

Early Mahāyāna Buddhism



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ABSTRACT

Early Mahāyāna Buddhism occupied the period from the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa* to the first century CE. For five centuries, Mahāyāna *sūtras* were developed gradually and disseminated orally. After the Buddha and his disciples passed away, there were two opposing views regarding *buddhavacana* or the words spoken by the Buddha. The first view stated that *buddhavacana* ended after the First Buddhist Council and the second held the view that *buddhavacana* continued. Mahāyāna Buddhism supports the latter view since its doctrines, in the form of *sūtras*, were written long after the council and new interpretations of its teachings were revealed at a later date.

Keywords: Buddhism, Buddhist Councils, Mahāyāna, buddhavacana, *sūtra*, bodhisattva

Introduction

This essay explores the origins of Buddhism and the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism. A central element of the evolution of Mahāyāna Buddhism is a shift in what was understood to be *dharma*, the teaching of the Buddha that was spoken directly by him, and teaching in written form, known as *sūtras*, that came at a later stage. The history of the Buddhist Councils marked the importance of the monastic disciplines and the true teaching of the Buddha. The purity and consistency in monastic disciplines was the fundamental base of the preservation of the true teaching.

Part I: Origin of Buddhism

Buddhism was founded in the fifth century BCE by Śākyamuni. The dates of his life have been approximated at between 563–483 BCE. Despite the fact that the exact dates of the Buddha's life are still a subject of scholarly debate, Buddhists share the similar belief that the Buddha's birth, his enlightenment and his death took place at a full moon day in the month of Vaiśākha (P. Vesākha, in April–May). They also accept the factual events that Siddhārtha was born in Lumbini and entered marriage at the age of 16. After having seen four human conditions – sickness, old age, death and the life of an ascetic – he renounced his world at 29. He then practised austerities for six years before he attained Buddhahood at 35 in Bodhgaya. The Buddha propagated his doctrines (*dharma*) for 45 years before he died (*parinirvāṇa*) at 80 in Kuśinagara.

The Life of the Buddha

There are many stories of the life of the Buddha found in different traditions but its essence is the same. The narrative of his life that is widely accepted by the different Buddhist schools is as follows (Hirakawa 1990, 20-37) (Lamotte 1988,13-25) (Piyadassi 2008, 104-13) (Warder 2000, 43-56):

He was born in a region of northern India and Nepal controlled by the Śākyā clan. His proper name was Siddhārtha (Pāli Siddhattha) and his family name was Gautama. He was well known as Siddhārtha Gautama, then later as Śākyamuni (the Sage of the Śākyā clan) after he had attained enlightenment.

His father was the *kṣatriya* Śuddhodana and his mother was Mahāmāya. He was born in the Lumbinī park near Kapilavastu. On the fifth day after his birth, Śuddhodana invited eight wise men to his palace and asked them to give a proper name for his baby and to foretell his future. The wise men predicted that the baby would be either a universal monarch (*cakravarti*) or a supreme religious leader as an enlightened being (*buddha*). The baby was then named Siddhārtha (P. Siddhattha), which means ‘one whose purpose has been achieved’.

His mother passed away on the seventh day after the birth of Siddhārtha. The baby Siddhārtha was then nursed by his mother’s sister, Prajāpatī Gautamī (P. Pajāpati Gotamī). His father provided him with a good education so that Siddhārtha acquired skill in many branches of knowledge, including in the arts of war.

When Siddhārtha reached the age of sixteen, his father arranged his marriage to Yaśodharā (or Bhaddakaccānā). Siddhārtha spent his youth living a luxurious life inside the palaces. He enjoyed sensual pleasures and had three palaces, one for the rainy season, one for the winter and one for the summer.¹ In his palaces, everything was geared toward pleasing his sensual faculties. He had little knowledge of what was happening outside his palaces.

One day, Siddhārtha desired to visit parks outside the city. Riding in his four-horsed chariot, he saw for the first time an unexpected human condition – that is, aged men, a sick man and a dead man. Siddhārtha realised that human beings were subject to ageing, disease and death. On the last occasion, he saw a monk (ascetic) who had abandoned household life in search of purity, liberation and enlightenment. After this meeting with the monk, he decided to renounce the world. That very day, his son was born and he was named as Rāhula (“fetter”).² At the age of twenty-nine, Siddhārtha quit his life as a householder and pursued the homeless life of an ascetic (*śramana*). He wanted to find the cure for these undesired human conditions.

¹Māgandiya Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 75)

²Mahāpadāna Sutta: The Buddha exemplified his four visits with Vipassi, previous Buddha, who made four visits outside the palace and saw the real human condition.

Śramaṇa Gautama joined the yoga masters, Ārāda Kālāma and Udraka Rāmaputra.³ He soon left them since their teaching and practice did not lead to supreme truth, the enlightenment. Siddhārtha practised severe austerities near the village at Uruvilvā-senāni on the Nairāñjana River. He practised the breathless meditation.⁴ His determined effort attracted five other ascetics (*pañcavargika*) and they joined him in the search for supreme truth. They were Ājñāta Kaundinya, Bhadrika, Vāśpa, Mahānāmān and Aśvajit.⁵

Śramaṇa Gautama practised severe austerities until the point of death. His body became emaciated and appeared as a living skeleton, but this did not lead him to his final goal. He then realised that he had experienced both extremes of life. He had enjoyed self-indulgence for twenty-nine years inside the palaces and practised self-mortification for six years. Both extremes were not leading to final liberation. Śramaṇa Gautama decided to abandon both extremes and chose the Middle Way (*madhyamā-pratipad*, P. *majjhimā-patipada*). He quit severe ascetic practice and started to eat solid food. His body returned to near normal. The group of ascetics left him since they assumed that Śramaṇa Gautama had failed in his ascetic practice.

Śramaṇa Gautama made a final resolution under the *bodhi* tree that he would remain still until he attained full enlightenment. At the age of thirty-five, after six years of ascetic practice and meditation, śramaṇa Gautama attained enlightenment and he became the Buddha, an awakened one. He knew that he had reached *bodhi* (awakening), escaped from *samsāra* (the cycle of birth and death) and experienced *nirvāṇa* (P. *nibbāna*).

