

## On Buddhists and their chairs

Joseph Walser

For some time now, I have been interested in the genre of Buddhist scripture and the ways in which it was seen to be invested with authority. In this paper, I would like to address two questions: First, is there a distinct jurisdiction for scripture, or can it overlap with other, empirical sources of knowledge? Second, can non-philosophical circumstances be interpreted as having been instrumental in the development of apologetical endeavors within a tradition? It seems to me that such questions of authority, jurisdiction and apologetics may be brought into fruitful conversation with a number of theories falling under the rubric of *genre studies*. Specifically, I want to think about the relation between Buddhist scripture as a genre and the physical props that frame and authorize a particular scripture *as Buddhist*.

In particular, I wish to argue that Buddhists understood the preaching dais to have a special relationship to the genre of scripture, and that conversely censorship of a scripture would have been epitomized by denied access to such a dais. Put differently, Buddhists of different stripes would have had to establish their right to access the preaching dais in order to be able to authorize their version of Buddhism as “Buddhism.” In the following, I would like to discuss the development of the chair as authorizing frame for Buddhist scriptures and ways in which Mahāyāna texts key this image in order to authorize their own *sūtras* and *sūtra* preachers and ultimately to dominate that space.

### The dais

In Buddhist texts we find three terms designating the authorized dais for preaching: the high seat (*uccāsana*), the lion throne (*siṃhāsana*), and the dharma seat (*dharmāsana*). As we shall see, each of these terms carries with it distinct nuances connecting it with other fields of discourse. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that the usage of these terms is unstable and we find the terminology shifting not only between texts, but between multiple translations/editions of the same text.

#### *The high seat*

From the earliest Buddhist *sūtras* there appears to have been a kind of protocol to listening to the Buddha. The Buddha's chief interrogator is often depicted as coming to him, respectfully greeting him and then sitting down to one side. There are a few sermons in which we are told that someone has "arranged a seat" (*āsanaṃ prajñāpya*) for the Buddha before he starts preaching. In most cases, this seat arranging is largely pragmatic and little is made of it. Indeed, it is easy to take the Buddha's chair as simply one more mute prop in the overall scene. But even at its simplest, the Buddha's chair acts as a framing device for the Buddha's speech, narratively inserting it into the discursive and highly intertextual world of chairs populating Buddhist and non-Buddhist literature. As stories of the Buddha's chair become elaborated and more importantly *reiterated*, the chair itself becomes an important trope in Buddhist scripture functioning to connect Buddhist discourse to various registers of authority; some Buddhist and some non-Buddhist.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Bakhtin 1982: 278: "The word forgets that its object has its own history of contradictory acts of verbal recognition, as well as that heteroglossia that is always present in such acts of recognition. For the writer of artistic prose, on the contrary, the object reveals first of all precisely the socially heteroglot multiplicity of its names, definitions and value judgments. Instead of the virginal fullness and inexhaustibility of the object itself, the prose writer confronts a multitude of routes, roads and paths that have been laid down in the object by social consciousness. Along with the contradictions inside the

At its simplest, the ritual of offering the Buddha a seat keys into larger social customs establishing hierarchy.<sup>2</sup> The Buddha sits on a seat while his audience does not. Presumably, these seats were less like chairs and more like low platforms or cushions that the Buddha would sit on cross legged as can be seen in many early anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha.

Nevertheless, to sit on anything at all is a signal of status since, in narrative friezes, when the Buddha sits everyone else stands or sits below him.<sup>3</sup> Sitting on a seat is superior to standing just as the relative height of a seat reflects one's status. The idea that relative height of the seat was a marker of hierarchy is reflected in the *Pratimokṣa* rules stating that a monk may not preach to someone on a seat higher than himself.

The Buddha's teaching authority results from his experience at the *bodhimaṇḍa*, and thus it should not be surprising to find that both the terminology and imagery used to describe his seat at the base of the Bodhi tree is identical to that of his preaching seat. Thus, we find Aśvaghosa's *Buddhacarita* referring to the Buddha's seat under the Bodhi tree as the "jeweled seat" (*ratnāsana*),<sup>4</sup> while the Pali *Aṭṭhakathās* refer to it as the diamond seat (*vajirāsana*)<sup>5</sup> or more

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object itself, the prose writer witnesses as well the unfolding of social heteroglossia *surrounding* the object ... the dialectics of the object are interwoven with the social dialogue surrounding it."

<sup>2</sup> Boris Oguibenine specifically attempts to connect the ritual of offering a seat to Vedic rites of initiation. While I agree with him that these rites may be alluded to in certain Buddhist contexts, the present paper seeks to demonstrate that the cultural resonances surrounding chairs include, but certainly extend beyond Vedic references. See Oguibenine 1983. My thanks to Amy Langenberg for pointing this source out to me.

