

The Hīnayāna Fallacy*

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In what follows I examine the function of the term Hīnayāna as a referent to an institutional entity in the academic study of the history of Buddhism. I begin by surveying the use of the term by Chinese pilgrims travelling in India, followed by taking up to the *Tarkajvālā*'s depiction of the controversy between adherents of the Hīnayāna and the Mahāyāna. I then turn to the use of the term in the West, in particular its promotion by the Japanese delegates at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. I conclude that the current academic use of the term as a referent to a Buddhist school or Buddhist schools is misleading.

The Chinese Pilgrims

According to the succinct definition given in the *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Hīnayāna “is a pejorative term meaning ‘Lesser Vehicle.’ Some adherents of the ‘Greater Vehicle’ (Mahāyāna) applied it to non-Mahāyānist schools such as the Theravāda, the Sarvāstivāda, the Mahāsāṃghika, and some fifteen other schools.”¹

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¹ Strong 2004: 328, who continues by indicating that in the *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* the term “mainstream Buddhist schools” is used instead. This term, which is an improvement over Hīnayāna, has not found unanimous acceptance, cf., e.g., Sasaki 2009: 25 note 2: “I cannot, however, subscribe to the indiscreet use of the term ‘Mainstream,’ which implies a positive assertion about a particular historical situation, and therefore, although completely outmoded, I continue to use the terms ‘Mahāyāna’ and ‘Hīnayāna’”; for critical comments on the expression “mainstream” cf. also Skilling 2013: 101f.

When trying to contextualize the term Hīnayāna in the historical setting in India,² obvious sources for information are the descriptions provided by the Chinese pilgrims Fāxiǎn, Xuánzàng and Yìjìng. The indications they give, however, make it clear that to use the term Hīnayāna as an umbrella term for the Buddhist schools or sects that arose in India, which tradition usually numbers as eighteen, is not entirely straightforward.

Reporting on the conditions of monasteries in early 5th century India, Fāxiǎn (法顯) on several occasions refers to monastics who were practising the Mahāyāna and the Hīnayāna (大小乘學). According to his description, in one region three thousand monks practiced the Mahāyāna and the Hīnayāna conjointly; in an adjacent region where the Buddha-Dharma flourished the Mahāyāna and the Hīnayāna were also practiced conjointly; and for Sāṅkāśya he records that about a thousand monks and nuns were also practising Mahāyāna in combination with Hīnayāna.³

Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna are mutually exclusive terms,⁴ thus both terms could not really be used to describe the practice of the same person. Therefore I take Fāxiǎn's description to imply that some monastics out of the group he was describing followed the Mahāyāna, while other monastics followed the Hīnayāna. These different vocations did apparently not prevent them from in some way living together.

However, since in order to become monastics in the first place these practitioners of the Mahāyāna and the Hīnayāna would have to be ordained in any of the 'eighteen' schools, it becomes clear that Hīnayāna as an umbrella term for these Buddhist schools does not fit the situation described by Fāxiǎn. If all eighteen

²The term Hīnayāna itself means, in the words of Rhys Davids 1913: 684, "a wretched, bad method, or system, for progress on the way towards salvation". The common expression "small vehicle" is in fact, as already pointed out by Nattier 2003: 173 note 4, "not based on the Indian term at all, but on the Chinese expression ... 小乘 ... used by Kumārajīva and others." Besides the fact that 小 does not render the pejorative *hīna*- as well as 劣 or 下, *yāna* need not imply a "vehicle", cf., e.g., Gombrich 1992, Vetter 2001: 62-66, Anālayo 2009 and Walser 2009.

³T 2085 (高僧法顯傳) at T LI 859a₁₆: 三千僧兼大小乘學, 859a₂₀: 兼大小乘學 (which thus does not explicitly indicate that these were monastics), and 860a₅: 僧及尼可有千人 ... 雜大小乘學.

⁴Cf., e.g., the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*, Lévi 1907: 4,24: *tasmād anyonyavirodhād yad yānaṃ hīnaṃ hīnaṃ eva tat, na tan mahāyānaṃ bhavitum arhati*, which, after having mentioned five aspects of opposition between the two *yānas*, concludes that due to this mutual opposition the Hīnayāna is indeed inferior, it is incapable of becoming the Mahāyāna. For a study of the contrast between Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna in this work in general cf. D'Amato 2000.

schools are Hīnayāna, members of one or the other of these schools should then not be Mahāyāna. Mahāyāna, alternatively referred to as the *bodhisattvayāna* or the *buddhayāna*, is “great” precisely because its followers have embarked on the path of the “bodhisattva” with the aspiration to become a “Buddha” in future. This decision marks the difference compared to the Hīnayānists, who do not aspire to future Buddhahood and who have not embarked on the path of the bodhisattva. Yet, if Fǎxiǎn’s description is to be trusted, some members of a monastic Hīnayāna school were at the same time adherents of the Mahāyāna.

