

## A Brief Introduction to Main Mahayana Sutras

Ven. Balangoda Ananda Chandrakeerthi.

### Introduction

Mahayana Doctrinal Literature is very vast. This literature has obtained canonical texts and non canonical etc. Here I give a rough minor explanation about only few main Mahayana Sutras. I selected to describe in this assignments about *Prajnaparamita* texts, The *Ratanakuta* Sutra, Pure Land Sutras, The *Saddharmapundarika* Sutra. It is obvious that non Mahayana traditions mention those treatises are not teachings of the Buddha. They explain those books are works of poets. Paul Williams mentions a reasonable answer for this question in his *Mahayana Buddhism; The Doctrinal Foundations*.

As always with Buddhism, the situation is more complex than that! What was necessary for a text not uttered by the Buddha himself to receive full authority was that the Buddha personally certified the utterance concerned. (Paul Williams Mahayana Buddhism; The Doctrinal Foundations 2005, Introduction, 29)

In same book, furthermore Paul Williams mentions again, Thus the Buddha approves of something someone has preached, or invites a person to preach on his behalf, or a teaching is given by a preacher who has been authorised by the Buddha, in the sense that preacher has been praised by The Lord for his wisdom and ability.

*Prajnaparamita* Sutra was a developed one during in long time periodically. English translation of the meaning is, *Perfection of Wisdom*. *Maharatanakuta* Sutra is also a one of the main Mahayana Sutras. It is named as *A Treasury of Mahayana Sutras*. This Sutra has

insisted in forty nine individual sutras. The Pure Land Sutra is a main Mahayana text. But this is not very fascinated one in comparison with other sutras. The *Saddharmapundarika* Sutra or The Lotus Sutra is also a most important one in Mahayana sacred treatises. Some people recite this sutra regularly. This sutra also was a huge work in Mahayana literature. *Prajnaparamita* Texts

This is the earliest Mahayana Sutra in the Perfection of the Wisdom literature. On account of that this literature named by this sutra. When we pay our attention to the meaning of the name that clearly mentioned it is *Sunyata*.

Now *prajna* is said to be a state of consciousness which understands emptiness (*sunyata*), the absence of self or essence even in *dharmas*.<sup>1</sup> There are many definitions about the term *prajna*. Here I mention few explanations among them. There are,

*Prajna* is a mental event, a state of consciousness, normally in the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist context a state of consciousness which results from analysis, investigation,..*Prajna* is sometimes a meditative absorption the content of which is the ultimate truth, the way things really are,... Thus the *Mahayanasamgraha* can refer to the perfection of wisdom as 'non-conceptual awareness' (*nirvikalpakajnana*),... Ultimate *prajna* as understood by the Mahayana, and *parjnaparamita*, the perfection of wisdom, appear to be generally the same.<sup>2</sup>

*Prajnaparamita* literature is the massive and extensive. But in originally it was not like that. Original texts were written in Sanskrit language in India. "The texts were translated into Chinese by Lokaksema about AD 179."<sup>3</sup> According to the Edward Conze's interpretation that he categorises *Prajnaparamita* texts as four phases.

The oldest text, the *Astahasrika* (8000 verse) *Perfection of Wisdom*, together with the *Ratnagunasamcayagatha*, which Conze sees as its verse summary.

The *Satasahasrika* (100,000 verse), the *Pancavimsatisahasrika* (25,000 verse), and the *Astadasahasrika*

(18,000 verse) *Prajna paramitas*.

The *Vajracchedika*: this is the famous *Diamond Sutra*, the 300 verse *Perfection of Wisdom*.

The *Abhisamayalamkara*, an exegetical work attributed to the 'celestial Bodhisattva' Maitreya. This is said to be the *Perfection of Wisdom* systematized for practice. Tibetans always study the *Prajnaparamita* through the medium of this text and its commentaries.

The *Adhyardhasatika* (150 verse) *Prajnaparamita*.<sup>4</sup>

This introduction is accepted by most of scholars. Likewise Poul points out again another nine stages about development of *Prajnaparamita* thought.