<sup>3</sup> For example, when the *samana* Bhaggava-gotta invites the Buddha to his hermitage for a discussion, we are told that he arranges a seat for the Buddha and that he himself sits on a low stool beside the Buddha. Walshe 1995: 371; CSCD, DN III p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Cowell 1969: 164; Johnston 1935: 15, vs. 51.

<sup>5</sup> CSCD, *Udāna Aṭṭhakathā* 31.

commonly the unconquered seat (*aparājītapallaṅka*).<sup>6</sup> The *Mahāvastu* and the *Lalitavistara* both refer to this seat as a “lion throne.” The latter text has all the gods competing to provide the lion throne that the Bodhisattva will sit on under the Bodhi tree. The scene is soon filled with 80,000 lion thrones and Bodhi trees, but by the power of the Bodhisattva, each *devaputra* thinks that Śākyamuni will sit on *his* throne alone.<sup>7</sup> Though labeled as lion throne, the seat is also clearly a high seat. The *Mahāvastu* waxes eloquent on how this seat is perceived by different tiers of devas; each group’s perception of its height being an index to the amount of merit they earned in a previous life.<sup>8</sup>

As is often the case in Buddhist texts, issues of authority and respect are worked out in the mythical time of the historical Buddha and his disciples and keyed to the local monastics by implication of semiotic similarity. Buddhist texts may not demand respect for the local preacher, but they do depict the Buddha<sup>9</sup> and luminaries such as Śāriputra, Maudgalyāyana and Upāli preaching from high seats and lion thrones that would have been identical to the chair the text was being read from.

Indeed, there are numerous passages in the *vinayas* dictating that when a monk preaches in the monastery it should be done from a high seat or lion throne just as the Buddha and his disciples are depicted as doing. Though space limitations prevent me from going into all of the details, it is clear from *vinaya* materials that the high seat or lion throne was an important part of the everyday furniture of the monastery. According to the *Dharmaguptavinaya* its use was restricted to one person at a time,<sup>10</sup> and the *Mūlasarvāstivādinaya* and Daoxuan’s commentary on the *Dharmaguptavinaya* also give

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., CSCD, *Dīgha Aṭṭhakathā* (Pali Text Society) i 67.

<sup>7</sup> See CBETA, T. 186 p. 515a12–22.

<sup>8</sup> Jones 1976: 293; Senart 1890: 312–313.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, CBETA, T. 1421 p. 30b9.

<sup>10</sup> CBETA, T. 1428 p. 817a9–11; also see Daoxuan’s commentary CBETA, T. 1804 p. 138a25.

rules for what to do if a heretic mounts the high seat.<sup>11</sup> We should take this as a strong indication that the seat was not to be used by heterodox preachers. A key point in all of this is that these preaching daises would have been limited in number and restricted in usage.

Thus, although the hagiographical descriptions of the Buddha's seat also refer to and authorize a particular piece of monastic furniture, once incorporated as a narrative trope, particular features of the trope key into discourses of legitimation and authority at the intersection of several different cultural fields. In particular, the emphasis on the height of the seat echoes the role of the *āsandī* in Vedic ritual. The *āsandī* is an item of *śrauta* paraphernalia that Jeannine Auboyer argues doubles as both an altar and a throne in late Vedic rituals of sovereignty. She notes, for example, that the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* contains quite a few discussions of the seat on which the sacrificer receives *abhiṣekha*. While one would not necessarily have to be a king to perform these rituals, these passages did form an important component in royal consecration rituals since the passages in question explicitly associate the seat and especially its height with royal power (both *kṣatra* and *saṃrājya*).<sup>12</sup>

### *Lion throne*

The connection of the preaching seat with sovereign authority becomes even more explicit when the high seat is referred to as the

<sup>11</sup> CBETA, T. 1442 p. 673b7; CBETA, T. 1804 p. 36a8.

<sup>12</sup> See Auboyer 1949: 16, n. 3–4. Vedic use of the throne is by no means limited to the *Śukla Yajurveda śākhā* but seems to be relatively common in *śrauta* texts. Theodore Proferes (2007: 88–90) discusses a passage in the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* in which Āditya himself is anointed on a royal throne. The parallels between thrones of the Buddha and those depicted in *śrauta* rituals become even more explicit when we get into tantric materials. For example, in the introduction to the *Mahāvairocanābhisambodhisūtra* we find the throne of Vairocana made up of the bodies of bodhisattvas (singular body in T. 848 but apparently plural in the Tibetan and in Buddhaghosya's commentary [see Hodge 2003: 47–48] just as we find in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*'s account of the coronation of Indra [cp. A.B. 8.3.12 and CBETA, T. 848 p. 1a12]).

