Les Sectes bouddhiques du petit véhicule* (Saigon: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1955), p. 20.

## *Mahāsāṃghika Origins*

commentary on Vasumitra's *Samayabhedoparacanacakra*): The division between the Mahāsāṃghikas and the Sthāvīriyas was the result of the activities of a certain Mahādeva who, in addition to advocating the heretical five points, tried to incorporate Mahāyāna sūtras into the Tripiṭaka.

6. *Śāriputrapariṣcchā-sūtra* (Mahāsāṃghika): The schism resulted from the objection of the future Mahāsāṃghikas to an attempt by the future Sthaviras to increase the number of Vinaya rules. The majority of the saṃgha, preferring to maintain the old version, called themselves Mahāsāṃghikas, while those who chose the version containing the additional rules took the name Sthaviras.

In addition to these, there are a number of other sources, such as Vinitadeva's *Samayabhedoparacanacakraṅkāyabhedopadarśana-saṃgraha*, the *Mañjuśrīpariṣcchā-sūtra*, I-tsing's list of sects (extant only in an incomplete form), the *San louen yi Kiuan*, and the *Varṣāgrapṛcchā-sūtra*,<sup>6</sup> which contain descriptions of the Mahāsāṃghikas and their subsects. They do not, however, include any discussion of the reasons for the original schism, so they will not be dealt with here.

In summary, then, we have two sources which attribute the split to differences over disciplinary matters, while the remaining sources blame the schism on doctrinal controversies which are generally, though not always, associated with a monk named Mahādeva.

The difficulty of reconciling these divergent accounts has been quite evident to Western scholars. A provisional compromise, suggested by Demiéville,<sup>7</sup> would consider the doctrinal stance of the Mahāsāṃghikas (i.e., their acceptance of the five theses) a reflection of their disciplinary laxity. The reason for the differences in these accounts, according to Demiéville, is that they are the outgrowth of two distinct oral traditions: that of the *Vinaya-dhāras* on the one hand, and of the *Dharma-dhāras* on the other. The former would naturally, in recounting the causes of the schism, emphasize matters pertaining to the monastic discipline, while the latter would be more concerned with doctrinal problems. Thus the various accounts of the schism represent a single event, viewed from two different perspectives. The appeal of this theory is obvious, as it would reconcile the accounts of all the sources

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the sect lists presented in these texts, see Bareau, *Les Sectes bouddhiques*, pp. 19–27.

<sup>7</sup> Demiéville, pp. 260–61.

## *History of Religions*

cited above. There are, however, some serious problems with Demiéville's hypothesis. If his distinction between the *Vinaya-dhāra* and *Dharma-dhāra* lines of transmission is correct, then we should expect to find only the Vinaya sources relating disciplinary disputes as the cause of the schism, and the Dharma sources presenting doctrinal differences as the cause. On the contrary, however, we find that the *Śāriputrapariṣcchā-sūtra*, which is an Abhidharma work of the Mahāsāṃghikas, and therefore, presumably, to be counted as a Dharma source, claims that disputes over the Vinaya were responsible for the schism. In fact, rather than finding a distinction between Vinaya and Dharma literature on this point, we find that the breakdown is according to sectarian affiliation: the Theravādin and Mahāsāṃghika sources cite the Vinaya as the source of the schism, while the Sarvāstivādin works (as well as Paramārtha, a Mahāyānist whose work is based on the Sarvāstivādin tradition of Vasumitra) all attribute the schism to matters of doctrine. This in itself raises some doubt as to the validity of Demiéville's theory. In light of this, we should consider individually whether either the Vinaya of the Mahāsāṃghikas, or their doctrine, particularly as represented in the five points of Mahādeva, do in fact reflect laxity. Before continuing this line of inquiry, however, we must first examine in detail the nature of each of our sources and determine to what extent, if any, they may be considered accurate accounts of the causes of the Mahāsāṃghika-Sthavira schism.

### THERAVĀDIN SOURCES

The fifth chapter of the Pāli *Dīpavaṃsa* records the events of the schism separating the Mahāsāṃghikas and Sthaviras. The predominant cause of this schism is cited to be the famous *dasa-vatthūni* of the council of Vaiśālī. This account has prompted Geiger, at least, to remark, "It is historically confirmed, I think, that the first schism in the Church proceeded from Vesālī and that the *dasa vatthūni* of the Vajji-monks brought it about."<sup>8</sup> In spite of the fact that Bareau maintains that the council was convened solely on the issue of the tenth point, that of accepting gold and silver, and that the other nine points represent later Sthavira accretions,<sup>9</sup> it would serve us well to examine the ten points in their entirety in hopes of determining whether the supposition

<sup>8</sup> Wilhelm Geiger, trans., *The Mahāvamsa, or the Great Chronicle of Ceylon* (reprint; London: Luzac & Co., for Pali Text Society, 1964), p. lix.

<sup>9</sup> Bareau, *Les Premiers Conciles bouddhiques*, p. 67.

## *Mahāsāṃghika Origins*

that the Mahāsāṃghikas demonstrated laxity in their observance has validity. Now to some extent Bareau has already done this,<sup>10</sup> concluding not only that the Mahāsāṃghikas condemn accepting gold and silver but that, "If they do not speak of the nine other practices, this is not because they approve of them, since they implicitly condemn them elsewhere."<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, Bareau was working with the Chinese version of the Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya as recorded in *Taiśhō* 1425, and this version might be stated to be somewhat later than the Sanskrit original. Fortunately, however, we now have both a Sanskrit text of the Bhikṣu *Prātimokṣa-sūtra* and its translation,<sup>12</sup> and perhaps these two studies bring us closer to a resolution of this problem. Since the Pāli and Mahāsāṃghika Vinayas seem to hold the key to the establishment or disapproval of the hypothesis set forth in the *Dīpavaṃsa*, we can easily compare them on each of the points of individual behavior.

The first point in the Pāli list refers to the inhibition of preserving salt in a horn (*siṅgilonakappa*), and has as its reference Pācittiya offense 38. This rule makes it an offense for monks to eat food which has been stored.<sup>13</sup> The Mahāsāṃghika Prātimokṣa correspondent is found in Pācattika rule 37 and reads, "In eating [food] that has been laid aside [as a store], there is a pācattika."<sup>14</sup> Here we find no disagreement whatsoever.

The second point in the Pāli list refers to taking food when the shadow is beyond two fingers wide (*dvaṅgulakappa*), and has as its reference Pācittiya offense 37. This rule makes it an offense for monks to eat at the wrong time.<sup>15</sup> The Mahāsāṃghika counterpart is found in Pācattika 36 and states, "In eating at the wrong time, there is a pācattika."<sup>16</sup> Again we have concord.

The third point in the Pāli list refers to finishing a meal and then going to another village for another meal (*gāmantarakappa*), and has as its reference Pācittiya offense 35. This rule makes it an offense for monks, after finishing a meal, to partake of more food

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 76–78.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>12</sup> For the text, see W. Pachow and Ramakanta Mishra, eds., "The Prātimokṣa Sūtra of the Mahāsāṃghikas," *Journal of the Gaṅgānāth Jhā Research Institute* 10, nos. 1–4 (November–August 1952–53): 1–48, appendix. For the translation, see Charles S. Prebish, *Buddhist Monastic Discipline: The Sanskrit Prātimokṣa Sūtras of the Mahāsāṃghikas and Mūlasarvāstivādins* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975).

<sup>13</sup> J. F. Dickson, ed. and trans., "The Pātimokkha, Being the Buddhist Office of the Confession of Priests: The Pāli Text, with a Translation and Notes," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, n.s. 8 (1876): 85, 113.

<sup>14</sup> Prebish, *Buddhist Monastic Discipline*, p. 80.

<sup>15</sup> Dickson, "The Pātimokkha," pp. 85, 113.

<sup>16</sup> Prebish, *Buddhist Monastic Discipline*, p. 80.

## History of Religions

that is not left over.<sup>17</sup> The Mahāsāṃghika counterpart is found in Pācattika 33 and reads, “Whatever monk who has eaten what is offered and risen from his seat, should chew or consume hard food or soft food that has not been left over, that is a pācattika.”<sup>18</sup> Here once again we have agreement.

The seventh point in the Pāli list refers to drinking unchurned milk, which is somewhere between the states of milk and curd, after having eaten (*amathitakappa*), and has as its reference Pācittiya offense 35. We have already seen the parallel for this point above, resulting in no disagreement. It is also worth noting that Mahāsāṃghika Pācattika offenses 36 (eating at the wrong time) and 39 (prohibiting special foods, except for ill monks) also apply here, and these correspond to Pāli Pācittiyas 37 and 39, respectively.

The eighth point in the Pāli list refers to drinking unfermented wine (*jalogim*), and has as its reference Pācittiya offense 51. This rule makes it an offense for monks to take intoxicating drinks.<sup>19</sup> The corresponding Mahāsāṃghika rule is found in Pācattika 76 and states, “In drinking intoxicating beverages, spirits, and liquors, there is a pācattika.”<sup>20</sup> Here we have perfect agreement.

The ninth point in the Pāli list refers to using a mat without a border (*adasakaṃ nisīdanam*), and has as its reference Pācittiya offense 89. This rule cites the dimensions for new rugs, noting that the border should measure one Sugata-span.<sup>21</sup> The Mahāsāṃghika counterpart is found in Pācattika 86 and notes, with regard to new rug measurements, “This is the measure here: in length, two spans of the Sugata-span; in width, one and one half; the border a span.”<sup>22</sup> In the Mahāsāṃghika text, Nihsargika-Pācattika 15 makes it clear that this one-span border is to be taken from the monk’s old rug as a means of disfigurement, and of course this corresponds to Pāli rule 15 of the same section as well.

The tenth point in the Pāli list refers to accepting gold and silver (*jatarūparajātam*), and has as its reference Nissaggiya-Pācittiya 18. This rule makes it an offense for monks to receive gold or silver, or for having another act as his agent, or to have such money deposited for him.<sup>23</sup> The Mahāsāṃghika counterpart is found in Nihsargika-Pācattika 18 and states, “Whatever monk should,

<sup>17</sup> Dickson, “The Pātimokkha,” pp. 85, 112.

<sup>18</sup> Prebish, *Buddhist Monastic Discipline*, p. 80.

<sup>19</sup> Dickson, “The Pātimokkha,” pp. 86, 114.

