Proto-Madhyamaka in the Pāli Canon Revisited: Early Buddhism, Gandhāra and the Origin of the *Prajñāpāramitā*[*]

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Abstract—Buddhist Studies has largely overlooked Luis O. Gómez's 'Proto-Madhyamaka' thesis, according to which apophatic thought resembling later Madhyamaka is found in the Pāli canon. Consequently, little progress has been made in understanding the history of early Buddhist thought, from the Buddha to Nāgārjuna. According to the standard account, a period of spiritual pragmatism, in the canonical suttas, gave way to the reductionism of the Abhidharma, which in turn inspired the Prajñāpāramitā and so laid the foundations for Madhyamaka. Based on Gómez's thesis, this paper suggests a different scheme: that in the late canonical period, an apophatic tradition was transmitted in the western lineage of Kaccāna, before reaching Gandhāra where it was reformulated as the Prajñāpāramitā.

Keywords: *Aṭṭhakavagga*, antirealism, Kaccāna, *prajñāpāramitā*, negation, emptiness, Gandhāra

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In his famous article 'Proto-Mādhyamika in the Pāli Canon' (1976), Luis O. Gómez claimed that old parts of the Pāli canon have a rather exceptional content. He argued that the *Aṭṭhakavagga* and *Pārāyanavagga*, 'The Book of Eights' and 'The Book on Going to the Far Shore', the two final books of the *Suttanipāta*, not only 'belong to the oldest of the Pāli texts' but also 'anticipate (rather than foreshadow) some of the key doctrines of the Great Vehicle' (1976: 139). He also claimed that the thought of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* cannot 'be reduced to other, more common teachings of the *Pāli Canon* without doing some violence to the text' (1976: 139), largely due to the fact that they contain 'some of the most explicit and representative statements of an extreme apophatic tendency found elsewhere in Buddhist literature' (1976: 140).

Now almost fifty years on, a critical evaluation is long overdue. I will here address the Proto-Madhyamaka thesis in three ways: first, by clarifying the scope of the concept, based on core teachings of the *Aṭṭhaka*; second, by reconsidering the place of Proto-Madhyamaka within the Pāli canon more generally; and third, by sketching a line of transmission connecting the Pāli canon to the early 'Perfection of Wisdom' (*prajñāpāramitā*) tradition in ancient Gandhāra. I will argue that the Proto-Madhyamaka thesis, properly understood, opens up a hidden spiritual history which changes how we think about Buddhist thought and practice prior to Nāgārjuna.

1. Proto-Madhyamaka in the *Aṭṭhakavagga*

What Gómez termed the *Aṭṭhaka*'s 'extreme apophatic tendency' is most pronounced in the four texts which have given the collection its name: the *Guhaṭṭhaka*, *Duṭṭhaṭṭhaka*, *Suddhaṭṭhaka* and *Paramaṭṭhaka Sutta*s (II–V), each of which contains eight (*aṭṭha*) verses.[1] A prominent theme of three of these texts (III–V), one shared by five other texts of the collection (VIII–X, XII–XIII), is their discourse on views. Views are said to expose a person (789): a

[1] Since the chapters of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* are arranged according to increasing number of verses, the length of verses would seem crucial to its formation; if so, a title based on the length of its fundamental sections, II–V, seems likely. Alternatively, the Chinese and Sanskrit title of the collection assumes that the MI *aṭṭhaka* is to be derived from Skt. *artha* rather than *aṣṭa*. Bodhi (2017: 138): 'There is a Chinese parallel titled 義足經, "The Discourse of Verses on Meaning," which is assumed to be a translation of a Skt title, *Arthapada Sūtra. An English translation is available (Bapat 1951), which also cites parallel verses from Sn. Another Skt form of the title, mentioned in other works, is Arthavargīya.'

normal person fashions them (910), grasps at or embraces them, sometimes passionately (832, 889, 891), rationalises them (892), regards them as truth (882), gets immersed in them (796, 878, 880, 895), and does not transcend them (781), believing that they bring purity (908). The opposite of this is the sage, who lets go of views (785), does not form them (786, 799), does not grasp at or adopt them (802, 837), and so does not rely on them (800), is not led into them (851), does not follow them (911), has 'shaken' them off (787), is released from them (913) and has no conceit because of them (846). The basic didactic orientation of the *Aṭṭhaka* is towards negation, therefore, in the sense that the very prospect of having an abstract view about the world is cut away.

Quite different from this 'no-view' perspective is the group of texts that concludes the *Aṭṭhaka*: the *Tuvaṭaka*, *Attadaṇḍa* and *Sāriputta Sutta*s (XIV–XVI). These suttas are exhortative, offering advice on spiritual practice, while saying nothing about views. This does not necessarily mean that these 'practice suttas' disagree with the eight 'no-view suttas': as long as one accepts that 'views' refer to abstract ways of understanding the world, rather than guidelines for spiritual practice in the here and now, the two groups could represent different aspects of a single spiritual understanding. For the time being, I regard the *Aṭṭhaka* as broadly homogeneous, albeit with different tendencies that might indicate some tension between different perspectives.[2] What ties the 'no-view' and 'practice' suttas together is the collection's consistent focus on cognition and experience. This is usually expressed in the form of a series of interrelated dichotomies: views vs. no views, apperception vs. non-conceptuality, mundane vs. transcendent cognition, attachment vs. non-attachment, and so on. As Gómez has pointed out (1976: 142), in the *Aṭṭhaka* the problem of suffering is caused by the

> misdirected mind, specifically the wrongly applied faculty of apperception (*saññā*). Apperception leads to dualities, graspings, conflicts, and sorrow because of its two primary functions: its power to conceptualize and define (*saṃkhā*) and its tendency towards division and multiplicity (*papañca*).

[2] For a different view, see Vetter (1988: 102). According to Fronsdal (2016, Introduction: Four Themes of the Book of Eights), the four basic themes of the collection are: 'letting go of views, avoiding sensual craving, the qualities of a sage, and the training to become a sage.' These themes, it should be noted, are carefully interwoven throughout the collection.

The key terms of this analysis are 'apperception' (*saññā*), 'conceptual diversification' (*papañca*), 'view' (*diṭṭhi*), and 'clinging' (*nissaya*/*nissita*; Gómez 1976, 149–50). These define the unenlightened mode of cognition, whereas their negation defines the opposite:

> **1. Mundane experience:** views, apperception, attachment, the conceptually diversified world of 'I', 'mine', etc.
>
> **2. Experience of the sage:** no views, no concepts, non-attachment, ineffability.

A couple of further points can be added to this rudimentary definition of Proto-Madhyamaka. The first is an idea that would seem to be implicit in the *Aṭṭhaka*, rather than stated outright: that what we perceive as external reality is fundamentally shaped by the mind. In other words, the metaphysical orientation of the collection is towards antirealism:

> **3. Antirealism:** the dependence of the 'world' on a person's cognitive apparatus.

A final point is that the *Aṭṭhaka*'s focus on cognition and experience is often expressed in descriptions of mindful states, both in terms of how an unenlightened person should experience the world and how a liberated person actually does:

> **4. Present-moment mindfulness**: the way to sagehood, and the nature of the sage's experience.

Only four suttas of the *Aṭṭhaka* make no mention of mindfulness: the *Duṭṭhaṭṭhaka* (III), *Pasūra* (VIII) and *Cūḷaviyūha Suttas* (XII), which focus on the spiritual ethics of debating and holding views, as well as the *Tissametteyya Sutta* (VII), which is concerned with the secluded, renunciant way of life. As can be seen in Table 1, terms and ideas in the other twelve suttas of the *Aṭṭhaka* presume the practice of mindfulness. In short, mindfulness is a prominent feature of the *Aṭṭhaka*, one that creates an underlying link that draws together its apophatic orientation (especially in III–V) and the exhortative teachings on practice/lifestyle (especially in XIV–XVI).

Table 1. Mindfulness in the *Aṭṭhakavagga*

Mindfulness in general		
upekkhako/upekkhati (Equanimity)	855 911–912 972	X. Purābheda XIII. Mahāviyūha XVI. Sāriputta
sato, sati (Mindfulness)	768, 771 855 916, 933 962, 964, 973–75	I. Kāma X. Purābheda XIV. Tuvaṭaka XVI. Sāriputta
appamatta/na pamajjati/na pamāda (Diligence)	779 925, 933–34 942	II. Guhaṭṭhaka XIV. Tuvaṭaka XV. Attadaṇḍa
Mindful cognitive states		
***diṭṭha, suta, muta,* etc.** (Direct experience: what is seen, heard, thought, etc.)	778 790, 793 797–98, 802 812–13 901, 914	II. Guhaṭṭhaka IV. Suddhaṭṭhaka V. Paramaṭṭhaka VI. Jarā XIII. Mahāviyūha
anupalitta/na (upa-)lippati ('Unsullied')	778–79 790 812 845	II. Guhaṭṭhaka IV. Suddhaṭṭhaka VI. Jarā IX. Māgandiya
no saññā (Non-conceptuality)	779 802 847 874	II. Guhaṭṭhaka V. Paramaṭṭhaka IX. Māgandiya XI. Kalahavivāda
phassa/phuṭṭha (Contact/Experience)	778 851 918	II. Guhaṭṭhaka X. Purābheda XIV. Tuvaṭaka

By 'mindful cognitive states' I especially mean statements which imply present-moment awareness. A few verses from the *Tuvaṭaka Sutta* are characteristic of this feature of the *Aṭṭhaka*:

> ***Tuvaṭaka Sutta* (Sn 917–18)**
> Whatever phenomenon (*dhammam*) he cognises (*abhijaññā*), internal or external, he should not become fixated on (*thāmaṃ kubbetha*), for the good do not called this quenching (*nibbuti*).
>
> He should not think (*maññeyya*) [of himself] as better, worse or the same; touched (*phuṭṭho*) by various forms, he does not linger imagining (*vikappayaṃ tiṭṭhe*) himself (*nātumānaṃ*).[3]

By imploring the practitioner not to 'become fixated' on experiential phenomena, and not to 'imagine' himself when experiencing multiple objects, these verses point towards a certain mindful way of experiencing present-moment phenomena. As Gómez perceptively noted (1976: 142–43), these verses show how mindfulness

> pulls the mind back to the ever-fleeting present, away from its extensions into the past and future. In this way it acts in exactly the opposite direction of the process of apperception, and thus uproots conception.

Similar sentiments are stated in the *Guhaṭṭhaka*, *Suddhaṭṭhaka* and *Paramaṭṭhaka Sutta*s. The motif of the sage remaining 'unsullied [by attachment]' (*lippati*)[4] to what is 'seen, heard (and thought)' is particularly important:

> ***Guhaṭṭhaka Sutta* (Sn 778–79)**
> Dispelling partiality (*chandaṃ*) for both ends, understanding contact (*phassaṃ*), devoid of craving, not doing what he would blame himself for, the resolute one is not sullied (*na lippatī*) by [attachment to] what is seen or heard (*diṭṭhasutesu*).