*siṃhāsana* or “lion throne.” The earliest evidence for the lion throne in India occurs in a statue of Vima Khadphises from Mathurā.<sup>13</sup> Unlike the high seat, the lion throne is first and foremost a royal throne. So, for example, the *Amarakośa* lexicon defines the king’s seat (the *nṛpāsana*) as the *bhadrāsana* and the *siṃhāsana*.<sup>14</sup> As the lion throne becomes the symbol of sovereignty in North India and Central Asia, we find some of the earliest Chinese translations depicting the Buddha sitting on a “lion seat” (師子座 – *shīzǐ zuò* = *siṃhāsana*). Clearly, the adoption of the lion throne motif for the Buddha’s seat was designed to meld religious power to widely established images of political power, and this connection is made explicit in the *Mahāprajñā-pāramitopadeśa* where it is said, “The place where the Buddha sits, whether wood, or earth is called the lion throne. Just like today the place where the king sits is also called the lion throne.”<sup>15</sup>

#### *Public high seat*

The idea of the high seat or lion throne as a platform for authoritative speech was not limited to Buddhist monasteries. Rather, the Buddhist high seat or lion throne appears to have been a sectarian iteration of a pan-Indian phenomenon. Not only do we find lion thrones depicted in Jain sculpture from the same period, but there is also evidence for such seats in use in a non sect-specific way. For

<sup>13</sup> See Zimmer 1955, plate 59. Rosenfield (1967: 184) argues that, “the form of Vima’s throne has less in common with the Buddhist *siṃhāsana* than with the iconic emblems and thrones of the contemporary Middle East.” He then goes on to cite a number of examples from Persia all the way to the Mediterranean that pre-date Vima. Suffice it to say this specific type of throne with lions for legs has quite a long history. The earliest example that I could find was that of the Pharaoh Khephren who lived from roughly 2558 to 2532 BCE, and even after the Kuṣāṇas, the lion throne continued to be used until at least the late fifth century by the Sassanian king Bahram Gur (r. 421–438). See for example, Ackerman et al. 1940: 35.

<sup>14</sup> *Amarakośa* 2.7.995: *nṛpāsanaṃ yat tad bhadrāsanaṃ siṃhāsanaṃ tu tat.*

<sup>15</sup> CBETA, T. 1509 p. 111a28–b5. This is echoed in a tenth-century commentary on the *Dharmaguptavinaya*, cp. CBETA, T. 1805 p. 414a5–7.

example, Kumārajīva's translation of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* mentions a story in which an eight year old Śāriputra defeats a group of Brahmins, amazing them with his intelligence.<sup>16</sup> For our purposes, however, what is significant is that the discussion takes place out in the open at the *Gīryagrāsamāja* festival during which four high seats (*gāo zuò* 高座) were set up: one for the king of the country, one for the crown prince, one for the great minister and one for a master of *sāstras* (論士).<sup>17</sup> What initially shocks the crowd is the fact that the precocious Śāriputra mounts the last of these high seats. This is understood to be a challenge that prompts the Brahmins in the crowd to test his knowledge. Śāriputra's success on the high seat wins him not only the respect of the brahmins but an endowment from the king of six villages.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps not incidentally, we find such

<sup>16</sup> CBETA, T. 1509 p. 136a14ff.; Lamotte 1976: 621–623.

<sup>17</sup> 論士 could also be translated as “master of debate,” but while there is certainly always an implicit understanding that anyone sitting in such a chair had better be prepared to defend themselves, the primary intent of mounting the seat seems to have been to preach rather than to debate. To get a feel for the social significance of these seats, I direct the reader to the account of Upagupta in the *Aśoka Avadāna* who mounts the lion throne in Mathura to preach the four noble truths.

When many hundreds of thousands of Brahmins had assembled, the elder, fearless as a lion, mounted the lion's throne.

As it is said:

It is impossible, they say,  
for an ignorant man to ascend the lion's throne;  
for he who merely sits on that seat  
becomes timid like a deer.  
But he who roars out like a lion  
in order to destroy the arrogance  
of differing philosophers,  
he is a lion among speakers,  
and is fit to mount the lion's throne.

The elder Upagupta preached a step-by-step discourse and exposed the truths. And upon hearing [his Teaching], many hundreds of thousands of living beings planted roots of merit conducive to liberation. [See Strong 1983: 196–197; Mukhopadhyaya 1963: 27–28.]

<sup>18</sup> This story is also mentioned in the Chinese translation of the *Dīrghanākhā Avadāna* in the *Avadāna Śataka* (although it is elided in the

public high seats still in use in South Asia. For example, storytellers in Kathmandu will speak from similar specially constructed raised platforms.<sup>19</sup>