<sup>20</sup> Prebish, *Buddhist Monastic Discipline*, p. 88.

<sup>21</sup> Dickson, “The Pātimokkha,” pp. 90, 118.

<sup>22</sup> Prebish, *Buddhist Monastic Discipline*, p. 90.

<sup>23</sup> Dickson, “The Pātimokkha,” pp. 81, 108.

## *Mahāsāṃghika Origins*

with his own hand, acquire gold or silver, or should have [another] acquire it [for him], even so much as to say: 'Deposit it here,' or should consent to having it deposited, that is a nihsargika-pācattika."<sup>24</sup> We can see that on this last point, too, the texts are in perfect agreement. In addition, another rule in this section makes it clear that monks are forbidden even to accept robe prices sent to the monk by lay persons (rule 10 in each version).

Bareau, in pointing out the particularities peculiar to each of the early sects, notes three further variations on points of individual conduct. These include: (1) taking meals in separate groups, (2) digging the earth with one's hands, and (3) multiple rounds of eating.<sup>25</sup> We can state that even these are condemned in the Sanskrit Mahāsāṃghika text by Pācattika rules 40, 73, and 33, respectively.<sup>26</sup>

Of the ten points in the Pāli tradition, three deal with collective saṃgha behavior. The fourth point involves holding several Uposathas within the same *simā* (*āvāsakappa*). The fifth point in the Pāli list forbids monks to confirm an act in an incomplete assembly, later having the absent monks provide their assent (*ānumatikappa*). The sixth Pāli point involves carrying out an act improperly, citing habitual practice as an authority (*āciṇṇakappa*). For Mahāsāṃghika agreement on the condemnation of these points we must defer to the Chinese texts, as no Sanskrit counterpart for the Skandhaka portion of the Vinaya seems to be extant. There is a summary of the *Bhikṣu-Prakīrṇaka* (which is the Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravādin counterpart of the vastus comprising the Skandhaka of the various other Vinayas) extant,<sup>27</sup> but it affords little help.

Having now carefully surveyed, on a point by point basis, the points listed in the Pāli account of the council held at Vaiśālī, as presented in the twelfth chapter of the Cullavagga of the Vinaya Piṭaka, in comparison with the Mahāsāṃghika statements on these points, we must conclude that there is nothing less than complete and absolute concord. Thus, when Demiéville states, "Thus, even on the single point of discipline which the Mahāsāṃghikas make mention of in their recitation of the council of Vaiśālī, their Vinaya appears infinitely more laxist than the Pāli

<sup>24</sup> Prebish, *Buddhist Monastic Discipline*, p. 70.

<sup>25</sup> Bareau, *Les Premiers Conciles bouddhiques*, pp. 76-78.

<sup>26</sup> Prebish, *Buddhist Monastic Discipline*, pp. 80, 88, 80, respectively.

<sup>27</sup> Gustav Roth, ed., *Bhikṣuṇī-Vinaya: Manual of Discipline for Buddhist Nuns* (Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1970), pp. 327-34.

## History of Religions

Vinaya,"<sup>28</sup> his conclusion seems to be unfounded. Demiéville appears to base his conclusion of disciplinary laxity on the extended account of the gold and silver issue in the Pāli Vinaya, and the complexity of its restrictions, as contrasted with the brevity exemplified by the Mahāsāṃghika text. Now it has long been accepted by scholars such as Bareau, Pachow, Hofinger, Frauwallner, and Roth,<sup>29</sup> that the Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya is very likely to be the most ancient stratum of Vinaya literature. Consequently, its brevity may well be attributable to its high antiquity rather than simply laxity. It is certainly not logical to assume brevity equals disciplinary laxity. In summary, then, we must restate our position that, with regard to the ten points of the Vaiśālī council, the Mahāsāṃghikas posit a condemnation equal to that of the Pāli sources, and our agreement with Bareau when he notes, "The nine practices of the monks of Vaiśālī could not have been one of the causes of the schism which separated the Mahāsāṃghikas from the Sthaviras as the Sinhalese chronicles maintain and, in their course, certain historians of Buddhism."<sup>30</sup>

In light of the work cited by Hofinger<sup>31</sup> and Bareau, and the new input that comes to the forefront with the addition of new Sanskritic materials, it is clearly established that the Mahāsāṃghikas cannot be identified with the Vṛjiputraka bhikṣus of Vaiśālī. Their condemnation of all the ten practices is simply too severe and uniform in all the sources consulted.

As Gustav Roth wryly remarks on the issue of the schism, "And why are the Mahāsāṃghika not mentioned in the Mā-Vin [Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya] report of this council when they already existed at the time?"<sup>32</sup> It is clear that he dates the actual splitting up somewhat later than the *Dīpavaṃsa* does.<sup>33</sup> Thus, of all the Pāli sources, it is only the *Dīpavaṃsa* that makes mention of the Mahāsāṃghikas (by name) issuing forth from the council of Vaiśālī. In addition to the fact that we have shown above that its thesis for the schism is unfounded, its supposition is even rejected by later Pāli texts. As Lamotte remarks, "The portion

<sup>28</sup> Demiéville, p. 275.

<sup>29</sup> Refer to André Bareau, "La Construction et le culte des stūpa d'après les Vinaya-piṭaka," *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* 50, no. 2 (1962): 273; Pachow (n. 2 above), pp. 61-62; Hofinger (n. 1 above), p. 237; Erich Frauwallner, *The Earliest Vinaya and the Beginnings of Buddhist Literature* (Rome: Instituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1956), p. 61; and Roth, p. vii, where Roth refers to Fa-hien's claim that the Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya is the original.

<sup>30</sup> Bareau, *Les Premiers Conciles bouddhiques*, p. 78.

<sup>31</sup> Hofinger, p. 179.

<sup>32</sup> Roth, p. x (brackets are mine).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. viii.

## *Mahāsāṃghika Origins*

relating to the Mahāsāṃghikas has been eliminated from the chronicles by the editors of the *Mahāvamsa* and the *Samantapāsādikā* and, as we shall see, has been replaced by an entirely different document in the *Nikāyasamgraha*.<sup>34</sup>

### SARVĀSTIVĀDIN SOURCES

In contrast to the Theravādin *Dīpavaṃsa* account, all the Sarvāstivādin works relate the schism to controversies over doctrinal issues. In this category we include four of the texts mentioned above: (1) the *Samayabhedoparacanacakra* of Vasumitra, (2) the *Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣā-śāstra*, (3) the first tradition recorded in Bhavya's *Nikāyabhedavibhaṅgavyākhyāna*, and (4) the *San loun hīuan yi* of Ki-tsang (based on an earlier work by Paramārtha, which is in turn a commentary on Vasumitra's text). Of these, the first two are of undoubted Sarvāstivādin origin. The third, considered by Tāranātha to be a Sthavira tradition, has been shown by Bareau to be, instead, a Kashmiri Sarvāstivādin work.<sup>35</sup> The fourth, a text of Mahāyāna (specifically Vijñānavādin) authorship, is not in the strictest sense a Sarvāstivādin work; but since it is a commentatorial work which is ultimately based on Vasumitra's *Samayabhedoparacanacakra*, it is directly connected to the Sarvāstivādin traditions concerning the schism, and for that reason it has been included here.

The treatise of Vasumitra is one of the earliest of the extant sources dealing with the so-called eighteen schools.<sup>36</sup> In Bareau's classification of these sources into three chronologically arranged groups, Vasumitra's text falls into the earliest category.<sup>37</sup> It is thus one of the more ancient of the available sources on the issue of early Buddhist sectarianism. Further, as Bareau demonstrates, it is directly related to the *Śāriputrapariṣcchā-sūtra*,<sup>38</sup> which is a Mahāsāṃghika source, a fact which may well add to Vasumitra's credibility, since he was in some contact with the writings of the sect whose schism he is discussing.

The reason for the schism, according to Vasumitra, was the list of five theses, propounded by a monk named Mahādeva.<sup>39</sup> These theses, which deal mainly with the nature and attainments

<sup>34</sup> Etienne Lamotte, *Histoire du bouddhisme indien des origines à l'ère Śaka* (Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1958), p. 315.

<sup>35</sup> Bareau, *Les Sectes bouddhiques*, pp. 20–21 (translation of the text by Jiryo Masuda, "Origin and Doctrines of Early Indian Buddhist Schools," *Asia Major* 2 [1925]: 1–78).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16–22.

<sup>38</sup> *Taiśhō* 1465, discussed in Bareau, *Les Sectes bouddhiques*, pp. 16–18.

<sup>39</sup> Masuda, p. 14.

## History of Religions

of the arhant, were accepted by the Mahāsāmghikas; those who rejected them called themselves the Sthaviras. The controversy, then, was a doctrinal one, centering not on the proper conduct of monks, but on the level of attainment which may legitimately be ascribed to the arhant.

A similar account, but a far more elaborate one, is given in the *Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣā-sāstra*.<sup>40</sup> Here the activities of Mahādeva are related at great length, and a story is told of how each of the five points came to be propounded. The basic point, however, is the same as in Vasumitra's treatise: that the doctrines contained in the five theses were the cause of the schism. An interesting divergence in this account, however, is the statement that the Sarvāstivādins, and not the Sthaviras, as in all our other accounts, were the ones who objected to Mahādeva and his Mahāsāmghika followers.<sup>41</sup> Since this account has been embellished with narrative details not found in our other sources, it should be used with some caution; still, there are no grounds that would warrant ignoring it altogether.

We have, then, two Sarvāstivādin sources which explicitly connect Mahādeva and his five theses with the origin of the Mahāsāmghika sect. Our third source, the first list in Bhavya's *Nikāyabhedavibhaṅgavyākhyāna*,<sup>42</sup> is far less informative: it merely states that the schism resulted from "various points of controversy."<sup>43</sup> This can hardly be counted as evidence for any hypothesis. The most that can be said here is that this text supports a plurality of causes for the schism.

Finally, we have the account contained in Ki-tsang's *San louen hiuan yi*.<sup>44</sup> Being a Mahāyāna work, this text contains many Mahāyānist amplifications of the originally Sarvāstivādin tradition: the schism is said to result from the activities of Mahādeva, but in Ki-tsang's account he is credited not only with having preached the five theses, but also with having to introduce Mahāyāna sūtras into the Buddhist canon.<sup>45</sup> This source is particularly

<sup>40</sup> *Taishō* 1545. A translation of the portion of chap. 99 which deals with Mahādeva appears in an unpublished paper by Victor Mair, "An Asian Story of the Oedipus Type." This paper will soon be included in a folklore anthology to be published by Harvard University Press.