The Buddha then went to Deer Park at Rśipatana, near Vārāṇasi. He preached the discourse on turning the Wheel of Dharma (*dharma-cakra-pravartana sūtra*) to his five former companions. Later they became the first Buddha's disciples. This event also marked the commencement of the Buddha's public ministry of 45 years. The Buddha travelled to many cities and preached the doctrines he had discovered. Many people joined his monastic order or became lay disciples of the Buddha.

³Ariyapariyesanā Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 26) mentioned his discipleship under two accomplished meditation teachers, Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta.

⁴Mahāsaccaka Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 36)

⁵In Pāli, they were known as *pañcavaggiya*, namely Añña Koṇḍañña, Bhaddiya, Vappa, Mahānāmā and Assaji.

In the last days of the Buddha he visited some cities accompanied by disciples. During this journey, he taught and repeated his teaching on *dharma* and *vinaya*. He fell ill after having eaten what was called pig's delight (P. *sūkara-maddava*). He arrived in Kuśinagara (P. *Kusinārā*) where he died (*parinirvāna*) in a grove of *śāla* trees. After the Buddha's body was cremated, his relics were distributed to eight locations where stupas were erected (Hirakawa 1990, 36).⁶

The Buddha's Teaching

The doctrines that the Buddha taught during his ministry are called *dharma* (P. *dhamma*). The *dharma* originated from the Four Noble Truths (*catur ārya-satya*, P. *cattari ariya-saccani*) that the Buddha discovered on the night of his enlightenment.⁷ The Buddha preached the Four Noble Truths for the first time in *dharma-cakra-pravartana-sūtra* (P. *dhammacakkapavattana sutta*) to his five former companions.

The Four Noble Truths is the teaching unique to the Buddha. This core teaching defines the universal truths of human existence in the world: suffering (*duḥkha*, P. *dukkha*), the origin of suffering (*duḥkha-samudaya*, P. *dukkha-samudaya*), the cessation of suffering (*duḥkha-nirodha*, P. *dukkha-nirodha*) and the way leading to the cessation of suffering (*duḥkha-nirodha-gāminī pratipat*, P. *dukkha-nirodha-gāmini-patipadā*) (Lamotte 1988, 26-27).⁸

In the fourth noble truth, the Buddha expounded the Eightfold Noble Path (*ārya aṣṭāṅgikamārga*, P. *ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga*) that his followers were to practice: right faith, right will, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration (Bodhi and Ñāṇamoli 1995, 32-33) (Lamotte 1988, 27). The Eightfold Noble Path is also called the Middle Way (*madhyamā-pratipad*, P. *majjhimā-paṭipada*).

⁶Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya 16) mentioned the Koliyas of Rāmagāma built a stupa where one portion of his relics was kept by *nāga* (serpent) kings.

⁷Bhayabherava Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 4.13) and Mahāsaccaka Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 36.42)

⁸Four Noble Truths are expounded concisely in Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 9.14-18), explained in detail in Saccavibhanga Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 141). In Mahāhatthipadapama Sutta, Sāriputta developed an original explanation of the truths.

The Buddha advised people to avoid two extremes in life since final liberation could not be achieved through excessive self-indulgence or severe self-mortification.

Every event in human life has a cause and creates future implications. The Buddha outlined the doctrines of cause-and-effect as twelve links of causal wheels as dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*, P. *paṭicca-samuppāda*). To escape from *samsāra*, human beings have to understand the work of dependent origination and put his efforts into cutting off the cause that leads to suffering. The dependent origination shows the connection of the past, the present and the future of human life. Due to ignorance in past lives, human beings are reborn in the present. Due to cravings in their present life, they will be reborn in the future according to what they have done. The Buddha advised his followers to eradicate craving completely since this is the only prerequisite to escape from *samsāra*.⁹ The cause-and-effect doctrines are implicitly related to the generally accepted term *karma*.

Monastic Order

The Buddha started his teaching career with a group of five ascetics (*pañcavargika*). It was said that the establishment of the monastic order called *saṅgha* commenced when his five former companions became his first disciples. The dissemination of the *dharma* did not rely solely on the Buddha's initiatives. After certain religious achievements, his disciples were then given responsibility for propagating the *dharma*. The Buddha established the fourfold community consisting of four assemblies (*pariṣad*): monks (*bhikṣu*), nuns (*bhikṣuni*), laymen (*upāsaka*) and laywomen (*upāsikā*) (Lamotte 1988, 54). The monks and nuns formed the monastic order called *saṅgha*. The Buddha introduced a set of monastic disciplines (precepts) in his *saṅgha* called *vinaya*.

The *saṅgha* was an autonomous institution since it governed itself in accordance with the *vinaya*. The *saṅgha* conducted fortnightly assemblies (*poṣadha*, P. *uposatha*) and rainy season retreats, a day of fasting, strict observances on precepts and recitation of *prātimokṣa* (corpus of disciplinary rules). At the early stages of Buddhist history, there was

⁹The Dependent Origination doctrines are explained in Majjhima Nikāya on the following *suttas*: Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta (9.21-26), Mahātañhāsankhaya Sutta (38.26-40), Mūlapariyāya Sutta (1.171), Cūlasīhanāda Sutta (11.16) and Māgandiya Sutta (75.24-25)

no exact number of monastic disciplines (precepts) that the monks had to follow. It was estimated that the *saṅgha* enforced 250 precepts for monks and between 250 and 355 for nuns (Hirakawa 1990, 64-64) (Lamotte 1988, 57-60).

The Buddha became an authoritative figure in the Buddhist community during his ministry. He was responsible for doctrines and monastic disciplines. He clarified any misunderstanding on *dharma* so that his disciples had no doubts on it. Offences in *vinaya* were to be immediately reported and rectified. The Buddha then formulated new monastic disciplines, if required, in order to minimise future violations.

The Buddha had abolished the caste system in his community, therefore all were able to join the *saṅgha*. The Buddha had numerous followers and disciples (*śrāvaka* means “hearer”, P. *sāvaka*). After hearing the Buddha’s doctrines, they either joined the *saṅgha* (as *bhikṣu* or *bhikṣuni*) or became lay disciples (as *upāsaka* or *upāsikā*). Some of his noble disciples (*arya-śravaka*) were Śāriputra, Mahāmaudgalyāyana, Mahākāśyapa, Upāli and Ānanda (Hirakawa 1990, 32-34). Śāriputra was well known for his wisdom, Mahāmaudgalyāyana possessed supernormal powers, Mahākāśyapa excelled in observing austere disciplines, Upāli mastered monastic disciplines and Ānanda was gifted in terms of his memory. He was able to memorise and to recite all of what the Buddha preached.