[3] Sn 917. *yaṃ kiñci dhammam abhijaññā ajjhattaṃ atha vā pi bahiddhā, na tena thāmaṃ kubbetha na hi sā nibbuti sataṃ vuttā.* 918. *seyyo na tena maññeyya nīceyyo atha vā pi sarikkho, phuṭṭho anekarūpehi nātumānaṃ vikappayan tiṭṭhe.* Reading *phuṭṭho* (B^{e}) for *puṭṭho* (E^{e}).

[4] *lippati*, a passive form of *lip*, MMW sv: 'to be attached to (loc.), stick, adhere, Iś Up'.

> The sage, unsullied by [attachment to] possessions (*pariggahesu*), understanding apperception (*saññaṃ*), might cross over the flood. Having plucked out the dart, wandering diligently (*caram appamatto*), he has no longing for this world or the next.[5]

These verses advise a certain attitude towards cognition: without attachment to 'what is seen or heard', one should understand contact and apperception. The implicit meaning is that suffering is overcome by not conceptualising present-moment experience. A similar understanding is stated in the *Suddhaṭṭhaka* and *Paramaṭṭhaka Sutta*s, which speak of a radical detachment from phenomena:

> ***Suddhaṭṭhaka Sutta* (Sn 793)**
> He is disassociated (*visenibhūto*) from all phenomena, whatever is seen, heard or thought (*diṭṭhaṃ va sutaṃ mutaṃ vā*). How, here in this world (*īdha lokasmiṃ*), might one conceive (*vikappayeyya*) the one whose vision is thus, who lives openly?[6]

> ***Paramaṭṭhaka Sutta* (Sn 802)**
> He does not fashion (*pakappitā*) even a subtle apperception (*aṇū pi saññā*), here (*īdha*), with regard to what is seen, heard or thought (*diṭṭhe va sute mute vā*). How, here in the world (*īdha lokasmiṃ*), might one conceive (*vikappayeyya*) that Brahmin, who does not grasp at view?[7]

We here learn that by not conceptualising present-moment experience, and being completely detached from it,[8] the sage cannot be imagined: he is ineffable. This state of non-conceptual awareness does not look anything like a state of insight as defined in standard canonical teachings, such as the 'three

[5] Sn 778. *ubhosu antesu vineyya chandaṃ phassaṃ pariññāya anānugiddho, yad attagarahī tad akubbamāno na lippatī diṭṭhasutesu dhīro.* 779. *saññaṃ pariññā vitareyya oghaṃ pariggahesu muni nopalitto, abbūḷhasallo caraṃ appamatto nāsiṃsatī lokam imaṃ paraṃ cā ti.*

[6] Sn 793. *sa sabbadhammesu visenibhūto yaṃ kiñci diṭṭhaṃ va sutaṃ mutaṃ vā, tam evadassiṃ vivaṭaṃ carantaṃ kenīdha lokasmiṃ vikappayeyya.*

[7] Sn 802. *tassīdha diṭṭhe va sute mute vā pakappitā n' atthi aṇū pi saññā, taṃ brāhmaṇaṃ diṭṭhim anādiyānaṃ kenīdha lokasmiṃ vikappayeyya.*

[8] The term *visenibhūto* (Sn 793), 'disassociated', really means something like 'being unobstructed', which, along with the close parallel in Sn 802, suggests a passive state of cognition beyond conceptualisation.

knowledges' (*tevijjā*). Indeed, the *Suddhaṭṭhaka* is clear that any cognition of an object is the antithesis of liberating awareness:

> ***Suddhaṭṭhaka Sutta* (Sn 788–90)**
> 'I see what is purified (*passāmi suddhaṃ*), the ultimate, beyond disease (*paramaṃ arogaṃ*): a person's purification comes through what is seen (*diṭṭhena saṃsuddhi*).' Understanding [it] thus, knowing [it as] 'the ultimate', [thinking: 'I am] observing the purified', he depends on knowledge (*pacceti ñāṇaṃ*).[9]
>
> If a person's purity is due to what is seen (*diṭṭhena*), or he abandons suffering through knowledge (*ñāṇena*), that one, purified by another (*aññena*) [would] have a [cognitive] substratum (*sophadīko*) — his view, indeed, betrays him as he speaks thus.[10]
>
> The Brahmin does not say that purity [comes] from another (*aññato*), or [lies] in what is seen, heard or thought, or in virtues and vows (*diṭṭhe sute sīlavate mute vā*). Unsullied with regard to merit and evil (*puññe ca pāpe*), abandoning what has been taken up, he does not fabricate (*pakubbamāno*) [anything] here.[11]

The term *upadhi* normally refers to a material substratum or attachment, but that sense is inappropriate here. Since the verses are concerned with cognising an object, *upadhi* must refer to some sort of cognitive or conceptual basis.[12] Cognising an object, something 'other' (*aññā*), apparently betrays an unenlightened state of consciousness. Thus for the *Suddhaṭṭhaka*, being disassociated from phenomena (*visenibhūta*) means not being in a state of cognitive duality. While this idea might seem strange in a canonical Pāli text,

[9] Sn 788. *passāmi suddhaṃ paramaṃ arogaṃ diṭṭhena saṃsuddhi narassa hoti, etābhijānaṃ paraman ti ñatvā, suddhānupassī ti pacceti ñāṇaṃ.*

[10] Sn 789. *diṭṭhena ce suddhi narassa hoti ñāṇena vā so pajahāti dukkhaṃ, aññena so sujjhati sopadhīko diṭṭhī hi naṃ pāva tathā vadānaṃ.*

[11] Sn 790. *na brāhmaṇo aññato suddhim āha diṭṭhe sute sīlavate mute vā, puññe ca pāpe ca anūpalitto attañjaho nayidha pakubbamāno.* Cf. *Jarā Sutta*, Sn. 813: 'A cleansed person does not think (*na maññati*) in terms of whatever is seen or heard, or in terms of thoughts (*diṭṭhasutaṃ mutesu vā*); he does not seek for purity from another (*aññena*): he is neither impassioned or dispassionate.' (*dhono na hi tena maññati yadidaṃ diṭṭhasutaṃ mutesu vā, na aññena visuddhim icchati: na hi so rajjati no virajjatī ti.*)

[12] CPD *upadhi*, 'lit. that on which something is laid or rests, basis, foundation, substratum'.

the cognitive nondualism of the *Aṭṭhaka* was well noted by Gómez,[13] and can be seen in the *Suddhaṭṭhaka*'s notion of 'not being sullied with regard to merit or evil' (Sn 790: *puñña ca pāpe ca anūpalitto*).

It is not the *Aṭṭhaka*'s style to generalise, to state anything in the abstract. But if we were to do so, we might say that, according to the *Aṭṭhaka*, cognitive duality results from the process of apperception and conceptualisation. The world in which we exist, our shared realm of objective experience, is a world we fashion ourselves, whereas liberation is a state in which this cognitive duality ceases. This happens through paying close attention to the workings of cognition, such that apperception falls away. Hence, according to the *Kalahavivāda Sutta*:

> Form disappears for a person whose mode of knowing is thus, for conceptual diversification and naming are founded upon apperception.[14]

The *Aṭṭhaka*'s cognitive nondualism implies a profoundly antirealist view of the world. It suggests that our world of experience, which we assume exists independently of the mind, in fact depends on the workings of our cognitive apparatus. The spiritual task is to stop this, so that 'the world' ceases.

2. Proto-Madhyamaka in the wider Pāli Canon

Negation is a prominent feature of the prose teachings of the Pāli canon. The most obvious 'no view' teachings are those that deal with the ten unanswered questions (*avyākata*), which avoid making any statement on the ultimate reality of the self and the world. With regard to the negation of other views, the most prominent examples are the denials of 'self' (*attā*) found in the *Mahānidāna Sutta* (DN 15) and the *Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta* (MN 38), teachings which specifically address early Upaniṣadic formulations of truth.[15]

[13] The most prominent example is Sn 886ab: 'There are not, indeed, many truths, fixed and varied, in the world, apart from apperception' (*na h' eva saccāni bahūni nānā aññatra saññāya niccāni loke*). Gómez (1976: 147) claims that this is 'a possible reason why such a doctrine [of nonduality] is necessary'.

[14] Sn 874 cd. *evaṃsametassa vibhoti rūpaṃ, saññānidānā hi papañcasaṃkhā*. The first half of this verse (*pāda*s ab) indicates a liberated state of awareness, even if it is not entirely clear what is meant: Sn 874ab. *na saññasaññī na visaññasaññī, no pi asaññī na vibhūtasaññī.*

[15] See DN II.66ff and MN I.256ff respectively, on which see Wynne (2010a: 132ff; 2018).

However, the most famous 'no view' style teaching is that which denies a self (*attā*) in relation to the five aggregates of form, sensation, apperception, volitions and consciousness.[16] This teaching is so well-known that saying anything new about it might be thought impossible. But it is worth pointing out that it negates without asserting anything. Instead, a careful examination of conditioned experience leaves the recipient in a cognitive vacuum, a 'no view' state of mind, as it were, in which incorrect ideas about the self have been negated, thus paving the way towards disillusionment and release,[17] in the sense of a radical detachment from the five aggregates. The *Aggivacchagotta Sutta* (MN 72) explains the transcendence of the aggregates in terms of radical ineffability:

> O Vaccha, the form (*yena rūpena*) with which you would designate the Tathāgata has been abandoned, cut off at its base, uprooted, annihilated (*anabhāvaṃkataṃ*) and is not liable to arise in the future. Released from the category 'form' (*rūpasaṅkhāvimutto*), Vaccha, the Tathāgata is profound, immeasurable, unfathomable, just like a great ocean. The statements 'He is reborn ... not reborn ... both reborn and not reborn ... neither reborn nor not reborn' do not apply.[18]

Thus the Tathāgata is in an unknowable condition in the here and now: ontological definitions do not apply to him.[19] As to the practice leading to this transcendence, present-moment mindfulness does not seem to be an important idea in the wider Pāli canon.[20] A notable exception, however, occurs in a teaching

[16] On this teaching see Norman (1981), Gombrich (1990: 14ff) and Wynne (2010b).

[17] See Wynne (2010b: 210–11).

[18] MN I.487–88: *evam eva kho vaccha yena rūpena tathāgataṃ paññāpayamāno paññāpeyya, taṃ rūpaṃ tathāgatassa pahīnaṃ ucchinnamūlaṃ tālāvatthukataṃ anabhāvakataṃ āyatiṃ anuppādadhammaṃ. rūpasaṅkhāvimutto kho vaccha tathāgato gambhīro appameyyo duppariyogāho, seyyathāpi mahāsamuddo. upapajjatī ti na upeti, na upapajjatī ti na upeti, upapajjati ca na ca upapajjatī ti na upeti, n' eva upapajjati na na upapajjatī ti na upeti.*

[19] According to Siderits (2007: 70), the idea that texts such as MN 72 deal with the ineffability of Nirvana in the present is 'a misunderstanding of certain early Buddhist texts'. A careful analysis of the text (Wynne 2007: 95ff) shows that this is not the case; the statement that the Tathāgata is 'released from the category/concept form' (*rūpasaṅkhāvimutto*) implies an experiential rather than an ontological transcendence. For a similar statement of ineffability in the present, see the citation from MN 22 below (at the end of §4).

