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Interpolations and Idiosyncrasies in  
Dharmakṣema's 曇無讖 Translation of the  
*Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra*  
(T.374 *Da banniepan jing* 大般涅槃經)

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**Introduction.**

The *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* (henceforth simply *Mahāparinirvāṇa*), sometimes called simply the “*Nirvāṇa Sūtra*” after its shorthand Chinese title *Niepan jing* 涅槃經, is a Mahāyāna discourse (*sūtra*) composed in India in the early centuries of the Common Era. In recent years it has been reassessed to be perhaps the strongest contender for the earliest extant Buddhist discourse to have espoused teachings about buddha-nature (*buddhadhātu*; commonly Ch. *foxing* 佛性), or the presence of what in India was commonly called *tathāgatagarbha* (Ch. *rulaizang* 如來藏) in the constitution of all

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sentient beings.<sup>1</sup> There are three complete versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* that are of primary importance for studies of its content and development in South Asia as well as its transmission from there:<sup>2</sup>

- 1) *Da bannihuan jing* 大般泥洹經 (T.376), translated into Chinese ca. 416–418 by a team including Faxian 法顯 and Buddhahadra 佛陀跋陀羅 (henceforth MPNMS<sup>F</sup>).
- 2) *Da banniepan jing* 大般涅槃經 (T.374), translated into Chinese ca. 421–432 by Dharmakṣema 曇無讖 (henceforth MPNMS<sup>D</sup>/MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>: see below).<sup>3</sup>
- 3) *Yongs su mya ngan las 'das pa chen po theg pa chen po'i mdo*, translated into Tibetan in the ninth century by Jinamitra, Jñānagarbha and Devacandra (henceforth MPNMS<sup>T</sup>: references throughout this paper are to the critical edition of Habata 2013).

Close reading of these three versions should also be supplemented by attention to numerous Sanskrit fragments surviving from three manuscripts

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding the date of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* relative to other works concerned with teachings about buddha-nature/*tathāgatagarbha*, see Radich 2015: 59–99; for ideas about its absolute dating, see *ibid.* 19–57; Jones 2021: 237–239. Earlier scholarship about the relative dating of these works is shaped by Takasaki 1974. See also a critical assessment of these matters in Zimmermann 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Two further translations are of greater relevance for those studying the transmission of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* outside of India: T.375, a revised version of T.374, produced in the 430s under the Liu Song 劉宋, and a second Tibetan translation based on Dharmakṣema's Chinese (e.g., Derge no.119; Peking no.787). Given that this second Tibetan version was used by Tibetan commentators, an argument could be made that MPNMS<sup>D</sup> was more influential in Tibet than MPNMS<sup>T</sup> also.

<sup>3</sup> Regarding the dating of Dharmakṣema's work, and on the phases of the translation of the *Niepan jing* in particular, see Chen 2004.

of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* recovered from Central Asia, together with a single complete folio held at Kōyasan, all diligently edited and studied by Habata Hiromi (e.g., 2007; 2009; 2019). The synoptic study of these materials is made infinitely easier by a concordance produced by Habata (2019: 435–448), to whose assiduous work on versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, especially its critical Tibetan edition (2013) and our extant Sanskrit, the present paper, and studies of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* more widely, owe a tremendous debt.

Of these discrete witnesses to versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, it is undoubtedly the translation of the well-travelled Indian scholar whose name has been reconstructed as Dharmakṣema (385–433) that is something of an outlier.<sup>4</sup> This has also been the far more influential of the two Chinese versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, ever since its celebrated role in the vindication of the monk Daosheng 道生 (355–434) in debates about the ubiquity of buddha-nature (*foxing* 佛性) and the status of the allegedly “irredeemable” *icchantikas* (*yichanti* 一闍提).<sup>5</sup> Suspending for a moment more technical matters regarding its content, the most apparent differences between Dharmakṣema's translation and our other witnesses to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* are two:

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<sup>4</sup> This is observed already by Takasaki (1971; 1974: 128–131). Regarding the biography of Dharmakṣema, see Hodge 2012: 10–30; with special attention to the dating of his translations, see Chen 2004. Note that in what follows I use the name Dharmakṣema loosely to include any team or studio associated with a figure by that name (or, strictly speaking, the Chinese Tanwuchen 曇無讖, from which “Dharmakṣema” is reconstructed).

<sup>5</sup> Liebenthal 1955; 1956; Liu 1984.

- a) Dharmakṣema's translation is roughly four times the length of MPNMS<sup>F</sup> and MPNMS<sup>T</sup>. Nearly all of this additional content continues after the end of material common to all versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*. None of this additional material corresponds to any content preserved in extant Sanskrit fragments. In what follows, content in Dharmakṣema's translation (T.374) that corresponds to what we have in our other versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* will be called MPNMS<sup>D</sup>; the abbreviation MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> will be used to refer to the vast amount of material in Dharmakṣema's translation that continues *after* our other witnesses to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, or the "core" text known to have had some basis in Indian Buddhism, draw to a close.<sup>6</sup>
- b) Considered on its own, as a translation purportedly produced *before* Dharmakṣema's acquisition of further scrolls and the production of MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>, MPNMS<sup>D</sup> has many passages and features that distinguish it from what we find in our other versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*. It is this unparalleled content of MPNMS<sup>D</sup> that is the primary focus of the current paper.

The jury is certainly out with respect to the provenance of MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>, which is purportedly based on material that found its way to Dharmakṣema at Guzang 姑藏, present day Wuwei 武威, after his production of MPNMS<sup>D</sup>. While very plausibly not translated from any Indic text, MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> exhibits

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<sup>6</sup> This begins at T.374 (XII) 428b17. For further discussion of these matters, see initially Hodge 2012: 22–30, as well as scholarship discussed in the next note.

knowledge of Indian Buddhism not known in other extant Chinese translations of that period.<sup>7</sup>

Pending further study of MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> on its own terms, there is also need to reflect critically upon material unique to MPNMS<sup>D</sup> that is embedded in Dharmakṣema's translation of the core material of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, which suggests either i) that its translator saw a substantively very different recension of the Indic text or ii), as evidence below suggests, interpolations in MPNMS<sup>D</sup> were introduced by its translator(s), who supplied a great deal, including short narrative episodes, in the production of the translation.<sup>8</sup> A consideration of MPNMS<sup>D</sup> alongside other witnesses to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, as well as some other works in Dharmakṣema's oeuvre as a translator, strongly suggest that passages and features unique to MPNMS<sup>D</sup> were supplied by him, to say nothing of the provenance of MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For a recent study of content in MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>, primarily that concerned with meditational practices, see Radich 2019: 578–615 (and specifically, concerning sources for Dharmakṣema's acquisition of this material, *ibid.* n.168); regarding evidence that MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> knows material of Indic provenance not apparently otherwise known in early fifth century China, see Radich 2011: 160–163. For an introduction to how MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> deals with teachings about buddha-nature, see Jones 2021: 62–69.

<sup>8</sup> The present article invites comparisons between Dharmakṣema and his predecessor Zhu Fonian 竺佛念 (late C4th), whose creativity in the production of Chinese Buddhist works, some of which can be demonstrated to be compositions by his own hand, is the focus of Nattier 2010, as well as Lin and Radich 2021.

<sup>9</sup> An early discussion of the differences between versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, which also points to the influence of MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> back upon content of MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, is Fuse 1942: 85–99. A very relevant text that will be discussed here is Dharmakṣema's translation of the *Mahāmeghasūtra* (T.387), which is the focus also of Jones forthcoming a; see also Radich 2017: 252–254. Yamada's (1968: 13–14) study of the *Karuṇāpūṇḍarikasūtra* asserts that in the Chinese translation attributed to Dharmakṣema (T.157: *Beihua jing* 悲華經) he

There are passages in MPNMS<sup>T</sup> and in extant Sanskrit fragments of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* that reflect slightly more developed forms of the text than those used in the production of both MPNMS<sup>F</sup> and MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, and yet there are still more instances where MPNMS<sup>D</sup> exhibits content, either supplementary details or long excurses, absent from all other versions.<sup>10</sup> There are also a great many linguistic and doctrinal idiosyncrasies throughout MPNMS<sup>D</sup> that one could highlight – the present paper cannot attend to every example of such things. What follows is attention to several passages in MPNMS<sup>D</sup> completely unique to it, which are marked in Habata's invaluable concordance of versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* (see above) by a plus symbol + after each reference to MPNMS<sup>D</sup> as it appears in the Taishō edition of the Chinese canon. These passages I below call “major interpolations”, of which there are eleven in MPNMS<sup>D</sup>.<sup>11</sup> Of these, six will receive close attention here; the remaining five, which require further scrutiny beyond the scope of the present paper, will receive only a brief overview, for the benefit of readers who might wish to investigate their content further.

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“seems to have taken the liberty of expounding certain passages,” some of which are signposted in footnotes throughout Yamada's work. See also n.28, below.

<sup>10</sup> Notably there are only two sections of MPNMS<sup>T</sup> (§206 and §267) that constitute material totally unique to this version. MPNMS<sup>T</sup> is in places more verbose than our Chinese translations, but perhaps our Chinese translators also made efforts to make their translations concise.

<sup>11</sup> Habata (2019: 189) refers to these as “Texterweiterungen” (expansions of the text). I believe that Habata has here identified passages that supply new content beyond what is found in other versions; this is not quite the same as the addition of further small details or glosses (what I below call “minor interpolations”), of which there are a great many more in MPNMS<sup>D</sup>.



Signposting the content of MPNMS<sup>D</sup> that we cannot be sure has an Indic basis, and which in fact looks suspiciously like the work of our translator, should be useful for further study of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*.<sup>12</sup> The present paper will close by attending to a few further details in Dharmakṣema's translation, what we might call "minor interpolations", as well as his treatment of a couple of pivotal aspects of the doctrine of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* that also deserve to be highlighted, given that they further support the hypothesis that MPNMS<sup>D</sup> is as much a witness to the doctrinal leanings of its translator as it is to the content of any Indian version of this influential Mahāyāna text.