The Buddha acted as the head of *saṅgha* when he was alive. He advised his disciples that *dharma* and *vinaya* lead their way to final liberation. The *saṅgha* was not hereditary and would continue to run as long as the monastic members preserved the *dharma* and committed to the *vinaya*. The Buddha did not appoint a successor as the head of the *saṅgha* after the *parinirvāna*, thereby causing intense issues on preserving the *dharma* and observing the *vinaya*.

The Growth of Buddhism

Brāhmanism was prevalent in India when Buddhism emerged. The salient feature of Brāhmanism was a belief that Brāhma was their supreme god. In this school of thought, the life of human beings was regarded as sacrifice (*yajña*). They performed various form of religious worships (*pūjā*). Ethics and morality were less important in Brāhmanism. Life spans of individuals were divided into four stages and each stage signified its role in society and family.¹⁰

At the time of the Buddha, there were two main religious practitioners in India: the *brāhmaṇas* and the *śramaṇas*. Firstly, the *brāhmaṇas* were the followers of Vedic religion who officiated at sacrifices. Their ideal life was divided into four stages (*catur āśrama*): as a student (*brahmacārin*), he devoted himself to the study of Vedas under a teacher; as a householder (*grhastha*), he married and had family; as a forest dweller (*vānaprastha*), he left his family and retired to the forest, devoting his life to prayer and sacrifice; and as *sannyāsin* he detached himself from all worldly things to live a life of wandering, during which he would die.

Secondly, the *śramaṇa* (or “person who strives”) abandoned his home to lead a life of wandering and begging. Since they were not bound to *catur āśrama*, they were able to pursue life as *śramaṇas* at any age. They devoted themselves to controlling and limiting their desires, practising yoga and asceticism in order to find absolute liberation (Hirakawa 1990, 16).¹¹ In Pāli Tipiṭaka, in Theravāda canon, these two opposing religious practitioners were addressed in numerous discourses as *samaṇabrahmaṇa*.

The social structure in ancient India was initially based on the division of labour and then gradually transformed into four castes: *brāhmaṇa* (priests), *kṣatriya* (warriors), *vaiśya* (merchants) and *śūdra* (workers). By the time Buddhism flourished in India, the

¹⁰ Nanayakkara, S.K. *Encyclopaedia Buddhism*, s.v. “Brāhmanism”, Colombo: Department of Buddhist Affairs, Ministry of Buddhasasana, 2003.

¹¹ The *brāhmaṇas* and *śramaṇas* are featured in detail in Brāhmaṇavagga (Division of Brahmins) and Paribbājaka (Division of Wanderers) of Pāli Tipitaka. Each division contains ten discourses: Brāhmaṇavagga (Majjhima Nikāya 91-100) and Paribbājakavagga (Majjhima Nikāya 71-80).

caste division had become functional and hereditary.¹² The ideal *catur āśrama* was for the *brāhmaṇas* only since they had the privileges of being able to learn the Vedas. The *brāhmaṇas*, therefore, claimed superiority over *ksatriya*, *vaiśya* and *sūdra*.

The *brāhmaṇas* supported the status quo of the caste systems. The learned *brāhmaṇas* enjoyed luxurious and privileged lives when Buddhism emerged in India. It was a common practice that kings and royal families donated lands and abodes to influential *brāhmaṇas* as royal gifts with royal powers. Their abodes were located in crowded areas so that they were able to play important roles in society. They always had ready access to grass, timber, water and corn.¹³

There were two factors affecting the growth of Buddhism in India. These incorporated religious and non-religious factors. The first factor was the acceptance of the Buddha's teaching in India over religious life in India. The second was the unification of sixteen countries into a great empire.

Firstly, Buddhism offered new perspectives over the religious groups in India. Buddhism appeared more attractive than what Brāhmanism offered. Buddhism was a non-theistic belief system that did not recognise the authority of the Vedas and rejected its sacrificial ritualism. Similarly, Buddhism rejected the supremacy of *brāhmaṇas*. The *saṅgha* operated within its monastic disciplines which were unknown to Vedic texts. Brāhmanism held the view of *ātmavāda*, the belief of external existence of self. The Buddha refuted the external existence by expounding a kind of *anātmavāda*, the belief that nothing lasted which one could call one's own (Joshi 1973, 8-13). Buddhism competed not only with *brāhmaṇas* but also with major *śramaṇic* groups, namely Jainas and Ājīvikas (Hirakawa 1990, 35).

In the Buddha's time there were six heterodox *śramaṇic* teachers. Each was the leader (*gaṇin*) of a group of disciples. One of the primary concerns of these *śramaṇas* was whether moral actions would have any effect on the person who performed them. They were Pūraṇa Kāśyapa (P. Pūrana Kassapa), Maskarin Gośālīputra (P. Makkhali Gosāla), Ajita Keśakambala (P. Ajita Kesakambalī), Kakuda Kātyāyana (P. Pakudha Kaccāyana), Sañjayin Vairatīputra (P. Sañjaya Belaṭṭhaputta) and Nirgrantha Jñātīputra (P. Nigaṇṭha Nāṭaputta) (Hirakawa 1990, 16-17).

¹² Kariyawasam, A.G.S. *Encyclopaedia Buddhism*, s.v. "Caste", Colombo: Department of Buddhist Affairs, Ministry of Buddhasasana, 2003.

¹³ These descriptions are mentioned in Dīgha Nikāya: Ambaṭṭha Sutta (3.1.1), Soṇadanda Sutta (4.1.1), Kūṭadanta Sutta (5.1) and Lohicca Sutta (12.1)

The six *śramanic* teachers and their doctrines are outlined in the *suttas*. Pūraṇa Kāśyapa held the doctrine of inaction (P. *akiriyavāda*). Maskarin Gośālīputra, a leader of Ājivaka sect, disseminated the doctrine of fatalism that denied causality (P. *ahetukavāda*). Ajita Keśakambala was a moral nihilist (P. *natthikavāda*) who rejected the existence of an afterlife and karmic retribution. Kakuda Kātyāyana rejected the basic tenet of morality. Sañjayin Vairatīputra was a sceptic and refused to take a stand on crucial moral and philosophical issues. Nirgrantha Jñātīputra, also known as Mahāvira, encouraged severe self-mortification in order to liberate nomadic souls entrapped in matter due to their past karma.¹⁴¹⁴ In the city of Śrāvastī, the Buddha defeated these six contemporaries in a public debate in the presence of Prasenajit (Lamotte 1988, 20).