[20] On which, see Dreyfus (2011).

to Māluṅkyaputta, a wanderer who is said to have been obsessed with the unanswered questions. At SN 35.95 the Buddha comments on the significance of paying close attention to 'what is seen, heard and thought' as follows:

> Here, Māluṅkyaputta, with regard to phenomena you see, hear, think or will cognise, in what is seen [...] heard [...] thought and cognised, there will be merely what is seen [...] heard [...] thought and cognised. When [... it is so ...] Māluṅkyaputta, then you will [have] no [connection] with it; when you [have] no [connection] with it, you will not be [situated] therein; when you are [not situated] therein, then you will not [be] here, yonder, or in between either. Just this is the end of suffering.[21]

Māluṅkyaputta's interpretation of this sheds some light on how the practice of present-moment mindfulness untangles the cognitive roots of suffering:

> The one who has no passion for forms,
> having seen a form, mindful,
>
> He experiences with a dispassionate mind,
> and does not linger attached to that (object).
>
> For him, seeing form in such a way,
> staying with (*sevato*) the sensation,
>
> [that sensation] wanes away (*khīyati*), and does not accumulate (*nopacīyati*),
> Thus he practices, mindful.
>
> For him, thus reducing (*apacinato*) suffering,
> Nirvana is said to be nearby.[22]

[21] SN IV.73: *ettha ca te mālukyaputta diṭṭhasutamutaviññātabbesu dhammesu diṭṭhe diṭṭhamattaṃ bhavissati, sute sutamattaṃ bhavissati, mute mutamattaṃ bhavissati, viññāte viññātamattaṃ bhavissati. yato kho te mālukyaputta [...] viññāte viññātamattam bhavissati, tato tvaṃ mālukyaputta na tena. yato tvaṃ mālukyaputta na tena, tato tvaṃ mālukyaputta na tattha. yato tvaṃ mālukyaputta na tattha, tato tvam mālukyaputta n' ev' idha na huram na ubhaya-m-antarena. es' ev' anto dukkhassā ti.*

[22] SN IV.74: *na so rajjati rūpesu rūpaṃ disvā patissato, virattacitto vedeti tañ ca nājjhosa tiṭṭhati. yathāssa passato rūpaṃ sevato cāpi vedanaṃ, khīyati nopacīyati evaṃ so caratī sato. evam apacinato dukkhaṃ santike nibbānam uccati.*

Māluṅkyaputta here expands on an *Aṭṭhaka* sort of teaching from the Buddha, on how to experience correctly what is 'seen, heard, thought and cognised'. He takes this to mean that when experiencing things carefully, with no attachment, the mind does not fixate on an object, and the sensations of experience disappear without leaving any trace. Cognitive conditioning is undone, in other words, an understanding of spiritual practice that seems to differ significantly from the various schemes of calm-insight in the Pāli suttas.

These teachings from the wider Pāli canon complement those of the *Aṭṭhaka*. But other prose teachings go further than it on the subject of antirealism. For example, the well-known teaching (SN 22.95) that presents the five aggregates as more or less an apparition:

> Form is like a lump of foam,
> sensation is like a bubble,
> Apperception is like a mirage (*marīcika*),
> constructions are like a banana tree,
> Consciousness is like an illusion —
> (so) taught the Kinsman of the Sun.[23]

The idea that the five aggregates are merely an appearance is in keeping with the statement of MN 72 that they are only conceptually real (e.g. *rūpa-saṅkhā*). Similarly, some prose Pāli teachings regard the 'world' not as an ontological fact out there, but rather as equivalent to a person's cognitive apparatus and the resulting conditioned experience. This can be seen in a number of Saṃyutta texts, where the term *loka* is explained in terms of the sense faculties, their objects and the subsequent forms of consciousness.[24] The *Rohitassa Sutta* (SN 2.26/AN 4.45) similarly understands the world in terms of conditioned experience:

> Where, sir, one is not born, does not age or die, does not fall away and get reborn — not by actually going there is the end of the world to be known, witnessed and attained, I say ... But nor do I

[23] SN III.142: *pheṇapiṇḍūpamaṃ rūpaṃ vedanā bubbuḷupamā, marīcikūpamā saññā saṅkhārā kadalūpamā, māyūpamañ ca viññāṇaṃ dīpitādiccabandhunā*. The teaching is reminiscent of MMK VII.34, XVII.33, XXIII.8.

[24] See SN 35.68, 35.82, 35.84 (= SN IV.39-40, IV.52, IV.53).

> say that one can make an end of suffering without reaching the end of the world. It is in this very fathom-long cadaver, possessed of apperception and mind, that I declare that the world's origin, cessation and way leading thereto.[25]

The motif of 'going to the end of the world' could perhaps be read as a metaphor for spiritual realisation within. On the other hand, stating that the body is endowed with apperception and mind offers a metaphysical perspective, one which suggests that 'the world' depends on our cognitive faculties. The *Kevaṭṭa Sutta* (DN 11) states this more directly, in the form of a story of a *bhikkhu* who travels as far as the Brahma world trying to find an answer to the question 'where do the four great elements cease without remainder?'.[26] Although the *bhikkhu*'s return to question the Buddha symbolises the futility of trying to reach the end of the world out there and stresses the necessity of finding the answer within, the Buddha introduces a metaphysical perspective by explaining that the material elements depend on consciousness:

> Consciousness (*viññāṇaṃ*), which is intransitive (*anidassanaṃ*),
> infinite (*anantaṃ*) and luminous (*pabhaṃ*) all round,
>
> Here water, earth, fire and wind do not stand firm,
> here the great and small, the minute and gross,
> the attractive and unattractive,
>
> Here name and form cease without remainder:
> with the cessation of consciousness, this ceases, right here.[27]

This is the most unambiguous statement of antirealism in the Pāli canon.

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[25] SN I.62 = AN II.48: *yattha kho āvuso na jāyati na jīyati na mīyati na cavati na uppajjati, nāhaṃ taṃ gamanena lokassa antaṃ ñāteyyaṃ daṭṭheyyaṃ patteyyan ti vadāmī ti. na kho panāhaṃ āvuso appatvā lokassa antaṃ dukkhassa antakiriyaṃ vadāmi. api khvāhaṃ āvuso imasmiññ eva vyāmamatte kaḷevare sasaññimhi samanake lokaṃ ca paññāpemi lokasamudayaṃ ca lokanirodhaṃ ca lokanirodhagāminiṃ ca paṭipadan ti*. Reading *sasaññimhi* (B^{e}) for *saññimhi* (E^{e}).

[26] DN I.215: *bhūtapubbaṃ kevaṭṭa imasmiṃ yeva bhikkhusaṅghe aññatarassa bhikkhuno evaṃ cetaso parivitakko udapādi: kattha nu kho ime cattāro mahābhūtā aparisesā nirujjhanti, seyyathīdaṃ paṭhavīdhātu āpodhātu tejodhātu vāyodhātū ti?* Reading *kevaṭṭa* (B^{e}) for *kevaddha* (E^{e}).

[27] DN I.223: *viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ anantaṃ sabbato pabhaṃ, ettha āpo ca paṭhavī tejo vāyo na gādhati, ettha dīghañ ca rassañ ca anuṃ thūlaṃ subhāsubhaṃ, ettha nāmañ ca rūpañ ca asesaṃ uparujjhati. viññāṇassa nirodhena etth' etaṃ uparujjhatī ti*. Reading *pabhaṃ* (B^{e}) for *pahaṃ* (E^{e}).

And, with this, the case for Proto-Madhyamaka in the wider Pāli canon is concluded: there can be no doubt that the teachings of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* — on 'no view', non-conceptuality, ineffability, present-moment mindfulness and antirealism — are found more widely among early Buddhist teachings. Precisely what this means for our understanding of early Buddhism is difficult to say. But rather than explore this subject, I will here try to understand how Proto-Madhyamaka shaped the Buddhist traditions which followed it.

3. From Kaccāna to Subhūti

Gómez did not believe a direct textual relationship between Proto-Madhyamaka and Nāgārjuna could be proved: 'there is no foolproof way of determining specifically which were the texts [Nāgārjuna] was familiar with' (1976: 153). He instead supposed that apophatic discourse was an independently recurring phenomenon in the history of Buddhism, a way of working out the implications of Buddhist spiritual practice in different times and places:

> In the present state of our knowledge it would be more reasonable to discard the possibility of a one-line transmission and assume that the apophatic teachings of the Aṭṭha, the Mādhyamika and, perhaps, the Ch'an, represent one type of path theory. It is also more accurate to envision this type not as a unique and isolated phenomenon, but rather as one tendency among others that grew among a complex of doctrinal attempts to define, refine, or map out the Buddhist mystical path. (1976: 153)

It is not clear why Gómez focused on establishing a connection between the *Aṭṭhakavagga* and Nāgārjuna, given that a more feasible point of connection, lying chronologically and conceptually between the two, is obvious: the early Prajñāpāramitā tradition. In fact, a simple connection can be made between the *Aṭṭhaka*, early Prajñāpāramitā and Nāgārjuna; the key to the puzzle is the figure of Mahā-Kaccāna, regarded by tradition as one of the Buddha's 'great' enlightened disciples. The salient facts are as follows:

- A number of Pāli suttas featuring Kaccāna show that he was a pivotal figure in the transmission and interpretation of the *Aṭṭhakavagga*;

- One of the most important canonical Kaccāna texts, the *Kaccānagotta Sutta* (SN 12.15, SN 22.90), provides the foundations for the earliest formulation of the Prajñāpāramitā;
- A Sanskrit version of the *Kaccānagotta Sutta* is also cited in the *Mūla-Madhyamaka-Kārikā*.

The line of transmission between these three phases of thought, perhaps more meandering than direct, is nevertheless real and significant. The *Kaccānagotta Sutta* is a short but intricate text. A full analysis cannot be given here; for the present purposes, it is important to note its idea that 'existence' and 'non-existence' are merely conditioned aspects of experience:

> As a rule, the world depends on a duality, Kaccāna, of existence and non-existence (*atthitañ c' eva natthitañ ca*). For the one who sees as it really is the origination of the world, with correct understanding, there is no non-existence in the world; (and) for the one who sees as it really is the cessation of the world, with correct understanding, there is no existence in the world.[28]

In this teaching, 'existence' and 'non-existence' are aspects of experience that cease with correct understanding. The teaching also mentions the idea that 'only suffering, arising, arises, and only suffering, ceasing, ceases',[29] indicating that, in the teaching, 'suffering' — i.e. experience — is synonymous with 'world', an idea also stated in the *Rohitassa Sutta* and related texts (above, §2). If so, SN 12.15 can be regarded as another antirealist text, according to which the world is equivalent to what a person experiences, meaning that 'existence' and 'non-existence' are not objectively real.