- (I) The initial phase represented by the first two chapters of the *Ratnagunasamcayagata*, (II) Chapters 3-28 of the *Astahasrika*;
- (III) Incorporation of material from the *Abhidharma*;
- (IV) concessions to the Buddhism of Faith; (V) the last third of the *Satasahasrika*; (VI) the short *sutras*; (VII) Yogacarin ( *Cittamtra*) commentaries; and finally (VIII) Tantric and (IX) Ch'an (Zen) uses and commentaries.<sup>5</sup>

Then in *Diamond sutra* mentioned about Blessed One's great disciple's Ven. Subhuti's pleased vow to the Buddha.

"It is wonderful, O Bhagawat, it is exceedingly wonderful, O Sugata, how much the noble-minded Bodhisattvas have been favoured with the highest favour by the Tathagata, the holy and fully enlightened!"<sup>6</sup>

This *Vagrakkhedika* or *Diamond-Cutter* has 32 chapters. In same treatise has another *Prajna-Paramita Hridaya-Sutra* and smaller *Prajna-Paramita-Hridaya-Sutra* too. Likewise Dr. Fa Qing mentioned like this, *Astahasrikaprajnaparamita*, or its verse rendering, the *Ratanagunasamcayagatha* reflected a polemic within Buddhism, centering on a critique of the "low aspirations" of those Buddhists who chose not to take the vows of the bodhisattvas.<sup>7</sup>



In Prajnaparamita texts included the doctrine of Sunyata as the central explanation of the Mahayana dharma. We can see that in clearly in Moti Lal Pandit's Sunyata.

The seminal ideas of the Mahayana are to be found in the Prajnaparamita texts. The Prajnaparamita is a generic name for a class of literature which largely concerns itself at explaining the central Mahayana concept of emptiness (*sunyata*). The Wisdom literature may, thus, be seen as the basis of Mahayana religious praxis and Philosophic thought. It is upon the notion of emptiness that Mahayana has interpreted, both in philosophic and religious terms, its soteriology.<sup>8</sup>

#### The Ratanakuta Sutra

The Ratanakuta Sutra, The Great Jewel-Heap Sutra had developed by many authors. "It is actually not one sutra, but a prodigious collection of forty-nine different sutras which cover a manifold range of topics."<sup>9</sup> According to the Charles's Buddhist Dictionary those texts collected into this Sutra earlier. "The texts were collected into the Ratanakuta-sutra were apparently quite early, and were said to have influenced Mahayana thought even from the time of Nagarjuna."<sup>10</sup> Then Hajime Nakamura mentions this treatise was written in Prakrit language. On account of that it is to be understood this text written in India. "As its original prototype was in Prakrit, the sutra was in vogue in the third-fifth centuries."<sup>11</sup> In same place he points out this sutra's translations and historical details,

The Chinese version of this text was translated between 585 and 592 A.D. It was probably produced not long before that time. Another view has it that the sutra came out after 550 when various religious added to it the teaching of the Saktas.<sup>12</sup>

There are special characteristics of the Mahatanakuta Sutra in A treasure of the Mahayana Sutras. That author mentions,

The range from the monastic precepts (Vinaya) to intuitive wisdom (prajna), ...Emptiness, or sunyata, is the outstanding, if not unique teaching of Buddhism. ... in Mahatanakuta, we find elaborate discussions on emptiness

in different settings, from different angles, and with different interpretations.<sup>13</sup>

It is very difficult to comprehend the Great Jewel-Heap Sutra.

#### The Pure Land Sutras

The teaching of Pure Land is known as long history of development. There are many aspects about pure land tradition in Mahayana treatise. Hajime Nakamura mentions many evidences in his Indian Buddhism. Under the conception of Amitabha Buddha this conception appeared form long ago. "This Buddha had two names: *Amitayus* and *Amitabha* from early days."<sup>14</sup> Then people started to worship the *Amithaba* Buddha and later it developed. But the doctrines of pure land are mainly based on three sutras.

They are,

1. The Smaller *Sukhavativyuha-sutra* (The Smaller Pure Land Sutra)
2. The Larger *Sukhavativyuha-sutra* (The Greater Pure Land Sutra)
3. The *Amitayurdhyana-sutra*.<sup>15</sup>

Master Thich Thien Tam mentions in his book about the transference of merit.