Secondly, India was experiencing extreme changes on its social structure due to the unification of sixteen countries in the period of the seventh to fifth century BCE. In the seventh century BCE, India was divided into a number of independent states known as *janapadas* or *mahājanapadas*. Over a period of 150 years, the 16 small states (*śodaśa mahājanapadas*) in the Ganges valley were unified and distilled into four great empires, named Avanti, Vatsa, Kosala and Magadha. Following the period of 550–350 BCE, the Magadhan empire emerged as a dominant political power in the Indian subcontinent under the famous rulers, Śrenika Bimbisāra and Ajātaśatru (P. *Ajātasattu*). This unification process, and centralisation of political power, created dramatic change in the social order and people's roles in society (Darian 1977, 227-8) (Hazra 1995, 4) (Lamotte 1988, 10).

The process of unification and centralisation of power also created extreme tensions in society. These great empires required more productive people with commercial skills. People from *vaiśyas* (merchants) played more important roles than *brāhmaṇas* (priests) did since they were able to make more contributions to expanding the empires. The *brāhmaṇas*, the priestly caste, were unable to anticipate the dramatic political change, and its influence on society declined. They encouraged the practice of sacrifice and discouraged commercial activities. Buddhism was more attractive in the new society since it did not compete for power. Its monks renounced the world and its lay followers had no claims to spiritual authority (Darian 1977, 228-30).

¹⁴ Two discourses in Majjhima Nikāya explaining those doctrines are Apanṇaka Sutta (60) and Sandaka Sutta (76)

The Buddha positioned himself as a human being without any claimed connection to God or any other “supernatural” being. He was neither God nor an incarnation of God, nor a prophet, nor any mythological figure. He claimed himself as a man, but an extraordinary man (P. *acchariya manussa*) (Piyadassi 2008, 112). He was well known as a teacher for human beings and gods. In the seventh year of his ministry, it was said that the Buddha ascended to Trāyastriṃśa (P. Tāvatimsa), the heaven of the Thirty-three, in order to preach higher doctrines (*abhidharma*, P. *Abhidhamma*) to the deities (*devas*). His mother, Mahāmāyā, was reborn as *deva* in the Trāyastriṃśa (Piyadassi 2008, 126).

The Buddha interacted with people from various social statuses in society. His teaching gave a solution to the problems of human existence such as birth, ageing, disease and death. The Buddha converted many people from various classes. Buddhism gained popularity and attracted many followers, including among the royal families in India.

It was reported that the Buddha spent most of his life in Magadha and Kosala, where the royal families patronised the *saṅgha*. King Śrenika Bimbisāra of Magadha became a lay disciple and donated a bamboo grove to be used as quarters for monks. King Prasenajit (P. Pasenadi) of Kosala was converted to Buddhism by his wife, Mallikā. King Udayana of Vatsa was converted to Buddhism by his wife, Śyāmāvatī (Hirakawa 1990, 32-35). Further, a wealthy merchant named Anāthapiṇḍada (P. Anāthapiṇḍika) requested the Buddha come to Śrāvastī where he donated the Jetavana monastery to the *saṅgha* (Hazra 1995, 7). As a result of royal patronage, the monastic order grew rapidly on a large scale.

During the Buddha’s lifetime, the missionary activities were reported in the western part of India. After the Buddha’s *parinirvāṇa*, the spread of Buddhism continued to the southwestern part of India (Hirakawa 1990, 76). The *saṅgha*, as monastic institutions, expanded and served as a place of culture and learning. The monastic institutions gradually transformed into monastic universities. Since it functioned within the regimen of monastic life, the universities were able to accommodate a large number of students. Over a millennium and a half, large universities were established in India such as Nālanda, Valābhī, Vikramaśila, Jagaddala and Odantapuri (Bapat 1956, 176-94).

Buddhist Councils and Schisms

The First Buddhist Council (*saṅgīti*) took place in Rājagrha (P. Rājagaha) in the same year as the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*. The council was intended to preserve the Buddha's teaching and the purity of the *saṅgha*. Mahākāśyapa presided over the council of 500 monks, all *arhats*, performing joint recitation of *dharma* and *vinaya*. He questioned Upāli on *vinaya* and Ānanda on the Buddha's discourses (*sūtra*). Ānanda told the assembly that in his last days, the Buddha had authorised the *saṅgha* to abolish the minor and least important disciplines (*kṣudrānuksūḍraka śikṣapada*). However, Ānanda did not ask what he meant by those disciplines. After the joint recitation Pūraṇa, along with 500 monks, arrived in Rājagrha. He claimed that he had memorised the *dharma* directly from the Buddha (Lamotte 1988, 124-6).

The First Council provided an early indication that the oral tradition of disseminating *dharma* might deteriorate at a later stage. The Buddha's great disciples, who held pure mind and mastered his teaching, might pass away and the doctrines might be corrupted in the future. There is no record that the First Council decided to put *dharma* into writing. The written tradition of Buddha's teaching was first known around the first century BCE, four hundred years after the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*. Sri Lankan history recorded that in the monasteries, the Pāli canon from Theravāda Buddhism was initially preserved in the memories of the monks until, in the first century BCE, they wrote it down on the dried leaves of the talipat palm (*Corypha umbraculifera*) (Schumann 2004, 263).

The Second Council took place one hundred years after *parinirvāṇa*. In this period, Buddhism had spread to broader geographical areas and the number of monks and followers had increased significantly. It is reported that the Vṛjjiputraka (P. Vajjiputaka) monks of Vaiśāli were practising ten monastic disciplines that were considered to be breaches. The monks, who numbered 700, then went to Vālikārāma in Vaiśāli. The *saṅgha* assembled and the debate on monastic disciplines was opened. The council was headed by eight monks acting as jury (*ubbāhikāya*) (Hirakawa 1990, 81) (Lamotte 1988, 126-8). The council did not work well. Although the ten monastic disciplines were considered against the *vinaya*, the ways they approached the issue created the initial schism in the *saṅgha*. Sthaviravāda maintained a conservative approach to preserve *dharma* and *vinaya*. They insisted that the Buddha's teaching should not be changed after *parinirvāṇa*. Mahāsanghika opposed the conservative approach and took up positions as liberal factions.