The impression that something is not quite right with the use of Hīnayāna for all of the Buddhist schools is further reinforced when turning to Xuánzàng (玄奘), who travelled to India two centuries later. In his travel records, Xuánzàng also regularly mentions that in India and elsewhere Buddhist monks practiced both Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna.⁵ On several occasions in his description of the situation in India he refers to practitioners of the Mahāyāna who were at the same time members of the Sthavira-nikāya (學大乘上座部法). In India itself he reports that nearly a thousand such monks were found at Bodhgayā, nearly five hundred in Kāliṅga, and nearly three hundred in another two locations.⁶

In the light of the conclusion that already suggests itself based on Fǎxiǎn’s description, Xuánzàng’s reference to these Mahāyāna practitioners found among the members of the Sthavira school is perhaps less puzzling than it might seem at first sight. That is, this description may simply refer to monastics ordained in the Sthavira tradition(s) whose spiritual vocation was to follow the bodhisattva path and who would presumably have studied Mahāyāna texts.⁷ The same interpreta-

⁵Cf., e.g., T 2087 (大唐西域記) at T LI 889c₁₇, 890b₄, 893c₁₇, 896b₇, 910a₅, 910b₁₉, 927a₂₂, 934c₁₅, 935a₂₈, 936b₁₃, 937a₄, 937c₈, 938a₆ and 940a₁₇. Xuánzàng usually mentions not only the number of monastics, but also the number of monasteries in which they were living (except for 910b₁₉, which describes the situation in Nepal). Since at T LI 877a₁₆ he indicates that the followers of the Mahāyāna and of the Hīnayāna were dwelling apart from each other, 大小二乘, 居止區別, I take it that in the situation he describes the practitioners of the Mahāyāna and the Hīnayāna were not staying in the same monastery.

⁶T 2087 at T LI 918b₁₄, 929a₃, 935c₂ (which has a slightly different formulation) and 936c₁₅. For Sri Lanka, which Xuánzàng did not visit personally, he mentions adherents of the Sthavira school that cultivate the Mahāyāna numbering twenty-thousand, T 2087 at T LI 934a₁₄. Regarding this reference, Deeg 2012: 153 could be right that this is an attempt “by Xuanzang to upgrade the otherwise, at least in a Chinese context, low-ranked Hīnayāna-*sthaviras* to the respected status of Mahāyāna-monks”, although I doubt this would be the case for the other references of this type.

⁷Bechert 1973: 13 comments that “the Mahāyāna-Sthaviravādin are those sections of the Sthaviravāda community who had accepted Mahāyāna doctrines although they still belonged to [the] Sthaviravāda school as far as bhikṣu ordination and vinaya-karma was concerned.”

tion would probably also apply to an eleventh century Khmer inscription, which refers to monks who have ordained as *mahāyāna sthavira bhikṣus*.⁸

To be sure, this interpretation only works if we allow that the Sthavira or other Buddhist schools were not entirely composed of Hīnayāna followers. That this appears to have been indeed the case can be seen from the report of the *Vinaya* specialist Yijing (義淨), who travelled India in the later part of the 7th century. He explains that in the case of the four main monastic schools (*nikāyas*) the distinction between the Mahāyāna and the Hīnayāna is uncertain.⁹ In fact, the distinction between Buddhist schools, *nikāyas*, is a matter of monastic ordination traditions, whereas the distinction between the Mahāyāna and the Hīnayāna refers to a vocational distinction.¹⁰ The two distinctions have no necessary relation to each other.¹¹

As Gombrich (1988: 112) points out, “Mahāyāna ... is not a sect, but a current of opinion which cut across sects as properly defined.” Bechert (1992: 96f) explains that “the formation of Mahāyāna Buddhism took place in a way which was fundamentally dissimilar from that of the formation of Buddhist sects. Whereas the formation and growth of Buddhist *nikāyas* took place mainly on the basis of local communities, the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism was a development which pervaded the whole sphere of Buddhism and many *nikāyas* ... One could not be a Buddhist monk without being a member of one of the old sects ... [yet] members of any one of these sects could have accepted the religious ‘program’ of Mahāyāna without leaving the community of their *nikāya*.”

How reliable is the information provided by Fāxiǎn, Xuánzàng and Yijing? The descriptions furnished by the Chinese pilgrims certainly need to be read keep-

⁸Cœdès 1929: 22,3: *vrah paṃnvas bhikṣu mahāyāna sthavira*, trsl. id. 23: “qui ont pris les ordres comme moines (*bhikṣu*) dans (la secte) Mahāyāna ou (dans la secte) Sthavira”; cf. also the similar rendering by Assavavirulhakarn 2010: 88: “monks ordained as Mahāyāna or Sthavira”. Yet, as Bizot 1988: 111f convincingly argues, to convey such a sense one would expect the inscription to be worded differently, wherefore it seems more probable that the reference is to monks ordained in a Sthavira tradition who are followers of the Mahāyāna. Skilling 2013: 149 note 159 comments that “we cannot say with certainty whether Xuanzang and Sūryavarman I used the compound in the same sense, but in any case Cœdès’ translation of the term as *dvanda* ... is incorrect, given that there is no such thing as a Mahāyāna *bhikṣu* ordination.”

⁹T 2125 (南海寄歸內法傳) at T LIV 205c8: 其四部之中, 大乘小乘區分不定; cf. also Deeg 2006: 120f.

¹⁰Cf. the discussion in La Vallée Poussin 1930.