### *Fetishized charisma*

In order for the high seat or the lion throne to function as an authoritative dais in the monastery, the authoritative registers keyed in Buddhist hagiographical literature would have to be seen as somehow concretized in the physical object in the monastery. A looser way of putting this would be to simply say that the chair would have to be seen as sacred. That the chair itself became invested with charisma and a power of its own can be demonstrated through Buddhist mythology, specific monastic regulations, as well as through art history. Mythologically speaking, there is a story in the *Kṣudrakavastu* of the *Dharmaguptavinaya* in which the Buddha is engaged in a magical competition with all of the *tīrthikas* from across India.<sup>20</sup> In the course of the story all of these *tīrthikas* along with their retinues come together to compete with the Buddha. The Buddha begins the competition by creating 100,000 seats for all of his monks and the *tīrthikas* and then creates a seven jeweled lion throne in the center of these on which he himself sits.<sup>21</sup> He proceeds to perform a miracle a day for a fortnight. On the eighth day, the *tīrthikas* apparently discover that they cannot compete with the Buddha's magical powers and so they plot, *not* to kill the Buddha, *but to destroy his high seat*.<sup>22</sup> On the level of monastic regulation, the *Mahīśāsakavinaya* reports that at a certain monastery the high seat from which the dharma was preached began to be worshiped by monks who threw flowers

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Sanskrit text translated by Feer). See, CBETA, T. 200 p. 255b2ff.

<sup>19</sup> Todd Lewis, personal communication. The aspect of the high seat as a platform for debate is reflected in the modern Tibetan practice of having the contenders in certain special debates sit on a seat over six feet high. See Dreyfus 2003: 235.

<sup>20</sup> CBETA, T. 1428 p. 946b13ff.

<sup>21</sup> CBETA, T. 1428 p. 949a2–4.

<sup>22</sup> CBETA, T. 1428 p. 949c2.

on it. The laity objected that this was too much like the worship of the king's chief minister. Later, the laity themselves wanted to offer flowers to the preaching monks. The Buddha steps in and dictates that while the seat itself could receive this kind of *pūjā*, the dharma preacher sitting on it could not.<sup>23</sup>

That the idea of doing *pūjā* to the chair was both early and not necessarily limited to any one sect, we need only to note that prior to the advent of anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha, his chair is often used as a symbolic representation of his presence. It is often, as in early friezes from Amaravati, Mathura and Gandhara, depicted as the object of worship.

#### *The seat as authorizing frame*

Now I am not suggesting that all sermons were delivered from a lion throne, just as the Pope does not always speak *ex cathedra* (literally, "from the chair"). But the fact that the Pope is *authorized* to speak *ex cathedra* lends a kind of implicit legitimacy to his speeches in other venues (only two popes have declared anything *ex cathedra*). What I am suggesting is that there was a culturally understood reciprocal authorization between the *sūtra* as a genre and the fact that its salient instantiation would have been framed by such a dais.

As such, to have access to the dais becomes the best route to authorize a given message as legitimately "Buddhist," and for that reason one of the more important stakes in any ideological struggle. There was probably only one per monastery and its use certainly would have been restricted to those who were explicitly authorized to occupy it. This becomes apparent when we look at specific Buddhist monastic sites. Take for example Bavikoṇḍa and Thotlakoṇḍa in Andhra Pradesh. As Lars Fogelin has shown, the *mahāstūpa* with circumambulatory path was not conducive to a single focal point necessary for preaching.<sup>24</sup> That leaves us with the *caityagrha* and the *maṇḍapa*. In sites like Bavikoṇḍa and Thotlakoṇḍa the *caityagrha*

<sup>23</sup> CBETA, T. 1421 p. 121c14.

<sup>24</sup> Fogelin 2006: 66–73.

would not have been large enough to accommodate many people, although I suppose it would be possible. The main site of preaching would have been the *maṇḍapa* in the center of the *vihāra* area which, according to Sastry contained, “a brick built platform measuring 2.40 × 2.00 meters.”<sup>25</sup> This would have been the one spot in the monastery for preaching and only the monk occupying this spot would have “air time.”

We find an even more dramatic example of how a lion throne authorizes a preaching space if we look at cave 10 at Ellora. The cave forms an apsidal *caityagrha* in which the stupa lies at the top of the apse. This arrangement forms a convenient space for an audience in front of the stupa. In such a situation the dharma preacher would have sat directly in front of the stupa, and in this cave, the front of the stupa is adorned with a life sized depiction of the Buddha preaching on a lion throne. Here it is easy to see how the authority of the Buddha’s lion throne reflects on the preaching monk who presumably would have positioned his own chair directly in front of the statue of the similarly seated preaching Buddha.

In the preceding, I have drawn on materials spanning at least a thousand years and a broad swath of the Subcontinent. This, however, is precisely the point. While certain strategies of legitimation, the Aśvamedha versus Purāṇic genealogies of descent from the gods, may vary over time, the trope of the throne and enthronement remains a fairly stable index of authority within the Indic cultural sphere, and thus provided a reliable source of legitimacy to be tapped.

### **Mahāyāna sūtras**

If access to the monastic dais was constrained and regulated, then we should expect to find those *sūtras* whose own legitimacy had not yet been established responding precisely at the level of the authorizing trope. This is exactly what we find in some Mahāyāna texts. In the remainder, I will give four examples of ways in which some

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<sup>25</sup> Sastry 1992: 48.