These two opposing factions experienced further schisms. Theravāda originated from Sthaviravāda and Mahāyāna had indirect roots in Mahāsāṅghika. The distinctive features of Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism started to appear gradually. Both schools transformed to be the dominant traditions in modern times. We can easily discern these schools on the basis of the language they use in their literature. Theravāda literature was written in Pāli and Mahāyāna literature was written in Sanskrit, and later in Chinese and Tibetan.

The Second Council opened the door to the emergence of many schools of Buddhism. By the time of Aśoka, approximately 150–200 years after the Second Council, at least 18 different Buddhist schools had emerged.¹⁵ The religious practitioners of these schools might be grouped into three paths or vehicles (*yānas*): *śrāvakayāna* (leading to listener's awakening, *śrāvakabodhi* or *arhatship*), *pratyekabuddhayāna* (leading to *pratyekabuddha*'s awakening, *pratyekabodhi*) and *bodhisattvayāna* (leading to Buddhahood, characterised by perfect awakening, *anuttara-samyaksambodhi* and omniscience, *sarvajñata*) (Skilling 2013, 82). The path of religious practitioners made clear, distinctive features between Theravāda and Mahāyāna. Theravādins seek enlightenment to be *arhat* by taking *śrāvakayana*, on the other hand, Mahāyānists select to be *bodhisattva* through *bodhisattvayāna*.

The goal of Theravādins is the attainment of the arhatship. The *arhat* represents the end of a gradual path of spiritual progress. Theravādins commence their spiritual journey from the stage of an ordinary person characterised by ignorance to the stage of an enlightened being endowed with wisdom. These paths are open to all beings and can be completed over many lifetimes.

The Theravāda paths of spiritual progress can be classified as the four paths (*mārga*, P. *magga*) or four noble persons (*ārya-pudgala*, P. *ariya-puggala*): stream-enterer (*srotāpanna*, P. *sotapanna*), once-returner (*sakṛdāgāmin*, P. *sakadagamin*), non-returner (*anāgāmin*, P. *anāgāmi*) and a fully awakened person (*arhat*, P. *arahant*). This religious progress is characterised by how many fetters the aspirants have eradicated and how many rebirths they will experience until suffering's end.¹⁶ The paths encourage that Buddhist ideals, *arhat*, may be accomplished in a shorter time if the aspirants choose a monastic life.

¹⁵ Santina, Peter Della, and Fa Qing. "The Origin of Mahāyāna". Lecture Handouts in Mahāyāna Buddhism from International Buddhist College, Penang, 2011

¹⁶ Bond, George D. *Encyclopedia Buddhism*, s.v. "Arhat". New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004.

The goal of the Mahāyānist is the attainment of Buddhahood through the *bodhisattva* path. A *bodhisattva* is a religious practitioner who aspires to become the Buddha in the future by practising the perfections (*pāramitā*). The aspirants seek complete awakening (*anuttarasamyaksambodhi*) through wisdom (*prajña*) and by benefitting all beings through compassion (*karuṇā*). The aspirants make every effort in seeking enlightenment by benefitting others (*parārtha*) as well as themselves (*svārtha*).¹⁷ The *bodhisattva* path also suggests that perfection in this life may be achieved either in monastic or householder life.

The Third Council was held in Pāṭaliputra under King Aśoka around three centuries after *parinirvāna*. This council belonged to the Theravāda school. At this time, there was a significant number of monks in the *saṅgha*. There was a faction of monks holding heretical views against the true Buddha's doctrines, the sixty-two wrong views condemned by the Buddha in Brahmajāla Sutta. They had infiltrated the *saṅgha* and caused the confusion of the *dharma* and *vinaya* so that the *uposatha* ceremony did not work as expected. Moggaliputta Tissa, with the support of the king, initiated the council in order to purify the *saṅgha*. Each group of monks had to answer one question, "What did the Buddha advocate?" (P. *kim vādi sammāsambuddha*). The answers varied according to their faiths and views. After the council these heretical monks, numbering sixty thousand, were forced to disrobe and leave the *saṅgha*. Aśoka concluded that the *saṅgha* was purified (*śuddha*) and proposed holding the *uposatha* for the first time after seven years of absence (Lamotte 1988, 272-3).¹⁸

The Fourth Council was held in Kashmir (Kuṇḍalavanavihāra) in 78 CE. Kaniṣka, the Kushan king, invited 500 arhats, 500 bodhisattvas and 500 paṇḍitas from 18 schools to hold the Fourth Council. The main purpose of the council was to reconcile the conflicting opinions of the different schools and settle once more on the *vinaya*, *sūtra* and *abhidharma* texts. Kaniṣka appointed a great scholar named Vasumitra to preside over the council. He was assisted by the great Buddhist poet, Aśvaghoṣa. The principal participants of the council were Sarvāstivādins. The outcomes of the council were a new Vinaya and a commentary called the Mahāvibhāṣa on *abhidharma* text, Jñānaprasthāna. The commentary became

¹⁷ Kawamura, Leslie S. *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, s.v. "Bodhisattva(s)". New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004.

¹⁸ Abhayawansa, Kapila. "The Second and Third Buddhist Councils". Lecture Handouts in History of Indian Buddhism from International Buddhist College, Penang, 2011.

the standard reference work for all Sarvāstivāda *abhidharma* issues.¹⁹ At the time of this council, Kashmir grew to become an academic centre attracting many reputed scholars from other places. The reputed scholars such as Kātyāyanīputra, Aśvaghoṣa, Vasubandhu, Vasumitra, Dharmatrāṭa, Saṅghabhadra and others produced Buddhist literature in Sanskrit (Dutt 2003, 17-9).

Part II: Early Mahāyāna Buddhism

Mahāyāna Buddhism has some distinctive features such as an enormous body literature, distinctive arts and many forms of religious practice. Its characteristics emerged when the idea of the Mahāyāna movement started at the time of the Buddha. The Mahāyāna *sūtras* and the concept of *bodhisattva* were the main topics in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Mahayanists follow the *bodhisattva* path as their ideal. They are more devotional in terms of practice, as indicated by reciting *sūtras* either at home or at monasteries.

The Rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism

The term “Mahāyāna” can be defined as a “great vehicle” that refers to the path belonging to the majority. This term implies that Mahāyāna is a laity inspired movement against the rigour of the monks (Lamotte 1988, 54). The idea of Mahāyāna Buddhism can be traced through the history of Buddhist Councils, especially the First and Second Councils. Two key issues that influenced the First Council, and by extension the Buddhist community, were the importance of monastic discipline and the authenticity of Buddhist doctrines, based on the Buddha’s teachings.

Firstly, there was the likelihood that monastic disciplines would change over time. When the Buddha was dying, he provided guidance on how the *saṅgha* were to preserve *dharma* and *vinaya*. He stated that the *saṅgha* had authority to abolish lesser precepts if they saw fit. The *saṅgha* had authority to change its monastic disciplines if required. As a result of this interpretation, many schools with their own *vinaya* started to emerge.

¹⁹ Prebish, Charles A. *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, s.v. “Buddhist Councils.” New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004. Santina, Peter Della, and Fa Qing. “The Fourth Council.” Lecture Handouts in Mahāyāna Buddhism from International Buddhist College, Penang, 2011.

Secondly, there were teachings heard by those other than Ānanda. At the First Council a monk named Purāṇa, with a large following, came to the assembly and claimed that he would retain the teaching of the Buddha, as he had heard it himself firsthand. Although Ānanda was able to recall all the teachings of the Buddha, he only served the Buddha as a personal attendant for 25 years. The Buddha had been teaching to human and non-human beings for 45 years. The Buddha also gave sermons to the gods in heaven. There is a possibility that Ānanda did not hear all the Buddha's teachings.²⁰ For this reason, it would be likely that the new *sutras* would be revealed in the future and be treated as the true teaching of the Buddha.

Mahāyāna tradition holds the view that the *dharma* and *vinaya* might experience evolutionary change over time, but that the essence of the Buddha's teaching is unchanged. The true teaching would accompany the lifetime of the *saṅgha*. With the assistance of the great Buddhist masters, the *dharma* in a new kind of *sūtras* would be revealed to human beings.

Early Mahāyāna Buddhism

There are no definitive explanations on when and how Mahāyāna Buddhism emerged as one major school in the history of Buddhism. Mahāyānists believe that the spirit of the Mahāyāna tradition started when Siddhārtha decided to become the first *bodhisattva* (Buddha to-be). This suggests that Mahāyāna ideas started when the Buddha was still alive. Others believe that Mahāyāna ideas emerged from the Second Council when Mahāsanghika took a position against conservative approaches on *dharma* and *vinaya*. The majority of the monks and lay followers supported the Mahāsanghika's decision on liberal approaches – that the *dharma* and *vinaya* might be changed and reinterpreted at later stages after *parinirvāṇa*, if required.

²⁰ Santina, Peter Della, and Fa Qing. "The Origin of Mahāyāna." Lecture Handouts in Mahāyāna Buddhism from International Buddhist College, Penang, 2011.

Mahāyāna flourished and became one of the major established schools in Buddhism around the first century CE. It took five hundred years from the emergence of Mahāyāna ideas for it to become an established tradition.²¹ This timeline marked the boundary of what we define as early Mahāyāna Buddhism. Early Mahāyāna Buddhism occupied the period of the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa* up to the first century CE. The *sūtras* written in this period are classified as early Mahāyāna *sūtras*.

Mahayana Literature

Due to the vastness of Mahāyāna literature, some scholars raised the question of whether Mahāyāna *sūtras* are the words actually spoken by the Buddha (*buddhavacana*) or the works of authors or poets at a later stage, developed after the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*. Early Mahāyāna Buddhism experienced gradual development in four Buddhist councils before it came to full establishment in the first century CE.

Mahāyāna literature can be classified into three categories according to its content: *sūtras*, *śāstra* and *tantras*. Mahāyāna *sutras* are authoritative texts containing the doctrines as spoken by the Buddha. A *śāstra* is a treatise attributed to an author and may be in the form of a commentary on *sūtras* or a systematic text book. A *tantra* is treated as a secret document that belongs to small esoteric sects.²²

The *śāstra* literature serves as a text written in a systematic way for justifying, giving reason and explaining the doctrines of the Buddha. The texts were well composed by the Mahāyāna masters and treated as non-*buddhavacana*. The great masters such as Nāgārjuna, Asaṅga, Vasubandhu and so forth, spent significant effort and time to write the Buddha's teaching in systematic and philosophical ways.²³

²¹ Santina, Peter Della, and Fa Qing. "Mahāyāna at Early Stage." Lecture Handouts in Mahāyāna Buddhism from International Buddhist College, Penang, 2011.

²² Marasinghe, M.M.J. *Encyclopaedia Buddhism*, s.v. "Mahāyāna", Colombo: Department of Buddhist Affairs, Ministry of Buddhasasana, 2003.

²³ Santina, Peter Della, and Fa Qing. "Mahāyāna Literature." Lecture Handouts in Mahāyāna Buddhism from International Buddhist College, Penang, 2011.

Features of Mahāyāna Sūtra

Many Mahāyāna *sūtras* are beautifully written and composed. Their form and diction are beautifully structured. So much so that scholars and non-Mahāyānists were concerned that the Mahāyāna *sūtras* were not the words of the Buddha but rather the work of poets (Williams 1996, 29). Mahāyāna *sūtras* were initially composed in Middle Indian dialects and then gradually transformed into ‘Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit’, approximately similar to classical Sanskrit, the prestigious language of ancient India (Harvey 2004, 90).

Despite being in many ways oppositional to other Indian philosophies prevalent at the time, Buddhism also broadly borrowed from these other traditions. Sanskrit is seen as the natural language. The writing composed in Sanskrit required a precise control of its complex inflectional system. A capacity to reproduce a variety of metrical systems artfully was required for verse writing.²⁴ The Buddhist masters proficient in Sanskrit also inherited the Indian great writing tradition. This fact explains why the *sūtras* are well written in beautiful verses and stanzas.