Elsewhere in the Pāli suttas, Kaccāna is closely associated with the *Aṭṭhakavagga*: in the *Udāna* and Vinaya he is named as the preceptor (*upajjhāya*) of Soṇa, a *bhikkhu* who is said to recite the *Aṭṭhakavagga* in the Buddha's presence (with the Buddha complimenting Soṇa's style of intonation),[30] and

[28] SN II.17: *dvayanissito khvāyaṃ kaccāna loko yebhuyyena, atthitañ c' eva natthitañ ca. lokasamudayaṃ kho kaccāna yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya passato yā loke natthitā sā na hoti. lokanirodhaṃ kho kaccāna yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya passato yā loke atthitā sā na hoti.*

[29] SN II.17: *dukkham eva uppajjamānaṃ uppajjati, dukkhaṃ nirujjhamānaṃ nirujjhatī'ti na kaṅkhati na vicikicchati aparapaccayā ñāṇam ev' assa ettha hoti.*

[30] Ud 5.6 (p.57–59), Vin I.196–97.

at SN 22.3 he analyses a verse from the *Māgandiya Sutta*, an important text of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* (Sn IV.9). A close connection between Kaccāna and Proto-Madhyamaka can also be made out in two of the three Majjhima Nikāya suttas (MN 18, MN 133) in which he figures:

- The *Madhupiṇḍika, Sutta* (MN 18): on non-apperception, non-disputation and 'no view'.
- The *Mahākaccāna-Bhaddekaratta Sutta* (MN 133): on present-moment awareness.
- The *Uddesa-vibhaṅga Sutta* (MN 138): on meditation.

Of these three texts, the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta* is probably the most important Kaccāna text in the Pāli canon apart from the *Kaccānagotta Sutta*. It contains two brief, aphoristic teachings attributed to the Buddha. The first occurs when the Buddha makes a pithy 'no view' statement, in response to the question of Daṇḍapāṇi, the Sakyan, about what he teaches; the second occurs when he is asked to elaborate on it. Both utterances resonate strongly with the *Aṭṭhakavagga*. In fact, the ideas stated and the vocabulary used could almost be drawn directly from it; for example, having no apperception, not being in conflict with the world, having no desire for ongoing becoming, and not taking up the stick and sword.[31] The meaning of these *buddhavacana* is subsequently elaborated by Kaccāna through an analysis of the dependent origination of cognition.

For the present purposes, the content of Kaccāna's teaching matters less than the style of its presentation. Both here and in other important Kaccāna Suttas (MN 133, MN 138, SN 22.3-4, SN 35.130, AN 10.26, AN 10.172), Kaccāna does not meet the Buddha directly but is asked to explain a teaching in the Buddha's absence.[32] As far as I am aware, this peculiar narrative scenario is

[31] Also see Fronsdal (2016, Introduction: Letting Go of Views): 'Composed in prose rather than verse, the first part of this discourse, the Honeyball Sutta, shares so many concepts and so much vocabulary with the *Book of Eights* that the two were undoubtedly composed in the same milieu.'

[32] Apart from MN 18, Kaccāna analyses teachings of the Buddha in his absence at MN 133 (= M III.194–99), MN 138 (= M III.223–29), SN 22.3–4 (= III.9, III.12–13), SN 35.130 (= IV.115–16), AN 10.26 (= V.46–47), AN 10.172 (= V.255–60). Kaccāna does not meet the Buddha directly in a number of other Sutta and Vinaya texts: Vin I.194–96, Vin I.355, Vin II.15–16, Vin IV.66, M (= II.83ff), SN 35.132 (= IV.116–21), AN I.65–69, AN 6.26 (= III.314–17), AN 6.28 (= III.321–22), Ud V.6 (p.57–59).

applied only to Kaccāna and Ānanda in the Pāli Nikāyas.[33] But unlike Ānanda, Kaccāna only really comes into clear focus in texts that maintain a strict distance between him and the Buddha. Indeed, apart from a few rather formulaic texts, Kaccāna barely has any contact with the Buddha in the Pāli canon.[34] This looks very much like an intentional narrative pattern: the emphatic textual distance between Kaccāna and the Buddha suggests that he was not an integral part of earliest Buddhism; that is, he was not a direct disciple of the Buddha. If so, we could perhaps read the Kaccāna texts symbolically, as a code for how *buddhavacana* was transmitted and elaborated within Kaccāna's lineage.

This possibility is suggested by the geographical location of Kaccāna in the Pāli suttas. The *Madhura Sutta* (MN 84) places Kaccāna in the city of Madhurā after the Buddha's *parinibbāna*; other suttas locate him in nearby Avanti, which was apparently politically connected with Madhurā by virtue of the fact that King Mādhura, also called Avantiputta, was the nephew of Pajjota, King of Avanti.[35] Whatever the case, both Madhurā and Avanti lie well beyond the core region of early Buddhism (Kosala/Magadha), in a W/NW region which is marginal in the canonical discourses, but plays an important role in the Pāli account of the Second Council.[36] If we make a loose connection between the Second Council and Avanti/Madhurā, we can assign the Kaccāna texts to roughly this period, or soon afterwards, that is, towards the end of the 4th century BC, when Buddhism was expanding West.

If Kaccāna's lineage was prominent in textual production during the early period of Buddhist expansion, and remained textually active in the soon-to-follow Mauryan period and beyond, when Sthavira traditions began to reach Kashmir and Gandhāra (the latter no later than the 2nd century BC),[37] we might expect to find the imprint of this lineage in the old Buddhist literature of the North-West. Exactly this seems to be the case in the early Mahāyāna literature of Gandhāra.

[33] But there are more Kaccāna texts in this style than Ānanda texts (at SN 22.90, SN 35.116–117 and AN 10.115).

[34] Kaccāna appears with the Buddha in only four suttas: SN 12.15 (SN II.17, repeated in SN 22.90 = SN III.134–35), SN 14.13 (SN II.153–54), Ud 1.5. (pp.3–4) and Ud 7.8 (pp.77–78). Kaccāna is also named as the most prominent analyser by the Buddha in AN 1.197 (I.23).

[35] According to the entries on Madhurā and Avantiputta in DPPN.

[36] Vin II.298–99.

[37] Salomon (2018: Part I, chapter 1: The Indo-Greeks). 'Buddhism was flourishing, or at least was becoming a significant presence there, by the mid-second century BCE.'

A recently discovered Gandhāran manuscript of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* has been dated to the 1st century AD, although the text is probably much older; according to Falk and Karashima (2013: 100), 'locating the Urtext deep in the first century BCE, if not earlier, seems safe'. The Lokakṣema translation of a closely related Gandhāran text is slightly later, and both precede the much-expanded Sanskrit version of the text. However, all three contain more or less the same ancient core, consisting of the initial teachings delivered by Subhūti. The first of these, which negates the Bodhisattva ideal, will be considered in the following section. The dialogue between Subhūti and Śāriputra, which immediately follows it, seems to develop the basic idea of the *Kaccānagotta Sutta*:

> **[Subhūti]:** 'Moreover, the Bodhisattva Mahāsattva, practising and cultivating the perfection of wisdom, should train so that he does not think in terms of the Bodhicitta. Why is that? Because that thought is non-thought — the original nature of thought is luminous (*prabhāsvarā*).'
>
> **[Śāriputra]:** 'But, Venerable Subhūti, does that thought which is non-thought exist?'
>
> **Su:** 'Venerable Śāriputra, can existence or non-existence be found in the state of non-thought?'
>
> **[Śā]:** 'It is not so, Venerable Subhūti ... But what is this state of non-thought?'
>
> **[Su]:** 'Venerable Śāriputra, the state of non-thought is beyond disturbance (*avikārā*), beyond imagination (*avikalpā*).'[38]

[38] Vaidya (1960: 3): *punar aparaṃ bhagavan bodhisattvena mahāsattvena prajñāpāramitāyāṃ caratā prajñāpāramitāyāṃ bhāvayatā evaṃ śikṣitavyaṃ yathā asau śikṣyamāṇastenāpi bodhicittena na manyeta / tatkasya hetoḥ? tathā hi tac cittam acittam / prakṛtiś cittasya prabhāsvarā // atha khalv āyuṣmān śāriputra āyuṣmantaṃ subhūtim etad avocat: kiṃ punar āyuṣman subhūte asti tac cittaṃ yac cittam acittam? evam ukte āyuṣmān subhūtir āyuṣmantaṃ śāriputram etad avocat: kiṃ punar āyuṣman śāriputra yā acittatā, tatra acittatāyām astitā vā nāstitā vā vidyate vā upalabhyate vā? śāriputra āha: na hy etad āyuṣman subhūte ... kā punar eṣā āyuṣman subhūte acittatā? subhūtir āha: avikārā āyuṣman śāriputra avikalpā acittatā.*

The old Gāndhāran version of the text differs slightly from this, by stating that the Bodhisattva ought not to think in terms of 'Bodhisattva' rather than *bodhicitta*.[39] Both the Gāndhārī text and Lokakṣema's translation also lack the Sanskrit text's statement that 'the original nature of thought is luminous' (*prabhāsvarā*), which recalls the *Kevaṭṭa Sutta*'s teaching that intransitive consciousness (*viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ*) is 'luminous all around' (*anantaṃ sabbato pabhaṃ*).[40] If this Sanskrit addition indicates that we are in Proto-Madhyamaka territory, the same is true of Subhūti's initial statement that 'thought is non-thought' (*tac cittam acittam*). While this negation is rather baffling, Subhūti goes on to speak more straightforwardly of 'the state of non-thought' (*acittatā*), in which the dichotomy between 'existence' and 'non-existence' cannot be found. Just as in the *Kaccānagotta Sutta*, the fundamental existential duality of the world is said to be a feature of consciousness, one that ceases in a transconceptual state. The basic idea of the *Kaccānagotta Sutta* is thus placed at the forefront of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*'s opening teachings.[41] The same point is made elsewhere in the text,[42] including the following:

> Although those *dharma*s cannot be found, [foolish, unlearned, ordinary people] imagine them, and once imagined (*kalpayitvā*) they adhere to two extremes (*dvayor antayoḥ abhiniviśante*), relying on them as a support, an apprehension (*tan nidānam upalambhaṃ niśritya*). They imagine past *dharma*s, future *dharma*s and present *dharma*s, and once imagined they adhere to name and form. Although not being found, they imagine all *dharma*s. Imagining all *dharma*s, which cannot be found, they do not know and see the path as it actually is.[43]

[39] Falk and Karashima (2012: 34) read '*teṇa yeva bosisa(t)v· (1–18:) + + + + ..*'; the Sanskrit parallel is *tenāpi bodhicittena na manyeta*.

[40] According to Falk and Karashima (2012: 34), the Gandhārī Prajñāpāramitā manuscript lacks a parallel to *prakṛtiś cittasya prabhāsvarā*; their translation of Lokakṣema's translation (2012: 35) also lacks it.