Mahāyāna texts re-frame the frame of the preaching dais to authorize their own preaching.

Despite Richard Gombrich's argument suggesting that Mahāyānists may have been content writing scriptures and quietly slipping them into the monastic library, it seems to me that Mahāyāna texts are equally, if not more concerned with being preached. And so we find that Mahāyāna texts have a lot to say about chairs.

### *Śūraṅgamasamādhisūtra*

For example, in Kumārajīva's 5<sup>th</sup>-century translation of the *Śūraṅgamasamādhisūtra*, immediately after a list of the benefits from "believing it, grasping it, remembering it and speaking and explaining it to others," the *sūtra* tells us that, "the Śakras, Brahmās and Lokapāla Kings of the gods," wished to, "present (*prajñāpayitum*) to the Tathāgata a lion throne (*siṃhāsana*) ... a throne for a great turning of the Wheel of the Dharma (*mahādharma cakrapravartanāsana*), so that the Tathāgata, seated on this throne of ours, will expound the *Śūraṅgamasamādhi* for a great turning of the Wheel of the Dharma."<sup>26</sup>

Each of the gods offers his own throne to the Buddha thinking that his is the only one, and that the Buddha will expound the *Śūraṅgamasamādhi* from his throne alone. There were 84,000 *koṭinayutas* of lion thrones in the assembly and yet they did not obstruct one another. Then, "desiring to demonstrate a little of the potency (*prabhāva*) of the *Śūraṅgamasamādhi* and have the practices (*caryā*) of the Mahāyāna adopted, the Tathāgata ... acted so that all the assemblies saw the Tathāgata present everywhere on the 84,000 *koṭinayutas* of precious *siṃhāsanas*."<sup>27</sup>

The theme of the gods competing to offer the Buddha a lion throne shows up in the *Lalitavistara* and in the *Tathāgataguhyasūtra* and in those contexts there is nothing particularly remarkable about the story. Here, however, the *Śūraṅgamasamādhi* takes what was probably an already established theme in Buddhist literature and recasts it

<sup>26</sup> Lamotte 2005: 115.

<sup>27</sup> Lamotte 2005: 116.

to serve the reproduction and authorization of the *sūtra* itself. In fact, I should point out here that when it comes to seats, we find a remarkable difference between Mahāyāna texts and their non-Mahāyāna counterparts. Whereas non-Mahāyāna texts often depict either the Buddha or one of his disciples preaching from a dais, we are seldom told the name of the *sūtra* being preached.<sup>28</sup> When Mahāyāna *sūtras* talk about daises, they tend to lapse into baroque excesses designed to rivet the reader's attention to the fact that *precisely this sermon* is being preached from that authorized chair – with the strong implication being that the reader should ensure the same happens from the corresponding chair in the local monastery. But unlike the monastic lion throne, of which there can be only one occupant, the staggering multiplication of lion thrones here (and the preaching of the *Śūraṅgamasamādhisūtra* on them) seems to be arguing for the authorization of a proliferation of such daises – arguing that when this does happen there will be no mutual obstruction.

#### *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*

Indeed, we find this theme of the proliferation of preaching daises (as well as their mutual non-obstruction) from the earliest strata of Mahāyāna texts to be translated into Chinese. The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, first translated by Zhī Qiān in the early third century, employs a slightly more complicated strategy than the *Śūraṅgamasamādhī*. The text first attempts to “dethrone” traditional preaching authorities specifically by undermining the authority of the seat. It then proceeds to authorize and seat a different set of authorities, the bodhisattvas – but not in the monastery. Though I am sure everyone here is familiar with this story, I ask you to rethink its significance as a story about preachers.

Reading from Zhī Qiān's translation at the beginning of chapter five, we find Śāriputra looking around Vimalakīrti's empty house and noticing that there are no chairs for the bodhisattvas and *śrā-*

<sup>28</sup> The *Dharmacakraparivartana* preached by Upagupta in the *Aśokāvadāna* and the *Appamādavagga* preached by Nigroda being two notable exceptions.

*vakas* to sit on. Vimalakīrti at first de-authorizes the preaching chair as commonly understood by chastising Śāriputra for seeking a chair instead of seeking the dharma.<sup>29</sup> After a short sermon expounding the Mahāyāna dharma, he tells of a distant universe called Sumerudhvajā whose resident Buddha, Sumerudīparāja sits on a lion throne whose height is 68,000 *yojanas* and his country is filled with 8,400,000 beautifully adorned lion thrones for his bodhisattvas. Sumerudīparāja then sends 32,000 thrones to Vimalakīrti's house, and the thrones all manage to fit without hindering one another. If the term "lion throne" here is meant to key the preaching chair in the monastery, then the multiplication of the preaching chairs along with the comment that they did not hinder one another again seems to be arguing that a similar proliferation of Mahāyāna preachers will similarly not cause any obstruction. We know that it is Mahāyāna that is to be preached from these seats since only the bodhisattvas are able to increase their size to sit on them. Traditional masters of preaching like Śāriputra cannot even get on the seat. What authorizes the bodhisattvas to sit on the seats is not their knowledge of traditional sermon material, but their supernatural powers. Only after paying homage to the Tathāgata Sumerudīparāja, are the *śrāvakas* granted the power to occupy the *siṃhāsanas*.