Mahāyāna *sutras* are long and voluminous in length since they make extensive use of parables and similes. Mahāyāna *sūtras* have a structure of repetition which is good for memorisation in oral tradition. The *sūtras* are discursive and didactic. The *sūtras* were written without any structure as the texts may move from one point to another point. They were designed to teach people, especially in moral lessons. Mahāyāna *sūtras* do not provide room for specific, logical and systematic reasoning for the Buddha’s doctrines.²⁵

The principal teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism that contributed to early Buddhist teachings are the creation of the *bodhisattva* (P. *bodhisatta*) ideals and the elaboration of the doctrines of emptiness (*śūnyatā*, P. *suññatā*). The earliest Mahāyāna text found in writing is *Saddharmapuṇḍarika Sūtra*. It is composed partly in prose and partly in verse. It was written at some point around the first century CE.²⁶

²⁴ Skilton, Andrew. *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, s.v. “Buddhist Literature in Sanskrit.” New York: Macmillan Reference USA.

²⁵ Santina, Peter Della, and Fa Qing. “Mahāyāna Literature.” Lecture Handouts in Mahāyāna Buddhism from International Buddhist College, Penang, 2011.

²⁶ Marasinghe, M.M.J. *Encyclopaedia Buddhism*, s.v. “Mahāyāna”, Colombo: Department of Buddhist Affairs, Ministry of Buddhasasana, 2003.

Thus did I hear (*evam mayā śrutam*).

The Mahāyāna *sūtras* almost invariably begin with the common phrase “thus did I hear” (*evam mayā śrutam*) which supported the belief that the Buddha’s teachings were disseminated orally in early times. One of the great disputes is to identify who is “I” in the phrase. Theravādins absolutely believe that Ānanda is the only person who remembered and recited all the Buddha’s teachings, which were later compiled into *Sutta-piṭaka*. Meanwhile, Mahāyānists claim that to leave the rapporteur unnamed is consistent with anonymity in Indian Mahāyāna literature. Some authors were permitted to add their thoughts in writing to the existing scriptures. A claim that the rapporteur is Ānanda, Vajrapāṇi, Mañjuśrī or Samantabhadra is at stake (Lopez 1995, 21-2).

To mention who heard the Buddha’s teaching would label the Mahāyāna *sūtras* as secret and exclusive; only certain groups might access the *sūtras*. The attribute of exclusivity was in conflict with Mahāyāna goals since the *bodhisattva* path encouraged its followers to save more human beings before they attained Buddhahood. By leaving the hearer (“I”) anonymous, it indicated that the *sūtras* are able to be heard and comprehended by anyone with the qualification of faith.

The Buddha, as described in the various discourses in the canon, interacted with human and heavenly beings. The opening phrase of Mahāyāna *sūtras* indicates that the discourse has been heard and recited. In *Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva Sūtra* we can read the prologue of “Thus have I heard: At one time the World-Honoured One sojourned at the Trāyastriṁśa (P. Tāvatiṁsa) heaven and was preaching on his mother’s behalf ...” (Pitt 2005, 6).

In addition to his teaching in the heavenly word, the Buddha also encountered non-human beings. The beings residing in non-human realms were said to hear the *dharma* spoken directly by the Buddha. Beings other than human, namely spirits and deities, were mentioned in various discourses such as *nāga*, *gandharva* (P. *gandhabbā*), *asura*, *preta* (P. *peta*), *yakṣa* (P. *yakkha*), *Indra*, *Brahmā*, *Māra*, etc. (Lamotte 1988, 68) (Walshe 1995, 37-46).

The opening phrase mentioning the location where the Buddha delivered his sermon will create some speculative questions. Ānanda and his attendants did not accompany the Buddha when he ascended to heaven to preach the *dharma*. The questions of “Who accompanied the Buddha when he gave the sermons at heaven?” and “Did the Buddha tell the story to his disciples on earth or did the deities write the *sūtra*?” have created room for speculation. By logical reasoning, the Buddha would repeat the same teaching to

human beings on different occasions or the gods (*devas*) would transcend to the world to disseminate what they had heard directly from the Buddha.

These interpretations are required in explaining the Buddha's sermons that were not heard by his human disciples. The likelihood that the *dharma* would be kept as hidden treasures in heavenly worlds was high. They will keep the *dharma* until human beings are able to comprehend it in the future. By the assistance of the Buddhist masters, lay followers with sufficient qualifications of faith are able to comprehend this *dharma*. Although it was revealed a long time after the *parinirvāṇa*, the *dharma* is still considered as *buddhavacana*.

Six Requirements of Mahāyāna Sūtras

To prove that the *sūtras* are spoken by the Buddha, they have to meet what are known as Six Requirements. These requirements will determine the reliability and validity of the Mahāyāna *sūtras* to serve as *buddhavacana*. The opening of the *sūtras* must incorporate the elements of: belief, hearing, time, host, place and audience. One example is drawn from the *Diamond Sūtra*, Chapter 1.

We can read:

Thus I have heard. At one time the Buddha was staying in the Jeta Grove of the Garden of the Benefactor of Orphans and the Solitary together with a gathering of great bhikṣus, twelve hundred fifty in all.

The opening of this *sūtra* meets the Six Requirements as follows: (1) *Thus* is the requirement of belief; (2) *I have heard* is the requirement of hearing; (3) *At one time* is the requirement of time; (4) *The Buddha* is the requirement of a host; (5) *In Śrāvastī in the Jeta Grove of the Garden of the Benefactor of Orphans and the Solitary* is the requirement of place; (6) *Together with a gathering of great bhikṣus, twelve hundred fifty in all* is the requirement of an audience. This *sūtra* meets the criteria of the Six Requirements so that this *sūtra* was spoken by the Buddha. *Buddhavacana* does not depend on when the *sūtra* was produced or written (Heng 1974, 46-7). Mahāyāna *sūtra* that conforms with the Six Requirements can be said to be *buddhavacana* and the time when the *sūtra* is produced does not matter.

Early Mahāyāna Buddhism and Buddhavacana

The word *buddhavacana* may be defined more precisely as the words actually spoken by the Buddha when he proclaimed his doctrine and framed rules for the order of monks. These words are preserved in different collections of sacred scriptures in the early Buddhist schools.²⁷ Some scholars refer to *buddhavacana* simply as the words spoken directly by the Buddha. Yet, since the Buddha's teachings were transmitted orally, how to determine which words were actually spoken by the Buddha became an increasing problem.