<sup>41</sup> Mair, p. 9.

<sup>42</sup> This is translated by André Bareau, "Trois traités sur les sectes bouddhiques attribués à Vasumitra, Bhavya et Vinīta-deva," *Journal Asiatique* 244 (1956): 167-71.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>44</sup> This is translated by Paul Demiéville, "L'Origine des sectes bouddhiques d'après Paramārtha," *Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques* 1 (1931-32): 14-64.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

## *Mahāsāṃghika Origins*

revealing, in that its author considers the Mahāsāṃghikas to be the ancestors of the Mahāyāna and is therefore concerned to present that sect in as favorable a light as possible. Consequently, we may consider their account of Mahādeva, which would seem to run directly counter to their own purposes by presenting him in a rather unfavorable light, to be a highly authoritative source. Certainly it does not provide conclusive evidence of the nature of the historical events surrounding the origins of the Mahāsāṃghikas. What it does tell us, though, is that Paramārtha (and Ki-tsang) knew of a tradition connecting Mahādeva with the origins of the Mahāsāṃghikas which was too well established to disregard, even though it describes the ancestors of the Mahāyāna in a highly uncomplimentary fashion. This text, then, although admittedly late and strongly colored with Mahāyānist additions, offers significant evidence in corroboration of the Mahādeva traditions found in our other Sarvāstivādin-based sources.

### SAMMITIYA SOURCES

Another text which attributes the Mahāsāṃghika-Sthavira schism to controversies of doctrine is the third list in Bhavya's *Nikāyabhedavibhaṅgavyākhyāna*, which Tāranātha considers to be a Saṃmitiya tradition.<sup>46</sup> Bareau ascribes this source to the first of his three chronological periods, thus including it among the earliest works on the Buddhist sectarian divisions.<sup>47</sup>

This account harmonizes fairly well with the Sarvāstivādin traditions about Mahādeva, though here the name does not appear. According to the Saṃmitiya tradition, the schism is provoked by Māra himself, who transforms himself into a man described as "bhadrā" (good) or, as Bareau translates, "possessing all the [good] qualities."<sup>48</sup> Taking on the robes of a monk, Māra teaches various supernatural powers (*ṛddhi*), and with his teaching of the five propositions, creates great dissension in the Buddhist community. As a result, the saṃgha is divided into the sects of the Sthaviras and the Mahāsāṃghikas. This account adds some details not found in the Sarvāstivādin sources, supplying for instance, the names of two monks, Nāga and Sthiramati, who accepted and praised the five points. It also differs in the date given for the

<sup>46</sup> Bareau, "Trois traités sur les sectes bouddhiques," pp. 172–91. For a discussion of the Saṃmitiya origin of this tradition, see Bareau, *Les Sectes bouddhiques*, p. 17.

<sup>47</sup> Bareau, *Les Sectes bouddhiques*, pp. 16–22.

<sup>48</sup> Bareau, "Trois traités sur les sectes bouddhiques," p. 172.

## History of Religions

schism, placing it at 137 A.N., as opposed to 116 A.N. in the Sarvāstivādin works. These divergences clearly demonstrate its separate lineage, which is to be expected since it belongs to the tradition of another sect. This Saṃmitīya account, then, provides a source belonging to a group other than the Sarvāstivādins, and which differs from their traditions in some details, but gives the same basic reason for the schism: the activities of a certain monk who propounded the five heretical theses.

### MAHĀSĀMḠHIKA SOURCES

In our search for the origins of the Mahāsāmḡhika-Sthavira schism, the sources belonging to the Mahāsāmḡhikas themselves are of unique value. While it would be unreasonable to assume their inherent validity simply on the basis of their being Mahāsāmḡhika works (a writer could certainly color his account in an attempt to make his own sect look as legitimate as possible), they are still in a favored position as sources produced by those who were immediately involved in the conflict. One would expect that a controversy important enough to bring about a schism would not be easily forgotten, and that the Mahāsāmḡhikas, above all, would have been likely to preserve the memory of its causes.

Unfortunately, one of our two Mahāsāmḡhika sources does not discuss the causes of the schism at all: the second list in Bhavya's *Nikāyabhedavibhaṅgavyākhyāna*, which is considered a Mahāsāmḡhika tradition by Tāranātha and accepted as such by Bareau,<sup>49</sup> gives only a list of the sectarian divisions and provides no account of their causes. This is a useful source for determining the relations of the various Mahāsāmḡhika subsects to each other, but is of no help in our search for the origins of the sect as a whole.

Fortunately, however, there is another source which is of Mahāsāmḡhika origin and which clearly states the reasons for the Mahāsāmḡhika-Sthavira split: the *Śāriputrapariṣcchā-sūtra*, an Abhidharma work of the Mahāsāmḡhikas, which claims that the schism was the result of a Vinaya dispute. Here we find an entirely different tradition from those which we have just seen in the Sarvāstivādin and Saṃmitīya sources: the controversy, according to the *Śāriputrapariṣcchā-sūtra*, had nothing to do with doctrinal matters at all. No mention is made either of Mahādeva or of the notorious five points. According to this source, the dispute

<sup>49</sup> Bareau, *Les Sectes bouddhiques*, pp. 22–23.

## *Mahāsāṃghika Origins*

was limited to disagreements about the number of rules which should be followed by Buddhist monks.

Chronologically, this is one of the most valuable of our sources, for according to Bareau, it is the earliest of all the treatises on the sects.<sup>50</sup> This work, then, has considerable validity, and will merit further examination.

### II. NON-MAHĀSĀṂGHIKA SOURCES: THE MAHĀDEVA CONTROVERSY

We have seen that, with the exception of the Pāli sources, whose account of the Mahāsāṃghika-Sthavira schism is based on a confusion of the Mahāsāṃghikas with the Vṛjiputraka monks, all of the sources listed above are of considerable validity. Since both the Sarvāstivādin and the Saṃmitīya sources find the source of the schism in the five points propounded by a monk who is sometimes (in the Sarvāstivādin sources) referred to by the name of Mahādeva, we may consider these sources as a whole, and return later to our sole Mahāsāṃghika source, the *Śāriputrapariprcchā-sūtra*.

One of the first issues which claims our attention is that of disciplinary laxity among the Mahāsāṃghikas (the monastic aspect of which has already been discussed in the section on Pāli sources). As already mentioned above, Demiéville has attempted to reconcile the conflicts between the various sources on the schism by claiming that the five points of Mahādeva are a reflection of Mahāsāṃghika laxity. Bareau takes a similar approach, as will be discussed below. If the five points could be shown to be a genuine indication of such laxity, this would offer strong cause for accepting all the sources (except, of course, the Pāli) as valid, since they could be taken as accounts of a single event seen from different perspectives (as Demiéville claims) or, as Bareau would have it, as accounts of a multiplicity of causes which may be easily harmonized with each other. If this is not a legitimate claim, however, then the issue calls for further clarification, and a decision will have to be made as to which of the sources correctly reflect the real reasons for the schism and which do not.

The meaning of the five points themselves has been the object of some controversy. Before dealing with the issue of their relation to disciplinary laxity, we must first determine, as

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp. 17–21.

## History of Religions

accurately as is possible, what the original intent of the five points really was.

### THE FIVE POINTS

#### Point 1

Vasumitra: "Arhants are tempted by others";<sup>51</sup>

*Mahāvibhāṣā*: "enticement by others";<sup>52</sup>

Bhavya: (Mahāsāṃghika)—"one gives to another in return,"<sup>53</sup>  
(Ekavyāvahārika)—"even Arhants attain the teaching thanks to others";<sup>54</sup>

Vinitadeva: "there is no knowledge by oneself";<sup>55</sup>

Paramārtha: "the clothing [is] soiled by another";<sup>56</sup>

*Kathāvattu*: "that an Arahant has impure discharge" (section title: "Of conveyance by another").<sup>57</sup>

There can be little doubt that the subject of the first point was whether or not an Arhant could still have nocturnal emissions. The first point of Mahādeva's five theses was interpreted in this sense by sources as widely separated by geography and sectarian affiliation as the *Kathāvattu*, a Pāli Theravādin work, and the *Mahāvibhāṣā*, a Sarvāstivādin work originating in Kashmir. In the *Kathāvattu* this is made the subject of the first point itself, while the *Mahāvibhāṣā* explains its cryptic statement that the Arhant is subject to "enticement by others" by stating that the occasion for the enunciation of this point was the discovery by a disciple that Mahādeva, who claimed to be an arhant, sometimes had nocturnal emissions. Paramārtha likewise explains that the point at issue is whether or not an Arhant is subject to temptation by "the women of Māra."

The statement of Vinitadeva that "there is no knowledge by

<sup>51</sup> The five points of Mahādeva are listed by Vasumitra as thesis 28 of the Mahāsāṃghikas (see Masuda, p. 24).

<sup>52</sup> The five points are summarized on p. 8 of Mair's translation of this portion of the *Mahāvibhāṣā*.

<sup>53</sup> Bhavya lists the five points as theses 1-5 of the Mahāsāṃghikas (see Bareau, "Trois traités sur le sectes bouddhiques," pp. 172-73).

<sup>54</sup> A variant version of the five theses is given by Bhavya as thesis 13 of the Ekavyāvahārikas (see Bareau, "Trois traités sur le sectes bouddhiques," p. 174).

<sup>55</sup> Vinitadeva lists the five points as thesis 16 of the Mahāsāṃghikas (see Bareau, "Trois traités sur le sectes bouddhiques," p. 192).

<sup>56</sup> The list of the five points according to Paramārtha is found in Demiéville, "L'Origine des sectes bouddhiques," p. 31.

<sup>57</sup> The *Kathāvattu* lists the five points at 2. 1-6. See Shwe Zan Aung and Mrs. Rhys Davids, trans., *Points of Controversy* (London: Luzac & Co., for Pali Text Society, 1915), pp. 111-24. This translation will be used here, unless otherwise noted.