Central to the Pure Land tradition is figure of the Bodhisattva Dharmakara, the future Amitabha Buddha, who came to exemplify the Bodhisattva ideal and the doctrine of dedication of merit.<sup>16</sup>

According to the scholastic point of views that Smaller *Sukhavativyuha sutra* is the earliest one. But there are some contradiction ideas too. There was a one Chinese version of this sutra that mentioned that the person can be born in "blessed land" with hears and chants the name of *Amitayus* Buddha's name. These teachings are not very clear to be understood. The teachings of the pure land are very populated in many countries such as Japan, China Tibet ect.

"Throughout all Pure Land Scriptures of India, meditation upon Amitabha Buddha (*Buddhamusmrti*) was the essential practice."<sup>17</sup> There was the Teaching of the Buddha about the Blessed Land in Smaller *Sukhavativyuha sutra*.

The Bhagavat addressed the honoured Sariputra and said, ' O Sariputra, after you have passed from here over a hundred thousand kotis of Buddha countries there is in the Western part a Buddha country, a world called



Sukhavati ( the happy country).<sup>18</sup>  
 Buddha himself mentioned in same Sutra about situation of the Pure Land.  
 "O Sariputra, there is neither bodily nor mental pain for the living beings.  
 The sources of happiness are innumerable there. For that reason is that  
 world called Sukhavati (the happy)"<sup>19</sup> In accordance with the Nakamura's  
 information there is no doubt that the Larger Sutra was in extensive before  
 200 A.D. Furthermore he mentioned The Larger Sukhavativyuha sutra  
 was compiled after the pattern of *avadana*. "*Amitayur-buddha-dhyana-*  
*sutra* is an exponent of thoughts more than advanced in a sense than  
 found in any version of the *Sukhavativyuha-sutras*."<sup>20</sup> Mostly this sutra  
 was produced at the end of the 4 th century. The Chinese monk Shan- tao  
 had given a description in unique way about this sutra. There are various  
 kinds of definitions about the expression of the Pure Land whether it is a  
 "Reward Land or a Transformation Land."<sup>21</sup>

#### The *Saddharmapundarika* Sutra

This Sutra is the most important one among main Mahayana sutras.

Original language of *Saddharmapundarika* sutra is Sanskrit. In recent  
 years several texts of the Lotus Sutra, titled in Sanskrit *Saddharma-*  
*pundarika Sutra* or "The Sutra of the Lotus of the Wonderful," have  
 been discovered in Nepal, Chinese Asia, and Kashmir.<sup>22</sup>

This sutra translated into Chinese, Tibetan, Mongol, Manchu, Korean and  
 Japanese. Not only that but recently several translations into English and  
 European languages. According to the Hajime Nakamura's point of views  
 Lotus Sutra's Manuscript can be divided into three groups."1.Nepalese  
 version, 2. Gilgit (Kasmir) version, and 3. Central Asian version."<sup>23</sup>  
 Kumarajiva's translation of Lotus Sutra has 28 chapters. These are name  
 list of the chapters in the Lotus sutra in the Burton Watson's translation.  
 1.Introduction 2.Expedient means. 3.Simile and parable. 4.Belief and  
 understanding. 5. The Parable of the medicinal herbs. 6. Bestowal of  
 prophecy. 7. The parable of the phantom city. 8.Prophecy of enlightenment  
 for five hundred disciples. 9. Prophecies conferred on learners and adepts.  
 10. The teacher of the law. 11. The emergence of the treasure tower. 12.  
 Devadatta. 13. Encouraging devotion. 14. Peaceful practices. 15.  
 Emerging from the Earth. 16. The life span of the thus come one. 17.  
 Distinctions in benefits. 18.The benefits of responding with joy. 19.Benefits

of the teacher of the law. 20. The Bodhisattva never disparaging. 21.  
 Supernatural power of the thus come one. 22. Entrustment. 23. Former  
 affairs of the Bodhisattva medicine king. 24. The Bodhisattva wonderful  
 sound. 25. The universal gateway of the Bodhisattva perceiver of the  
 world's sounds. 26. Dharani. 27. Former affaires of king wonderful  
 adornment. 28. Encouragements of the Bodhisattva universal worthy.

In whole of the sutra included with the systems of pros and verse. Burton  
 Watson mention in his Introduction that main teachings of this Sutra are  
 Four Noble Truths ,Eight fold path and twelve link of Depending origination.  
 According to the Nakamura's findings that he points out four periods to  
 pass before this sutra was completed.