This part discusses two theories on *buddhavacana*. Firstly, that *buddhavacana* ended after the First Council. When the Buddha and his great disciples (*arya-śrāvaka*) passed away, no *sūtras* were produced at a later stage. Secondly, that *buddhavacana* continued after the First Council in the form of new *sūtras*. The new *sūtras* are said to have been *dharma* taught by the Buddha to both humans and heavenly beings. Those *sūtras* were then revealed by Buddhist masters after the Buddha's passing, and were treated as *buddhavacana*.²⁸ The argument that the teachings most widely accepted by most Buddhist schools can be classified as *buddhavacana* is also explored.

Firstly, buddhavacana ended at the First Council.

Ānanda, as the Buddha's personal attendant, played a very significant role in the First Council. Ānanda was believed to have heard the Buddha's discourses directly, and retained them directly from the Buddha. During the joint recitation of the *dharma*, Ānanda had to verify the context and arrangement of the *sūtras* (MacQueen 1981, 305).

The *sūtras* produced by the First Council were called early Mahāyāna *sūtras*. These *sūtras* are portrayed as the direct record of the Buddha's speech. Some scholars argued that although *sūtras* from the First Council may be categorised as *buddhavacana*, Ānanda was not a direct witness to all of the Buddha's discourses. Further, not all of the discourses that form the basis for *sūtras* were in fact spoken by the Buddha.

²⁷ Karunaratna, Upali. *Encyclopaedia Buddhism*, s.v. "Buddhavacana", Colombo: Department of Buddhist Affairs, Ministry of Buddhasasana, 2003.

²⁸ G. MacQueen wrote two excellent articles on "Inspired Speech in Early Mahāyāna Buddhism." See MacQueen (1981, 303-19) and (1982, 46-65).

The Buddha held a position of control over all expression of *dharma* and *vinaya* when he was alive. In brief, utterances or sermons by people other than the Buddha were accepted as the basis of *sūtra* only with his certification. There were three modes of certification to determine whether Mahāyāna *sūtras* are *buddhavacana*: approval after the event, approval before the event and authorisation of persons.

First mode. Someone gave a discourse; the hearer of the discourse subsequently repeated it verbatim to the Buddha; the Buddha gave his approval of it. The discourse was considered as *buddhavacana*.

Second mode. The Buddha invited someone to give a discourse on his behalf. Even where such discourses were not followed by certification after the event (as they frequently were) it was clear that they were to be considered as ‘*buddhavacana* by permission’.

Third mode. This mode would refer to the Buddha’s noble disciples (*arya-śrāvakas*). They had acquired wisdom and possessed the ability to speak the *dharma*, considered as authorised by the Buddha. Their words were certified in advance (MacQueen 1981, 309).

After the Buddha’s *parinirvāṇa*, the first two modes of certification became impossible. After the Buddha’s noble disciples died, there is no possibility of the *dharma* being preached under the third mode of certification. Consequently, *sūtra* production must here come to an end.

When these three modes of certification are taken into account there remain very few *sūtras* in the canon that are based on discourses presented as neither given by the Buddha nor certified by him. These arguments supported the theory that after the First Council, the production of *sūtras* classified as *buddhavacana* ended.

Secondly, buddhavacana continued after the First Council.

Issues arise when we are talking of Mahāyāna *sūtras* produced at a later stage, after the First Council. Since some major Mahāyāna *sūtras* were translated (or written) during the first and second century CE such as Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra, Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra and Saddharmapundarīka Sūtra, the Buddhists from non-Mahāyāna traditions believe that they are not *buddhavacana*.

After the Buddha’s *parinirvāṇa* and the passing away of his noble disciples, some remembered material was added to the *sūtras* collections as long as it harmonised well with the existing corpus in style and content, and no contradictory doctrines were found. The new *sūtras* were different in style and tone, but were treated as the ‘word of the Buddha’ through various devices.

Firstly, through meditative visions and dreams, the *sūtras* were seen as the inspired teaching as if spoken by the still-existing Buddha. Secondly, the *sūtras* contained the teachings of the same kind of perfect wisdom referring to the *dharma*. Thirdly, the *sūtras* contained the Buddha's teachings that were hidden in *nāga* (serpent-deities') world (Harvey 2004, 90-1). Mahāyāna Buddhist masters played significant roles in revealing the hidden teachings in the future. They then disseminated the teachings that were not heard directly by the Buddha's noble disciples as the new *sūtras*.

There was an interesting event at the end of Fourth Council in Kashmir. After recitation of the texts, it was settled that the text acknowledged by the eighteen schools were all treated as “the words of the Buddha”. King Kaniṣka had all the treatises inscribed on copper-plates and had them enclosed in stone-boxes and deposited them in a stupa made specially for the purpose (Dutt 2003, 17).

The certification of *buddhavacana* took place approximately five centuries after the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*. This factual evidence demonstrated that the Buddha's doctrines and disciplines were classified as *buddhavacana* as long as they were compiled and harmonised based on existing texts. The time when the existing texts were produced did not matter. The new treatises still served as the true teaching of the Buddha, *buddhavacana*.

Conclusion

After the Buddha and his disciples passed away, Theravādins claimed that the authentic teaching of the Buddha, *buddhavacana*, ended. Mahāyānists held a position that *buddhavacana* continued. Some of the Buddha's teachings that were transmitted by oral tradition would be revealed, understood and written even after the First Council. Mahāyāna *sūtras*, either originated in early or later phases of Mahāyāna Buddhism, are *buddhavacana*. Although Mahāyāna *sūtras* were beautifully composed, they were not merely literary works by authors or poets. The phrase “Thus did I hear (*evam mayā śrutam*)” supported the evidence that his disciples, laity or gods had heard the Buddha's teachings and disseminated them to others by oral tradition. The rapporteur, represented as “I”, does not point to Ānanda only, as believed by Theravādins, but may indicate human or heavenly beings. The prologue of Mahāyāna *sūtras* contain particular phrases indicating that the *sūtras* were spoken by the Buddha. To be valid and reliable, the *sūtras* must meet the six requirements of attributing *buddhavacana*, i.e. requirements of belief, hearing, time, host, place and audience. The true teaching of the Buddha may be found in different schools. After being compiled and harmonised across the scriptural text, the new treatise will carry the attribute of *buddhavacana*.

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