[41] On the relationship between Kaccāna and the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, see Attwood (2015).

[42] The initial exchange between Śāriputra and Subhūti (Vaidya, 1960: 3) is repeated more or less verbatim soon after (*ibid.*: 10). Much later on in the text (*ibid.*: 217), the dichotomy is said to be illusory (*māyā*): *so 'haṃ bhagavan anyatra māyāyā māyopamādvā cittāt taṃ dharmasamanuśyan katamaṃ dharmam upadekṣyāmi astīti vā nāstīti vā? yaś ca atyantavivikto dharmaḥ, na so 'stīti vā nāstīti vā upaiti / yo 'pi dharmo 'tyantatayā viviktaḥ, nāsāvanuttarāṃ samyaksaṃbodhim abhisaṃbudhyate /*

[43] Vaidya (1960: 8): *tasmāt te 'saṃvidyamānān sarvadharmān kalpayanti / kalpayitvā dvāv antāv*

According to this antirealist teaching that all *dharma*s are an illusion, the imagination of two extremes, existence and non-existence, is once again drawn from the *Kaccānagotta Sutta*. All this means that in the earliest sections of the oldest Mahāyāna *sūtra*, and in what is almost certainly the oldest extant statement of the Prajñāpāramitā, we find a clear reformulation of old Proto-Madhyamaka themes, as well as an obvious inheritance from Kaccāna. An appropriate conclusion would be that when the Prajñāpāramitā was first formulated, in Gandhāra and its surroundings, it occurred within a tradition closely associated with a Proto-Madhyamaka lineage stemming from Mahā-Kaccāna.

This finding suggests that further speculation on the late canonical material related to Subhūti is in order. A marginal figure in the Pali canon, the *Udāna* singles out Subhūti for his meditative prowess: he is one who has 'destroyed thoughts' (Ud VI.7, p.71: *yassa vitakkā vidhūpitā*). In the single verse attributed to Subhūti in the *Theragāthā* — the very first stanza of the text — he likewise speaks of meditating in a forest hut (*kuṭikā*).[44] There is also a connection between Subhūti and the North-West, for a verse attributed to Subhūti appears in the fifth and final book of the *Milindapañha*, set in the city of Sāgala (modern Sialkot in Pakistan) and so part of 'Greater Gandhāra'. According to von Hinüber (1996: 83), the original language of the *Milindapañha* was not Pāli, but a different Middle-Indic, possibly Gandhārī. Although Subhūti's verse belongs to what is probably one of the additional books of the *Milindapañha* (*ibid.*: 85), its association with material from the North-West is notable. Like the *Udāna*, this verse is concerned with the secluded life, speaking favourably of ascetics (*tapassin*) who abide in the forest (*vana*).[45]

With regard to the Prajñāpāramitā and early Mahāyāna, the past-life story of Subhūti in the *Therāpadāna* is notable.[46] An ardent ascetic living in the Himalayas in a past life, Subhūti's Buddhist career is said to have begun when

[44] Th v.1 (p.1). *channā me kuṭikā sukhā nivātā vassa deva yathāsukhaṃ, cittaṃ me susamāhitaṃ vimuttaṃ ātāpī viharāmi vassa devā ti. itthaṃ sudaṃ āyasmā subhūti thero gāthaṃ abhāsitthā ti.*

[45] Mil p.386–87: *bhāsitam p' etaṃ mahārāja therena subhūtinā: rāgūpasaṃhitaṃ cittaṃ yadā uppajjate mama, sayam eva paccavekkhitvā ekako taṃ damem' ahaṃ. rajjasi rajanīyesu dussanīyesu dussasi, muyhase mohanīyesu nikkhamassu vanā tuvaṃ. visuddhānaṃ ayaṃ vāso nimmalānaṃ tapassinaṃ, mā kho visuddhaṃ dūsesi nikkhamassu vanā tuvan ti.* Another verse attributed to Subhūti, on the absence of desire, is found at Mil p.391: *sāsane te mahāvīra yato pabbajito ahaṃ, nābhijānāmi uppannaṃ mānasaṃ kāmasaṃhitan ti.*

[46] Ap I.67ff; Apadāna III: Therāpadāna, Vagga III: Subhūtivaggo (21. Subhūti).

he was visited by the Buddha Padumuttara. After worshipping him for an entire week, Subhūti is predicted to have many divine and royal rebirths before being reborn in the lifetime of Gotama and attaining liberation. Padumuttara also teaches Subhūti the 'recollection of the Buddha(s)' (*buddhānussati*), a practice hardly mentioned elsewhere in the *Therāpadāna*.[47] All these features merit the hypothesis that Subhūti was a Buddhist from a north-western Sthavira/Theriya lineage, early enough to be mentioned in the *Udāna* and *Theragāthā*, but late enough for one of his teachings to be transmitted alongside or within the tradition of the *Milindapañha*. If his lineage was associated with the practice of non-conceptuality and recollection of the Buddha(s), a close connection with the nascent Prajñāpāramitā/Mahāyāna seems likely.[48]

4. The Rhetoric of Negation

A connection between Proto-Madhyamaka and the early Prajñāpāramitā can also be seen in the very first teaching of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*. Before Subhūti's dialogue with Śāriputra, the Buddha asks Subhūti to explain the perfection of wisdom, and Subhūti replies as follows (in the Sanskrit text):

> The Blessed One has said 'Bodhisattva, Bodhisattva', but of what *dharma*, Blessed One, is this a designation, that is, 'Bodhisattva'? I do not perceive the *dharma* 'Bodhisattva', and furthermore, Blessed One, do not perceive the *dharma* called 'the perfection of wisdom'. Not finding, not apprehending, not perceiving these *dharma*s, what *dharma* 'Bodhisattva' and what *dharma* 'the perfection of wisdom' could I teach and instruct? But if, Blessed One, when it is being taught thus the heart of the Bodhisattva

[47] The practice of *buddhānussati* is mentioned in v.36, 39–40, 46, 49–51 of the story of Subhuti (Ap I.69–70); elsewhere, it is only mentioned in three places: Ap I.115 (v.7 of Sucintita-thera), I.210 (v.3 of Raṃsisaññaka-thera), II.463 (v.41 of Sugandha-thera).

[48] The canonical material on Subhūti has been overlooked in the scholarship on early Mahāyāna. Buswell's *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (2004) has no entry on him, the only mention being a short remark by Skilton (Buswell 2004: 233) in the entry 'Disciples of the Buddha': 'In later layers of Buddhist canonical literature a number of these disciples continue to appear as protagonists. Of particular importance is the promotion to chief interlocutor in the PRAJÑĀPĀRAMITĀ LITERATURE of Subhūti, a monk and disciple noted in the *āgama*s and *nikāya*s as chief of those who dwell in the forest and, presumably thereby, also the one most worthy of offerings.'

> does not sink down [...] if his mind does not tremble [...] this very Bodhisattva, a great being, ought to be instructed in the Perfection of Wisdom.[49]

As Nattier has pointed out (2003: 179–80), this teaching follows a negative type of discourse, which she has termed the rhetoric of 'absence' or 'negation':

> In one of the earliest scriptures of the Prajñāpāramitā group, the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines* (*Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*), for example, the term *śūnyatā* appears only rarely in the early chapters, and in the *Diamond Sūtra* (*Vajracchedikā*) it is never used at all. Yet the rhetoric of negation is nonetheless carried on with great intensity through the use of other terminology.

In the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* the 'rhetoric of absence' is often used in statements focusing on what is not 'found', 'obtained' (*na samvidyate*, *nopalabhyate*),[50] or 'not perceived' (*na ... samanupaśyāmi*), as in this opening teaching. Strictly speaking, this is not a teaching about 'emptiness', at least at the formal level: the terms 'empty/emptiness' are not used, and there would seem to be little point in making an ontological point about the Bodhisattva, i.e. that the concept lacks essence or 'own being' (*svabhāva*). For what Buddhist would ever have claimed this? Apart from the first chapter of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, teachings on emptiness are marginal in other early Prajñāpāramitā texts. The *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā* does not use the terms *śūnya/śūnyatā* at all, but instead employs the rhetoric of absence in a

[49] Vaidya (1960: 3): *bodhisattvo bodhisattva iti yadidaṃ bhagavannucyate, katamasyaitadbhagavan dharmasyādhivacanaṃ yaduta bodhisattva iti? nāhaṃ bhagavaṃstaṃ dharmaṃ samanupaśyāmi yaduta bodhisattva iti / tamapyahaṃ bhagavan dharmaṃ na samanupaśyāmi yaduta prajñāpāramitā nāma / so 'haṃ bhagavan bodhisattvaṃ vā bodhisattvadharmaṃ vā avindan anupalabhamāno 'samanupaśyan, prajñāpāramitāmapyavindan anupalabhamāno 'samanupaśyan katamaṃ bodhisattvaṃ katamasyāṃ prajñāpāramitāyām avavadiṣyāmi anuśāsiṣyāmi? api tu khalu punarbhagavan saced evaṃ bhāṣyamāṇe deśyamāne upadiśyamāne bodhisattvasya cittaṃ nāvalīyate na saṃlīyate na viṣīdati na viṣādamāpadyate, nāsya vipṛṣṭhībhavati mānasam, na bhagnapṛṣṭhībhavati, notrasyati na saṃtrasyati na saṃtrāsamāpadyate, eṣa eva bodhisattvo mahāsattvaḥ prajñāpāramitāyām anuśāsanīyaḥ.* For the Gandhārī and Chinese parallels to this section of text, see Falk and Karashima (2012: 34); for a parallel to the description of the Bodhisattva not losing heart in the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra, see Strauch (2018: 229).

[50] Nattier (2003: 180, n.18).

number of ways.[51] Most typically, it uses statements along the lines 'X is a non-X, that is why it is called X'.[52] Also frequent are outright negations along the lines 'X does not exist' (*nāsti*),[53] along with negations of apperception in statements such as 'the apperception/notion (*saṃjñā*) of X should not occur (*pravarteta*)'.[54]

The situation appears to be the same in the recently discovered 'Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra', an old Gandhāran text dating to the 1st or 2nd century AD, which is remarkable for its rather positive attitude towards the Śrāvakayāna. According to Schlosser and Strauch (2016: 331), '[d]espite its clear Mahāyāna character and its concentration on the path to buddhahood, the world of the Bajaur Mahāyāna *Sūtra* is still defined by the values and concepts of the *śrāvaka* path which continue to be recognized and esteemed.' Positioned somewhere between canonical doctrine and the Prajñāpāramitā, the text says very little about emptiness: the term *śūnya/śūnyatā* barely features, and the term *prajñāpāramitā* is not found at all. It instead applies the rhetoric of absence in a number of ways throughout the text, including simple negations ('*na* X'), statements on non-perception (*na sam-anu-paś*) and stipulations not to let the apperception (*saṃ-jñā*) or conception (*pra-jñā*) of something occur.[55] Of these varied forms of negation, the 'non-perception' (*na sam-anu-paś*) of something seems most common, more or less exactly the same method which opens the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*.[56] According to Strauch (2018: 222, on BajC 2: 7C14), the text also advises not forming apperceptions with regard to the terms *ātma*, *sattva*, *bhava*, and *jīva*, a sequence that is also found in the *Vajracchedikā*.[57] This

[51] Zacchetti (2020, 'The Development of Prajñāpāramitā Literature: A Historical Overview'), assigns the Vajracchedikā to a new phase of Prajñāpāramitā literature beginning 'sometime during the 4th century ce'. Harrison (2006: 141) and Schopen (2004: 227) raise the possibility that the text is older than this; according to Harrison, the text has features that 'predate the 2nd century AD'.