**Major Interpolation 1: Cuṇḍa's Discussion with the Buddha (MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 372a2–b12 [≈ MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §51]).**

The first major interpolation appears already in the first chapter of MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, in its second fascicle. This is in material that Shimoda Masahiro has argued constitutes an earlier stratum in the composition of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, in which the text is focused firmly on the Buddha's apparent death and the revelation that his true mode of being, his *dharmakāya* or otherwise his "adamantine body" (*vajrakāya*), is permanently enduring.<sup>13</sup> An important point to note at the outset is that this structurally and perhaps chronologically

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<sup>12</sup> I have in mind also those who may read the English translation of MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, produced by Mark Blum (2013), which reasonably enough does not signpost content that is found only in Dharmakṣema's translation.

<sup>13</sup> Regarding this stratification, see Shimoda 1997: 163–171; also, Radich 2015: 207–210.

earliest content in the composition of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, across our other versions of it, makes no mention of teaching about buddha-nature or *tathāgatagarbha*; in this regard, content of MPNMS<sup>D</sup> alone differs.

Narratively, this first major interpolation in MPNMS<sup>D</sup> appears just after the introduction of the lay devotee Cuṇḍa, who is known already from other versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* narrative as the person who offers to the Buddha what becomes his final meal.<sup>14</sup> At this point in the Mahāyānist *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, the Buddha has already declared that he is soon to depart from the world, and although he has been offered meals by a host of kings, deities and other well-wishers it is Cuṇḍa's offering that the Buddha accepts. Immediately the assembled gods and humans launch into praise for how rare it is for someone to be able to provide a buddha with his final meal. But in MPNMS<sup>D</sup> alone we find a further exchange between the Buddha and Cuṇḍa, all before we rejoin the events of other versions of the text. The indented passage that follows is a precis of the content unique to MPNMS<sup>D</sup>.

The Buddha applauds Cuṇḍa's gift, and states that it will bring about two karmic results, which cannot be distinguished from one another, once it is accepted: the attainment of supreme, perfect awakening (阿耨多羅三藐三菩提), and entry into *nirvāṇa* (入於涅槃). This confuses Cuṇḍa, who asks how he can attain the former given that he has demonstrably not done what is required to attain awakening, such as generate the power to aid other sentient beings; moreover, the latter cannot be attained by the Buddha precisely because he has both the

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<sup>14</sup> For example, in the Pāli *Mahāparimibbānasutta/-suttanta*: DN II 72 (Cuṇḍa is introduced at page 126).

propensity and compassion to help all others. Cuṇḍa also points out that he is just a lowly sentient being, while the Buddha is “a god among gods” (*tianzhong tian* 天中天); Cuṇḍa has a body sustained by food, while the Buddha has a body without afflictions, a *vajrakāya* (*jingang zhi shen* 金剛之身), a *dharmakāya*, a permanent body, a limitless body. Cuṇḍa has mortal eyes, while the Buddha has higher forms of vision; he eats food, and the Buddha does not.<sup>15</sup>

The Buddha states that for innumerable ages he has not had a body sustained by food, but rather the *dharmakāya*, or *vajrakāya*; he moreover says that those who have not seen buddha-nature (未見佛性者) are those who have a body that is afflicted, a body sustained by food, and that this is a body with limitations.<sup>16</sup> The Buddha states that if a bodhisattva were to accept a gift of food such as that which Cuṇḍa offers, then enters into the *vajrasamādhi* (*jingang sanmei* 金剛三昧), then when that meal is digested they would perceive buddha-nature (見佛性) and immediately attain supreme, perfect awakening – that is, the status of a buddha.<sup>17</sup> A bodhisattva in this condition, although perhaps unable to explain everything in the twelvefold canon of Buddhist scriptures, will nonetheless be more proficient in all such things than he would be otherwise. The Buddha finishes by stating that he has not really accepted any sustenance for innumerable ages, and

<sup>15</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 372a2–b26.

<sup>16</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 372a29–b1: 善男子，未見佛性者，名煩惱身，雜食之身，是後邊身。

<sup>17</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 372b1–3. Note that MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §51, corresponding to MPNMS<sup>F</sup> 858a9–11, is incredibly short, and is simply the Buddha's acceptance of Cuṇḍa's offering.

that his apparent acceptance of rice from the two female cowherds Nandā and Nandabalā (*nantuo* 難陀 and *nantuoboluo* 難陀波羅), and his subsequent awakening, were all just a display.<sup>18</sup> The Buddha finally accepts Cuṇḍa's offering for the sake of the assembly, although he clarifies that in reality he eats none of it.<sup>19</sup>

The opening matter of this passage, concerning the Buddha's transcendent character beyond his flesh-and-blood body, does not substantively depart from what is said elsewhere across all versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, although its elaboration of the Buddha's character, like much of what follows in the Buddha's response, in this passage unique to MPNMS<sup>D</sup> occurs before we find any such thing in our other versions.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the assertion that the Buddha has for many ages not had a body sustained by food is a primary concern of later lines in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*; in MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, it appears in the passage above then recedes without further elaboration: structurally, it is conspicuous. A further detail that is then offered is still more curious, as the Buddha reveals that those who have regular bodies are those who have not seen buddha-nature (*foxing* 佛性). This, together with the further reference to "seeing" buddha-nature in the lines below, comes seemingly out of

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<sup>18</sup> Mention of these two women, in place of the girl Sujātā, is found also in sources including the *Ekottarikāgama* (T.125 [II] 560a29–b10) and *Aluohan jude jing* 阿羅漢具德經 (T.126 [II] 834a29), and in the *Catuspariṣatsūtra* of the (Mūla)Sarvāstivāda (trans. Kloppenborg 1973: 47–50). For more regarding this detail, see Hackstein, Habata and Bross 2019: 1–7.

<sup>19</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 372a27–b12.

<sup>20</sup> This interpolation interrupts content corresponding to MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §51; the first mention of a *vajrakāya* in MPNMS<sup>T</sup> occurs at §144. For more on this and related themes, see Radich 2011 [2012]; 2015: 105–157.

nowhere, and in all other versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* any mention of this teaching only appears much later, after much more material that is instead only invested in the figure and character of the Buddha himself.<sup>21</sup>

Not only does this introduction of what seems to be buddha-nature teaching appear premature, but the specifics of it are noteworthy. First, the expression used is *foxing* 佛性, which is Dharmakṣema's preferred way of referring to that which is permanently present in all sentient beings; in contrast, for example, to the expression *rulaizang* 如來藏 (i.e., *tathāgatagarbha* – language to which we will return below). Second, there is the specific detail that buddha-nature is something *seen*, and that vision of buddha-nature is not only desirable but integral to the achievement of awakening. All complete versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* refer to the importance of seeing one's *tathāgatagarbha*, or buddha-nature.<sup>22</sup> However, it is in MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, and then with great frequency throughout MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>, that there is repeated emphasis on seeing one's buddha-nature, which in MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> seems sometimes to be equated with attaining

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<sup>21</sup> As stated above, this interpolated content corresponds to MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §51. The first mention of the expression *tathāgatagarbha* (*de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po*) appears only at §272, while the first trace of any (*buddha-*)*dhātu* (*[sangs rgyas kyī] khams*) is in a verse of §117, then at §244 or §274, with the first unambiguous reference to *buddhadhātu* at §279.

<sup>22</sup> E.g., MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §376.24–25 : ...*de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po ni sems can thams cad la yod la mthong bar mi nus pa tsam du zad* – "...in all sentient beings is the *tathāgatagarbha*, but they are simply unable to see it"; compare MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 407b20–28; MPNMS<sup>F</sup> 883b24–25 (which at this juncture refers to "knowing" one's buddha-nature). Other passages refer to the fact that while it cannot be seen by lesser beings, a bodhisattva of the tenth-stage (*bhūmi*) is capable of perceiving their buddha-nature in some faint manner (MPNMS<sup>F</sup> 887a6–b17; MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 411c20–12b8; MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §405–414), an idea carried into the commentarial stratum of the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (Johnston 1991 [1950]: 77.3–4). For more on this language in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, see Jones 2021: 40–47.

“*mahāparinirvāṇa*”.<sup>23</sup> The idea of seeing one's buddha-nature also appears several times in Dharmakṣema's translation of the *Mahāmeghasūtra* (T.387 *Dafangdeng wuxiang jing* 大方等無想經).<sup>24</sup> These passages again employ the expression *foxing* 佛性 to refer to that which is present in all sentient beings; but these references to buddha-nature, let alone catching sight of it, are entirely absent from our Tibetan version of the same discourse, as well as the Sanskrit manuscript of the *Mahāmeghasūtra*.<sup>25</sup>

Also interesting in the above interpolation is the fleeting mention of the *vajrasamādhi*. This meditative state is associated with the moment of the Buddha's awakening. As it appears here (minus the reference to buddha-nature), it is commonly associated with a bodhisattva's climactic realization of supreme awakening, and the end of their long journey to buddhahood. Whereas the *vajrasamādhi* is not mentioned at all in our other witnesses to

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<sup>23</sup> For some prominent examples, see MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> 502b19–21; 514c8-14; 516b16–17; also 480c11–21, discussed by Radich (2019: 563). Teachings about buddha-nature in MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> (exclusively), which are far from consistent and strongly suggest the composite nature of this material, require further and careful study. See also the brief overview of the eleventh major interpolation in MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, below.

<sup>24</sup> Other versions of the Chinese canon apart from the Taishō know this text by a name more befitting its Indic title: *Da fangdeng dayun jing* 大方等大雲經.

<sup>25</sup> For examples in the *Mahāmeghasūtra*, see T.387 (XII) 1082c18–21; 1085b3–4; 1102c13-15. This feature of the *Mahāmeghasūtra* was perhaps first noticed by Takasaki (1974: 276–301). Buddha-nature in the *Mahāmeghasūtra* is a topic explored in a forthcoming publication (Jones forthcoming a), very much indebted to personal correspondences with Ye Shaoyong, who is currently studying a Sanskrit manuscript of the *Mahāmeghasūtra* held at the Potala Palace (Ye et al forthcoming; also Ye 2023). Also relevant, and showing all the signs of Dharmakṣema's idiom, is the separate “*Ninth Fascicle of the Great Cloud Sūtra*” (T.388: *Da yun wuxiang jing juanju* 大雲無想經卷九), regarding which see Radich 2017.

the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, it reappears several times in MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>.<sup>26</sup> On one occasion it appears in a list of what are presented as major topics of MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>, featuring ideas and terminology representative of this material rather than anything we find in the core *Mahāparinirvāṇa*.<sup>27</sup> This content of MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> has been cited as a significant source for the history of the *vajrasamādhi* idea in East Asia, in particular in relation to the composition in China of the “*Vajra-samādhi-sūtra*” or *Jingang sanmei jing* 金剛三昧經 (T.273).<sup>28</sup> However, it is once again not clear that any Indian form of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* contained any of this material, including the fleeting reference to this pivotal meditative state in the passage of MPNMS<sup>D</sup> cited above: it appears only in content exclusive to MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, and MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> after it, but not in other extant versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*.