¹¹This difference does not seem to have been fully clear to Xuanzang himself, as in T 2087 at T LI 891a₂₁ he speaks of a thousand monks, of which many practice the Hīnayāna, while a few practice in other schools (*nikāyas*), 多學小乘, 少習餘部.

ing in mind that they combine first hand impressions with hearsay and hagiography in a manner not easily set apart from each other. Moreover, the way they describe conditions in India must have been influenced by awareness of the propagandistic effect their reports would have back in China.¹²

Now according to Schopen (2000/2005: 10), “in China in the third century the Mahāyāna was of ‘paramount importance’, well situated among the ecclesiastical and social elite, well on its way – if not already – mainstream. In India it is, during the same period, embattled, ridiculed, scorned by learned monks and the social elite ... and at best marginal.”¹³ In such a setting one would expect the pilgrims to err on the side of overstressing the dominance of the Mahāyāna and belittling the Hīnayāna, in line with the stark contrast between the two *yānas* with which they would have been familiar from textual sources available in China.¹⁴ Since their descriptions do not corroborate such a stark contrast and repeatedly show the Mahāyāna in a less than dominant position, it seems that their accounts deserve to be taken seriously in this respect. That is, the report that both *yānas* were practiced by Indian monastics stands a good chance of reflecting actual conditions, even if the numbers given may not necessarily be accurate.

The *Tarkajvālā*

If the descriptions given by the Chinese pilgrims stand a chance of reflecting the ground situation in India in the 5th to 7th century, the question arises in what sense all of the Buddhist monastic schools can be assembled under the heading of being Hīnayāna. An example of such use can be found in Paramārtha’s biography of Vasubandhu, who according to the traditional account was a follower of the Hīnayāna until he converted to the Mahāyāna. The biography, apparently compiled in China, reports that Vasubandhu had completely learned the principles of the eighteen schools and had well understood the Hīnayāna; he held on to the Hīnayāna as right and had no faith in the Mahāyāna, as this was not taught by

¹²For the case of Xuanzang cf. the discussion in Deeg 2009.

¹³Cf. also the observation by Bareau 1985: 648 that Faxian and Xuanzang report only rarely instances of actual Mahāyāna forms of practice in India.

¹⁴Deeg 2006 suggests that the stark contrast between the two *yānas* made in Chinese texts, even though in actual fact there was no substantial presence of the Hīnayāna in the country, served as a foil to avert criticism raised against the Buddhist tradition as a foreign creed not suitable to the situation in China. In this way, qualities perceived as negative could be attributed to the Hīnayāna tradition, with the prevalent Mahāyāna in contrast being a form of teaching that was suitable for the Chinese.

the Buddha.¹⁵ This description suggests a relationship between the application of Hīnayāna to the eighteen schools and the perennial accusation of the Mahāyāna as not stemming from the Buddha.

Vasubandhu provides several arguments against this accusation in the *Vyākhyāyukti*,¹⁶ which seem to have formed the basis for a similar series of arguments in the *Tarkajvālā*, a 6th century doxographical work that offers a detailed examination of the Buddhist schools and their tenets. This examination is preceded by a reference to those who are of an “inferior aspiration”, *hīnādhimukta* / *dman mos*.¹⁷ The *Tarkajvālā* reports that those of inferior aspiration criticize the Mahāyāna on the grounds that it was not taught by the Buddha, as its teachings are not included in the discourses, etc., and do not exist among the eighteen schools.¹⁸ That is, the accusation that the Mahāyāna is not the Buddha’s teaching is rooted in the observation that its teachings are not found in the discourse collections transmitted by the eighteen schools.

The *Tarkajvālā* then comes out with arguments against such challenges. One is to propose that the Mahāyāna teachings are part of a compilation carried out by Samantabhadra, Mañjuśrī and Maitreya, etc. Of course, the disciples (of the eighteen schools) did not include the Mahāyāna teachings in their collections because these were beyond their ken.¹⁹

The reasoning recorded in the *Tarkajvālā* makes it clear in what sense – from the Mahāyāna viewpoint – all of the eighteen Buddhist schools are Hīnayāna. This

¹⁵T 2049 (婆藪槃豆法師傳) at T L 190c₁₂: 法師既遍通十八部義, 妙解小乘, 執小乘是不信大乘, 謂摩訶衍非佛所說; cf. also Takakusu 1904: 290 and Tola and Dragonetti 1996/1997: 244.

¹⁶For a study of these arguments in the *Vyākhyāyukti* cf. Cabezón 1992; cf. also Pāsādika 2009: 503.

¹⁷Eckel 2008: 303,8 (4.1). The importance of the *Tarkajvālā* for appreciating the application of the term *hīnayāna* to the Buddhist schools suggests itself to me from the circumstance that this work employs the corresponding Tibetan term *theg pa dman pa* on several occasions, cf. D 3856 *dza* 42b₆, 48a₁ and 48b₃ or Q 5256 *dza* 45b₇, 51a₄ and 51b₈ (*dbu ma'i snying po'i 'grel pa rtog ge 'bar ba*). In contrast, I have not been able to locate occurrences of the term *hīnayāna* with a digital search in central doxographical works like the *Mañjuśrīparipṛcchā*, T 468 (文殊師利問經), the *Śāriputraparipṛcchā*, T 1465 (舍利弗問經), the *Samayabhedoparacanacakra*, T 2031 (異部宗輪論), T 2032 (十八部論), T 2033 (部執異論) and D 4138 or Q 5639 (*gzhung lugs kyi bye brag bkod pa'i 'khor lo*), and of course in the *Dīpavaṃsa*. The term *hīnayāna* is also relatively rare or even absent in early Mahāyāna discourses, as already noted by, e.g., Kimura 1927: 119, Harrison 1987: 80, Williams 1989/2009: 43, Harrison 1990: xviii, Karunaratne 1992: 453, and Nattier 2003: 172.

¹⁸Eckel 2008: 307,28 (4.7): *na buddhoktir mahāyānaṃ, sūtrāntādāv asaṃgrahāt*, 308,30 (4.8cd): *aṣṭādaśanikāyāntarbhāvābhāvan na niścitam*.