[52] Harrison (2006: 136) has called such statements the *Vajracchedikā*'s 'signature formula'.

[53] Such statements usually occur when Subhūti is asked by the Buddha if a certain *dharma* exists (*asti*). According to Nattier (2003: 180, n.18), such language 'is only one of many reasons to suspect that the *Vajracchedikā* is the product of an environment quite separate from the ones that produced most of the other *prajñāpāramitā* texts.'

[54] E.g. Vaidya (1961: 75, §3) = Harrison (2006: 143).

[55] These comments are based on the preliminary online edition of the text prepared by Schlosser and Strauch (http://130.223.29.184/readviewer/BC02.html).

[56] Strauch (2018: 222, 227–28) has noted a number of parallels between the two texts.

[57] E.g. Vaidya (1961: 76, §6): *na hi subhūte teṣāṃ bodhisattvānāṃ mahāsattvānām ātmasaṃjñā pravartate, na sattvasaṃjñā, na jīvasaṃjñā, na pudgalasaṃjñā pravartate.*

similarity suggests that the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, *Vajracchedikā* and Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra were composed in related circles in and around Gandhāra.

How are the different applications of the 'rhetoric of absence' in the three texts to be understood? Nothing suggests that it is an offshoot of the teaching of emptiness. In fact, the situation should rather be reversed: since the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra, *Vajracchedikā* and early parts of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* almost completely avoid the idea of emptiness, and instead focus on negation and absence, it would be more accurate to say that the teaching of emptiness was formed within a speculative tradition based on negation and absence, rather than the other way around. It hardly needs to be pointed out that negation and absence, allied with a focus on non-conceptuality and the stilling of apperception, are defining features of Proto-Madhyamaka. Just as in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*'s initial dialogue between Subhūti and Śāriputra, we are here dealing with a reworking of Proto-Madhyamaka themes.

The Proto-Madhyamaka inheritance is most evident in the various negations of apperception (*saṃjñā*) in the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra. According to Schlosser and Strauch (2016: 331), 'the principle of non-apperception is factually present in all parts of the text and underlines the coherent character of the *sūtra* as a literary composition'.[58] Strauch (2018: 235) adds that '[t]he Bodhisattva path leading to awakening is described mainly in terms of a meditational practice characterised by the feature of non-apperception. This mainstream practice is largely based on conceptions developed in Mainstream Buddhism.' In this respect it looks very much as if the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra has taken the *Aṭṭhakavagga*'s teaching (Sn 802) that one should not fashion 'even a subtle apperception', and applied it not just to 'what is seen, heard or thought', but to all aspects of Buddhist thought.

The early Prajñāpāramitā rhetoric of absence/negation is also strikingly similar to negations of self in canonical texts such as DN 15, MN 22 and MN 38. These teachings negate and leave the hearer in a cognitive absence, a state that inclines towards letting go of certain views. The idea of not perceiving the Bodhisattva, or any other entity, has exactly the same trajectory: such Prajñāpāramitā teachings apply to Buddhist doctrine an approach originally concerned with the negation of non-Buddhist ideas. The Prajñāpāramitā rhetoric of absence or negation is therefore little more than a reformulation of the 'no view' tendency within early Buddhism. Buddhist thinkers used

[58] Schlosser and Strauch (2016: 331).

to negating views, to asserting nothing about self or world, to valuing non-conceptuality as the highest form of truth, and to remaining silent when questioned about the Tathāgata, simply applied *via negativa* rhetoric to Buddhist doctrine itself. Precisely why they did this will be addressed in the next section.

That the rhetoric of negation is a reformulation of Proto-Madhyamaka is suggested by another feature of the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra and Subhūti's opening teaching in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*. In the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra, negative rhetoric is most emphatically applied to the non-perception of the Tathāgata (e.g. §1.2.1–1.2.2), which recalls canonical teachings on not being able to define or find the Tathāgata (e.g. Sn 793/802, or MN 72; above, §1–2). The notion that the Prajñāpāramitā built upon this specific aspect of Proto-Madhyamaka is also suggested by a parallel between not finding the Bodhisattva in the opening teaching of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, and not finding the Tathāgata in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* (MN 22):

> When the gods including Indra, Brahma and Prajāpati search for the *bhikkhu* thus released in mind (*cittavimuttaṃ*), they cannot establish that 'the consciousness (*viññāṇaṃ*) of the Tathāgata is located here'. Why is that? Even in the present, *bhikkhu*s, I say that the Tathāgata is untraceable. Speaking and teaching thus, *bhikkhu*s, some ascetics and Brahmins falsely slander me: 'The ascetic Gotama is a nihilist (*venayiko*) who declares the destruction, annihilation and non-existence of an existing being.'[59]

This teaching parallels the opening teaching in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* very closely. Both texts state the inability to find the spiritual adept — the Tathāgata or the Bodhisattva — before commenting on the negative reaction this provokes — the accusation of nihilism, and the Bodhisattva losing heart. The teachings are of course different, but both have exactly the same structure and apply the same type of discourse in making their *via negativa* points.

[59] MN I.140: *evaṃ vimuttacittaṃ kho bhikkhave bhikkhuṃ sa-indā devā sabrahmakā sapajāpatikā anvesaṃ nādhigacchanti: idaṃ nissitaṃ tathāgatassa viññāṇan ti. taṃ kissa hetu? diṭṭhe vāhaṃ bhikkhave dhamme tathāgataṃ ananuvejjo ti vadāmi. evaṃvādiṃ kho maṃ bhikkhave evamakkhāyiṃ eke samaṇabrāhmaṇā asatā tucchā musā abhūtena abbhācikkhanti, venayiko samaṇo gotamo sato sattassa ucchedaṃ vināsaṃ vibhavaṃ paññāpetī ti.*

5. The Genealogy of Emptiness

We have seen that rather than innovating the rhetoric of absence, the oldest parts of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* as well as the *Vajracchedikā* and the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra inherited and developed a negative style of discourse from the canonical teachings. In these early Prajñāpāramitā texts, we see not simply how an important early Mahāyāna tradition emerged, but find something more specific and precise: how Proto-Madhyamaka themes were given a fresh rendering, which in the case of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* was dependent on the canonical tradition related to Kaccāna.

What distinguishes the Prajñāpāramitā rhetoric of absence from Proto-Madhyamaka is its focus on Buddhist doctrine. The point seems to be that from the 'no view' perspective, in which ultimate truth is ineffable, all aspects of discourse, including Buddhist teachings, are conceptual constructs; from the perspective of ultimate truth, they cannot be perceived or found. The denial that fundamental items of Buddhist teaching are ultimately real suggests that the Prajñāpāramitā emerged from the internal dynamics of Buddhist debate. Unlike the canonical period, negation was focused on Buddhist rather than non-Buddhist ideas. But who were the Buddhist opponents of the Prajñāpāramitā? The standard answer to this goes something like the following:

> The early period of the Buddha and his successors was one of spiritual pragmatism. What mattered was the way to Nirvana, the practical focus on which set limits to abstract speculation. But ongoing reflection on the meaning and purpose of the canonical teachings eventually resulted in the Abhidharma. While this analysis was primarily psychological, and focused on elaborating the different mental states discussed in the canonical teachings, especially those concerning the path, it was also philosophically grounded on the idea that that all *dharma*s lack self. Thus Abhidharma philosophy came to espouse a reductionistic vision of a selfless cosmos. This provided the impetus for the Perfection of Wisdom, in which Abhidharmic selflessness was extended to encompass the 'emptiness' (*śūnyatā*) of all *dharma*s. Thus the Prajñāpāramitā emerged in reaction to Abhidharma, or as an extension of it.

An example of this version of intellectual history, at least with regard to the transition from Abhidharma to the Prajñāpāramitā, is contained in Paul Williams' *Mahāyāna Buddhism* (2009):

> [...] in the early Mahāyāna, as well as in some schools with no particular Mahāyāna association as such, the teaching of *dharma*s as those final realities out of which we construct the world was rejected in favour of a teaching of the emptiness of *dharma*s (*dharmaśūnyatā*). *Dharma*s too lack any fundamental status and are not ultimate realities. *Dharma*s too can be analysed away. For these traditions the analysis commonly associated with the Abhidharma had ended too early, and thus such a *prajñā* was a defective *prajñā*, not the perfection of *prajñā*, or no real *prajñā* at all. Now *prajñā* is said to be a state of consciousness which understands emptiness (*śūnyatā*), the absence of 'self' or intrinsic nature, even in *dharma*s. (2009: 50)

> The principal ontological message (message concerning what ultimately exists) of the Prajñāparamitā is an extension of the Buddhist teaching of not-Self to equal no essential unchanging core, therefore no fundamentally real existence, as applied to all things without exception. In context the suggestion is that there simply is no such thing as 'intrinsic nature' [...] for *dharma*s, any more than for anything else, to possess. All things without exception are just pragmatic conceptual constructs. (2009: 52)

> So the terminology of the Perfection of Wisdom is that of the Abhidharma, but the critique is of the claim to have found some things which really, fundamentally, ultimately exist, i.e. *dharma*s. These early Prajñāparamitā texts constantly ask what *dharma* is referred to by the term X; the reply is that no such *dharma* can be found, in reality there is no such thing [...] (2009: 54)[60]

[60] It should be pointed out that Williams also problematises the scheme whereby 'emptiness' emerged as an extension of the idea of the selflessness of *dharmas*, by recognising that the Prajñāpāramitā might have deeper roots in 'teachings akin to those of emptiness in the Sutta Nipāta of the Pali Canon' (2009: 53).