A final detail worthy of note is the mention of a bodhisattva's knowledge of the twelvefold canon of Buddhist scripture (*shi'er bujing* 十二部經). By itself this would not be terribly noteworthy, given that many Buddhist traditions known to us accepted the idea that the Dharma remains

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<sup>26</sup> A search finds 35 occurrences of 金剛三昧 in MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>, and of course simply one occurrence in MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, and no occurrences in MPNMS<sup>F</sup>. On this topic, see also Radich 2011 [2012]: 276–280, especially n.195.

<sup>27</sup> MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> 559a13–21. See also 524c23–25. Many more, shorter passages referencing the *vajrasamādhi* in MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> could be listed. What is apparent is that this is a topic of interest in MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>, present in a passage unique to MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, but not a feature of other versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*.

<sup>28</sup> See Buswell 1989: 109–111; also 114. The passages that Buswell cites as having been particularly influential in his exploration of the *vajrasamādhi* in East Asia, and in the context of the early formation of the Ch'an tradition, are drawn from MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>. As Buswell notices (ibid. n.108), the *vajrasamādhi* appears in Dharmakṣema's *Karuṇāpūṇḍarīkasūtra* (T.157 [VIII] 209c14–19; 221b13–14), although both times simply in lists of other meditative states; notably, this is absent from our Sanskrit version of the text: see n.9, above.

in the world through twelve types of literature. However, like some traditions – represented by statements in the Pāli Canon, and curiously also the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* – the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* otherwise consistently recognizes a canon that is ninefold (*jiu bujing* 九部經): this is the case across MPNMS<sup>F</sup>, MPNMS<sup>T</sup> and, conspicuously, some other passages of MPNMS<sup>D</sup> apart from this interpolation.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, content of MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> consistently agrees with the above passage, unique to MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, and refers almost exclusively to a twelvefold canon, and only fleetingly to one that is ninefold.<sup>30</sup> This is a clear discrepancy between material proper to core material of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* on the one hand and material unique to Dharmakṣema's translation on the other. There is one more occasion in MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, again in material unique to it (one might call this a “minor interpolation”), that mentions a twelvefold canon, and this is more tantalizing still:

For example, it is as if a monk were to see a great conflagration of fire, and say: “I would sooner embrace this blazing conflagration of fire, than I would dare to slander what is taught by the Tathāgata, the

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<sup>29</sup> For example: MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 383c8; 383c29; 390c29–391a9; 404a5–15; 405a21–b1; 420c11–12; 426c6–7. See also Fuse 1942: 88–89. Regarding the distinction between a twelvefold and ninefold canon, see Mayeda 1964 (especially the chart provided therein). For mentions of a ninefold canon, see *Āṅguttaranikāya* 7.68; *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* (e.g.) Kern and Nanjio 1908–1912: 46.1–2: (v.2.49); T.262 (IX) 8a6.

<sup>30</sup> MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> features 68 mentions of 十二部經; two mentions of a ninefold canon (九部經, at 463c7 and 463c16) appear in the context of describing what is known and not known to disciples (*śrāvakas*) and *pratyekabuddhas*; it may, plausibly, deliberately evoke the idea of a smaller canon of Buddhist teachings with these categories in mind.



twelfold scriptures as well as the secret treasure store (*mimizang* 秘密藏), saying that these are taught by Māra.”<sup>31</sup>

This is a detail not found in our other two versions, which instead refer straightforwardly to monks who hear secrets from the Buddha and declare them to be teachings by Māra.<sup>32</sup> Once again, MPNMS<sup>D</sup> supplies the idea of a twelfold canon, but here also suggests that apart from this there is the Buddha's “secret store”: a hidden repository of something particularly precious, separate from all else that the Buddha is known to have taught. We return below to what Dharmakṣema may have intended by this.

### **Major Interpolations 2 and 3: On Rarity, and Entering the “Secret Store” (MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 376b19–c17 [≈ MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §89–90]).**

The next two major interpolations are situated close to one another, both in the midst of the Buddha declaring at length how remarkable it is that members of his audience have been born human and in the time of a buddha. Again, we begin with a summary of this content.

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<sup>31</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 385b16–19: 譬如比丘見大火聚便作是言：「我寧抱是熾燃火聚，終不敢於如來所說十二部經及秘密藏，謗言云[云=此經<元><明><宮>]是波旬所說」。

<sup>32</sup> MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §170: [...] *dge slong dag gang dag de bzhin gshegs pa las gsang ba sna tshogs thos na / 'di ni bdud kyis smras pa yin no zhes gzhan dag la zer zhing* [...]; MPNMS<sup>F</sup> 868a28–b7: [...] 不於如來方便密教其心未悟聞說有常便起誹謗，而言魔教世論歌頌。

The Buddha states that it is unusual to avoid eight kinds of unfortunate births, and reminds us that over many lifetimes of asceticism he has attained supreme command of stratagems (*fangbian* 方便); for the sake of sentient beings he has sacrificed his body time and again. The Buddha then describes how one should decorate the jeweled castle of the true Dharma (*zhengfa baocheng* 正法寶城) – with walls, moats and parapets made of good conduct, meditative concentration and insight respectively. Having arrived at it, monks should be grateful; to do otherwise would be to emulate a merchant who finds a castle full of treasure but returns home with only debris. The Buddha encourages monks who have not accepted the Mahāyāna to do so, and stresses that what they are witnessing is the true Dharma. The Buddha then lauds “the sun of knowledge” (*huiri* 慧日), with ten powers, that stands before them, and compares the Dharma (as the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* very frequently does) to an ambrosial medicine that cures all ills (*ganlu fa* 甘露法).<sup>33</sup>

There is little focus elsewhere in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* on the Buddha's efforts as a bodhisattva over previous lifetimes, despite this being a very common feature of wider Buddhist literature. Slightly more conspicuous is the mention of the Buddha's skillful use of stratagem (Skt. *upāya*[*kauśalya*]) as something like an accomplishment. The term does occur elsewhere in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, including in Sanskrit via a quotation of the

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<sup>33</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 376b19–c9. Regarding the language of “ambrosia”, see Habata 2021.

*Mahāparinirvāṇa* in the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*.<sup>34</sup> However, I find no other portion of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* where it is presented as an attainment of the Buddha in the manner presented here. Meanwhile, proximate material in MPNMS<sup>T</sup> contains a fleeting mention of “the ambrosial food of the city of liberation”, which suggests a foundation for the more elaborate material found only in MPNMS<sup>D</sup>.<sup>35</sup> In the comparatively terse content of MPNMS<sup>F</sup>, we find reference to the “ambrosial Dharma”, with no city imagery, and otherwise the Buddha simply encourages his monks to ask their remaining questions prior to his entry into (*pari*)*nirvāṇa*.<sup>36</sup>

Our third major interpolation follows directly after what is recounted above:

The Buddha says of his fourfold community, all of whom are like his own children, “I now lead all to reside in my secret store (*mimizang* 秘密藏); and I also shall reside there, and enter into *nirvāṇa*.”<sup>37</sup> The meaning of this “secret store” is then unpacked: it is like three dots,

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<sup>34</sup> Johnston 1991 (1950): 75.5–9. Interesting is that both MPNMS<sup>D</sup> and MPNMS<sup>F</sup> sometimes employ *fangbian* 方便 in some unclear relation to *mijiao* 密教 (specifically, 方便密教) where MPNMS<sup>T</sup> suggests, and sometimes Sanskrit fragments clearly show, no use of *upāya(kauśalya)* or anything else typically rendered into Chinese by 方便: see, e.g., MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 366a24; MPNMS<sup>F</sup> 853b5; MPNMS<sup>T</sup> 20–21; Sanskrit fragment no.0.7/1.1 (Habata 2019: 92–93). I cautiously suggest that this may be supplied by translators of *both* Chinese versions, glossing the Buddha’s use of cryptic utterance in terms of the notion of *upāya(kauśalya)*, informed maybe by engagement with Kumārajīva’s landmark translation of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* (T.262) at the start of the fifth century.

<sup>35</sup> MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §90.3: *thar pa'i grong khyer gyi bdud rtsi'i zas*.

<sup>36</sup> MPNMS<sup>F</sup> 861c5–9.

<sup>37</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 376c9–11: 我今當令一切眾生及以我子四部之眾，悉皆安住秘密藏中。我亦復當安住是中入於涅槃何等名為秘密之藏。

which only when arranged like the three eyes on the face of Maheśvara (*Moxishouluo* 摩醯首羅) become meaningful as the letter “i” (as written in forms of Brahmī script). Three things, we are told, are not by themselves *nirvāṇa*: they are liberation, the body of the Tathāgata, and great insight (*mohebanre* 摩訶般若: \**mahāprajñā*), but when the Buddha exists as he now does, for the sake of sentient beings, he can be said to enter *nirvāṇa*.<sup>38</sup>

In our other versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* there is no mention of any “secret store” at this juncture, although in proximate material MPNMS<sup>T</sup> does refer to “the various secret teachings of [the Buddha’s] Dharma.”<sup>39</sup> The fact that the Buddha here reveals secrets (Tib. *gsang ba*: Skt. *guhya*), and explains what are otherwise said to be examples of utterances with unclear or cryptic intent (*dgongs pa’i tshig*: *sandhābhāṣya*) is a theme throughout the text, often expressed in both MPNMS<sup>F</sup> and MPNMS<sup>D</sup> in terms of the Buddha’s “secret teachings” (*mijiao* 密教); the notion of the Buddha’s secret store/treasury (*mimizang* 秘密藏) is however unique to MPNMS<sup>D</sup>.<sup>40</sup> The above passage includes the first occurrence of this notion in MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, which reappears with great frequency throughout this translation and beyond into MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>.<sup>41</sup> Its significance with respect to Dharmakṣema’s account

<sup>38</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 376c9–17.

<sup>39</sup> MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §90.2–3: *nga’i chos bstan pa rnam pa sna tshogs gsang ba*. Note that this is in the same breath as mention of ambrosia and the “city of liberation”, discussed above.