If the lion throne in this story is meant to key the authority of the actual preaching dais in the monastery, its reframing here effects two important displacements. As I have already mentioned, the traditional preaching authorities, the arhats, are displaced in favor of the layman Vimalakīrti and the bodhisattvas. While this plays on a theme that appears in the *Dharmaguptavinaya* in which the Buddha creates hundreds of thousands of chairs in a *gr̥hapati's* house,<sup>30</sup> unlike that story in which all of the thousands of *tīrthikas* get to sit, the seats in Vimalakīrti's house serve the function of separating the worthy from the unworthy. This leaves us with the distinct impression that the author(s) expected such a winnowing to take place away

<sup>29</sup> Lamotte 2005: 134; CBETA, T. 474 p. 526c20ff.

<sup>30</sup> CBETA, T. 1428, p. 947a11–b23. This story appears to have been a later insertion into the larger story of the Buddha's competition with the other *tīrthikas* to show supremacy of magical powers.

from the monastery among the laity. Granted, laypeople's houses have always been an important preaching venue. But the authority of the preacher in the household context is derivative of that person being authorized by their monastery. Here, the center of gravity (if not the actual locus) seems to have shifted to the itinerant preacher, and is no longer with the elders back at the monastery.

### *Sadāprarudita story*

We find a different tactic in the story of Sadāprarudita in the *Aṣṭasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*.<sup>31</sup> Here, the dais that Dharmodgata preaches from is completely dissociated from the monastery. For example, in Lokakṣema's late second century text we find Dharmodgata's high

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<sup>31</sup> The theme of the preaching throne actually occurs earlier in chapter 4 of the *Aṣṭa*, though there the implication for the Buddhist preaching dais is more oblique. The chapter has the Buddha ask whether Śakra would choose a copy of the *Prajñāpāramitā* or a universe full of the Tathāgata's relics. He responds that, although he has great reverence for the relics of the Tathāgata, he would choose the *Prajñāpāramitā*, since it is the cause of the *sarvajña* that pervades the relics and gives them authority. Śakra then goes on to give the example of his own throne.

It is as with my own godly seat in the Sudharmā, the hall of the Gods. When I am seated on it, the Gods come to wait on me. But when I am not, the Gods, out of respect for me, pay their respect to my seat, circumambulate it, and go away again. For they recall that, seated on this seat, Śakra, the Chief of the Gods, demonstrates Dharma to the Gods of the Thirty-three. In the same way, the perfection of wisdom is the real eminent cause and condition which feeds the all-knowledge of the Tathāgata. The Relics of the Tathāgata, on the other hand, are true deposits of all knowledge, but they are not true conditions, or reasons, for the production of that cognition. As the cause of the cognition of the all-knowing the perfection of wisdom is also worshipped through the relics of the Tathāgata. [Conze 1994: 116]

This passage can be found (with minor variations) in most versions of the *Aṣṭa*, with the exception of T. 225. While the main thrust of the paragraph is to subordinate the authority of the Buddha's relics to that of the *Prajñāpāramitā*, a secondary implication of the passage is that the preaching throne achieves its ultimate legitimacy, not from the Buddha, but from that which *enlightens* the Buddha – namely the *Prajñāpāramitā*.

seat, set up in the middle of the realm. There is no indication in the text that he is in a monastery, and on the contrary, his status as a layperson is emphasized by references to his concubines. Here, Dharmodgata occupies the highest chair from which he preaches the *Perfection of Wisdom* while the bodhisattvas listen, write it down, study it, etc.<sup>32</sup>

Dharmodgata, like Vimalakīrti, is clearly a layperson here, but unlike the Vimalakīrti example, Dharmodgata's seat is not meant to invoke the monastic dais, but the high seat set up in public places. The Sanskrit version of this passage differs in a number of ways, but despite the fact that Dharmodgata's seat is designated a *dharmāsana*, the Sanskrit further emphasizes the non-monastic setting by placing Dharmodgata's dais at the *nagara śṛṅgāṭaka* – the crossroads of town. This is less a recontextualization of monastic authority than a call to street preaching of the *Prajñāpāramitā* by lay adherents.

#### *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*

We see the opposite strategy developed in the *Perfection of Wisdom in 25,000 Lines*, which, it seems, fully intends to usurp the monastic dais. Mokṣala's late third century translation opens with the Buddha setting out his own lion throne and sitting on it in lotus position.<sup>33</sup> He does not speak,<sup>34</sup> but performs a number of miracles by entering different kinds of *samādhis* on the lion throne. The last of these has him reveal himself on a lion throne<sup>35</sup> whose luster and height all surpasses all mount Sumerus.<sup>36</sup> From that lion throne, he illuminates the

<sup>32</sup> Translation from Lancaster 1968: 239–240; cp. Conze 1994: 280–281 and CBETA, T. 224 p. 471c23ff.