A similar reconstruction is stated in Rupert Gethin's *The Foundations of Buddhism* (1998: 235–37):

> Central to the Abhidharma is the distinction between the conventional truth (that persons and selves exist) and the ultimate truth (that persons and selves are ultimately simply aggregates of evanescent dharmas — physical and mental events). The main teaching of the Perfection of Wisdom is that, from the perspective of perfect wisdom, even this account of the way things are is ultimately arbitrary. [...]
>
> Abhidharma theory and the associated meditations thus provide a way of getting behind appearances to a world that is quite different from the one ordinarily experienced — a way of easing the mind from the ways and patterns of thought it habitually uses to understand the world. [...] Our minds have a predilection to the formulation of views (*dṛṣṭi/diṭṭhi*), to conceptual proliferation (*prapañca/papañca*), and to the manufacture of conceptual constructs (*vikalpa*); it is these which we tend to confuse with the way things are and to which we become attached. In other words, we are always in danger of mistaking our own views and opinions for a true understanding of the way things are. This danger — and this is the really significant point — may apply to views and opinions based on the theoretical teachings of Buddhism (the Abhidharma and the account of the stages of the path) no less than to views and opinions derived from other theoretical systems. Perfect wisdom, however, is what sees through the process of the mind's conceptual construction and is not tainted by attachment to any view or opinion. [...] From the perspective of perfect wisdom all these are seen for what they ultimately are: empty (*śūnya/suññ*a). That is, the conceptual constructs of Buddhist theory are ultimately no less artificial and arbitrary entities than the conceptual constructs of the ordinary unawakened mind which sees really existing persons and selves. The mind can grasp at the theory of *dharma*s and turn it into another conceptual strait-jacket. [...]

> The teaching of emptiness should not be read, as it sometimes appears to be, as an attempt to subvert the Abhidharma theory of *dharmas* as a whole. After all it applies to the constructs of all Buddhist theory, including the Mahāyāna and, crucially, itself: there are no bodhisattvas and no stages of the bodhisattva path. [...]
>
> In carving up reality into *dharma*s in the manner of the Abhidharma, we are essentially constructing a theoretical 'model' or map of the way things are. [...] Some maps and models will reflect the way things are better than others, but they nevertheless remain models and maps. As such, none should be mistaken for the way things are. Thus for the Perfection of Wisdom, just as persons and beings are ultimately elusive entities, so too are all *dharma*s. In fact the idea that anything exists of and in itself is a simply a trick that our minds and language play on us. The great theme of the Perfection of Wisdom thus becomes 'emptiness' (*śūnyatā*/*suññatā*) — the emptiness of all things that we might be tempted to think truly and ultimately exist of and in themselves.

A similar reconstruction focused more specifically on the Prajñāpāramitā in Gandhāra is found in Bronkhorst (2018):

> The special point to be emphasised is that the 'Perfection of Wisdom' which is the subject matter of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* in its surviving Sanskrit version, only makes sense against the background of the overhaul of Buddhist scholasticism that had taken place in Greater Gandhāra during the last centuries preceding the Common Era. It was in Greater Gandhāra, during this period, that Buddhist scholasticism developed an ontology centred on the lists of dharmas that had been preserved. Lists of dharmas had been drawn up before the scholastic revolution in Greater Gandhāra, and went on being drawn up elsewhere with the goal of preserving the teaching of the Buddha. But the Buddhists of Greater Gandhāra were the first to use these lists of dharmas to construe an ontology, unheard of until then. They looked upon the dharmas as the only really existing things, rejecting the existence

> of entities that were made up of them. Indeed, these scholiasts may have been the first to call themselves *śūnyavādins*. (2018: 124)
>
> The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* is largely built on the scholastic achievements of Greater Gandhāra, as are other texts of the same genre; it draws conclusions from these. One of its recurring themes is its emphasis that everything that is not a dharma does not exist. This is the inevitable corollary of the conviction that only dharmas really exist, but one that is rarely emphasised in the Abhidharma texts. The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* goes further and claims that the dharmas themselves do not exist either, that they are empty (*śūnya*). Once again, all this only makes sense against the historical background of the Abhidharma elaborated in Greater Gandhāra. (2018: 125–26)

These reconstructions are not entirely wrong. They must reflect, to some degree, actual thought processes that occurred to numerous individuals at various points in the formulation of the Prajñāpāramitā. But according to the oldest sources, this was not the primary impetus behind their creation. The dominant feature of the old Prajñāpāramitā literature of Gandhāra is not a critique of Abhidharma essentialism, but the rhetoric of absence directed against standard features of mainstream Buddhism. Contrary to what Bronkhorst claims, one of the recurring themes of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* is not 'its emphasis that everything that is not a dharma does not exist'; his claim that the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* states that 'the dharmas themselves do not exist either, that they are empty (*śūnya*)' is fictitious. Very little in the text, especially its earliest sections, gives the impression that it knows and is reacting to a reductionistic Abhidharma philosophy.

This is not to deny that early Prajñāpāramitā texts critique the Abhidharma. The problem is that such critiques are minor features of these texts, but have been regarded as their primary focus. Thus Section 1 of the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra consists almost entirely of negations and the rhetoric of absence. Alongside this is a rather brief section on not perceiving the 'inherent nature' and 'distinct character' of *dharmas* (*svabhāva*, *lakṣaṇa*), which Strauch (2018: 214) believes is fundamental to the text:

> Based on the notions developed in Abhidharma (and particularly Sarvāstivāda) scholasticism, the initial dialogue provides an extensive discussion of the character of dharmas. In a certain way, the discourse described here paves the way for the teaching of the entire sūtra and establishes a theoretical framework which prepares the listener for the following instruction in the bodhisattva path.

This reading of Section 1 of the Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra seems to overstate the importance of its rather brief Abhidharma critique. Strauch further claims (2018: 222) that its brief Abhidharma critique provides the foundations for the *sūtra*'s teaching on the Bodhisattva path, contained in Section 2 of the text:

> The teaching called here bodhisattva training has to be interpreted as a natural outcome of the preceding instruction regarding the character of dharmas. Based on the assumption that all dharmas are empty (*śūnya*) and without an inherent nature (*asvabhāva*), they cannot be apprehended (*anupalambha*). Any notion/apperception (*saṃjñā*) of them as real entities must therefore be considered a false view or error and has to be strictly avoided by a person accepting the doctrine of emptiness. Consequently, the training of a bodhisattva is described as a strict obedience to the principle of non-apperception/non-notion.

This reading of the *sūtra* follows the long-established idea that Prajñāpāramitā is, essentially, a critique of Abhidharma. But while the teaching of emptiness is obviously connected to the rhetoric of silence, the weight of evidence suggests that the logical order is the opposite of what Strauch claims: it is because they cannot be apprehended, and because all apperceptions have been negated, that *dharma*s are said to be empty, rather than vice versa. The Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra in fact agrees with the other early examples of Prajñāpāramitā literature, in that very little in it has anything to do with Abhidharma. Zacchetti's presentation of emptiness as a theme within Prajñāpāramitā teaching in general describes the situation more accurately.[61] Schopen is also correct to point out (2004: 495) that the theory that Mahāyāna Buddhism emerged in reaction to Abhidharma and Hīnayāna scholasticism is based on a 'disproportionate' evaluation of the sources:

[61] Zacchetti (2020, 'Doctrinal Aspects of the Prajñāpāramitā').

> The representation of Hīnayāna Buddhism as narrowly scholastic rests almost entirely on a completely disproportionate, and undeserved, emphasis on the Abhidharma. The *abhidharma* was almost certainly important to a narrow circle of monks. But *abhidharma* texts were by no means the only things that Hīnayāna monks wrote or read. They also wrote — especially it seems in what should have been "the Mahāyāna period" — an enormous number of stories, and they continued writing them apparently long after the early Mahāyāna Sūtras were in production. Some of these stories are specifically called Jātaka and they have come down to us as separate Avadāna collections.

If we bear in mind that the 'Hīnayāna' stories Schopen mentions include much mythic material (i.e. Jātaka type narratives) and related spiritual ideals (Bodhisattva type path adventures), we have a much better idea of the sort of Buddhist realism that the Prajñāpāramitā was reacting against. Indeed, Nattier (2003: 180–81) has noted that spiritual realism is deeply embedded in numerous Mahāyāna *sūtra*s; texts such as the *Ugra-paripṛcchā* lack teachings on emptiness and the rhetoric of absence, but take 'a quite literal and affirmative view' of such things as 'Arhatship, Buddhahood, or the path':

> A comparison of the *Ugra* with other early Mahāyāna sūtras shows that it is not unique in this regard. The *Akṣobhyavyūha*, for example, is also quite unselfconscious in urging both *śrāvaka*s and bodhisattvas to hasten their progress toward their respective goals by seeking rebirth in Akṣobhya's (apparently quite real) paradise. Likewise the larger *Sukhāvatīvyūha* seems unconcerned about any possible hazards of reification, and simply devotes its energy to encouraging both bodhisattvas and *śrāvaka*s to seek rebirth in Amitābha's realm. Even the *Lotus Sūtra* — widely read through the lens of "emptiness" philosophy by both traditional East Asian Buddhists and modern readers — only rarely uses the term *śūnyatā*, and in general seems more concerned with urging its listeners to have faith in their own future Buddhahood than in encouraging them to "deconstruct" their concepts.

Nattier (2003: 182) suggests that the general situation is to be understood as follows:

> It is tempting, therefore — and it may well be correct — to view the *Ugra* as representing a preliminary stage in the emergence of the bodhisattva vehicle, a phase centered on the project of "constructing" ideas about the practices of the bodhisattva that preceded a later "deconstructionist" — or better, dereifying — move. Yet it is clear that the move from affirmation to antireification did not proceed in one-way fashion. On the contrary, what we see in later literature is more like a series of zigzag developments, with each new idea about the bodhisattva path first asserted in positive (or "constructionist") fashion, and then negated in subsequent texts.

If the 'deconstructionist' sort of early Mahāyāna, that is the Prajñāpāramitā, stands in a much older Proto-Madhyamaka tradition stemming from the canonical period, there is no need to regard the *Ugra-paripṛcchā* or even Pure Land Buddhism as historically prior. Both should rather be regarded as continuations of trends well established in the canonical period. If, for example, the *Aṭṭhakavagga* is regarded as the oldest source of the negative tradition that resulted in the Prajñāpāramitā, then the *Khandhaka* (Skt. *Skandhaka*) section of the Vinaya plays a similarly foundational role for Bodhisattva realism, especially if, as claimed by Frauwallner, it was originally part of a longer work containing a full biography of the Buddha.[62]

Both texts could not be more different. Whereas the *Aṭṭhaka* focuses on cognition, negation and present-moment awareness, the *Khandhaka* has a more cosmic vision in which Buddhism is part of the fabric of the world, celebrated in the higher, divine realms, and even including the idea that direct contact with the Buddha and reception of teachings from him effects a decisive and irreversible step along the spiritual path — what Peter Masefield (1986) memorably termed 'divine revelation'. We must imagine parallel trajectories stemming from the early traditions defined by these texts, the *Aṭṭhakavagga* (and related *via negativa* teaching) on the one hand, and the *Khandhaka* (and related mythic discourses) on the other, between which there

[62] See Frauwallner (1956, chapter 3: 'The Origin of the Skandhaka').

was much interaction over time, lots of to and fro, resulting eventually in the emergence of Bodhisattva realism and Pure Land Buddhism in opposition to the antirealism of the Prajñāpāramitā.