<sup>40</sup> See a discussion of this language in Radich 2015: 193–197; also Ruegg 1989, and Jones forthcoming b.

<sup>41</sup> It is however noticeable that this language in any form (秘密藏; 秘密之藏; 密密之藏) drops off in usage in the latter half of MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>: it is virtually absent

of buddha-nature teaching will be a topic to which we return below, but at this point we note simply that this store or treasury is somehow something within which both the Buddha and his audience are supposed to dwell (安住 [...]中), during or prior to the Buddha's apparent attainment of (*pari*)*nirvāṇa*.

The explanation of this secret store in terms of three dots is not terribly clear, although the imagery employed is both interesting and important with respect to Dharmakṣema's source(s). MPNMS<sup>D</sup> here evokes a form of Brahmī script, in which the character for the letter "i" is formed by three dots arranged in a triangle, comparable to the three eyes in the face of Maheśvara, otherwise known as the deity Śiva.<sup>42</sup> This detail obviously evinces knowledge both of that family of Indic scripts and of Indian religious iconography beyond what is Buddhist. In proximate content of MPNMS<sup>T</sup> (not, strictly speaking, corresponding to material in MPNMS<sup>D</sup>) the Buddha says that he has taught "on the dot of a single written letter (*yi ge: akṣara*)."<sup>43</sup>

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after the earlier fascicles of this material, during which the Buddha continues to discuss with the bodhisattva Kāśyapa.

<sup>42</sup> A perhaps pertinent detail is that this must surely mean a form of Brahmī script in which one dot sits centrally above the other two, otherwise this would not resemble depictions of Śiva-Maheśvara with a third eye located on his forehead. Most forms of Brahmī, however, locate the third dot centrally beneath the other two, or otherwise form a triangle pointing to the right; see Bühler 1896: 12 (with gratitude to Shin'ichiro Hori for this reference). Icons depicting Śiva with his third eye, principally faces adorning *liṅgas*, were well-established in North India in the early centuries of the Common Era; see the chapters and plates in the extensive study by Kreisel 1986.

<sup>43</sup> MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §90.8–9: [...] *yi ge 'bru gcig pa'i thig le'i gnam yang bzhag nas* [...]. I am unsure exactly what this means, and can find no other occurrences of this idea in another text. Compare also MPNMS<sup>F</sup> 861c5–6, with no mention of any *akṣara*.

Further reference to the form of the Brahmī letter “i” appears twice more in just MPNMS<sup>D</sup>.<sup>44</sup> Where MPNMS<sup>T</sup> refers to the Buddha leading his disciples to comprehend the perfection of insight (*shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa: prajñāpāramitā*), in MPNMS<sup>D</sup> the Buddha causes them to “abide in the teachings of great insight, liberation and so forth, like the letter ‘i’.”<sup>45</sup> In other content unique to MPNMS<sup>D</sup> (major interpolation 5: see below), the Buddha mentions that disciples (*śrāvakas*) and *pratyekabuddhas* do not comprehend “the three dots of the letter ‘i’ that are liberation, *nirvāṇa* (not, as above, the body of the Buddha), and great insight,” and “do not attain the Buddha’s secret store.”<sup>46</sup> The only other occurrence of what clearly reflects a transcription of some form of Indic *mahāprajñā* appears where MPNMS<sup>D</sup> cites what it calls the \**Mahāprajñāpāramitāsūtra* (*Mohe banre boluomi jing* 摩訶般若波羅蜜經).<sup>47</sup> Whereas MPNMS<sup>F</sup> and MPNMS<sup>T</sup> both seem to suggest the title \**Prajñāpāramitā-mahāsūtra*, MPNMS<sup>D</sup> employs the title given to Kumārajīva’s 鳩摩羅什 translation of the Larger *Prajñāpāramitā* (T.223), produced in the years 403–404.<sup>48</sup> In summary, we find that the three mentions of 摩訶般若 in MPNMS<sup>D</sup> coincide with the three mentions of the

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<sup>44</sup> This discounts content of all versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* concerned with the secret meanings of all syllables (*akṣaras*: see also n.103), amidst which the long vowel “ī” (which is written often as four dots) is understood to stand for “*īśvara*”; the short “i” is associated only with the word “this” (*idam*: see MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §422). This content exhibits further reference to forms of Brahmī script: the character “*ṭha*”, depicted in Brahmī with a circle, is associated with “perfection” (MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §428.4–5: *yongs su rdzogs pa*), while “*la*”, written with a prominent vertical stroke, is here associated with an “upward movement” (MPNMS<sup>T</sup> 431.6–8: *gyen du bskyod*).

<sup>45</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 377a8–9; compare MPNMS<sup>F</sup> 861c24–26; MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §94.

<sup>46</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 387b10–12.

<sup>47</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 411a8–10.

<sup>48</sup> MPNMS<sup>F</sup> 886b24–25 (般若波羅蜜大經); MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §400.17–18 (*shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i mdo chen po*). Regarding T.223, see Zucchetti 2005: 32.

structure of the letter “i”, and while these three passages do not perfectly agree with one another (the “third dot” is first the body of the Buddha, then *nirvāṇa*) this curious imagery is unique to MPNMS<sup>P</sup>.

**Major Interpolation 4: On Distortions, and the Attributes of the Buddha (MPNMS<sup>P</sup> 377c3–14 [≈ MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §101]).**

This next passage is not a terribly long interpolation, but with respect to its content is doctrinally significant. All versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* feature a striking discussion of conceptual distortions (*diandao* 顛倒; Tib. *phyin ci log pa*: Skt. *viparyāsa*), which with respect to Indian Buddhism seems to mark the introduction of a set of ideas that is carried likely from this discourse into the *Śrīmālādevīsīṃhanādanirdeśa* and then, with reference to both of these, into the commentarial stratum of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*.<sup>49</sup> The Buddha's monks deliver to their teacher a simile about an intoxicated man who believes the world and all of its features to be spinning when in fact they are not; in a similar fashion, the monks explain, sentient beings erroneously take 1) what is impermanent (*anitya*) to be permanent (*nitya*), 2) what is not the self (*anātman*) to be the self (*ātman*), 3) what is impure (*aśubha*) to be pure (*śubha*), and 4) what is unsatisfactory (*duḥkha*) to be pleasant or blissful (*sukha*). This is all conventional Buddhist doctrine. However, across all versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* the Buddha explains that these positive attributes do have some basis in reality: the

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<sup>49</sup> See Jones 2021: 33–40; 130–131; 167–169.

Buddha can rightly be considered the self, the *dharmakāya* can be considered permanent, *nirvāṇa* can be considered to be blissful, and the Dharma can be considered pure.<sup>50</sup> Only in material unique to MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, however, are we then provided with further elaboration.

The Buddha states that with respect to what is worldly the notions of 1) permanence, 4) bliss, 2) selfhood and 3) purity (*chang le wo jing* 常樂我淨) have no referent, but they do with respect to what is supermundane. Confusion over worldly phenomena stems from three kinds of distortion (*san[dian]dao* 三[顛]倒): of conceptualization (*xiang* 想), thought (*xin* 心) and view (*jian* 見).<sup>51</sup>

The Buddha then essentially repeats the four inversions to the four distortions (discussed above, and found in all versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*), but expands it to a total of eight correspondences: 2a) absence of self refers to transmigration, whereas 2b) the self is the Tathāgata; 1a) impermanent are disciples and *pratyekabuddhas*, whereas 1b) permanence means the *dharmakāya*; 4a) unsatisfactory are “all other paths/traditions” (一切外道), whereas 4b) what is blissful is *nirvāṇa*, and 3a) impurity refers to conditioned phenomena (*weifa* 為法), whereas 3b) what is pure are the true qualities (*zhengfa* 正法) of buddhas and bodhisattvas. These are what the Buddha calls “non-distortions” (*budiandao* 不顛倒). To be rid of the four

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<sup>50</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 377b7–22; compare MPNMS<sup>F</sup> 862a4–14; MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §100–101.13. For further analysis see Jones 2021: 33–40; also Shimoda 1991.

<sup>51</sup> In this passage Dharmakṣema uses both *dao* 倒 and *diandao* 顛倒.



distortions, the Buddha concludes, one must understand properly permanence, bliss, selfhood and purity.<sup>52</sup>

In MPNMS<sup>D</sup> alone do we find anything about three categories of distortion. This set of three features prominently, however, in both Kumārajīva's translation of the Larger *Prajñāpāramitā* (T.223) and, by the same translator, in the *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論 (T.1509: \**Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*).<sup>53</sup> This is not the occasion for a thorough account of these categories; what is significant for the present study is their appearance here, in a discussion of a different set of distortions (that is: "concepts that *are* distorted", such as permanence and impermanence, rather than "*types* of distortion"), and their total absence from our other versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*. Dharmakṣema then repeats the explanation of the four positive attributes – what I will henceforth call a "tetrad" of qualities attributed to the Buddha – and expands the referents of the antonyms of these four qualities. The notion that these are "not inverted" returns briefly in MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>, in which the Buddha clarifies to Mañjuśrī (a major interlocutor in MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>, but a minor figure in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* otherwise) that what is distorted is not really the case, and that all that is distorted is included in the truth of suffering (*kudī* 苦諦).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 377c3–14.

<sup>53</sup> See T.223 (VIII) 298a1–4; 298c15–23; 299a14–15; 299b6–17; T.1509 (XXV) 487b16–18; 488c24–489a4 (with perhaps the clearest account of this idea); 491c14–22.

<sup>54</sup> MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> 443c25–444a4. See also 468b16–26, in which "what is correct is called 'not distorted'" (正者名不顛倒).

Most of what we have read above does not substantively depart from what is taught in our other versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, but this interpolation is crucial because it develops the tetrad of qualities attributed to the Buddha in a manner that is carried into MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>. Notice, before we proceed further, that with this expanded list of what MPNMS<sup>D</sup> alone calls “non-distortions” the sequence changes, and more than once: in material common to all versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* the tetrad is i) 1) permanence, 2) selfhood, 3) purity and 4) bliss (*chang wo jing le* 常我淨樂); then, at the beginning of content unique to MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, it becomes ii) 1) permanence, 4) bliss, 2) selfhood and 3) purity (*chang le wo jing* 常樂我淨); what are then unpacked are iii) 2) selfhood, 1) permanence, 4) bliss and 3) purity (*wo chang le jing* 我常樂淨). It is the second sequence (*chang le wo jing* 常樂我淨) that then dominates throughout MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>.