<sup>33</sup> CBETA, T. 221 p. 1b7.

<sup>34</sup> Although CBETA, T. 221 p. 1c21 states that some of the assembled beings, "...examine the lion throne and 聞 what the Buddha has said..." Usually *wén* means "to hear," but it can also mean "to make known." This is missing in the Sanskrit.

<sup>35</sup> Mokṣala has him sitting (beneath) a "lion tree." Presumably 床 is a mistake for 座. CBETA, T. 221 p. 1c16.

<sup>36</sup> CBETA, T. 221 p. 1c17.

Tathāgata Ratnākara who teaches the *Perfection of Wisdom* in the world system Ratnavatī.<sup>37</sup>

Here the Perfection of Wisdom tradition appears to be aiming straight for the monastic lion throne. The Buddha himself does not speak throughout the introduction, but sits in *samādhi* throughout. It is other Buddhas who speak for him and about him. We are nevertheless told several times that these *samādhis* are performed by the Buddha sitting in lotus position on the lion throne. The classical instance in which the Buddha sits in *samādhi* on a lion throne is when he sits under the Bodhi tree. If his *samādhi* illuminates other Buddhas preaching the perfection of wisdom and if in the Sanskrit version of this text,<sup>38</sup> those other Buddhas describe Śākyamuni as preaching Perfection of Wisdom in this *samādhi*, we might be forgiven from assuming that the “original” lion throne was itself authorized by the king of *samādhis* stemming from the practice of the Perfection of Wisdom. In so doing this text usurps one of the sources of authority for any monastic lion throne – the *bodhimaṇḍa* itself.

#### *Suvarṇabhāṣasūtra*

There is one last example I would like to discuss in regard to preaching daises, although I haven’t been able to find other examples of it in Mahāyāna literature. The *Suvarṇabhāṣasūtra* addresses the king to offer his throne to a monk to preach.<sup>39</sup> But here, he is to do so specifically to have the monk preach the *Suvarṇabhāṣasūtra*.

<sup>37</sup> CBETA, T. 221, p. 2a10.

<sup>38</sup> Conze 1975: 42; Dutt 1934: 13, lines 6–7.

<sup>39</sup> The *Ajitasenavyākaraṇasūtra* has King Ajitasena offering his own lion throne to the Buddha to sit in and preach to him. The implication here is that in matters of dharma, the preaching monk (the contemporary stand-in for the Buddha) is king and the king is supplicant. [Dutt 1939: 129] The Pali *Mahāvamsa* makes this move explicit, bypassing the Buddha altogether to connect the authority of the lion throne directly to the preaching Buddhist saint when Aśoka offers his throne to the monk Nigroda.

The king, in whom kindly feelings had arisen towards that same (Nigroda), summoned him in all haste into his presence; but he came

In order to hear this excellent *Suvarṇabhāsa*, king of *sūtras*, that king of men must enter the chief palace. And having entered that place, he must sprinkle it well with water of various perfumes and bestrew it with flowers. In that place ... a seat of the Law<sup>40</sup> is to be provided, set up high (and) well adorned with various adornments. That place must be well adorned with various umbrellas, banners and flags. And that king of men must wash his body well, wear well-perfumed clothes, be clad in new and brilliant garments, be adorned with various ornaments. For himself a low seat must be provided. When he has sat down on that seat, he must not be elated by his sovereignty.<sup>41</sup>

Here, one wonders whether the chair being sought may not be the lion throne of the palace itself, but rather the *dharmāsana* or “dharma seat” discussed in *dharmasāstra*, i.e., the equivalent of the judicial bench.<sup>42</sup> Manu says that it may be occupied by a Brahmin if the

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staidly and calmly thither. And the king said to him: ‘Sit, my dear, upon a fitting seat.’ Since he saw no other *bhikkhu* there he approached the [lion] throne. Then as he stepped toward the throne, the king thought: ‘To-day, this *sāmaṇera* will be lord in my house!’ Leaning on the king’s hand he (the monk) mounted the throne and took his seat on the royal throne under the white canopy. And seeing him seated there king Asoka rejoiced greatly that he had honoured him according to his rank. When he had refreshed him with hard and soft foods prepared for himself he questioned the *sāmaṇera* concerning the doctrine taught by the Saṃbuddha. Then the *sāmaṇera* preached to him the ‘*Appamādavagga*.’ [Geiger 1986: 31]

<sup>40</sup> The Sanskrit has *dharmāsana* here, while Dharmakṣema’s two early fifth century translations both have 大法座師子之座 (\**mahādharmāsana siṃhāsana*). See CBETA, T. 664 p. 383b5 and T. 663 p. 342a17–18.