That is to say, the gathas of class I came into being in the first period, and  
 the second period saw the appearance of its expatiation in prose. In the  
 third period an enlargement of those of class II was made, and in the  
 fourth the chapters beginning with the *Bhaisajyarajapurvayoga-parivarta*  
 XXII were added.<sup>24</sup>

All living beings are called as the children of the Buddha in accordance  
 with the *Saddharmapundarika* sutra. This Lotus sutra was very populated  
 in Japan and Korea. Paul Williams mentions in his Mahayana Buddhism  
 that some groups recite this sutra large number of times.

An accompanying text explains that each word contains all others, one  
 instant of thought contains 3,000 words (popular T'ien-t'ai slogan). The  
 outline of the circle, and the lines separating the realms, are not unbroken  
 lines but are made up of many small circles. Each time the Lotus Sutra is  
 recited 10,000 times, or (even better) 100,000 times, one small circle is  
 linked in.<sup>25</sup>

According to the features were mentioned by many scholars we can be  
 known about the value of the main Mahayana Sutras. These are the very  
 important topics to make researches. I also like to find more details about  
 the main Mahayana sutras.

#### Conclusion

Mahayana literature is a very vast and difficult to understand for a new  
 student. But when we started to study about this treatises that it is very  
 interesting. First I decided to search about more other few sutras too.  
 Such as *Buddha-Avatamsaka* , *Mahaparinirvana*, *Vimalakirti Nirdesa*,  
 and *Prajnaparamita Upadesa* too. But according to problems of less



time that I had to discuss only few sutras. Among the Mahayana treatises *Prajanaparamita*, *Ratanakuta Pure land* and *Saddharamapundarika* sutras also very famous in the world. Specially *Saddharamapundarika* sutra is very respected in Japan and Korean countries. As a final conclusion I can say this sutras are the treasures of the people not only Buddhists but non Buddhists also. Our responsible is the preserve these texts and teaches to the people correctly.

### Foot Notes

- 1 Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism; The Doctrinal Foundations*, Reprinted in New York, 2005, page 43.
2. Ibid... pages 42,43,43,44.
3. Moti Lal Pandit, *The Essence of Mahayana Spirituality*, Munsshiram Manoharal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 1988, page 293.
4. Paul Williams...Ibid, page 41.
5. Paul Williams...Ibid, page 42.
6. The Sacred Books of the East, Part II, The Vagrakkhedika, Translated by Various Oriental Scholars, and Edited by F. Max Muller, Printed in India, 1997, pages 112-113.
7. Fa Qing, Buddhist Studies, 03 The-Main-Mahayana- Sutras.pdf, 07 Nov. 2008, <http://www.ibc.ac.th/faqing/MA/Mahayana>.
8. Moti Lal Pandit...Ibid, page 294.
- 9.A treasury of Mahayana Sutras; *Selections from the Maharatnakuta Sutra*, Translated by Garma C.C. Chang, Genral Editor, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd, Delhi, Reprint: 2002, page IX.
10. Charles S. Prebish, *Historical Dictionary of Buddhism*, Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi, 1995, page 221.
11. Hajime Nakamura, *Indian Buddhism; A Survey with Bibliography Notes*, Reprinted: Delhi, 2007, page 210.
12. Hajike Nakamura...Ibid, page 210.
13. A treasure of Mahayana Sutras...Ibid, XI.
14. Hajime Nakamura... Ibid, page 202.
15. Ibid, page 203.
16. Pure- Land Zen; *Zen Pure Land Letters from Patriarch Yin Kuang*, Translated by Master Thich Thien Tam, consulting Editor, Forrest G.Smith, Reprinted and donated by The Corporate Body of the Buddha Education Foundation, 1993, page 11.
17. Hajike Nakamura...Ibid, page 205.
18. The sacred Books of the East, Part II, the Smaller Sukhavati-Vyuha,..Ibid , page 91.
19. Ibid, page 91.
20. Ibid,.. page 207.
21. Ibid... Page 209.
22. The Lotus Sutra, Translated by Burton Watson, Published by Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi,1999, page X.
23. Hajime Nakamura..Ibid, page, 185.
24. Ibid, page, 186.
25. Paul Williams... Ibid, page 157.