Although their content deals with the four components of this tetrad, nowhere do MPNMS<sup>F</sup> or MPNMS<sup>T</sup> present it as a pithy four-character set; moreover, after this portion of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, our other versions do not dwell further on it. By contrast, MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, and MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> after it, use this tetrad with tremendous frequency. In fact this happens almost immediately after the passage summarized above: the next lines of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* have the monks refer back to what the Buddha has just taught, and only in MPNMS<sup>D</sup> (and three times in quick succession!) is this tetrad explicitly mentioned.<sup>55</sup> To take just one more example of this feature, to which others could be added, the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* later compares its teachings to exquisite milk products from fine cattle; thieves may steal the

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<sup>55</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 377c15–17; compare MPNMS<sup>T</sup> (§102) and MPNMS<sup>F</sup> (862a25–862b1).

cattle, but then are unable to get from them the high-quality milk, and so dilute what they have. Similarly, people in the world will corrupt what the Buddha here teaches about his permanence.<sup>56</sup> This content in MPNMS<sup>D</sup> conspicuously replaces mention of just the Buddha's permanence with the tetrad; it appears twice more in lines that follow soon after.<sup>57</sup>

While there is content that provides a clear basis for these four qualities in other versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, available evidence suggests that Dharmakṣema himself may have tailored MPNMS<sup>D</sup> to promote further this tetrad of the Buddha's qualities as a key feature of this discourse and, significantly, others besides. While it is entirely absent from MPNMS<sup>F</sup>, the tetrad 常樂我淨 features thirteen times in MPNMS<sup>D</sup> and a hefty 122 times in MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>.<sup>58</sup> Strikingly, it also reappears with great frequency throughout Dharmakṣema's translation of the *Mahāmeghasūtra*. Specifically, this tetrad occurs 59 times in that text, but with no corresponding trace of it in the Tibetan version of this discourse nor, as far as it has been scrutinized to date, in the surviving Sanskrit of the *Mahāmeghasūtra*.<sup>59</sup> Hence, either Dharmakṣema translated a form of the *Mahāmeghasūtra* that agreed with his translation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, or – the simpler and more likely answer

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<sup>56</sup> MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §137.

<sup>57</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 382a24–26; 382b5.

<sup>58</sup> There is just a single mention in MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> (465b13) of a different sequence, 常我樂淨, although apparatus in the Taishō edition states that the Yuan, Ming and Palace versions of the Chinese canon preserve our more common sequence, 常樂我淨. Dharmakṣema's preferred sequence of the tetrad is inherited also by Daolang 道朗 (316–420), his assistant in the translation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, who refers to it in his preface to the complete text (i.e., both MPNMS<sup>D</sup> and MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> as a whole): MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 365a21–22.

<sup>59</sup> See n.25, above.

– he supplied this to passages of both translations (and quite possibly others besides) where he deemed these four attributes to be a valuable gloss on the supermundane character of the Buddha.<sup>60</sup>

**Major Interpolation 5: On Nirvāṇa and Emptiness (MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 387b19–c1 [≈ MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §182]).**

This content of MPNMS<sup>D</sup> is longer and more detailed than what we find in our other versions, and there are some interesting changes that echo some of what we have seen already. All versions refer to four motivations for the Buddha teaching, which if we follow MPNMS<sup>T</sup> are 1) motivation by circumstance; 2) by his own intent; 3) because of another, and 4) because of questioning.<sup>61</sup> Unpacking the fourth of these, MPNMS<sup>T</sup> refers again to how the Buddha teaches “on the dot of a single letter,” but also to the Buddha’s “secrets” taught by allusion or cryptic utterance.<sup>62</sup> It is in material corresponding to this that MPNMS<sup>D</sup> again refers to the *three* dots of the letter “i”, mentioned above (see major interpolation 3), saying that disciples and

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<sup>60</sup> Also conspicuous is a use of this tetrad, as attributes that one might hope to acquire, in content of the *Mahāsaṃnipāta* collection attributed to Dharmakṣema (\**Sūryaguhya* *parivarta* 日密分, T.397[13] [XIII] 214b5–6), and then three occurrences of the tetrad in what may be Dharmakṣema’s translation of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (T.1582), traditionally but probably erroneously attributed to Guṇavarman 求那跋摩 (367–431), but none in the alternative version (T.1581) traditionally, but again probably wrongly, ascribed to Dharmakṣema. See also n.102, below.

<sup>61</sup> MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §181.22–§182.15: 1) *byung ba’i dbang*; 2) *bdag gi lhag pa’i bsam pa*; 3) *gzhan gyi lhag pa’i bsam pa*; 4) *’dri ba’i dbang*.

<sup>62</sup> See references in n.40, above.

*pratyekabuddhas* do not hear about liberation, *nirvāṇa* and great insight, and do not attain the Buddha's secret store.<sup>63</sup> All four of these kinds of teaching refer, we are told, to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* itself, and our versions compare them to four different expressions that refer to absence: following MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, these appear to be space (*xukong* 虛空), lack of any existence/existents (*wusuoyou* 無所有), inactivity (*budong* 不動), and lack of impediment (*wu'ai* 無礙).<sup>64</sup> Although four expressions may be used, we are told that they all have the same referent. It is at this juncture that MPNMS<sup>D</sup> features a lengthy interpolation.

Addressing Kāśyapa, the Buddha says that if someone holds that the Tathāgata is impermanent this is because they remember him having taught that the eradication of afflictions is *nirvāṇa*, and that like a fire having been extinguished this is nothing whatsoever; the Buddha had taught, they hold, that in *nirvāṇa* there is no kind of existence (*wuyou zhuyou* 無有諸有). This being the case, how can the Buddha be said to abide permanently? *Nirvāṇa* is like a torn garment, which can no longer be considered what it once was; or, for another example, the cessation of desire leaves only quiescence, in the manner that a man who has been beheaded is simply without a head: "empty, without anything existing, this is therefore called *nirvāṇa*."<sup>65</sup>

<sup>63</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 387b9–13; compare the slightly different MPNMS<sup>F</sup> 870a8–7; MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §182.9–15.

<sup>64</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 387b14–15. Compare MPNMS<sup>F</sup> 870a8–10; MPNMS<sup>T</sup> (§182.16–19) suggests the four terms *ākāśa*, *ambara*, *akimcana* and *asaṅga*.

<sup>65</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 387b19–c1: [...] 空無所有故名涅槃。

All of our versions then feature verses that compare *nirvāṇa* to the disappearance of heat from iron that has been left to cool; like this, no-one can tell where finally liberated beings have gone.<sup>66</sup> These reflections on absence unique to MPNMS<sup>D</sup> were perhaps inspired by the simile that immediately preceded this passage, found in all versions, which uses the language of absence or the ether. The *Mahāparinirvāṇa* cannot be said to be a text that discusses emptiness in any great depth, although content of MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> contains much longer and more detailed discussions of it. For example, MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> mentions eleven senses of “emptiness” (*kong* 空), and among them, and as we see above, emptiness understood in terms of absence of anything existing (無所有).<sup>67</sup> Elsewhere in MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>, the construction 空無所有 features repeatedly in a string of similes concerning a village that is utterly bereft of people or anything valuable in it; like this, we read, should the bodhisattva consider the six sense bases.<sup>68</sup> Although content of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* common to all versions does contain an interesting excursus on the meaning of emptiness, and using similar imagery, the point there is to explain how the character of the Buddha's liberation is bereft of certain phenomena (such as afflictions) but not lacking others (his transcendent qualities).<sup>69</sup> In summary, and although content of the above interpolation is not as conspicuously out of place as some others, it again

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<sup>66</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 387c1–5. Compare MPNMS<sup>F</sup> 870a13–16; MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §183.

<sup>67</sup> MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> 461b5–8. More accurately, what is listed is 無所有空: “the emptiness that is absence of any existence.”

<sup>68</sup> MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> 500c9–501a9.

<sup>69</sup> See MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §280. For a discussion of this material see Jones 2021: 220–221.

prefigures concepts and terminology that is revisited and explored further only in MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>.

**Major Interpolation 6: The Secrets of the Buddha (MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 390b24–c15 [≈ MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §219]).**

This next major interpolation in MPNMS<sup>D</sup> consists of several similes absent from our other versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*. Although these do little more than stress the point being made by material common to all versions, this interpolation occurs in a particularly crucial passage of the text. Relative to other major interpolations discussed so far, these similes introduce nothing doctrinally new to the text, nor anything consonant with themes of MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> specifically.

At this juncture in all versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, the bodhisattva Kāśyapa touches upon a major and significant issue regarding the authority of what he has so far heard. Kāśyapa asks the Buddha whether or not he has taught any secrets, and moreover implores the Buddha to not use any speech that is cryptic or has any underlying meaning – his worry is that the words of the Buddha are like a creation by an illusionist.<sup>70</sup> The Buddha reassures Kāśyapa that there are no secrets regarding what he has taught, and that the utterances of a buddha are radiant and complete like the full moon. He compares the Buddha to a householder who teaches his son first the meaning of letters, and only then grammar; Kāśyapa concedes that

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<sup>70</sup> See content discussed above, with respect to the fifth major interpolation.

such a father does not conceal anything from his son, and that one cannot consider there to be secrets kept in the case of someone who acts out of compassion. All versions refer repeatedly to the Buddha's use of cryptic utterance to justify how what they reveal sits in difficult tension with the Dharma already received.<sup>71</sup>

The first thing to note is that all of this language about secrecy in our other versions is presented in MPNMS<sup>D</sup> as a question about the Buddha's possession of a secret store or treasury (*mimizang* 秘密藏).<sup>72</sup> The curious detail that follows is that the Buddha then states that in fact he does *not* have such a thing, even though we have already seen (and will consider further below) how this is a central and conspicuous feature of Dharmakṣema's version of the text.<sup>73</sup> Content unique to MPNMS<sup>D</sup> occurs between the comparison of the Dharma to the full moon and the longer simile about instruction in language, and can be summarized as follows.

For example, someone may have amassed large amounts of gold and silver, but is miserly (*qianlin* 慳吝), so may conceal his wealth. The Buddha uses the treasures of the Dharma that he has amassed, over many ages, to help other beings – he is not stingy.