## *Mahāsāṃghika Origins*

oneself” (which Bareau obtains by emending the *rañ rig-pa yin-no* of the Tibetan text to *rañ rig-pa ma yin-no*, thus changing the meaning from positive to negative) is difficult to explain and seems clearly at variance from the other sources. Likewise, Bhavya’s quotation of the first point of the Ekavyāvahārikas, which states that the Arhant attains the teaching thanks to others, is significantly different, though one can discern an underlying similarity in structure: the Arhant receives something through another, though in this case it is the teaching rather than temptation or enticement. Bhavya’s first (Mahāsāṃghika) version, which Bareau translates “one gives to another in return,” is another variant; the Tibetan *gžan-la lan gdab-pa* means literally “(one) gives back to another,” or “(one) replies to another,” neither of which can be assimilated to the structure mentioned above.

Even though the divergent texts are difficult to explain, we are still justified, on the weight of the evidence given in the *Mahāvibhāṣā* and the *Kathāvattu*, and confirmed by Paramārtha, in concluding that the original issue was whether or not an Arhant could have nocturnal emissions. It would appear that at least Vasumitra, and perhaps some of the other texts as well, are also pointing, albeit in a rather obscure fashion, to the same issue.

### *Point 2*

Vasumitra: “(they) have still ignorance”;

*Mahāvibhāṣā*: “ignorance”;

Bhavya: (Mahāsāṃghika)—“ignorance,” (Ekavyāvahārika)—  
“even Arhants have ignorance”;

Vinītadeva: “even among Arhants there is ignorance” (his point 3;  
in this versions points 2 and 3 are reversed);

Paramārtha: “unknowingness”;

*Kathāvattu*: “that the Arahant may lack knowledge.”

Here the agreement among our sources is complete. It is not immediately clear, however, just what kind of ignorance is meant. The *Mahāvibhāṣā* distinguishes ignorance which is defiling from that which is not, and claims that (according to Mahādeva) the Arhant is still subject to ignorance of the second type, though not of the first. According to the *Kathāvattu*, those who accepted the five points did not claim that the Arhant was ignorant with respect to religious matters (i.e., the path, the fruit, the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṃgha, etc.), but only that they could be said to be ignorant with respect to worldly matters: “the name and lineage of a woman or a man, of a right or wrong road, or of how grasses,

## History of Religions

twigs, and forest plants are called.”<sup>58</sup> Paramārtha, following a line similar to that of both of these texts, states that the Arhant is no longer subject to the type of ignorance that causes birth in the three *dhātus* (i.e., defiling ignorance), but he is nevertheless subject to “the unknowingness which is a residue (*vāsanā*) of nonknowledge (*wou-tche: ajñāna*).”

In summary, then, those sources which offer any commentary at all on this point all agree that according to Mahādeva the Arhant is not subject to defiling ignorance—that is, ignorance which causes one to remain in *saṃsāra* (which would be impossible, since the Arhant is by definition not subject to further rebirth)—but only to ignorance of everyday, worldly matters. This claim was rejected by the opponents of the Mahāsāṃghikas, who felt that the two types of ignorance were inseparable: to claim one was to allow for the other as well, and to allow that the Arhant might be ignorant in matters of religion would be to undercut the essential value of that state.

### Point 3

Vasumitra: “(they) have still doubt”;

*Mahāvibhāṣā*: “hesitation”;

Bhavya: (Mahāsāṃghika)—“doubt,” (Ekavyāvahārika)—“even Arhants have doubts”;

Vinītadeva: “even among Arhants there is doubt” (his point 2);

Paramārtha: “doubt”;

*Kathāvatthu*: “that an Arahant may have doubts.”

This point is closely related to the preceding one, and again the agreement between our sources is almost exact, with the exception of the substitution of “hesitation” for “doubt” in the account of the *Mahāvibhāṣā* (which, however, returns to the word “doubt” in its narrative discussion of the meaning of this point). As it does with respect to ignorance, the *Mahāvibhāṣā* has Mahādeva distinguish between two different kinds of doubt: “that of muddle-headedness” and that which “derives from mistakes in judgment.”<sup>59</sup> Of these two, the Arhant has eliminated the first type, but is still subject to the second. The *Kathāvatthu*, in similar fashion, follows its own argument against the possibility of an Arhant being ignorant, merely substituting the word “doubt” for “lack of knowledge,” and “perplexity” for “ignorance.” Paramārtha, finally, states that according to Mahādeva the Arhant

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>59</sup> Mair, p. 6.

## *Mahāsāṃghika Origins*

would not be subject to doubts with respect to the three doors to deliverance (*vimokṣamukha*), but could still have doubts “with regard to exterior things.”<sup>60</sup> The argument, then, is of the same order as that used in the second point: according to Mahādeva and the Mahāsāṃghikas, the Arhant is fully perfected in spiritual matters, but is still subject to doubts in matters of everyday life.

### *Point 4*

Vasumitra: “enlightenment through the other”;

*Mahāvibhāṣā*: “initiation by another”;

Bhavya: (Mahāsāṃghika)—“perfect knowledge,” (*Ekavyāvahārika*)—“even Arhants have perfect knowledge”;

Vinitadeva: “even among Arhants one must explain the words of another in order to (attain) the fruit”;

Paramārtha: “salvation by another”;

*Kathāvatthu*: “that the Arahant is led across by others.”<sup>61</sup>

Here the emphasis is on the fact that the Arhant relies on others for assistance, rather than depending exclusively upon himself. Only Bhavya diverges widely from this issue, stating that the Arhant has *yoṅs-su brtags-pa*, “perfect knowledge, perfect understanding.” Bareau points out, however, that the Peking version of this text has *btags-pa* in place of *brtags-pa*, a form which could possibly be rendered as “adherence, reliance.” This would bring the meaning of the text into line with the other sources, again referring to the Arhant’s dependence upon others.

Among the texts which supply a commentary to this point, the *Mahāvibhāṣā* gives the interpretation that the Arhant may be unaware of his own wisdom or supernatural power, and therefore he needs to be initiated by others into the realization of that which he already possesses. Paramārtha follows the same line of reasoning, explaining that “salvation by another” means that “the people of dull faculties (*mṛdvindriya*), obtaining the initial fruit,

<sup>60</sup> Demiéville, “L’Origine des sectes bouddhiques,” p. 32.

<sup>61</sup> Aung and Davids, p. 119, translate the Pāli *atthi arahatto paravitāraṇā* as “the Arahant is excelled by others.” However, as Louis de La Vallée Poussin points out in “The ‘Five Points’ of Mahādeva and the Kathāvatthu,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, n.s. 42 (1910): 420, the term *vitāraṇā* may also be translated as “leading over, bringing across.” Furthermore, Demiéville, “L’Origine des sectes bouddhiques,” p. 32, n. d, points out that the Chinese term *tou*, which he translates “(faire) passer, (faire) traverser,” corresponds exactly to the *vitāraṇā* of the *Kathāvatthu*. We have therefore chosen to translate the Pāli as “the Arahant is led across by others,” since the general agreement of the sources seems to indicate that this was the meaning originally intended. The rest of the discussion of this point given on p. 119 of the Pāli translation is in complete harmony with this interpretation, so there is no reason not to accept this revised translation.

## History of Religions

do not know by themselves that they have attained it; they explain that the characteristic of the initial fruit is to be exempt from doubt with regard to the three Jewels and the four Truths. . . .”<sup>62</sup> The *Kathāvattu*, on the other hand, takes a more general approach dealing with the need for assistance in general, rather than referring specifically to the problem of recognizing whether or not one has “obtained the fruit.” Vinītadeva’s expanded version of the fourth point, stating that “For [an Arhant to obtain] the fruit, another must explain the words,” gives further emphasis to the issue of being able to recognize when one has obtained the fruit.

Given the abbreviated nature of many of our sources, and the relative lateness of those which provide commentaries on this point, it is difficult to determine exactly what the fourth point originally meant. If the *Kathāvattu* agreed more closely with our northern sources, it would be possible to draw a more specific conclusion; since it does not, however, we can only state generally that the fourth point refers to the necessity for the Arhant to rely, at least in some circumstances, on others. This is clearly a statement that the Arhant is not self-sufficient, and (in some sources) not all-knowing, a position which is clearly confirmed by both points two and three.

### Point 5

Vasumitra: “the path is accompanied by emission of voice”;<sup>63</sup>

*Mahāvibhāṣā*: “the way is manifested because one shouts”;

Bhavya: (Mahāsāṃghika)—“the way (*mārga*) is salvation by oneself,” (Ekavyāvahārika)—“the Way (*mārga*) is nothing but the abandonment of suffering (*duḥkḥaparihāna*)”;

Vinītadeva: “by saying: ‘Suffering!’ (*duḥkḥa*), because one pronounces the word ‘suffering,’ one produces the Way (*mārga*)”;

Paramārtha: “the holy Way manifested by the word”;

*Kathāvattu*: “that there is articulate utterance on the part of one who has entered into Jhāna.”

On this point, most of our sources seem clear: the issue is that the Mahāsāṃghikas claim that some type of exclamation of words is related to, or produces, the Path. Bhavya seems clearly divergent here. Neither his statement that “the Path is salvation by oneself” (Mahāsāṃghika version) nor his second version of this

<sup>62</sup> Demiéville, “L’Origine des sectes bouddhiques,” p. 32.

<sup>63</sup> Masuda, p. 24, translates “the path is realized by utterances,” but we have used a more literal translation based on the Tibetan (*lam sgra ’byin-pa dan-bcas-pa*) “the path is accompanied by the emission of voice.”

## *Mahāsāṃghika Origins*

point, attributed to the Ekavyāvahārikas, that “the Path is nothing but the abandonment of suffering,” seems at all close to the statements of our other sources.<sup>64</sup> We will, therefore, concentrate our attention on the remaining sources, which seem at least to be dealing with a common issue.

The *Mahāvibhāṣā* explains the meaning of this point by attributing to Mahādeva the following statement: “In speaking of the holy way, if one is not utterly sincere in the anguish with which he heralds it, it will never become manifest at that moment when one’s life reaches its end.”<sup>65</sup> The shout, in this case, is “Oh, how painful it is!” The emphasis here is on the cry of pain (*duḥkha*) and the importance of the full experience of this suffering.

In Paramārtha, on the other hand, there is no mention of *duḥkha* at all. Here, the fifth point is interpreted to mean that when one obtains the holy Path, this is sometimes manifested by words, “as it happened to Śāriputra, who obtained the initial fruit at the very moment when he was reciting a stanza orally.”<sup>66</sup> Only the fact of some verbal expression seems important here, and not the content of the expression.