¹⁹Eckel 2008: 336,8: *theg pa chen po'i gsung rab ni de dag gi yul ma yin pa'i phyir ro*.

notion emerges as an expedient reply to being challenged for lacking canonical authority. Those who according to tradition compiled the teachings of the Buddha, an event called the first *saṅgīti* and located at Rājagṛha, did not include the superior Mahāyāna teachings. Therefore the teachings they did include are fit to be reckoned Hīnayāna, and those who transmit those teachings – the ‘eighteen’ schools – deserve the same epithet.

Thus the application of the term Hīnayāna emerges in the context of a polemical argument; it does not reflect the actual historical situation. To reckon the teachings collected at the first *saṅgīti* at Rājagṛha as Hīnayāna is in fact an anachronism, as the early Buddhist period does not yet know of the generalized aspiration to become a Buddha in the future.²⁰ Hence from a historical viewpoint it is not meaningful to apply the distinction between Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna to early Buddhism. Such a distinction presupposes the existence of the bodhisattva path as an ideal to be emulated, which one may either reject or else adopt. For such a decision to be possible and thus to form the basis for a meaningful distinction, the bodhisattva ideal first of all has to come into existence.

This would be like applying the term “protestant” to early Christianity. While the teachings of early Christianity can indeed be seen as in some way being a protest against certain aspects of Judaism, the term “protestant” only makes sense from the time of Luther onwards, once the distinction between Catholics and Protestants has come into being. In the same way, it makes only sense to use the qualification Hīnayāna for those who are unwilling to pursue the bodhisattva path, who have decided not to embark on the *bodhisattvayāna*. As long as this *yāna* has not yet come into existence, it is not really possible to qualify someone as “inferior” because of not embarking on this *yāna*.

The passages surveyed above from the Chinese pilgrims show that the application of the term Hīnayāna to the ‘eighteen’ Buddhist schools does not fit what appear to have been the actual historical conditions in ancient India. Monastic followers of the Mahāyāna were at the same time members of a Buddhist school by dint of their ordination.²¹ Skilling (2004: 143) explains that “available scriptures

²⁰For a study of the first traces of developments, evident in later layers of the early discourses, that eventually would have led to the arising of the bodhisattva ideal, cf. Anālayo 2010.

²¹Here it may also be relevant to note that the lay origin of early Mahāyāna proposed by Hirakawa 1963 (cf. also Przyłuski 1926: 369f, Lamotte 1954: 378-379, the related position taken by Ray 1994, and the discussion in Vetter 1994), has been critically reviewed by, e.g., Schopen 1975: 180, Williams 1989/2009: 21-27, Harrison 1995: 57-63, Sasaki 1997, Silk 2002: 376-382, Nattier 2003: 89-96 and Sasaki 2004; cf. also the recent contribution by Strauch 2010: 25f.

of the eighteen schools allow all three options: it is one's own decision whether [to] become an Arhat, a Pratyekabuddha, or a Buddha, and to practice accordingly. That is, the eighteen or four schools embrace the three *yānas*.”

In sum, the term Hīnayāna as a referent to the teachings of early Buddhism or to the Buddhist schools has its origins and meanings in a polemic context; it does not accurately represent the historical situation. Nevertheless, the term has been used widely in academic publications. In what follows I survey the development that appears to have contributed to this usage.

The Parliament of Religions

According to recent research, use of the term Hīnayāna in western publications becomes a broadly visible phenomenon at the beginning of the 20th century and steadily increases until reaching a peak around 1960.²² The event that appears to have exerted particular influence in this respect is the World's Parliament of Religion in 1893 at Chicago, in the sense of leading to a more widespread use of the term Hīnayāna.²³

The World's Parliament of Religion – the first time in the West that representatives of religions from around the world came together – had a strong impact on the reception of Buddhism in the United States of America.²⁴ The Parliament itself was held in 1893 as part of the Columbian exposition to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of the journey of Columbus to the New World.

The Columbian exposition was an opportunity for the United States of America as well as for Japan to show themselves to the world as modern nations. For the Japanese, presenting Japan as a civilized modern nation with an ancient culture – of which Japanese Buddhism was seen as a central aspect – carried the hope that acquiring recognition from the West would enable a renegotiation of unfair

²²Perreira 2012: 454.

²³Perreira 2012: 500 explains that “it was in Chicago at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions when the terms by which we study Buddhism took a decisive turn. From this time forward, the terms Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna are in ascendance, and will gradually eclipse ‘Northern Buddhism’ and ‘Southern Buddhism’ as the main categories by which Buddhism was to be organized in scholarly and popular discourse.”

²⁴In his study of Buddhism in America in the period 1844-1912, Tweed 1992/2000: 31 notes that “with the possible exception of the publication of Arnold's *Light of Asia*, no single event had more impact than the World's Parliament of Religions of 1893.”

treaties that had earlier been imposed upon Japan by the Western powers.²⁵ At the same time, success abroad would of course result in a welcome strengthening of Buddhism at home, which was still recovering from the previous persecutions during the Meiji period.