A person with some disfigurement may hide himself from others out of shame (*xiuchi* 羞恥). The Buddha, however, has the true Dharma,

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<sup>71</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 390c15–391a10; compare MPNMS<sup>F</sup> 872a28–b17; MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §220–222. This material is discussed at greater length in Jones forthcoming b.

<sup>72</sup> Note that throughout this material we also find, used interchangeably, the following: *mizang* 秘藏; *mizang* 密藏; in one instance also *fuzang* 覆藏.

<sup>73</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 390b15–21.



in its totality, and so makes it known – there is no defect of which to be ashamed.

A poor person may have great debt, and so go into hiding out of fear (*buwei* 怖畏). But the Buddha hides nothing, and thinks all sentient beings to be like his only child, so teaches. The Buddha is like a wealthy merchant who adores his only child, and uses all of his means to demonstrate this.

People in the world hide their genitals, thinking them to be ugly or foul. A buddha, however, has that organ permanently disguised – for him, there is nothing to conceal.

For a final example, a brahman would not allow members of other social strata (*chali*, *pishe*, *shoutuo* 刹利、毘舍、首陀: *kṣatriyas*, *vaiśyas*, *sūdras*) to hear his compositions or treatises (*lun* 論); this is because works associated with brahmans have faults (*guo 'e* 過惡). By comparison, the true Dharma of the Buddha is perfect throughout – for this reason, it cannot be called a secret store (*mizang* 秘藏).<sup>74</sup>

Dharmakṣema's similes explore different reasons for concealing something: due to greed, shame, fear or frailty, embarrassment, and finally – intending a broadside against Brahmanical teaching – inferiority. The most curious of these examples is that which references brahmans and their teachings, which are contrasted with the secret store of the Buddha. The Buddha's own store, we can deduce, is also understood to be a repository of ideas or instruction, which in spite of what we read elsewhere in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* – or

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<sup>74</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 390b24–c15.

perhaps *because* of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, making that treasury known – cannot be considered something truly “hidden” from the world.

### **Major Interpolations 7–11 in Overview.**

The present paper cannot give equal treatment to all eleven major interpolations in Dharmakṣema's translation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*. Aside from the matter of length, there are many features in these interpolations that ask for further study that would take this paper away from several recurring themes discussed so far: namely, Dharmakṣema's buddhology, his presentation of teachings about buddha-nature, and his preoccupation with the theme of “secrecy” with respect to what the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* discloses. Nonetheless, I offer below summaries and some preliminary observations regarding the five remaining major interpolations not studied here.

*Major Interpolation 7: The Consolation of Prasenajit* (MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 391a17–b5 [≈ MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §223]).

The *Mahāparinirvāṇa* compares its teachings to a great downpour of rain; just as some plants still will not grow, so too will some people not hear the Buddha's “great secret that is the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*[*sūtra*?].”<sup>75</sup> In content

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<sup>75</sup> MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §223: [...] *yongs su mya ngan las 'das pa chen po gsang chen* [...]. In corresponding material of MPNMS<sup>D</sup> the only addition is reference to the king of the *nāgas*, serpent creatures associated with the rain, who are said not to withhold anything when the rains fall.

unique to MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, Kāśyapa states that he is still struggling with the revelation of the Buddha's permanence: the Buddha had taught before that all liberated beings (including *pratyekabuddhas* and arhats) relinquish bodies that are impermanent, as do some other sentient beings – how is the Buddha different to this? In response, the Buddha recounts the death of the mother of King Prasenajit, upon which the distraught king visited the Buddha.<sup>76</sup> The Buddha taught Prasenajit that death is inescapable, including for buddhas and other liberated beings; but now, akin to a child who is taught grammar only having first learnt about letters, does the Buddha reveal that he is beyond death.

*Major Interpolation 8: The Unification of the Three Refuges* (MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 395c17–396a6 [≈ MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §282]).

This interpolation opens by identifying liberation with the Tathāgata, the Tathāgata with *nirvāṇa*, *nirvāṇa* with what is inexhaustible, what is inexhaustible with buddha-nature (*foxing* 佛性), buddha-nature with “certainty” (*jueding* 決定), and certainty with supreme, perfect awakening.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> This evokes a passage earlier in the text, where Kāśyapa points out that the Buddha is supposed to have taught consistently but also did not teach any of what is found in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* to King Prasenajit: see MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §179. Meanwhile, MPNMS<sup>D</sup>+ mentions Prasenajit frequently, reminding the audience of a number of episodes in the Buddha's life story that involved the king. According to most other sources it is the death of Prasenajit's grandmother (Pāli *ayyakā*; SN I 96–97) that troubles him, with a notable exception being the corresponding story in one Chinese version of the *Samyuktāgama* (T.100[54] [II] 392a26–c3); for more, see Hartmann 2017.

<sup>77</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 395c14–17.

The content of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* amidst which this interpolation appears otherwise does not dwell at all upon buddha-nature teaching. The interpolation in MPNMS<sup>D</sup> consists of a great number of identifications between aspects of Buddhist teaching: primarily, the three refuges, *nirvāṇa*, and “space” (*xukong* 虛空).<sup>78</sup> The Buddha then recounts a conversation with his stepmother Mahāprajāpatī, in which he instructs her to make offerings to the Saṅgha rather than to the Buddha, and reassures his audience that simply to follow the Buddha's words is to make an offering to the Buddha. The Buddha adds that the refuges are sometimes taught to be three, sometimes as one, the meaning of which cannot be known by mere disciples and *pratyekabuddhas*.<sup>79</sup>

*Major Interpolation 9: Further Details Regarding Hermeneutics* (MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 402a27–b14 [≈ MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §333–335]).

This interpolation is particularly difficult to tease out, seeing as what are in MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §333 and §335 (with corresponding content in MPNMS<sup>F</sup>) appear to have been switched in MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, and in this version alone §333 is longer. After content found in all versions, in which there is an emphasis on the

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<sup>78</sup> “Space” is not a dominant motif in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, but is frequently used as a metaphor for the character of the Buddha in MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>: e.g., 495a12–b17; 503a19–22.

<sup>79</sup> This episode evokes a story about Mahāprajāpatī wishing to offer robes to the Buddha, and instead being encouraged to offer them to the Saṅgha, in for example the *Dakkhiṇāvibhaṅgasutta* (MN II 253; regarding other versions, see Anālayo 2011: 810–819). The notion of there being just a single refuge is found in Indic texts indebted to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, regarding which see Jones 2021: 132–136.

definitive and not provisional character of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, MPNMS<sup>D</sup> glosses what it means to “rely upon meaning” (*yiyi* 依義), and among a string of identifications affirms that what is reliable is the permanence of the Buddha. Next we are told what it means to “rely upon knowledge” (*yizhi* 依智), which refers to the permanence of the Saṅgha, and to “rely upon what is definitive” (*yiliaoyi* 依了義), which refers to complete knowledge and also what is taught by the Buddha's many stratagems (*fangbian* 方便). Who dwells in what is definitive knows ultimate meaning (*diyiyi* 第一義). Stylistically these equivalences are highly reminiscent of content in MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>, but their specifics require further critical attention.

*Major Interpolation 10: Still Further, Final Details on Hermeneutics* (402b21–c10 [≈ MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §336]).

The next major interpolation follows promptly after the last, closing an extended reflection on hermeneutics. In MPNMS<sup>D</sup> alone, we are told that the Buddha teaches whatever is required for any given occasion – he might even permit his monks to accept servants, gold, silver and other prohibited possessions in some circumstances. But some say that the Buddha permits these things at all times, and any source that says so (*jielü*, *apitan*, *xiuduoluo* 戒律, 阿毘曇, 修多羅: *vinaya*, *abhidharma* or *sūtra*) should not be trusted. The Buddha then concludes that the four “reliances” (*siyi* 四依) are for those

of limited vision, but not persons with the eye of insight (*huiyan* 慧眼).<sup>80</sup> “Dharma”, we are told, refers to the nature of phenomena (*faxing* 法性); “meaning” to the permanence of the Buddha; “knowledge” is awareness of buddha-nature in all sentient beings, and “definitive” refers to correct comprehension of teachings in the Mahāyāna. As in the case of the previous major interpolation, this stylistically resembles the kind of identifications found prominently throughout much of MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>. Once again, content proximate to this interpolation found in our other versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* makes no mention of buddha-nature.

*Major Interpolation 11: Cuṅḍa's Further Doubts* (≈ MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 422c6–20 [MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §519]).

The final major interpolation comes much later in MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, where all versions of the text compare the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* to an autumn rain that pours heavily and widely; the text will spread south until its decline, when it will travel north to Kashmir, before disappearing from the world.<sup>81</sup> In our other versions the focus returns to teaching about buddha-nature, but before that MPNMS<sup>D</sup> alone adds more. Mañjuśrī addresses the Buddha to say that

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<sup>80</sup> MPNMS<sup>F</sup> uses the expression 慧眼 three times, including at the end of the preceding section of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, whereas MPNMS<sup>T</sup> features no mention of what would reflect *praññācakṣus* (Tib. *shes rab kyi mig/spyan*). The prominence of this term in Kumārajīva's translations of Prajñāpāramitā materials may explain its presence in both MPNMS<sup>F</sup> and MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, and still more prominently in MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>.

<sup>81</sup> Regarding the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*'s prophetic account of its own disappearance and reappearance in the world, see Radich 2015: 64–71.

the lay devotee Cuṇḍa, whose offering initiated the Buddha's teaching, still has doubts. The bodhisattva clairvoyantly detects that Cuṇḍa wonders whether or not he is able to see his own buddha-nature: if not, then it is surely not present, and if he is able then, having seen it, it should surely cease. Cuṇḍa's perspective is informed by the teaching that all things are impermanent. The Buddha gives a verse about the impossibility of things existing over the three times, and Mañjuśrī explains that only now does he understand the difference, and also lack of difference, between buddhas, bodhisattvas, disciples and *pratyekabuddhas*.<sup>82</sup>

Further to other likely allusions to Kumārajīva's work, discussed above, Takeda has observed already that the verse about the three times aligns closely with content of the *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論 (T.1509).<sup>83</sup> Otherwise, this content seems to do little more than stress once more the permanence of buddha-nature, although we must note again that it is specifically vision of one's buddha-nature that is key. Finally, it is conspicuous that Mañjuśrī initiates this short episode: he otherwise features only early in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, and without this interpolation all other versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* present us with one long, coherent dialogue between the Buddha and the bodhisattva Kāśyapa.