<sup>41</sup> Emmerick 1992: 32.

<sup>42</sup> While this term would seem to be a natural designation for a preaching chair, it doesn’t occur in Pali before the *Aṭṭhakathās* and doesn’t occur in any Chinese text before Dharmarakṣa in the third century. When it does occur, it is used interchangeably (often in the same sentence) with “high seat” and so in most contexts it may be treated as a kind of high seat. Here, however the *dharmāsana* clearly occurs in the king’s court, hence we should also be aware of discussions of the *dharmāsana* that occur in later *dharmasāstras*. Thus, according to the *Manusmṛti*, the *Nārada-smṛti* and the *Viṣṇu-smṛti*, the *dharmāsana* is the seat from which

king does not wish to be bothered by the caseload, and here we have a Buddhist text that displays an unusual degree of concern with the brahmanical world putting a Buddhist monk in the same chair. Manu says that the one ascending the dharma seat should first propitiate the *lokapālas*. In the *Suvarṇabhāsasūtra* it is the *lokapālas* themselves (the four Kings) who urge the king to put the Buddhist monk in that seat (if this were the case, it would certainly make Mahāyānists' life easier). Even if the dharma seat here is not specifically the seat of justice it clearly is not a preaching dais in a monastery. Like the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, the strategy here is to vie for non-monastic preaching space and perhaps to gain access to the monastic dais on the recommendation of the king. In this context, it is perhaps significant that the earliest inscription to mention the word *mahāyāna*, describes a *cozbo* as one "who has set forth in the *mahāyāna*."<sup>43</sup> The end of this same letter may also refer to the *Suvarṇabhāsasūtra* itself.<sup>44</sup> Though most of the Niya documents depict the office of *cozbo* as a kind of governor-general,<sup>45</sup> some of the documents clearly depict the *cozbo* engaging in the investigation of legal cases.<sup>46</sup> In this context, we can

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court cases are decided. The following is from the *Manusmṛiti* 8: 23ff:

Ascending the *dharmāsana* with his body covered and his mind composed, he should pay homage to the guardians of the world [the *lokapālas*] and open the trial. Paying attention to only these two – what is and what is not in accord with the provisions of polity (*artha*), and what is and is not in accord with the Law (*dharmā*) he should try all the cases brought by litigants in the order of their social class. [Olivelle 2004: 124.]

<sup>43</sup> Fragment 390, Senart 1920: 140; Burrow 1940: 79–80.

<sup>44</sup> This is not clear from Burrow's translation, but line 6 of Senart's edition clearly mentions a "*suvamṇiya nama sutra*." That this refers to the Mahāyāna *sūtra* of the same name, though possible, is nevertheless not certain.

<sup>45</sup> This is the translation used by Valerie Hansen in her discussion of these documents. See Hansen 2004: 305.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, fragment 364:

(To *cozbo* Soṃjaka.)

read the *Suvarṇabhāṣasūtra* as attempting to coopt the center of political/judicial authority.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, I wish to answer the question with which I began this investigation “*Is there a distinct jurisdiction for scripture?*” Though I suspect that I have taken the word *jurisdiction* in a different sense than was intended, I nevertheless find that *sūtras* (and *sūtra* authors) did seek jurisdiction or a kind of polemical dominance over concrete spaces in the monastery as a key tactic in maximizing attention for particular messages and for legitimating them as properly “Buddhist.” In looking at the preaching dais in Buddhist monasteries, I have also shown how the numerical limitations and regulative practices associated with these daises are reflected in the apologetical endeavors of certain key Mahāyāna *sūtras* that seek access to these daises.

### Abbreviations and references

#### Abbreviations

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Amarakośa – Pandit Shivadatta/Vashudev Laxmana Shastri (eds.): *The Nāmaliṅgānuśāsanam [Amarakośaḥ] of Amarasimha With the Commentary (Vyākhyāsudhā or Ramāśramī) of Bhanuji Dikshita.* Varanasi 2002: Chowkhamba Krishnadas Academy.

CBETA – *Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association.*

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... are quickly to be sent under custody to the king’s court. They will make a complaint here in our presence, (and) there will be a decision. Let him (it) not be unlawfully taken from Camaka. Also Caṣgeya has worked a slave belonging to Camaka for twelve years ... has brought. Again he demands the camel. This dispute is to be carefully examined in your presence with oath and witness. A decision is to be made according to the law. If you are not clear there, they are to be quickly sent here to the king’s court under custody, and there will be a decision here in our presence. [Burrow 1940: 72].

- CSCD – *Chatṭha Saṅgāyana Compact Disc* (Burmese Edition of the Pali Canon)
- T. – Junjirō Takakusu/Kaigyoku Watanabe: *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō, The Tripiṭaka in Chinese*. 100 volumes. Tōkyō 1924–1934: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai.

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