Against this background, a central aim of the Japanese delegation at the World's Parliament of Religion was to counter Western perceptions of the Pāli canon as representative of original Buddhism and to establish the authenticity of the Mahāyāna Buddhism of Japan.²⁶ A recurrent theme in the presentation of the delegates was thus naturally the polemic discourse that establishes the canonical authenticity of the Mahāyāna, following the traditional arguments based on the Hīnayāna / Mahāyāna divide and the *pànjiāo* (判教) schemes of classifying Buddhist teachings so as to accommodate their diversity within a coherent system that can be attributed to a single teacher,²⁷ the Buddha. Due to the need to differentiate themselves from other forms of Buddhism in Asia – Sri Lankan Buddhism was represented at the Parliament by Anagārika Dharmapāla and Siamese Buddhism by Prince Chudhadharn – the Japanese delegates recurrently identified the Thera-

²⁵This topic was taken up explicitly by one of the Japanese delegates, Hirai Kinzō, in his talk at the Parliament; cf. Barrows 1893: 445 or Houghton 1894: 159.

²⁶Snodgrass 2003: 199 indicates that “up to the time of the Parliament in 1893 almost nothing was known about Japanese Buddhism beyond the general assumption that as a form of Mahayana it was necessarily a later and therefore aberrant form of the original teachings of the historical Buddha.” Thus, in the words of Snodgrass 2003: 9, “the task ... the delegates faced ... was to relate Japanese Buddhism to the Western construct that privileged the Theravada of the Pali texts. They needed to show that Japanese Buddhism encompassed all of the truth of the Theravada – that is, all those aspects of Buddhism which had attracted contemporary Western approval – but that Theravada, Southern Buddhism, was no more than a provisional and introductory expression of the Buddha's teachings.” Harding 2008: 139 notes that “Japanese Mahāyāna, portrayed as the culmination of Buddhism, was actively differentiated from earlier schools of Southern Buddhism, pejoratively labelled ‘Hīnayāna.’” Perreira 2012: 512 explains that “approaching the Columbian Exposition as a unique opportunity to recast the terms by which the Buddhism of Japan had been defined in Western scholarship, the Japanese ... fully embraced the idea that the Buddhism of Japan was indeed more ‘developed’, but not in the sense of being less genuine or authentic as Western scholarship insisted – rather, it was portrayed as more progressive, and, as such, it constituted the very essence of the Buddha's teaching.”

²⁷In his detailed study of the *pànjiāo* taxonomies, Mun 2006: 1f points to early fifth century China as the starting point, when “Kumārajīva systematically translated an enormous amount of texts”, which led to “an urgent need to devise doctrinal classifications in order to explain ... contradictions among them.” Thereon “Kumārajīva classified the Buddha's teaching into two groups, i.e., the Mahāyāna and the Hīnayāna”, presenting “the Mahāyāna as superior to the Hīnayāna.”

vāda as being the present day manifestation of the Hīnayāna known to them from their own doctrinal background.

In his initial presentation at the Parliament, the layman Noguchi Zenshirō remarked that, instead of making gifts of Japanese teapots and the like to his American hosts, he wished to make a gift of the best of his possessions, which is Buddhism.²⁸ He then announced that the delegation had brought thousands of books for distribution to their hosts, among them Kuroda's *Outline of the Mahāyāna, as Taught by the Buddha*.²⁹

As the title already indicates, the book by Kuroda, which had been specifically prepared for distribution at the Parliament, claims that the Mahāyāna was taught by the Buddha himself. The term Hīnayāna is used by Kuroda as a referent to the Buddhism found in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.³⁰

The Shingon representative Toki Hōryū introduced precisely the same claims in his presentation at the Parliament, namely that the Buddha taught Mahāyāna and that the Hīnayāna is now found in Southern Buddhism.³¹ The argument presented by Toki Hōryū and Kuroda was in fact crucial to the effort of the Japanese delegation.³²

²⁸Barrows 1893: 440 or Houghton 1894: 156.

²⁹Snodgrass 2003: 82f notes that “the Japanese were very aware of the importance of the published record of the conference to Western understanding of their religion ... the delegates and their supporters not only prepared their papers with this in mind but prepared a number of books on Japanese Buddhism for distribution.”

³⁰Kuroda 1893: iif introduces the terms Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna and then explains that “though these two doctrines are not without differences, they were both taught by one Buddha”; adding that in Japan Hīnayāna is considered “only as secondary branch of religious knowledge”, whereas in “Southern India, Ceylon, Birmah, Siam, etc., only the Hīnayāna is taught.” Snodgrass 2003: 178 reports that the publication by Kuroda “achieved greater permanence than others because it was reprinted and further distributed through the Theosophical Society in 1894.” Kuroda 1893 was also translated into German by Seidenstücker 1904, thereby extending the influence of his presentation to German readers. Similar doctrines were also made available to the French by Fujishima 1889: 54f, who repeats the statement by Nanjio 1886: 2 quoted below (note 36) on the Hīnayānists not being ashamed and speaking evil of Mahāyāna texts, followed by ingeniously arguing, in regard to certain Mahāyāna-sūtras that he reckons as having become part of the Tripiṭaka a century after the Buddha's demise: “si ces derniers n'avaient pas existé auparavant, d'où les aurait-on tirés?”

³¹Barrows 1893: 543 or Houghton 1894: 222, which differ in their record of the details of his talk.

³²Snodgrass 2003: 221 comments that “establishing that the Mahayana was the Buddha's teaching was pivotal. Upon this rested the claim that Japanese Buddhism was ‘real’ Buddhism.”