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<sup>82</sup> I do not fully understand everything in this passage, in this context; it certainly departs significantly from what is discussed in proximate content of other versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* otherwise.

<sup>83</sup> Takeda 2001; see also Radich 2019: 599–601.

**Further Idiosyncrasies, and Reflections on the Buddha's "Secret Store".**

There are other features in MPNMS<sup>D</sup> that deserve closer attention, which is perhaps only possible with the aid of a synoptic edition of versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, which would present alongside MPNMS<sup>D</sup> the comparatively terse MPNMS<sup>F</sup>, MPNMS<sup>T</sup> and, where available, portions of extant Sanskrit (usually very close to content of MPNMS<sup>T</sup>). What we might call "minor interpolations" in MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, which further distinguish it from all other witnesses to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, are myriad and diverse. Some are perhaps of little doctrinal import. For example, during the text's introduction of various kinds of humans, spirits, deities and animals who attend the Buddha's deathbed, Dharmakṣema alone adds that the kings of the bees (*fengwang* 蜂王) were present, led by a king called "Fine Voice" (*miaoyin* 妙音); they offer flowers to the Buddha, without attempting to offer him a final meal (as most other attendants do), and duly take their place.<sup>84</sup>

Other differences could however be doctrinally significant, and require further investigation.<sup>85</sup> For example, whereas other versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* refer to the idea of there being in the world ninety-six "paths" apart from Buddhism (*waidao* 外道), in place of this MPNMS<sup>D</sup> refers to only ninety-five; a number that is less prominent in Indic and

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<sup>84</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 369b2–4.

<sup>85</sup> In this article I cannot consider further a perhaps important "minor interpolation" in MPNMS<sup>D</sup> (393b5–17), concerning the status of the *icchantika*, with details that depart substantively from what is found in our other versions (MPNMS<sup>F</sup> 873c11–16; MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §224.10–13) and including some unexpected discussion of the nature of phenomena (*fajie* 法界: \**dharmadhātu*).



Tibetan sources than it is in Chinese Buddhist materials.<sup>86</sup> Another small detail worthy of note, but easily missed, is that whereas all versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* refer by name to the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, it is only Dharmakṣema's version of the text that acknowledges its hallmark teaching of a single vehicle of Buddhist instruction (*yisheng* 一乘: *ekayāna*).<sup>87</sup> This teaching is promoted in other Indian texts concerned with buddha-nature, but among versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* only MPNMS<sup>D</sup> mentions it, and explicitly in opposition to teachings about three vehicles (*sansheng* 三乘: *yānatraya*).<sup>88</sup> Meanwhile, MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> refers to the single vehicle repeatedly, and ties it closely to ideas about buddha-nature.<sup>89</sup> Further to what was discussed above, with respect to the first major interpolation in MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, we should also not be surprised to find that there are two mentions of the

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<sup>86</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 426c3–4 (then in MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> 425c4, 429a23–25); see, in comparison, MPNMS<sup>F</sup> 880c23–881a4; MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §86.7, §562.11. A mention of ninety-five non-Buddhist traditions is also found in Dharmakṣema's translation of the *Mahāmeghasūtra* (T.387 [XII] 1094c26–27), and is unique to that version. Mentions of ninety-five rather than ninety-six non-Buddhist traditions in non-Chinese sources are rare; for an exceptional case, in the Tibetan version of the *Ratnarāśisūtra*, see Silk 1994: 292 (and a discussion of this matter at *ibid* n.2).

<sup>87</sup> For mention of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, see MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 420a23–24; MPNMS<sup>F</sup> 893c6; MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §495.17; preserved also in Sanskrit fragment 21.3 (Habata 2019: 161–162: *saddharmapuṇḍar[i]k(a)[m](ahāsūtra)*).

<sup>88</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 383a25. Concerning teaching about the single vehicle across literature associated with the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, see Jones 2021: 203–210. Further to other points made above (e.g., n.34; 80), my suspicion is that these are traces of MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, and MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> after it, having been influenced by the impact of Kumārajīva's translation work less than two decades earlier; a feature discussed also in Radich 2019.

<sup>89</sup> E.g., MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> (initially) 430b10; (relating this to teachings about buddha-nature).

single vehicle in Dharmakṣema's Chinese of the *Mahāmeghasūtra*, but again not corresponding to any content of the extant Tibetan.<sup>90</sup>

This leads us back to perhaps the most prominent feature of Dharmakṣema's translation activities, both with respect to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* and his wider oeuvre: the notion of buddha-nature, taught using the expression *foxing* 佛性, and what Dharmakṣema intended by the closely related expression *rulaizang* 如來藏. Other Chinese Buddhist translations show that the former was employed, from Faxian's translation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* onwards, to render the Sanskrit term *buddhadhātu*; the latter, meanwhile, was used as a means of rendering the slippery expression *tathāgatagarbha*.<sup>91</sup> Attention to both MPNMS<sup>F</sup> and MPNMS<sup>T</sup> suggests that in an Indic context these two terms were used somewhat interchangeably – the presence in sentient beings of *buddhadhātu* (Tib. *sangs rgyas kyi kham/dbyings*) is the presence of *tathāgatagarbha* (Tib. *de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po*).<sup>92</sup> This is borne out by further evidence in two discourses that are clearly doctrinally related to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*: the *Aṅgulimāliyasūtra* and *Mahābherī(hāraka)sūtra*.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> T.387 (XII) 1087a7; 1101a16–18. At present I am unable to verify that there is no corresponding mention of *ekayāna* in our mostly complete Sanskrit of the *Mahāmeghasūtra* (see n.25, above), but am confident that further attention to it will bear out that these features of Dharmakṣema's Chinese translation are unique to his version only.

<sup>91</sup> The correspondence between 佛性 and *buddhadhātu* is most clearly evinced by what is found throughout the sixth-century Chinese translation of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*: e.g., T.1611 (XXXI) 821c26–27, corresponding to Johnston 1991 (1950): 6.11.

<sup>92</sup> See Radich 2015: 30–32; Jones 2021: 14–21.

<sup>93</sup> A clear expression of this in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* is MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §376.2–5, corresponding to MPNMS<sup>F</sup> 883b15–17; MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 407b9–11. For more, see relevant chapters in Jones 2021; also Jones 2020.

However, throughout MPNMS<sup>D</sup> the situation is somewhat different. As observed already by Radich, throughout MPNMS<sup>D</sup> Dharmakṣema uses the expression 如來藏 only four times; variations on *rulaimizang* 如來密藏 and *rulaimizang* 如來秘藏 occur 35 times or more. Radich goes on to observe how MPNMS<sup>D</sup> uses the language of secrecy, and moreover the sense of a “secret store/treasury” (密/秘藏) to refer, it would seem, to the content of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*.<sup>94</sup> Where our other versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* refer to the threat posed to the Saṅgha by Māra, in MPNMS<sup>D</sup> alone it is the secret store of the Tathāgata (如來秘藏) that cannot be damaged (or perhaps “defamed”: *huihuai* 毀壞).<sup>95</sup> Relatedly, MPNMS<sup>D</sup> generally does not use this language to refer to what is otherwise taught by *foxing* 佛性; that is, the two terms are not interchangeable.<sup>96</sup> That Dharmakṣema uses 如來藏 to exceed what he intends by 佛性 is demonstrated succinctly where MPNMS<sup>D</sup> says that the former possesses (*you* 有) the latter; MPNMS<sup>T</sup>, meanwhile, appears to take *tathāgatagarbha* (*de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po*) and *buddhadhātu* (*sangs rgyas kyi kham*) to refer broadly to the same thing:

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<sup>94</sup> Radich 2015: 194–195. An early occurrence of this is where MPNMS<sup>D</sup> refers to “the extremely profound and secret store of the Tathāgata” (MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 401c10–11: 如來甚深密藏). One can trace a similar concern with the language of some “treasury” (藏) in MPNMS<sup>F</sup>, which surely had a bearing on Dharmakṣema's use of this terminology: see, for example, the focus on this language at MPNMS<sup>F</sup> 868b26–c11 and, correspondingly, MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 385c18–386a1, both of which say things that differ subtly from our other witnesses to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* (MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §171.53–76; Sanskrit fragment 13.3–7 [Habata 2019: 119–122]).

<sup>95</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 414a15–16. Compare MPNMS<sup>F</sup> 888c13–14; MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §433.4–5.

<sup>96</sup> Blum (2013: xxi) refers to Dharmakṣema's use of *rulai(mi)zang* as a “gloss of the notion of *tathāgatagarbha*.” I would go further, to suggest that Dharmakṣema comes to employ a translation of *tathāgatagarbha* for a new purpose: as a means of referring to the Buddha's highest teachings including (but not limited to) the revelation of buddha-nature in all sentient beings.

something that all sentient beings themselves possess.<sup>97</sup> We have also seen above, in relation to the first major interpolation in MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, that the Buddha's store can be listed alongside the divisions of Buddhist teaching. In short: Dharmakṣema intends more by 如來藏 than simple reference to the presence of buddha-nature, which he calls 佛性.

Radich writes that “it would not be an exaggeration to say that for [MPNMS<sup>D</sup>], the main *translation* of \**tathāgatagarbha* is ‘secret store of the Tathāgata’,” and moreover that it is “difficult to determine where the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine ends and the theme of secrecy begins.”<sup>98</sup> Comparatively, there is no such complexity with respect to Dharmakṣema's use of 佛性, which occurs 112 times in MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, and a further 661 times throughout MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>; it is that which sentient beings “have” (*you* 有), and in content unique to Dharmakṣema's translations it is unequivocally how to refer to the presence of buddha-nature in all sentient beings. On one exceptional occasion, perhaps following closely the Indic materials that Dharmakṣema had to hand, MPNMS<sup>D</sup> does state that 如來藏 is itself something that sentient beings “have”.<sup>99</sup> But he does not refer to 如來藏 as something that anyone might “see”. Meanwhile, vision of one's buddha-nature (見佛性) is found throughout MPNMS<sup>D</sup> (9 occurrences) but not once in our other Chinese translation, MPNMS<sup>F</sup>. Vision of one's buddha-nature

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<sup>97</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 410b7–8: [...]如來秘藏有佛性故。 Compare MPNMS<sup>F</sup> 885b20–21; MPNMS<sup>T</sup> §394.12–22. A single but illuminating passage of MPNMS<sup>T</sup> (§435.10–11) seems to clarify that the (*buddha*)*dhātu* is something enveloped (*khyab pa*) by what is called *tathāgatagarbha* – that is, a chamber (Skt. *garbha*) for it – although both terms are still used to refer to what sentient beings have within themselves; see also Habata 2019: 37–38.