Within this grand development of Buddhist spirituality, the Prajñāpāramitā critique of Abhidharma would seem to be peripheral. It is not even clear if the discourse about being empty of 'own-being' was originally formulated in opposition to Abhidharma. For all the conceptual tools required for the critique are to be found in the canonical discourses. At SN 35.85, the expression 'the world is empty' (*suñño loko suñño loko ti*) is explained as 'empty of self and what pertains to self' (*suññaṃ attena vā attaniyena*), which is then explained in terms of the six senses, their objects, and forms of sentience/consciousness and experience: all of these are said to be 'empty of self and what pertains to self'.[63] To reach the Prajñāpāramitā, this analysis need only be combined with the teaching of SN 22.95 (§3 above), in which the five aggregates are presented as an apparition ('Form is like a lump of foam … consciousness is like an illusion'). Since the discourse on emptiness in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* is most commonly applied to the five aggregates,[64] what role did the Abhidharma play in the formulation of these teachings? It is not logically required.

6. Conclusion

The general failure to consider Gómez's Proto-Madhyamaka thesis has been a missed opportunity in Buddhist Studies. For as we have seen, a careful reconsideration of it opens up new perspectives on the history of early Buddhist thought. The apophatic thought of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* is much more prevalent in early Buddhist teachings than Gómez believed: silence, negation, non-conceptuality, ineffability, present-moment mindfulness

[63] SN 35.85 follows the format of SN 35.84, on which see n.24 above. These suttas were evidently the work of the same early Buddhist tradition.

[64] The first teaching on emptiness in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* begins as an extension of canonical teachings on the rise and fall of the five aggregates. However, this is not stated as a doctrinal position to be assented to, but is rather presented as a conceptual understanding to be avoided. Vaidya (1960: 6): *saced rūpe carati, nimitte carati / saced rūpanimitte carati, nimitte carati / saced rūpaṃ nimittam iti carati, nimitte carati / saced rūpasyotpāde carati, nimitte carati / saced rūpasya nirodhe carati, nimitte carati / saced rūpasya vināśe carati, nimitte carati / saced rūpaṃ śūnyam iti carati, nimitte carati.*

and antirealism are found throughout the Pāli discourses. These aspects of early Buddhist teaching can be contrasted with the realistic assumptions of Buddhist myth and its spiritual dimensions. The latent tension between these perspectives explodes onto the Buddhist scene in the formative period of Mahāyāna, when the apophatic tendency was reformulated as the Prajñāpāramitā, and mythic/spiritual realism was reformulated into different versions of the Bodhisattva ideal, in particular Pure Land Buddhism.

To understand the relationship between the early Buddhist period and the early Prajñāpāramitā, a 'mapping' approach has been adopted to locate canonical persons, lineages, ideas and practices in time and space. This allows us to situate Kaccāna in the West/North-West of the subcontinent (Avanti/Madhurā) around the end of the 4th century BC. Regardless of the historicity of this individual, we can at least identify a lineage bearing his name that was deeply involved in the textual transmission of Proto-Madhyamaka in (roughly) the mid-canonical period. Buddhist Studies has not yet realised the potential of this approach. But it should be obvious that the 'Kaccāna hypothesis' proposed here, which connects the mid/late canonical period with the nascent Prajñāpāramitā, and situates it within the expansion of Buddhism towards the West, is a considerable advance on previous thinking about Prajñāpāramitā origins, which has focused on minor scholastic developments more or less entirely abstracted from the real world.

One implication of this thesis is that the 'forest hypothesis', i.e. that forest asceticism and/or meditation played a major role in the origins of Mahāyāna, should be revived.[65] In the Pāli canon, Kaccāna is a forest meditator. In Avanti he stays in a forest hut (*araññakuṭikā*) near the market town of Makkarakaṭa (SN 35.132); in Madhurā he stays in the Gundāvana (MN 84), which the commentary calls 'the black Gundā forest' (SN-a III.319: *kaṇhaka-gundā-vane*);[66] and in the *Udāna* (Ud 7.8), he is praised by the Buddha for practising bodily mindfulness.[67] Moreover, the 'practice suttas' of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* (XIV–XVI) suppose a strictly ascetic way of life, close to that described in their sister text from the *Suttanipāta*, the *Khaggavisāṇa Sutta* (Sn I.3). The meditative/ascetic character of Kaccāna, plus his connection with

[65] For critique of the 'forest hypothesis', see Drewes (2010) and Harrison (2018: 9ff).

[66] SN IV.117: *ekaṃ samayaṃ āyasmā mahākaccāno avantīsu viharati makkarakaṭe araññakuṭikāyaṃ*.

[67] Ud 77: *addasā kho bhagavā āyasmantaṃ mahākaccānaṃ avidūre nisinnaṃ pallaṅkaṃ ābhujitvā ujuṃ kāyaṃ paṇidhāya kāyagatāya satiyā ajjhattaṃ parimukhaṃ sūpaṭṭhitāya*.

the ascetically inclined *Aṭṭhakavagga*, should not be overlooked in attempts to trace the origins of the Prajñāpāramitā.

Needless to say, meditating in the forest was hardly an unusual vocation in early Buddhism. One could reasonably argue that the *Udāna* sutta which singles out Kaccāna for his meditative prowess is stereotypical, and repeated for a number of other *bhikkhus*.[68] However, the *Udāna* description of Kaccāna as a skilled meditator puts him in a rather elite group including Sāriputta, Moggallāna and Aññātakoṇḍañña, followed by the lesser known Kaṅkhārevata and Cūlapanthaka, as well as Piṇḍolabhāradvāja and Subhūti. Apart from the very famous disciples, this grouping includes at least one celebrated ascetic, Piṇḍolabhāradvāja, a *paṃsukūlika bhikkhu* according to the *Udāna*, and one extremely marginal figure, Subhūti, possibly a meditation master from the late canonical period (§3 above).

Moreover, with regard to Kaccāna staying in 'forest huts' (*araññakuṭikā*), it should be noted that such abodes are very rarely mentioned in the Pāli suttas, and not at all in the Vinaya. All this adds up to a small but significant collection of evidence supporting the ascetic inclinations of Kaccāna (or the lineage using his name). Thus it is reasonable to suppose that the figures of Kaccāna and Subhūti belonged to successive phases in the spread of an ascetically inclined lineage to the West/North-West, perhaps from the late 4th to late 3rd centuries BC. The origins of the Prajñāpāramitā should be located here, rather than among groups of scholastics poring over Abhidharma lists in the dusty corners of their monastic libraries.

To be sure, the strands of tradition on which these claims are made are rather meagre, especially with regard to Subhūti; sceptics will no doubt retort that any such historical claims are speculative at best. But constructing a theory is preferable to ignoring the evidence. The canonical traditions suggesting that Kaccāna and Subhūti were forest masters of the W/NW *could* be fabrications. On the other hand, why would early Buddhist tradition have placed Kaccāna in such a marginal region, if there were not some truth to it? And when composing new *suttas/sūtras*, surely it would have been preferable to memorialise the venerable teachers of one's lineage, rather than create entirely fictitious characters. Thus it is *preferable* to regard Kaccāna as an eminent figure in an apophatic and ascetic Buddhist tradition, of roughly

[68] See: Ud 3.24–25 (pp.27–28), Sāriputta and Mahā-Moggallāna; Ud 3.36 (pp.42–43), Piṇḍola-Bhāradvāja; Ud 3.40 (p.46), Sāriputta; Ud 3.50 (p.61), Cūḷa-panthaka; Ud 3.57 (p.71), Subhūti; Ud 3.66 (p.77), Aññāsi-Koṇḍañña; Ud 3.68 (p.77), Mahā-Kaccāna.

the mid-canonical period; to view Subhūti as a meditation master from the same tradition in the late canonical period; and to hypothesise that the Prajñāpāramitā emerged from this tradition, some time after Buddhism had become well established in Gandhāra in the 2nd century BC.

While this could be rejected as excessively conjectural, dismissing the historical value of canonical texts out of hand is unwarranted. Unlike Mahāyāna *sūtra*s, the canonical discourses are mostly realistic and early; they were not composed in an historical vacuum.[69] In this context, a recently discovered inscription from Deorkothar, central northern India, containing a lineage stemming from the Buddha via Anuruddha, is important. As Salomon and Marino have shown (2014), this inscription is found in the region where Anuruddha is situated in the Pāli suttas (the Ceti kingdom). The localisation of figures in early Buddhist texts should therefore be taken seriously. If there really was a lineage using Anuruddha's name in the exact same region where Anuruddha is situated in the canonical texts, it is reasonable to suppose that the same applies to Kaccāna and a lineage in his name in Madhurā/Avanti. As Salomon and Marino have warned (2014: 37), we should be careful not to fall into the trap of 'letting skepticism take over one's thinking, leading to the mindset of "In the end, we know nothing"'. It is preferable to formulate a positive hypothesis, to get as much out of the evidence we have, rather than throwing our hands up in the air and exclaiming 'who knows?'.

The background to the Prajñāpāramitā should thus be understood in terms of a tension between an apophatic and ascetic tradition, and the tendency towards Buddhist myth and cosmology. Furthermore, the notion that the Prajñāpāramitā was a scholastic reaction to Abhidharma should be regarded as a projection of later scholastic concerns onto early material which mostly lacks them. From Nāgārjuna onwards, the central tenet of Madhyamaka philosophy was that all *dharma*s are empty (*śūnya*) of own-being (*svabhāva*): Buddhist scholars have taken this philosophical position as intellectual history, it would seem, an historical mistake compounded by the lack of attention given to Gómez's thesis.

All this being said, it should by now be clear that the concept of 'Proto-Madhyamaka' confuses rather than clarifies the intellectual history of early Buddhism. What Gómez termed 'Proto-Mādhyamika in the Pāli canon'

[69] On the realism of canonical texts, see Sujato and Brahmali (2015: 81–83, §4.3.3; 84–89, §4.4.1).

would be better termed 'Proto-Prajñāpāramitā', since the content, style and meaning of the Prajñāpāramitā is anticipated in the Pāli canon, whereas the Prajñāpāramitā itself would be better described as 'Proto-Madhyamaka', since this is clearly the starting point for the later Madhyamaka tradition. However, reading certain teachings of the Pāli canon as 'Proto-Prajñāpāramitā' puts the cart before the horse, and fails to do justice to the breadth and subtlety of the early *via negativa* tradition.

A more suitable emic term to describe this tradition would be 'No View Buddhism', an etic equivalent of which could be 'Apophatic Buddhism'. Thus we can conclude that No View/Apophatic Buddhism, comprising a collection of closely interwoven ideas, themes and practices, fed into the Prajñāpāramitā/Proto-Madhyamaka, which in turn provided the resources for the Madhyamaka philosophical tradition. At all stages of development, from the Buddha to Nāgārjuna, the No View/Apophatic tradition can be distinguished from, and was most likely in dispute with, mythic and meditative realism. While the realism of the Abhidharma was a later addition to the philosophical scene prior to Nāgārjuna, by the 2nd century AD it had become the primary target of the No View/Apophatic tradition. This explains the marginal presence of Abhidharma critique in the Prajñāpāramitā texts, followed by its central position in Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka.

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