The Jōdo Shinshū representative Yatsubuchi Banryū then recommended to his audience the study of the *History of Japanese Buddhist Sects* by Professor Nanjō.³³ Nanjō, who had studied under Max Müller in Oxford and thus spoke with the credentials of an accredited academic,³⁴ claims in his book that the *Buddhāvataṃsaka-sūtra* was the first teaching given by the Buddha after his awakening.³⁵ Having identified the eighteen schools as Hīnayāna, Nanjō then highlights the inability of the Hīnayānists to understand the Mahāyāna.³⁶

The Tendai representative at the Parliament, Ashitsu Jitsuzen, again identified the Buddhism found in southern Asian countries like Ceylon and Siam as Hīnayāna, followed by presenting Japanese Mahāyāna Buddhism as the most powerful Buddhist tradition.³⁷

During the Parliament, the Rinzai representative Shaku Sōen befriended the publisher Paul Carus.³⁸ A year after the Parliament Carus published his influen-

³³Houghton 1894: 324 records his statement in this way: “those of you who would care to know the outline of Buddhism might read Professor Nanjo’s English translation of the ‘History of the Japanese Buddhist Sects.’” I take the fact that this injunction is not found in the corresponding section in Barrows 1893: 723 to be due to the circumstance, noted by Snodgrass 2003: 201, that “papers in Barrow’s official copyright record have been heavily edited.”

³⁴According to Snodgrass 2003: 120, Nanjō had gone to the West and became a disciple of Max Müller “to study the science of religion, the philology and historical techniques of Orientalist scholarship. These were to be used to present Japanese Buddhism in a manner acceptable by the standards of Western scholarship ... by participating at the highest levels of Western academia, the Japanese priests obtained academic credentials ... and were listened to and taken seriously within professional circles, their interpretations validated by the same processes as those of Western authorities.”

³⁵Nanjō 1886: xiii, a claim based on distinguishing the Buddha’s teaching into five periods, following a traditional expedient for presenting Mahāyāna as the first teaching given by the Buddha. According to this scheme, Hīnayāna was taught by the Buddha only in the second period of his teaching activities.

³⁶Nanjō 1886: 2 speaks of “the eighteen schools of the Hīnayāna”, and p. 51 remarks on “the collection of the Mahāyāna books. Though it is as clear or bright as the sun at midday, yet the men of the Hīnayāna are not ashamed at their inability to know them, and speak evil of them instead.”

³⁷Barrows 1893: 1040 or Houghton 1894: 541. According to the record in Houghton 1894: 541, he added that “there have been a great many Europeans and Americans who studied Buddhism with interest, but unfortunately they have never heard of Mahayana. They too hastily concluded that the true doctrine of Buddhism is Hinayana ... they are wrong. They have entirely misunderstood.”

³⁸Snodgrass 2003: 228 explains that “the Japanese presentation was a major revelation for Carus”. Nagao 2009: 176 notes that “Carus served as a councilor of the Parliament of Religions and lectured at one of its sectional meetings. This great event proved to be a turning point in his career ... after the Parliament concluded, Carus invited Shaku Sōen to his mansion in La Salle for a week”, adding in a footnote that Shaku Sōen had been advised beforehand to befriend Carus.

tial *Gospel of Buddha*,³⁹ with an introduction that contrasts the Hīnayāna to the Mahāyāna.⁴⁰ As a result of the contact between Shaku Sōen and Paul Carus, D.T. Suzuki, a lay Zen disciple of Shaku Sōen, came to stay in the United States with Carus.

In his *Outlines of Mahāyāna Buddhism*, the prolific writer D.T. Suzuki continues in ways similar to the Japanese delegates at the Parliament.⁴¹ He presents the Mahāyāna as a teaching originating from the time of the historical Buddha,⁴² and criticizes the Western perception of Hīnayāna Buddhism as the only genuine teaching of the Buddha.⁴³

³⁹ According to Tweed 1992/2000: 65, “with the possible exception of Olcott, Carus was probably more influential in stimulating and sustaining American interest in Buddhism than any other person living in the United States.”

⁴⁰ After referring to the Hīnayāna, Carus 1894: ix explains that “following the spirit of missionary propaganda, so natural to religious men who are earnest in their convictions, later Buddhists popularised Buddha’s doctrines and made them accessible to the multitudes ... they constructed, as they called it, a large vessel of salvation, the Mahāyāna, in which the multitudes would find room and could be safely carried over ... the Mahāyāna is a step forward in so far as it changes a philosophy into a religion and attempts to preach doctrines that were negatively expressed, in positive propositions.”

⁴¹ Pereira 2012: 528 comments on Suzuki that “it is largely owing to his influence that Buddhism, from this time onward, will increasingly be conceived as being divided into two principal schools – Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna”. In a paper on Suzuki, Pye 2008: 1f comments that “there is probably no other single writer whose works have had a greater influence on the European and North American reception of Buddhism.”

⁴² Suzuki 1907: v refers to “Mahāyāna Buddhism, whose history began in the sixth century before the Christian era.” As Snodgrass 2003: 263 comments, “the concern to show that Mahayana and Japanese Buddhism are the teachings of the historical Buddha remains.”

⁴³ Suzuki 1907: 11 explains that “what is generally known to the Western nations by the name of Buddhism is Hīnayānism, whose scriptures ... are written in Pāli and studied mostly in Ceylon, Burma and Siam. It was through this language that the first knowledge of Buddhism was acquired by Orientalists; and naturally they came to regard Hīnayānism or Southern Buddhism as the only genuine teachings of the Buddha ... Owing to these unfortunate hypotheses, the significance of Mahāyānism as a living religion has been entirely ignored; and even those who are regarded as best authorities on the subject appear greatly misinformed and, what is worse, altogether prejudiced.”