The *Kathāvatthu* goes one step farther in its discussion of the importance of words, saying that the point at issue is only whether or not one produces utterances while in the *jhāna* states. Specifically, this text says to its opponents: “You affirm that, knowing the fact of Ill, he utters the word ‘Sorrow,’ yet you deny that, knowing the fact of Cause [of Ill], he utters the word ‘Cause.’ Why?” (2. 5. 4.). The *Kathāvatthu* goes on to ask why one does not utter the words “cessation” and “path” as he recognizes the third and fourth noble truths, respectively.

Here, then, the point again seems to be not the utterance of sounds in general, but the utterance of the specific word “sorrow” (*duḥkha*). This is further confirmed by a sixth point presented in this section of the *Kathāvatthu* which is in all probability a variant of the fifth: “That induction [of insight] by the word ‘sorrow!’ is a factor of and included in the Path.”

Vinītadeva, too, agrees, that the point at issue is the Mahāsāṃghika claim that one “produces the path” by uttering the word “sorrow!”

We may summarize, then, by saying that the original point of controversy seems to have been the utterance of the word

<sup>64</sup> This problem is discussed, but not resolved, by La Vallée Poussin, p. 422.

<sup>65</sup> Mair, p. 7.

<sup>66</sup> Demiéville, “L’Origine des sectes bouddhiques,” pp. 32–33.

## *History of Religions*

“sorrow!” which was taken either as a sign that one had entered the Path or as a means of inducing that entrance.

Having clarified the meaning of each of these points, insofar as it is possible to do so, we may now return to our original question: Are these points in fact an indication of laxity on the part of those who advocated them?

An overview of all five points shows clearly that four of them have to do with the nature of the Arhant, while the fifth focuses on the utterance of the word “sorrow!” and its relation to the Path. It is certainly the points dealing with the Arhant, and not the fifth point, which have been the focus of the accusation of Mahāsāṃghika laxity. In what sense, then, could these descriptions of the Arhant be an indication of lax practice?

Certainly the acceptance of these points, taken out of context, would appear to be a sign of laxity, in that their effect is to “demote” the Arhant from the status of near-perfection which had previously been his. If the Arhant is still the goal to be pursued, the net effect would be to lower the level of that goal, thus making it easier to attain. If the Arhant is *not* still the goal, however, then the picture changes radically. If another, higher goal is being advocated, then these points, as demeaning as they might be to the Arhant, cannot be taken as a sign of laxity on the part of those who adopted them. Is there any evidence, then, that the Mahāsāṃghikas were substituting another goal for the old goal of Arhantship? There are at least two such indications. On the one hand, in at least one place Mahādeva is referred to as a Bodhisattva,<sup>67</sup> a title which would certainly indicate an attempt to replace the goal of Arhantship with the Bodhisattva practice, resulting in the eventual attainment of full Buddhahood. Unfortunately, this remark is found in a Mahāyāna-influenced source, which considerably diminishes the value of such an attribution, although it is still worthy of note. There is other evidence, however, that would support this claim. The Mahāsāṃghikas are well known for their claim that Bodhisattvas, as well as Buddhas, are supramundane beings, having capacities far beyond those of ordinary people. For example, Vasumitra lists among the Mahāsāṃghika tenets the statements that Bodhisattvas do not pass through the usual embryonic stages in their mothers’ wombs; that they all assume

<sup>67</sup> *Fen-pie-kong-yo-louen*, a half-Mahāsāṃghika, half-Mahāyānist commentary on the Chinese Ekottarāgama (translated between A.D. 25 and 220) (see Etienne Lamotte, “Buddhist Controversy over the Five Propositions,” *Indian Historical Quarterly* 32 [1956]: 156).

## *Mahāsāṃghika Origins*

the form of elephants upon entering their mothers' wombs; that they are not born in the usual fashion, but emerge from the right side of their mothers; and that no Bodhisattva entertains any thoughts of greed, anger, or harm to others.<sup>68</sup> Not all the Mahāsāṃghika sects, however, shared this position. Several, in fact, took the position that Bodhisattvas are only average beings and are not exempt from being born into the lower states of existence (*durgati*).<sup>69</sup> This is a far cry from the supramundane Bodhisattva of the other Mahāsāṃghikas, who is free from all effects of karma, and who is described in such exalted terms that no human being could hope to imitate him. The same schools who held that the Bodhisattva was an average person also subscribed to a second thesis, which adds another perspective on this issue. They claimed that the cult of the *stūpa* (i.e., worship of the relics of the Buddha) did not produce great merit. Could these theses, taken together, indicate a position radically different from that of the other Mahāsāṃghikas—not a cult of worship directed toward a supramundane Buddha, but the beginnings of an attempt to imitate rather than to worship? It may be that we have here the earliest phase of the Bodhisattva practice, made available to ordinary human beings by virtue of the fact that the concept of the Buddha (and of the Bodhisattva, who is by definition a future Buddha) has remained human, rather than undergoing the process of divinization which occurred among some of the Mahāsāṃghikas.

The schools which maintained the concept of the humanized Bodhisattva, and devalued the devotional practices associated with the *stūpa* cult, form a special group within the Mahāsāṃghika sect. Nalinaksha Dutt has labeled them the “southern” or “later” Mahāsāṃghikas since they centered around the area of the Andhaka mountains in south-central India and emerged at a time after the initial formation of the Mahāsāṃghika sect.<sup>70</sup> The “northern” or “earlier” Mahāsāṃghikas, to use Dutt’s terminology, centered in northern India, and included the sects of the Lokottaravādins, Ekavyāvahārikas, Gokulikas, and (according to some sources) the Bahusrutiyas and Prajñaptivādins, that is, the sects who considered Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to be supramundane. The sects belonging to the southern group include the Caitra (also called the Cetiyas or Caitikas in other sources), the Matariyas, the Pūrva-

<sup>68</sup> Mahāsāṃghika theses 16–19 (see Masuda, p. 21).

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 38 (thesis 1 of the Śāila schools).

<sup>70</sup> Nalinaksha Dutt, *Buddhist Sects in India* (Calcutta: K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1970), pp. 68–72.

## *History of Religions*

śailas (or Uttaraśailas), the Aparāśailas, the Rājagirīyas, and the Siddhārthikas, as well as (according to some sources) the Bahuśrutīyas and Prajñāptivādins. Though Dutt's northern-southern terminology leaves something to be desired, since the northern schools were not exclusively located in the north of India, it is still a reasonable distinction, and for purposes of convenience it will be adopted here.

In summary, we may conclude that the notions of the Bodhisattva varied widely among the different subsets of the Mahāsāmghikas, with a highly divinized concept being held by the so-called northern schools, and a much more human description being given by the southern sects. With the limited evidence offered by the early treatises on the sects, it is not possible to decide conclusively whether the southern schools were in fact advocating the goal of Buddhahood (to be attained by the Bodhisattva practice) as a viable alternative to the Arhant ideal. If this was in fact the case, it is of extreme importance, since as we shall see in the next section, there is a special connection between Mahādeva and the southern Mahāsāmghikas in the earliest sectarian treatises. Therefore, even if the practice of the Bodhisattva path by at least some of the Mahāsāmghikas cannot be definitively proven, the possibility should be given due consideration before deciding that Mahādeva was content to accept the goal of becoming (or being) a far less than perfect Arhant. The five points could be interpreted as an expression of Mahāsāmghika laxity only if it could be conclusively proven that Mahādeva was not, in fact, pursuing the higher goal of Buddhahood. Since at least some of the Mahāsāmghikas held doctrines which would make that possible, we cannot rule out the possibility that Mahādeva, far from advocating laxity, was urging his followers toward the even more rigorous practice of the Bodhisattva path.

Related to their views on the Bodhisattva is yet another important thesis of the southern Mahāsāmghika schools: the Arhant, according to these sects, is capable of regressing to a lower spiritual state, while the northern schools claimed precisely the opposite. This brings to mind the whole problem of the first four of Mahādeva's five points, which are concerned exclusively with the nature and attainments of the Arhant. Since the northern and southern branches of the Mahāsāmghikas differed so radically in their stance on whether or not the Arhant can regress, might they also have differed in their attitudes toward Mahādeva's

## *Mahāsāṃghika Origins*

five points? And if so, how would this affect our view of Mahādeva's role in Mahāsāṃghika sectarianism?

In answering this question, there are three separate issues which claim our attention: (1) the attitudes of the northern and southern Mahāsāṃghikas toward the Arhant, (2) the statements of the northern and southern schools on the subjects of *duḥkha* and the importance of exclamations in relation to the Path, and (3) the place assigned to Mahādeva in the development of Mahāsāṃghika sectarianism according to the various sources at our disposal. Before examining the doctrinal issues, we will first deal with the third point, to determine whether there is any historical basis for expecting the southern schools to have a different attitude toward Mahādeva and his five points than that of the northern schools.

All four of the earliest sect lists mention a division within the Mahāsāṃghika sect which occurred sometime after the initial Mahāsāṃghika-Sthavira schism. In all the accounts, the newly formed subgroup of the Mahāsāṃghikas includes a sect called Caitra,<sup>71</sup> Cetiya,<sup>72</sup> or Caitika.<sup>73</sup> The *Śāriputrapariṣcchā-sūtra* also includes in this subgroup a sect called the Matariya. Vasumitra lists the Bahuśrutīya, Prajñaptivādin, Aparasāila, and Uttaraśāila sects as belonging to this movement. All the sources agree, though, that there was a subschism of some kind, arising within the ranks of the Mahāsāṃghikas, which produced one or more new sects, at a time later than the original formation of the Mahāsāṃghika sect.

It is the *Śāriputrapariṣcchā-sūtra*, which is at once the oldest of our sources and an extremely important one due to its Mahāsāṃghika origin, which provides the most valuable evidence on the place of Mahādeva with respect to the Mahāsāṃghika schools. In this text, along with the listing of the Caitra and Matariya sects as results of the later schism, is given the name of Mahādeva. This, coupled with the omission of his name in the text's relation of the primary schism, can only mean that Mahādeva was associated in the mind of the author of this text not with the original separation of the Mahāsāṃghikas from the Sthaviras, but with this later schismatic movement within the Mahāsāṃghikas themselves.

The treatise of Vasumitra supports the contention of the

<sup>71</sup> See the *Śāriputrapariṣcchā-sūtra*, cited in Bareau, *Les Sectes bouddhiques*, p. 17.

<sup>72</sup> See the *Dīpavaṃsa*, cited in Bareau, *Les Sectes bouddhiques*, p. 16.

