

Did Nagarjuna Write the Mahayana Kashyapa Parivarta Sutra or at Least a Part of It?

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Did Nagarjuna write the Mahayana Kashyapa Parivarta Sutra or at least a part of it?

It is known that all Mahayana Sutras have anonymous authors. The Mahayana Kashyapa Parivarta Sutra is one of the earliest Mahayana Sutras and some of its material meshes well with what Nagarjuna wrote. For example, Nagarjuna in his Mula Madhyamaka Karika, at one point refutes both Atman and Anatman. This is also found in the Mahayana Kashyapa Parivarta Sutra. This contradicts what Lord Buddha said because Lord Buddha denied Atman and preached Anatman.

It is not known which or who is earlier, the Mahayana Kashyapa Parivarta Sutra or Nagarjuna. If the Mahayana Kashyapa Parivarta Sutra is earlier, then there is a very strong chance that Nagarjuna read it and was strongly influenced by it. If, on the other hand, Nagarjuna was earlier, the possibility that Nagarjuna wrote the Mahayana Kashyapa Parivarta Sutra, or at least a part of it, cannot be discounted.

Certainly, Nagarjuna may have written one or more Mahayana Sutras in addition to the works attributed to him, for example, Mula Madhyamaka Karika, Vignahavyavartani, Achintyastava and Lokatitastava, just to name a few. All four of the above writings of Nagarjuna are extant in Sanskrit and Nagarjuna's exposition of the philosophy of emptiness can be clearly found in them. Nagarjuna also wrote works like Shunyatasaptati which are not available in Sanskrit. Nagarjuna refers to Lord Buddha's sermon to Kachchana in Chapter 15 of his Mula Madhyamaka Karika. It is well known that Nagarjuna was writing at a time when Mahayana Buddhism was evolving. Mahayana Sutras of that period tend to be hybrid texts, combining traditional Buddhist teachings with new innovative concepts.

However, while the emptiness portion of the Mahayana Kashyapa Parivarta Sutra fits in well with Mula Madhyamika Karika, the Bodhichitta mentioned in the Mahayana Kashyapa Parivarta Sutra does not. This makes one rethink the whole scenario and conclude that even if Nagarjuna had a hand in writing the Mahayana Kashyapa Parivarta Sutra, he probably wrote only a part of it.

There is no evidence in any of the authored works of Nagarjuna that Nagarjuna ever changed his worldview significantly. Therefore, we have to compare any Mahayana Sutra which we suspect Nagarjuna with having written with Nagarjuna's authored works to arrive at some sort of opinion as to whether Nagarjuna had a hand in writing the Mahayana Sutra in question. For example, the Mahayana Shrimala Sutra is an early Mahayana Sutra and it is cited by the later Mahayana Lankavatara Sutra as well as by the Mahayana Sutralankara Bhashya. But the Mahayana Shrimala Sutra's concept of Tathagatagarbha does not conform at all with Nagarjuna's concept of lack of Swabhava, self-nature, in all things. Therefore, Nagarjuna may safely be passed over as the author or one of the authors of the Mahayana Shrimala Sutra.

What I have mentioned about Nagarjuna applies to Mahayana Buddhist scholars and saints in general. Besides their authored works, they may have written Mahayana Sutras. At this point of time, we have no way to tell.

The Mahayana Sutras themselves give us some clues as to their place of writing. The Mahayana Lankavatara Sutra and the Mahayana Gandavyuha Sutra point to the south as the place of writing while the Mahayana Amitabha-vyuha Sutra, which brought into existence Amitabha Buddha, was most probably composed in the north with considerable Zoroastrian influence because both the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda and Amitabha Buddha are associated with luminosity. In fact, the name Amitabha means 'Unbounded Light'. His other name is Amitayus meaning 'Unbounded Life'. The Mahayana Saddharma Pundarika Sutra, or Lotus Sutra, was certainly written later than the Mahayana Amitabha-vyuha Sutra because it already refers to Amitabha Buddha. Silk, which at that point of time could only have come from China, is mentioned in the Lotus Sutra and some other Mahayana Sutras as well indicating that the anonymous authors of these Mahayana Sutras lived in places where there was trade with China.

Nagarjuna's main claim to fame is his being the founder of the Madhyamika school of Mahayana Buddhism, a school which bifurcated into the Prasangika Madhyamika, typically represented by Buddhapalita and Chandrakirti, and Swatantrika Madhyamika, typically represented by Bhavaviveka, in later times.

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