Current Usage

From the Parliament to subsequent publications,⁴⁴ the distinction between Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna successfully made its way into the general discourse on Buddhism.⁴⁵ While the term Hīnayāna was known earlier,⁴⁶ it appears to have come into prominent use after the World’s Parliament of Religion in 1893,⁴⁷ where its promotion by the Japanese delegation and then by D.T. Suzuki stands in a logical continuity with the polemics recorded in the *Tarkajvālā*. Throughout, the expression Hīnayāna serves to deflect criticism of the lack of canonical authority of the Mahāyāna. In spite of a general awareness of the fact that the term stems from a polemical context and has clear pejorative connotations,⁴⁸ the use continues up to the present day.⁴⁹

An example, chosen simply for the sake of illustration, would be the sketch of the history of Buddhism in Faure (2009: 7 and 10), who reports that “a schism occurred between the disciples of the Buddha that eventually led to a separation into the two main schools – the ‘Great Vehicle’ (Mahāyāna) and the ‘Lesser Vehicle’ (Hīnayāna) ... the ‘Lesser Vehicle’ ... later became Theravāda.” “Hīnayāna (a term we are using here for want of a better one and which we do not intend

⁴⁴Harding 2008: 16 notes that “the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions provided a singularly spectacular showcase of positions, prejudices, preferences, and portrayals that continue to determine the presentation and reception of Buddhism in both Asia and the West.”

⁴⁵In a paper on the Western reception of Zen, Sharf 1995: 108 comments that “given the pedigree of these early Zen missionaries, one might have expected Western scholars of Buddhism to approach their high-minded pronouncements with considerable caution, if not scepticism, but such has rarely been the case.”

⁴⁶Already Rémusat 1836: 9–12 introduced the term with a detailed discussion. Rockhill 1883/1907: 196, after translating the section from the *Tarkajvālā* on the Buddhist schools, reported that these were referred to as Hīnayāna. Beal 1884: 5 identified the little vehicle with early Buddhism. Eitel 1888: 63f offered a short entry on Hīnayāna that speaks of “18 subdivisions.” Monier-Williams 1889/1995: 159 indicated that “the people of Ceylon, Burma and Siam have always preferred the ‘Little Vehicle’”; etc.

⁴⁷Perreira 2012: 519 explains that the “effort to promote Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna as the basic division in Buddhism ... continued long after the Parliament, and it eventually gained traction in the United States.”

⁴⁸According to Perreira 2012: 450f, the Inaugural Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, held in Sri Lanka in 1950, appears to have been particularly instrumental in drawing public attention to the pejorative connotations of the term Hīnayāna.

⁴⁹For the type of reasoning involved cf., e.g., Sharma 1976: 131, who holds that while “on the one hand the term Hīnayāna is undesirable as it is a pejorative; on the other hand it is useful academically as referring to the pre-Mahāyāna schools collectively.”

to have any pejorative connotations whatsoever) was initially transmitted to Sri Lanka during the reign of Ashoka and then, from the tenth century CE, spread throughout Southeast Asia (Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia). It lives on today in the form of Theravāda.”

A schism involves a splitting of a monastic community that leads to the resultant factions undertaking their respective communal observances independently.⁵⁰ This is different from a vocational difference based on the individual decision whether or not to embark on the bodhisattva path. As the reports by the Chinese pilgrims show, this vocational difference cuts across the Buddhist monastic schools which, including the Mahāsāṃghika school, are comprised under the heading of the “eighteen schools”. Thus the distinction between Hīnayāna and the Mahāyāna is not the product of a schism.

The Theravāda tradition cannot simply be considered a developed form of Hīnayāna. Identifying Theravāda as a form of Hīnayāna is self-contradictory, since among the Buddhist populations of Burma, Sri Lanka and Thailand the aspiration to become a Buddha in the future has for a long time been a recognized aim, attested to in inscriptions and texts.⁵¹ This makes it misleading to refer to these Buddhist populations with a term that by definition stands in contrast to the bodhisattva path.

The main problem in presentations of this type is not merely the continued use of a pejorative term, instead of using other and less loaded alternatives.⁵² The real problem is that the contrast between Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna, in the words of Skilling (2005: 270), refers to “trends in ideas and practices that developed ... within the institutions of the Buddhist *saṃghas*”. Hence it is not meaningful to use these terms as if they were in themselves *saṃgha* institutions.

Such misapplication naturally tends to obscure an accurate perception of the historical situation. According to Cohen (1995: 18), “the prevailing conception of the *nikāyas* as sub-species of the Hīnayāna should be aborted ... the Mahāyāna/Hīnayāna distinction ... loses most of its significance as a handle for Indian Buddhist institutional history.”

⁵⁰ Cf., e.g., Bechert 1961/1982 and Hüsken 1997.

⁵¹ Cf., e.g., Rahula 1971, Tambiah 1976: 96f, Ratnayaka 1985, Endo 1996, Samuels 1997, Skilling 2003, Harvey 2007 and Chandawimala 2008. For inscriptions in Theravāda countries that document the donor’s aspiration for Buddhahood cf., e.g., Luce 1969: 56, Dohanian 1977: 20–25 and Assavavirulhakarn 2010: 175.

⁵² Cf., e.g., the discussion in Katz 1980 and also above note 1.

At times, the use of Hīnayāna in academic publications is not really required. Thus the classic on the Buddhist schools by Bareau (1955) has the title *Les sectes bouddhiques du petit véhicule*. The topic of his research would have been clear to the reader if he had just chosen *Les sectes bouddhiques*, “the Buddhist sects”. This suffices to show that the topic in question is the *nikāyas* and there seems to be no real benefit in adding the qualification that these are of the “little vehicle”.