<sup>73</sup> See Bhavya's Saṃmitīya tradition (list 3) and Vasumitra's *Samayabhedo-paracanacakra*, given in Bareau, *Les Sectes bouddhiques*, pp. 17 and 18, respectively.

## *History of Religions*

*Śāriputrapariṣcchā-sūtra* that the name of Mahādeva is to be connected with the second schism. According to Bareau,<sup>74</sup> the oldest versions of Vasumitra's treatise do not name Mahādeva in connection with the first schism, but only in discussing the later schism of the Caityaśaila. The translation of Hsüan-tsang, which is later, associates him with both schisms and, since the schisms are at least two generations apart, we have the strange result of two monks, both named Mahādeva, both discussing the five points, and both causing schisms connected with the Mahāsāṃghikas. A similar reduplication is found in the work of Bhavya,<sup>75</sup> where the initial schism is said to be the result of the activities of an incarnation of Māra who takes on the form of a monk and preaches the five theses. The second schism is caused by Mahādeva who again propounds the five theses established by his predecessor and founds the Caitiya sect.

How are we to interpret the confusing evidence presented by these texts? Can they be harmonized in any way with the Sarvāstivādin accounts which explicitly name Mahādeva as the perpetrator of the original Mahāsāṃghika-Sthavira schism? We would suggest the following interpretation. Since both the *Śāriputrapariṣcchā-sūtra* and the treatise of Vasumitra, which are our earliest sources on this issue, explicitly connect Mahādeva with the second, rather than the first, of the schisms (the name Mahādeva being associated with the first only in a later translation of Vasumitra), we are inclined to accept these accounts as valid. Even Bhavya, who connects the five points with both schisms, uses the name of Mahādeva only in the account of the second. The name of Mahādeva (who was known to be involved with a schism affecting the Mahāsāṃghikas), and with him the five points, was only later read back into the original schism by subsequent sources. As a result, the later texts attribute the original schism of the Mahāsāṃghikas from the Sthaviras to the activities of Mahādeva, when in fact he was involved only with the second.

Though this thesis explains adequately the discrepancies in the accounts of Mahādeva in the sources discussed above, it does not rest on an interpretation of these traditions alone. There are also strong doctrinal indications that the five points of Mahādeva originally were accepted only by the southern/Caityaśaila schools, and only later were considered to be doctrines of the northern Mahāsāṃghikas as well.

<sup>74</sup> Bareau, *Les Premiers Conciles bouddhiques*, p. 98.

<sup>75</sup> Bareau, "Trois traités sur les sectes bouddhiques," pp. 172 and 176.

## *Mahāsāṃghika Origins*

At this point it is necessary to examine in detail those doctrines of both the northern and the southern Mahāsāṃghika schools which would have some bearing on either of the two major topics of the five points: the status of the Arhant, and the importance of *duḥkha* and the utterance of sounds for progress on the Path. Turning first to the issue of the Arhant, we find a strong divergence between the northern and southern schools on this point. As already mentioned above, the southern schools (which, according to our hypothesis, should be associated with Mahādeva) hold that the Arhant is capable of regression, while according to the northern schools he is not. This indeed is a major difference, and demonstrates one point on which the doctrines of the southern schools would seem much closer to the theses of Mahādeva than would the position of the northern schools. If, as Mahādeva suggests, the Arhant is still far from perfect, then it would follow that he is capable of falling back from his exalted but imperfect state. It would be hard to reconcile the idea of the Arhant's imperfections with the thesis that he has reached such a high state that he is no longer able to regress.

The fifth of Mahādeva's points is concerned with the issue of "verbal utterances," which are usually associated with the exclamation of *duḥkha*. A variety of doctrines ascribed to various Mahāsāṃghika sects may be associated with this point, each of which will be examined here, in an attempt to determine which of the Mahāsāṃghika subsects (i.e., the northern or the southern schools) has the greater doctrinal affinity with the statement of Mahādeva on this point. The doctrinal theses of the Mahāsāṃghikas which seem to be related to this point, based on Bareau's translations,<sup>76</sup> are the following: (1) "to say 'suffering' can help"; (2) "suffering leads to the Way"; (3) "to say 'O suffering!' causes one to know suffering"; (4) "there is vocal utterance by one who has entered into possession of the Way"; (5) "there is vocal utterance in *samādhi*." A further point which associates the view of *duḥkha* with entry into *samādhi*, but does not specifically

<sup>76</sup> According to the listing given by Bareau in *Les Sectes bouddhiques*, the twelve doctrinal points to be discussed are as follows: (1) thesis 32 of the Mahāsāṃghikas; (2) thesis 31 of the Mahāsāṃghikas; (3) thesis 43 of the Andhakas; (4) theses 27 and 30 of the Mahāsāṃghikas, and thesis 7 of the Pūrvaśailas; (5) theses 27 and 30 of the Mahāsāṃghikas, and thesis 7 of the Pūrvaśailas (as in 4 above), as well as theses 2 of the Bahuśrutīyas, 3 of the Cetīyas, and 7 of the Aparāśailas (and thesis 5 of the Haimavatas); (6) thesis 5 of the Bahuśrutīyas; (7) thesis 34 of the Mahāsāṃghikas, and thesis 8 of the Pūrvaśailas; (8) thesis 4 of the Bahuśrutīyas; (9) thesis 4 of the Prajñaptivādins; (10) thesis 45 of "some Uttaraśailas" (as well as thesis 10 of the Hetuvādins); (11) thesis 3 of the Prajñaptivādins (as well as thesis 7 of the Hetuvādins); (12) thesis 1 of the Bahuśrutīyas.

## History of Religions

mention the utterance of sounds is (6) “one enters into *samādhi* by seeing the suffering of the conditioned [dharmas].” Finally, some doctrines which are even further removed from the issue of verbal utterances, but which stress the importance of *dukkha* are: (7) “suffering is a food”; (8) “there are three truths: suffering, ordinary (truth), and noble (truth)”; (9) “suffering is an absolute reality”; (10) “suffering is *pariniṣpanna*”; (11) “all conditioned [dharmas] are suffering”; and (12) “the teaching of suffering is *lokottara*.”

A fact of particular significance is that none of these twelve statements is ever attributed specifically, in any of our sources, to the northern Mahāsāṃghika subjects: the Lokottaravādins, Gokulikas, or Ekavyāvahārikas. They are ascribed to the Mahāsāṃghikas as a whole (when the term is used as a general title), to several of the southern schools, and to the two “pivot” schools, the Bahuśrutīyas and the Prajñāptivādins, which (as noted above) are sometimes classified with the northern group and in other sources with the southern. Never, however, are these doctrines listed as specific tenets of any of the northern schools. This in itself is a fact of major importance, which is augmented by yet another piece of evidence: that several of these doctrines (numbers 3, 6, 7–12) are ascribed *only* to sects of the southern group and not to the Mahāsāṃghikas in general. These doctrines, which are in the main those connected with the idea of *dukkha*, demonstrate clearly the importance of that concept for the southern schools. Listed according to the sects to which they belonged, the twelve doctrines are as follows: Mahāsāṃghikas (as a whole): 1, 2, 4, 5, 7; Andhakas: 3; Pūrvaśailas: 4, 5, 7; Cetīyas: 5; Aparāśailas: 5; Uttaraśailas: 9 (some), 10 (some); Bahuśrutīyas: 5, 6, 8, 12; Prajñāptivādins: 9, 11.

Since “Andhaka” is a term synonymous with the Śāila schools as a whole, and since the Cetīya school, according to Bareau,<sup>77</sup> is in all probability the “mother sect” of all the Śāila schools, we can condense this list as follows: Mahāsāṃghikas (as a whole): 1, 2, 4, 5, 7; Cetīya/Śāila Schools (or Andhakas): 3, 4, 5, 7, and (some of the Uttaraśailas) 9 and 10; Bahuśrutīyas: 5, 6, 8, 12; Prajñāptivādins: 9, 11.

The overall result of this listing is that the southern schools are at least as strongly affiliated with the doctrines related to Mahādeva’s fifth point as are the Mahāsāṃghikas as a whole, if not

<sup>77</sup> Bareau, *Les Sectes bouddhiques*, pp. 89, 88.

## *Mahāsāṃghika Origins*

even more so, while none of the northern Mahāsāṃghika schools appear in this connection at all. It is clear, therefore, that the fifth point of Mahādeva, like the first four, harmonizes much more clearly with the doctrinal positions of the southern Mahāsāṃghika schools than with those of the northern sects. This confirms, from the doctrinal standpoint, what we have already seen in our review of the sources on Mahāsāṃghika history: that Mahādeva and his five points should be associated not with the original Mahāsāṃghika-Sthavira schism, but rather with a later schism which developed among the ranks of the Mahāsāṃghikas themselves, resulting in the founding of the Cetiya sect (which later produced the Śailas or Andhakas, and the rest of the southern schools) by the followers of Mahādeva.

One final problem remains. If Mahādeva and his five points were accepted only by the southern Mahāsāṃghika schools, and that acceptance brought about a schism of those schools from the northern sects, why then do we find the five points listed (in Vasumitra, Bhavya, and Vinitadeva) as doctrines of the Mahāsāṃghikas in general? There are two possible answers: (1) that at a later time all the Mahāsāṃghikas did in fact accept these points, or (2) that the writers of these treatises, knowing that Mahādeva and his doctrines were associated with the Mahāsāṃghikas, mistakenly read these famous theses back into the doctrinal lists of the Mahāsāṃghikas as a whole. It is significant that none of the sources which do this are Mahāsāṃghika works. As outsiders, writing several centuries after the events with which they were concerned, they might very well have confused what was originally an intra-Mahāsāṃghika controversy with the dispute which brought about the original appearance of the sect. We have already seen that this is, in all probability, what occurred with the historical accounts of Mahādeva's place in the sectarian movement, and it is quite likely that the same process has taken place here. Furthermore, the only Mahāsāṃghika source which lists the subsets of that school after the first period (i.e., the Mahāsāṃghika list given by Bhavya) is totally ignorant of the northern schools, listing only the names of the southern sects. If Bareau is correct in interpreting this to mean that the northern schools had by this time disappeared,<sup>78</sup> it would be easy to see how the doctrines of Mahādeva could have been falsely attributed to schools which were no longer in existence.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

## *History of Religions*

Having shown that the original Mahāsāṃghika-Sthavira schism could not have been caused either by the lax practices of the Vṛjiputraka monks (who were not the same as the Mahāsāṃghikas at all) or by the five doctrinal points of Mahādeva (which involved only part, and not all, of the Mahāsāṃghikas), we must now confront the question of what the real reason for that schism could have been.