<sup>98</sup> Radich 2015: 194–195.

<sup>99</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 406c11–12.

appears again, with tremendous frequency, throughout MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> (109 occurrences).<sup>100</sup> In some content of MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>, the sight of buddha-nature is nothing less than the attainment of perfect awakening.<sup>101</sup> To summarize: we find the idea of “seeing buddha-nature” i) abundantly throughout MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>, content of which remains of unknown provenance, but also ii) present in content unique to MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, which has no basis in other witnesses to the Indian *Mahāparinirvāṇa*. A further crucial detail is that vision of one’s buddha-nature occurs also in iii) Dharmakṣema’s translation of the *Mahāmeghasūtra*, and without any corresponding terminology in our Tibetan translation or extant Sanskrit of that text.<sup>102</sup>

Across his translations, Dharmakṣema preferred to write about “buddha-nature” (佛性), which is something that might become visible to sentient beings as they arrive at the status of a buddha.<sup>103</sup> That he supplied the expression 佛性 beyond any explicit use of the term *buddhadhātu* in his manuscript is all but certain.<sup>104</sup> After just a couple of exceptional cases in

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<sup>100</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> contains seven occurrences of the variant form 見如來性, which appears to be for metrical reasons; this is not found at all in MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>.

<sup>101</sup> See also n.22, above; see also Radich 2015: 136–138.

<sup>102</sup> See n.25, above. Also not beyond suspicion are occurrences of *foxing* 佛性 in other works attributed to Dharmakṣema: for example, in his version of the \**Sāgaramatipariprcchā* 海慧菩薩品 (T.397[5] [XIII] 60a5–6; 71a12); also three occurrences in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, but not the version traditionally attributed to Dharmakṣema (T.1581), which has none, so much as that attributed to Guṇavarman (T.1582), the traditional attributions of which have already been questioned by Radich (2017: 288, n.74; also 2019: 586–587, n.286–287). See also n.57, above.

<sup>103</sup> See, e.g., MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> 514c8-14.

<sup>104</sup> Where Dharmakṣema translates a passage concerning the secret meaning of Indic syllables (*akṣaras*): “The syllable ‘ga’ refers to a ‘store’ (藏 *zang*: Skt. *garbha*); the store is the secret store of the Tathāgata. All sentient beings have buddha-nature (一切眾生皆有佛性); hence there is said ‘ga’” (MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 414c2–

MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, Dharmakṣema reserved the expression 如來藏 to refer not so narrowly to buddha-nature but rather the Buddha's teachings about this "secret" of the Dharma, revealed in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* – a discourse that at the end of Dharmakṣema's work is far longer than any form that we know to have circulated India, and certainly more than what was available to Chinese audiences in MPNMS<sup>F</sup>. Wading now into the vast and relatively uncharted waters of MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>, consider the following lines from early in its content, spoken by the Buddha to the bodhisattva Kāśyapa about the importance of promulgating the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* far and wide:

You also, not long from now, will like myself explain this to the great assembly: the *Mahāparinirvāṇa[sūtra]*, the Tathāgata's buddha-nature, the secret store taught by the buddhas.<sup>105</sup>

Buddha-nature and the Buddha's secret store do not appear to refer to the same thing, though they are closely related. Lines later, the Buddha projects beams of light from his body that travel across various hell-realms, and "in the midst of that light there is taught the secret store of the Tathāgata, saying that 'all sentient beings possess the nature of the buddha'."<sup>106</sup> We might understand from this that the Buddha's secret store is his teaching, the

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3). Quite reasonably, MPNMS<sup>T</sup> (§426.6–7) explains the syllable "ga" to refer to the fact that "all sentient beings possess *tathāgatagarbha*"; use of 佛性 is surely the mark of Dharmakṣema's preference for this particular terminology over faithfulness to his Indic source.

<sup>105</sup> MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> 499b6–8: 汝亦不久復當如我廣為大眾演說如是: 大般涅槃、如來佛性、諸佛所說秘密之藏。

<sup>106</sup> MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> 430a2–3: 是光明中宣說如來秘密之藏, 言諸眾生皆有佛性。The refrain is repeated below at 430a10–11; 15–16, and 19–20.

*content* of which is the revelation of buddha-nature in all sentient beings; but it does not *itself* denote that nature. That this was Dharmakṣema's usage of *rulaizang* 如來藏, at least by the end of his work on MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>, is supported by the wording of his assistant Daolang 道朗 in his preface to the finished work, referring as it does to "the opening of the secret store" (闡秘藏), as well as "the inspection of the secret store" (覩秘藏),<sup>107</sup> the referent of which seems to be the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, or Dharmakṣema's *Niepan jing*, itself.<sup>107</sup>

On the one hand, this notion of a secret store or treasury in Dharmakṣema's work must derive from the focus in the core content of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* on *tathāgatagarbha*, understood by early Chinese translators as a storehouse (*zang* 藏) of something precious, used in an Indian context to refer to something concealed in the constitution of all sentient beings. However, as suggested by various data above, we might ponder further what led Dharmakṣema to present his version of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* itself as a previously hidden "repository" of teachings. Consistent with what we have seen so far, it is a line of Kumārajīva's translation of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* that suggests an important influence upon Dharmakṣema. In that work, the Buddha compares the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* to a precious jewel that belongs to a king, a symbol of his authority, that he withholds from offering as a reward to his generals until having bestowed any number of other gifts upon them; like this, what the Buddha now reveals to his audience is "the secret treasure store of the buddhas" (諸佛如來秘密之藏): the pinnacle of all that they teach, which

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<sup>107</sup> MPNMS<sup>D</sup> 365a22–24; 365b4; see Lai 1982.

has not been taught for an incredibly long time.<sup>108</sup> Extant Sanskrit corresponding to this passage preserves reference to a secret of the Dharma (*dharmaguhyā*), long protected by the buddhas (*cirānurakṣita*).<sup>109</sup> Kumārajīva's Chinese rendering of something like this Indic material, in the very early years of the fifth century, is conspicuously close to both the letter and spirit of Dharmakṣema's idea of the Buddha's "secret store": a precious treasury of teachings revealed and delivered only at the supposed end of the Buddha's ministry. As in Kumārajīva's text, this terminology refers not to any one doctrinal element, such as the revelation of buddha-nature in all sentient beings, but the discourse in which this and other mysteries are climactically revealed – in Dharmakṣema's case, the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*.

### Concluding Reflections.

To employ language that Dharmakṣema himself would likely approve, his *Niepan jing* is a treasure-trove of ideas, arguments and stories that could with further investigation reveal any number of secrets regarding the transmission of Buddhism, and especially Mahāyāna teachings, across India, Central Asia and into China in the early fifth century. The matter of how far what I call MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>, which follows and exceeds the "core" content of the

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<sup>108</sup> T.262 (IX) 39a17–20. See also *ibid.* 1a9, in the preface to the text. I am grateful to Jan Nattier for having alerted me to this feature of T.262, which looks to be a very clear example of Dharmakṣema's knowledge and use of Kumārajīva's work. For more on this topic, very worthy of still further investigation, see Radich 2019: 578–605.

<sup>109</sup> Kern and Nanjio 1908–1912: 291.5–6.



*Mahāparinirvāṇa*, was produced by Dharmakṣema's own hand is difficult to judge, and will remain so at least until more thorough studies are made of its vast content. What the present article has attempted to demonstrate is that one must also handle with care the earlier content of Dharmakṣema's translation, what I here call MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, in what scholars are nonetheless correct to consider a translation of a version of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* produced in India – albeit, perhaps, with some significant, and sometimes lengthy, embellishments.

Features of MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, especially in passages that do not correspond to anything extant in other versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, cannot be hastily presumed to have a basis in any Indic source material. This is particularly so where these align suspiciously well with doctrinal content of the enigma that is MPNMS<sup>D+</sup>. A close reading of Dharmakṣema's MPNMS<sup>D</sup>, attending also to patterns consistent throughout MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> and his translation of the *Mahāmeghasūtra*, suggests that we can go further. Material in Dharmakṣema's translations that seems to have no basis in any known Indian text employs the language of the Buddha's "secret store" to refer to the Buddha's teachings, and more specifically those with respect to topics such as the permanence of the Buddha and presence of buddha-nature, which are understood to be "late" revelations in the gradual unfolding of the Dharma. Moreover, it is the expression *foxing* 佛性 that Dharmakṣema uses time and again, and prominently in material that we cannot yet confirm had Indian provenance, to refer to that precious essence of sentient beings that his works teach should be sought, unveiled, and, climactically, seen.

**Abbreviations.**

- AN *Āṅguttaranikāya*: Pali Text Society edition.
- MN *Majjhimanikāya*: Pali Text Society edition.
- MPNMS<sup>D</sup> Content of the Chinese translation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* (T.374 *Da banniepan jing* 大般涅槃經), translated ca.421–432 by Dharmakṣema 曇無讖, culminating at T.374 (XII) 428b13.
- MPNMS<sup>D+</sup> Content of the Chinese translation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* (T.374 *Da banniepan jing* 大般涅槃經), translated ca.421–432 by Dharmakṣema 曇無讖, beginning at T.374 (XII) 428b17.
- MPNMS<sup>F</sup> Chinese translation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* (T.376 *Da bannihuan jing* 大般泥洹經), translated ca.416–418 by Faxian 法顯 and Buddhahadra 佛陀跋陀羅.
- MPNMS<sup>T</sup> Tibetan translation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra* (*Yongsu mya ngan las 'das pa chen po theg pa chen po'i mdo*), translated into Tibetan in the ninth century by Jinamitra, Jñānagarbha and Devacandra; references are to sections in the critical edition of Habata 2013.
- SN *Samyuttanikāya*: Pali Text Society edition.
- T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaikyoku 渡邊海旭 (eds). 1924–1932. Issaikyō kankōkai 一切經刊行會. Tokyo. References are given in the form T[text number][volume number][page/register/line].

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