A key reference work by Norman (1983) has the title *Pāli Literature, Including the Canonical Literature in Prakrit and Sanskrit of all the Hīnayāna Schools of Buddhism*. Here as well, there seems to be no need for the qualification *Hīnayāna* once the *Schools of Buddhism* have been mentioned, which makes it fairly clear that literature of *nikāya* Buddhism is intended, not Mahāyāna works. If a need is felt to make this indubitably plain in the title, however, then instead of *Hīnayāna* an expression like *nikāya* Buddhism would be preferable. Thus the title could read: *Pāli Literature, Including the Canonical Literature in Prakrit and Sanskrit of all the Schools of (nikāya) Buddhism*.

The issue is not one of redundancy only, however. The problem that can result from considering the Theravāda tradition as Hīnayāna can be exemplified with a page in the study of Buddhism in Burma by Spiro (1970/1982: 62). After quoting Suzuki’s *Outlines of Mahāyāna Buddhism*, Spiro explains that “the *Bodhisattva* ideal is not found – nor for reasons just suggested, could it be found – in the *Theravāda* tradition.”⁵³ On the very same page he then reports that “in Theravādist Burma ... there has been a long tradition of aspiration to Buddhahood.”

If there has been a long tradition of aspiration to Buddhahood, then it is not really possible to state that the *bodhisattva* ideal is not found in the Burmese Theravāda tradition. Yet, such a contradiction is not easily noticed as long as we are misled by the assumption that the Buddhist traditions fall into two distinct institutional categories, of which in principle only one advocates the *bodhisattva* path. This is to fall prey to what I would call the “Hīnayāna fallacy”, taking polemical arguments as if they were accurate descriptions of historical facts.

Cohen (1995: 20) points out that once “Mahāyāna is positively characterized by its members’ pursuit of the *bodhisattva* path; the Hīnayāna is negatively characterized as the non-Mahāyāna” and by the fact that its members do not pursue the *bodhisattva* path. “However, when positively characterized, the Hīnayāna

⁵³ While Spiro 1970/1982: 61 was aware of the fact that Suzuki’s presentation is the “point of view of a partisan”, he nevertheless seems to have been influenced by the basic underlying distinction that informs Suzuki’s presentation.

is defined by members' affiliation with one or another *nikāya*, which, of course, means that the Mahāyāna is known negatively by its members' institutional separation from those same *nikāyas*." Cohen (1995: 21) concludes that "we are left with the Mahāyāna/Hīnayāna distinction as a mere structural dualism devoid of specific content, a mere nominalism." In fact, neither of these two descriptions reflects historical reality, making it clear that there is something basically wrong with the distinction between the Hīnayāna and the Mahāyāna as historical categories.

In the words of Silk (2002: 367f) "the referent of the term 'Hīnayāna,' when it occurs in Buddhist texts themselves, is never any existent institution or organization, but a rhetorical fiction ... a fundamental error is thus made when we imagine references to 'Hīnayāna' in Mahāyāna literature to apply to so-called Sectarian Buddhism, much less to Early Buddhism." Skilling (2013: 76) concludes that "the Hīnayāna never existed, anywhere or at any time, as an establishment or organization, as a social movement, as a self-conscious historical agent. Nor was Hīnayāna a stage or period in the development of Buddhism ... the Hīnayānist was defined by Mahāyānist polemics; he was a dogmatic construction, not a social identity. He was a straw man, a will-o'-the-whisp, a *māyāpuruṣa*."

Conclusions

By way of conclusion, it seems to me that the use of the term Hīnayāna as a fundamental category for studying the history of Buddhism is misleading. As far as I can see, the term Hīnayāna is best confined to discussions of Mahāyāna polemics. The problems of continuing to deploy it as a classificatory concept for studying the history of Buddhism are, in brief:

- 1) Referring to Buddhism in India at least until the reign of Aśoka as Hīnayāna is meaningless, since neither Mahāyāna nor its opponents had so far come into existence and their main issue of contention — the option to follow the bodhisattva ideal — was still in the making. A better term for this period would be "early Buddhism".⁵⁴
- 2) Hīnayāna as an umbrella term for the Buddhist monastic schools is misleading, because Mahāyāna was not confined to laity. Terms that can be used instead

⁵⁴On the Pāli discourses as reflecting "early Buddhism" cf. Anālayo 2012.

would be “Buddhist schools” and/or “*nikāya* Buddhism”;⁵⁵ a way of designating the period in question would be “Buddhism of the middle period”.⁵⁶

3) The use of Hīnayāna for the traditions of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and South-east Asia is incorrect, because the respective Buddhist traditions recognize the assumed distinctive characteristic of the Mahāyāna – the bodhisattva path – as a viable option of practice. A better term would be “Theravāda”.⁵⁷

Abbreviations

- D Derge edition
- Q Peking edition
- T Taishō (CBETA) edition

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⁵⁵Cf., e.g., Strong 1995: 87.

⁵⁶Schopen 1995/2004: 94 uses the expression “Middle Period of Indian Buddhism” for “the period between the beginning of the Common Era and the year 500 C.E.”. On following his definition, the two centuries between the time of Aśoka and the beginning of the Common Era would require a term on its own, which could be, e.g., the “post-Aśokan” period.

⁵⁷For a more detailed discussion of my reasons for using the term Theravāda cf. Anālayo 2013.

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