### III. THE MAHĀSĀMĀGHKA-STHAVIRA SCHISM:

#### A NEW APPROACH

Earlier in this paper we examined the two traditional theses most often associated with the Mahāsāṃghika-Sthavira schism: (1) that the schism occurred because of the ten points of discipline cited at the Vaiśālī council, and (2) the notorious five points of Mahādeva which, to a large extent, redefine the notion of the Arhant. Each of these theses maintains Mahāsāṃghika laxity, the former stressing disciplinary laxity, and the latter stressing an extension of this enterprise into the philosophical domain. Another possibility is found in the writings of André Bareau. He states, "On the contrary, if one compares the rigorist attitude taken by the future Mahāsāṃghikas at the time of the second council with their attitude at the time of the schism, one sees that their austerity has diminished significantly during that time, and an interval of thirty-seven years between the two events would not seem at all exaggerated."<sup>79</sup> This statement is particularly revealing on two accounts. First, it sets the stage for Bareau to advance his personal thesis that the actual schism took place 137 A.N., a date which we have associated above with the Sammitiya list of Bhavya's *Nikāyabhedavibhaṅgavyākhyāna*. Although we will discuss the date of the schism elsewhere in this paper, it does seem that Bareau's main reason in choosing this date (after, of course, dismissing 100 A.N. and 160 A.N. as being "manifestly aberrant"<sup>80</sup>) as opposed to the date 116 A.N., offered by Vasumitra's *Samayabhedoparacanacakra*, is that thirty-seven years is more reasonable than sixteen years for laxity to develop. Second, Bareau reveals that he does shift position on the laxity question. In Bareau's estimate, the schismatic Mahāsāṃghikas were clearly lax in discipline. However, he also believes that the schism resulted, to some degree, from Mahādeva's five theses.

<sup>79</sup> Bareau, *Les Premiers Conciles bouddhiques*, p. 89.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

## *Mahāsāṃghika Origins*

We have already seen that Demiéville's attempt to effect an explanation of the manner in which Dharma and Vinaya issues were interrelated is somewhat suspect. Bareau offers another possibility, stated, curiously enough, immediately following his discussion of Demiéville's notions on this point. Bareau claims,

Is it not possible to reconcile these two traditions, which appear to be so contradictory? Probably so. In fact, although the above five theses are never mentioned or discussed in Vinaya works, they are, nonetheless, closely connected with monastic discipline. The first, related to the presence of nocturnal seminal emissions among Arhants, is nothing but a corollary of the first saṅghavaśeṣa, which, in all the Prātimokṣas or monastic codes, condemns the monk who, except in the case of a dream, lets his sperm flow. The Sthaviras reinforced the rigor of this rule in eliminating, for the Arhant, the excuse of the dream, which was left to the ordinary monk, while the Mahāsāṃghikas adhered to the letter of this article of the disciplinary code. As to the other four theses, they could have arisen from speculations on the spiritual and intellectual qualities required of the ācārya and upādhyāya masters as they are enumerated in the chapters related to ordination (upasampadā). Here again, the Sthaviras increased the rigor of the rule, while the Mahāsāṃghikas interpreted it in a more laxist sense. In summary, the subjects of the quarrel belonged as much to the abhivinaṃya as to the abhidharma.<sup>81</sup>

This is most ingenious, and the argument does not fall prey to the manner of criticism directed at Demiéville. Nevertheless, if our arguments above are correct regarding the absence of laxity in the Mahāsāṃghika school, both in disciplinary and philosophical matters, then Bareau's thesis stands contradicted, and to some extent we have disparaged the manner in which supposed laxity on either issue tends to be reciprocally influencing in the eyes of most Western scholars of Buddhism.

As noted above, in the absence of disciplinary laxity, and with Mahādeva located at a somewhat later date than is traditionally ascribed to him, both accepted tenets for the great schism in early Buddhism (and the various combinations of them) lose their impact and authenticity as explanatory devices. However, the basic problem still persists. Where, if anywhere, can we find evidence that is sufficiently authoritative to enable us to unravel the mystery of the Mahāsāṃghika-Sthavira schism? Perhaps we can employ a two-fold approach, utilizing the Mahāsāṃghika texts themselves, that will bring us significantly closer to a resolution of the issue. On the one hand, we can utilize the *Śāriputrapariṣcchā-sūtra*, translated into Chinese between A.D. 317 and 420 but likely to have been composed by around 300,<sup>82</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., pp. 95–96.

<sup>82</sup> Bareau, *Les Sectes bouddhiques*, pp. 17, 21.

## History of Religions

and representing the oldest of all the sectarian treatises; and on the other hand, we can refer to the Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya itself, noted by many scholars to be the most ancient of all the Vinayas.

The *Śāriputrapariṣcchā-sūtra* relates an episode in which an old monk rearranges and augments the traditional Vinaya, said to have been codified by Kāśyapa at the alleged first council of Rājagṛha, thus causing dissension among the monks which required the king's arbitration. Lamotte offers a translation of this passage, taken from *Taishō* 1465, page 900b.<sup>83</sup>

At that time there was an old bhikṣu hungry for glory and given to disputes. He copied and rearranged our Vinaya, developing and augmenting what Kāśyapa had codified and which was called "Vinaya of the Great Assembly" (*Ta-chong-lin: Mahāsāṃghavinaya*). He collected from the outside materials neglected [until then], with the intention of tricking the beginners. Thus he formed a separate party which disputed with [the Great Assembly]. There were then some bhikṣus who asked the king to pass judgment. The king called together the two schools and had a suffrage taken by black and white tablets (*śalākā*), proclaiming that those who approved of the old Vinaya could take the black tablets, and those who approved of the new Vinaya the white tablets. Those who took the black tablets numbered more than ten thousand, and those who took the white tablets were only a little over a hundred persons. The king considered that [the doctrines of the two parties represented] were both the work of the Buddha, and since their preferences were not the same, [the monks of the two camps] should not live together. As those who studied the old Vinaya were in the majority, they were called the Mahāsāṃghikas (*Mo-ho-seng-k'i*); those who studied the new [Vinaya] were in the minority, but they were all Sthaviras (*Chang-tso*, senior members): thus they were named *T'a-pi-lo* (Sthaviras).

It is clear from the above quoted passage that from the Mahāsāṃghika perspective, the real issue culminating in the schism was Vinaya expansion. The Mahāsāṃghikas are designated in the passage as those who study the "ancient Vinaya," and this tallies extremely well with the conclusions of Bareau, Pachow, Hofinger, Frauwallner, and Roth (cited above, and see n. 29) that the Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya represents the most ancient of all the Vinaya traditions. It is interesting as well that each of these scholars seems to arrive at his conclusion by applying a separate critical technique. Bareau arrives at his conclusion seemingly on the basis that the Śaikṣa-dharma section of the Mahāsāṃghika *Prātimokṣa-sūtra* is shorter in length, and significantly so, than other schools' versions of the same text. Pachow bases his conclusion on a careful study of the entire *Prātimokṣa-sūtra* (in almost all available recensions) of all the schools. Hofinger's thesis is founded on an examination of all the second council

<sup>83</sup> Lamotte, *Histoire du bouddhisme indien*, p. 189.

## Mahāsāṃghika Origins

materials found in the various Vinayas. Frauwallner has studied the Skandhaka sections of the various Vinayas and offers some content and stylistic comments, and Roth investigates the language and grammar of the Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya (as preserved in the Sanskrit texts of the Lokottaravādin subsect). What, however, is the nature of this “ancient Vinaya,” and on what basis does it preserve a shorter text than that of the Sthaviras (and, for that matter, the other early Buddhist groups)?

If we focus, as a means of comparative assessment, on the basic monastic disciplinary text, that is, the *Prātimokṣa-sūtra*, we will begin to see the manner in which the Sthaviras and other sectarian groups began to expand their respective texts. In this regard, we may consult table 1. This chart shows that there is a

TABLE 1

| <i>Bhikṣu Prātimokṣa Sūtra</i> |   |    |     |    |    |    |     |            |
|--------------------------------|---|----|-----|----|----|----|-----|------------|
| School (Language)              | I | II | III | IV | V  | VI | VII | VIII Total |
| MSG (Chinese) . . . . .        | 4 | 13 | 2   | 30 | 92 | 4  | 66  | 7 218      |
| MSG (Sanskrit) . . . . .       | 4 | 13 | 2   | 30 | 92 | 4  | 67  | 7 219      |
| T (Pāli) . . . . .             | 4 | 13 | 2   | 30 | 92 | 4  | 75  | 7 227      |
| K (Chinese) . . . . .          | 4 | 13 | 2   | 30 | 90 | 4  | 96  | 7 246      |
| D (Chinese) . . . . .          | 4 | 13 | 2   | 30 | 90 | 4  | 100 | 7 250      |
| MHS (Chinese) . . . . .        | 4 | 13 | 2   | 30 | 90 | 4  | 100 | 7 250      |
| MSV (Chinese) . . . . .        | 4 | 13 | 2   | 30 | 90 | 4  | 98  | 7 248      |
| MSV (Tibetan) . . . . .        | 4 | 13 | 2   | 30 | 90 | 4  | 108 | 7 258      |
| MSV (Sanskrit) . . . . .       | 4 | 13 | 2   | 30 | 90 | 4  | 108 | 7 258      |
| S (Chinese) . . . . .          | 4 | 13 | 2   | 30 | 90 | 4  | 113 | 7 263      |
| S (Sanskrit) . . . . .         | 4 | 13 | 2   | 30 | 90 | 4  | 113 | 7 263      |
| Mahāvvyutpatti . . . . .       | 4 | 13 | 2   | 30 | 90 | 4  | 105 | 7 255      |

SOURCES.—The notion for this table, as well as much of its content, is taken from Pachow (n. 2 above), pp. 27–28. Information on the Sanskrit texts was gleaned from the following sources: Mahāsāṃghika—Pachow and Mishra’s text (n. 12 above); Mūlasarvāstivādin—Ankul Chandra Banerjee, ed., *Prātimokṣa-Sūtram [Mūlasarvāstivāda]* (Calcutta: Calcutta Oriental Press, 1954); Sarvāstivādin—Louis Finot, ed., “Le Prātimokṣasūtra des Sarvāstivādins,” *Journal Asiatique* 2 ser. 11 (November–December 1913): 465–557. Due to the fragmentary character of this last manuscript, Finot’s numbering system, which was kept in line with the Chinese text, is only partially correct.

### KEY

|                        |                                  |
|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| MSG: Mahāsāṃghika      | I: Pārājika-dharmas              |
| T: Theravādin          | II: Saṃghāvaśeṣa-dharmas         |
| K: Kāśyapiya           | III: Aniyata-dharmas             |
| D: Dharmaguptaka       | IV: Niṣargika-Pāyantika-dharmas  |
| MHS: Mahiśāsaka        | V: Pāyantika-dharmas             |
| MSV: Mūlasarvāstivādin | VI: Pratideśaniya-dharmas        |
| S: Sarvāstivādin       | VII: Śaikṣa-dharmas              |
|                        | VIII: Adhikarāṇa-Samatha-dharmas |

remarkable agreement in all the schools on six of the eight categories of offenses. One can find diversity only in the Pāyantika-dharma and Śaikṣa-dharma sections. The disparity in the Pāyantika-dharma section, in which only the Mahāsāṃghikas and Theravādins list ninety-two rules while the other sects list ninety,

## History of Religions

is easily resolved. The two extra rules are in some ways restatements of issues already dealt with in this section, and the other schools likely eliminated what they considered to be redundancy.<sup>84</sup> The Śaikṣa-dharma section, though, is a completely separate matter, and it is here that we see great diversity in the various schools, not just in number but in content as well. Now it is not our intention to recount the issue of Śaikṣa-dharma development, as that has already been done.<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, this portion of the Vinaya does, in fact, represent the one clear area in which expansion and embellishment of the basic text is focused. Bareau does notice this, remarking, “. . . one may justly think that the cause of the quarrel resided in the composition of the code of the monks and, more specifically, in the list of the śikṣakaraṇīya.”<sup>86</sup> He dismisses it, however, by noting, “It is improbable that such a serious conflict could have been provoked by dissension on such trivial subject.”<sup>87</sup> Strangely enough, Bareau does concede, immediately following the above quoted statement, that the majority of points on which the Vṛjiputraka bhikṣus were re-proved were scarcely more important than the ones cited here. Bareau’s statements are very reminiscent of Lamotte, who says, “Each Buddhist school tries to set up its own Prātimokṣa, but between the diverse lists one can only state minimal differences.”<sup>88</sup> It is here that we think Bareau (and Lamotte) has too easily dismissed what is in all likelihood the real cause of the schism. The *Śāriputrapariṣcchā-sūtra* has informed us that the cause of the schism was Vinaya expansion, and here we have located the substantiation of this hypothesis as witnessed by the *Mahāsāṃghika Prātimokṣa-sūtra* presenting the shortest list of offenses. It is debatable as well regarding whether the Śaikṣa-dharmas are even to be regarded as full-fledged offenses. In this regard, Pachow has stated, “The nature of these rules is essentially concerned with the daily conduct and decorum of the Bhikṣus such as: walking, moving to and fro, looking, dressing, contracting, and stretching and so forth. They do not come under any penal section inasmuch as there will not be any sanction or punishment for their breaches or violations.”<sup>89</sup> This certainly

<sup>84</sup> Charles S. Prebish, “The Prātimokṣa Puzzle: Fact versus Fantasy,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 94, no. 2 (April–June 1974): 173.

<sup>85</sup> See Pachow, pp. 59–64 and 69–79; and Prebish, “The Prātimokṣa Puzzle,” pp. 173–76.

<sup>86</sup> Bareau, *Les Premiers Conciles bouddhiques*, p. 94.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> Lamotte, *Histoire du bouddhisme indien*, p. 181.

<sup>89</sup> Pachow, *A Comparative Study of the Prātimokṣa*, p. 69.

## *Mahāsāṃghika Origins*

seems to present added confirmation that the Mahāsāṃghikas were not to be regarded as lax simply because of a short Śaikṣadharmā section, and in no way conflicts with our Vinaya expansion hypothesis, but rather supports it. Although Bareau ascribes little value to this section of rules, as a means for the demarcation of schismatics, it can easily be shown that this very section of the *Prātimokṣa-sūtra* has profound implications in the later sectarian movement. An example of this point may be taken with regard to the Dharmaguptakas, who posit twenty-six rules in this section to delegate appropriate conduct at a *stūpa*. The appearance of these particular twenty-six rules in the Dharmagupataka *Prātimokṣa-sūtra* (and their absence in the texts of the other schools) reveals a considerable amount about the place of this school, historically, in the early sectarian movement, and equally, offers some insight into the ritual applications of their doctrinal affinities. Similar arguments (on issues other than *stūpa* worship) can be made for other Buddhist sects.<sup>90</sup>

One final question remains regarding the issue of Vinaya expansion. Why do the future Sthaviras choose to enlarge the Vinaya? It is not unlikely that the council of Vaiśālī, in representing the first real threat of division in the quasi-unified Buddhist saṃgha, made all Buddhists aware of the problem of concord now that the Buddha was long dead. In seeking to insure the continued unity that all Buddhists must have desired, they simply began to expand the disciplinary code in the seemingly appropriate direction. Just as the respect for orthodoxy inhibited the participants at the alleged first council of Rājagṛha from excluding the “lesser and minor points” which the Buddha had noted to be expendable (and since Buddha gave no indication of what the specific points were, the monks would have had to risk orthodoxy by guessing, however intelligently they performed their task), the same respect for orthodoxy inhibited the future Mahāsāṃghikas from tolerating this new endeavor, however well intentioned it was.

#### IV. THE DATE OF THE SCHISM

It goes without saying that the dating of events in early Indian Buddhism is generally problematic, and this is seen in the extreme when applied to the issue of dating the first Buddhist schism. Four dates have traditionally been offered as possibilities. These include 100 A.N., 116 A.N., 137 A.N., and 160 A.N. Each of these

<sup>90</sup> E.g., see Prebish, “The Prātimokṣa Puzzle,” pp. 174–76.

## History of Religions

must be examined in brief with an eye toward the potential authenticity of any of them.

The date of 100 A.N. is found primarily in two sources: the Pāli texts and the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sāstra*. The Pāli sources, of course, link the schism to the second council, and we have already demonstrated the inadmissibility of that thesis. Consequently, their interpretation of the dating must also be dismissed. The *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sāstra*, dating later than the *Vibhāṣa* but before 400, also notes the schism to have occurred in 100 A.N. It does this by linking the schism, the date, and King Aśoka. The reasoning is straightforward, if inaccurate. From one legend presented in the *Divyāvadāna* and *Aśokāvadāna*, in which Buddha is said to predict the reign of the great Aśoka in Kusumapura 100 years after the parinirvāṇa, the king and the date are harmonized. The text then assumes that an event such as the great schism could only have occurred under the reign of the great Aśoka.<sup>91</sup> Obviously, the thesis is weak in its dating of Dharmāśoka and its assumptions regarding the possibility of the schism only under the reign of a great king. The 160 A.N. date is presented in a reportedly Sthavira (but actually Sarvāstivādin) list in Bhavya's *Nikāya-bhedavibhaṅgavyākhyāna*. This date can be ruled out on the very likely basis of digital confusion or inversion, resulting in a date of 116 A.N. rather than 160 A.N., and Bareau explains very clearly the intricate mechanics of such an error, both in Chinese and Tibetan.<sup>92</sup> It is curious, though, that the correction of this error yields the date 116 A.N., to which we shall refer later. The date 137 A.N. emerges from a Saṃmitīya list in Bhavya's *Nikāya-bhedavibhaṅgavyākhyāna* and seems to locate the schism under the reign of Mahāpadma and Nanda (or more likely Mahāpadma Nanda). There is a small problem of detail with this date as Nanda does not come to rule until 140 A.N.<sup>93</sup> (and even if these are *two separate* rulers, the Purāṇas and Tāranātha note Nanda to be the father of Mahāpadma). Nevertheless, it is this date that Bareau chooses to accept as appropriate with regard to providing sufficient time for Mahāsāṃghika laxity to develop. The final date offered is 116 A.N., arising from Vasumitra's *Samayabhedoparacanacakra*. The problem here is that Vasumitra associates the schism with the reign of Dharmāśoka. It is our contention that

<sup>91</sup> André Bareau, "La Date du nirvāṇa," *Journal Asiatique* 241 (1953): 39-43.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>93</sup> See the king list in Lamotte, *Histoire du bouddhisme indien*, p. 96.

## *Mahāsāṃghika Origins*

Vasumitra (and others), writing well after the death of Dharmāśoka but almost certainly having been influenced indirectly by this great king's impact on Indian Buddhist history, simply confused the bare name Aśoka with Dharmāśoka, rather than identifying it with Kālāśoka, who is said to have ruled in India from 90 to 118 A.N.,<sup>94</sup> and of course this is consonant with Vasumitra's date for the schism. Now we need not belabor the issue of dates, kings, and their relationships, as this work has already been meticulously done by others. We agree with Bareau that the dates 100 A.N. and 160 A.N. are unreasonable choices for the reasons stated. We further agree with Bareau that two old Kashmiri texts, the *Vibhāṣā* and the *Śāriputrapariprechā-sūtra*, would indeed not remain silent on the king issue if the schism had taken place under Dharmāśoka,<sup>95</sup> but we would add that they might not be inclined to mention a lesser king, such as Kālāśoka, and this seems to be precisely what happened. Consequently, while we admit that there are some problems with each of the two remaining dates, 116 A.N. and 137 A.N., we reject 137 A.N. for two primary reasons. First, we have shown clearly that no Mahāsāṃghika laxity developed, and this undercuts that line of argumentation. Second, if we are right in assuming that the Vaiśālī council instilled great fear of separation into the Buddhist community, which the future Sthaviras sought to remedy by expanding the Vinaya, then this call to action would have occurred more quickly than witnessing a thirty-seven-year time lag. By the above process of elimination, we are led to accept the date 116 A.N. for the schism. We might add too that much of the information presented, when read from this point of view, seems to form a unified statement which finally unravels the mystery of the rise of Buddhist sectarianism.

*Harvard University  
and  
Pennsylvania State University*

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Bareau, *Les Sectes bouddhiques*, p. 31.