

Linnart Mäll's Contribution to Mahāyāna Studies¹

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The name Linnart Mäll is probably considerably more well-known in the scholarly circles of the former Soviet Union than among the mainly English-speaking Western Buddhist Studies scholars. His research in the 1960s–1970s and the publication of a number of articles in Russian on the interpretation of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, a central text in Mahāyāna Buddhism, won him the status of the most prominent scholar in Buddhist Studies in the Soviet Union at the time, as well as a high reputation amongst the researchers in Moscow, Leningrad, and naturally, in his homeland Estonia in the old university town of Tartu. Yet, his reputation did not reach far beyond the “iron curtain” of the Soviet system due to political restrictions. This included a language barrier, for it was compulsory that all academic works be published in Russian within the Soviet Union, and publication restrictions abroad, typical in those times.² It is to be taken into consideration that while Mäll was not a member of the Communist Party and did not hide his critical attitude towards the Soviet system, he was constantly observed by the KGB and not allowed to travel outside the Soviet Union.³ His best creative years were spent in a kind of academic inner exile, formally filling the office of an engineer at the University of Tartu without rights

¹ In recent years, I have published the following about the life and works of Linnart Mäll: “Linnart Mäll’s Contribution to Oriental and Buddhist Studies in Estonia” (Mäll 2005: 194–197); “Linnart Mäll: Creator and Translator” (Kulmar, Läänemets 2008: 11–20); “In Memoriam Linnart Mäll” *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia*, vol. 11, issue 1, pp. 151–156.

² The publication of the original Russian-language article *A Possible Approach Towards Understanding śūnyavāda* (Mäll 2005: 16–24; bibliographical data on p. 224) in the French Structuralist-oriented literary magazine *Tel Quel* (Mäll 1968) constitutes nearly the only exception.

³ Mäll was allowed to travel outside the Soviet Union (to Mongolia) for the first time only in 1989 — at a time when travel restrictions were much more relaxed as a result of Gorbachov’s reforms —; Mäll was already more than 50 years old.

to even give lectures. This was the tragedy of Mäll – the researcher and the original-minded interpreter of Buddhism. The first representative collection of his selected writings in English was published only decades later, in 2003 and 2005.⁴ Nowadays when Mahāyāna studies have made a huge leap forward compared to the late 1960s, the collection allows us to appreciate the value of Mäll's scholarly heritage and his innovatively-inclined mind in the context of his times, although belatedly. When one reads the works of the next generation scholars of Buddhist Studies, one gets the impression that notwithstanding the somewhat different wording of these works, and the substantially greater amount of sources available, the researchers, who were most probably unacquainted with Mäll's works, have reached similar opinions. However, this fact should not diminish the importance of Mäll as a Buddhist thinker and visionary man, but rather contribute to the image.

Linnart Mäll began his career as researcher in the middle of the 1960s, when he was in his late twenties. He started out with several visionary articles understanding and interpreting Buddhism in a rather original way that diverged from the so-called main trends of Buddhist studies back then. Before turning to the actual analysis of his works, it would be necessary to say a few words on his development as a Buddhist and a Buddhologist. It should be noted that if one is to take into account the circumstances of his times, then the story of a young man with scholarly interests coming from the periphery of the Soviet Union, who first develops an interest in Buddhism and lives to become a remarkable scholar and translator, has the makings of quite an unconventional narrative. Later in life, when Mäll was already a convinced Buddhist and respected scholar, he always emphasised the importance of his teachers in his development.

Mäll has attributed the role of teacher and inspirer (in the Buddhist sense – a benevolent friend or *kalyāṇamitra*) to a number of scholars, who encouraged him to study Buddhism and especially the Mahāyāna sūtras. He listed the Russian academic Nikolai Konrad⁵; the Estonian theologian Uku Masing⁶; the Moscovian Indologist and philosopher

⁴ Linnart Mäll. *Studies in the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā and Other Essays*. – *Studia Orientalia Tartuensia. Series Nova*. Vol. 1. Tartu: Centre for Oriental Studies, University of Tartu, 2003. Two years later this volume was reprinted under the same title by Motilal Banarsidass Publishers (Mäll 2005).

⁵ Николай Иосифович Конрад (13.03.1891–30.09.1972).

⁶ 11.08.1909–25.04.1985.

Alexander Piatigorsky⁷, who later taught at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London; as well as the heir to and imparter of the Buryatian Tantric Buddhist tradition and distinguished Buddhist scholar Bidia Dandaron⁸. Other important persons for him were the Indologist Oktiabrina Volkova⁹, the Tibetologist Yuri Parfionovitch¹⁰ and the Sinologist Lev Menshikov¹¹.

Nikolai Konrad, a highly respected member of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, was not a Buddhist Studies scholar, but a classical Sinologist and Japanologist. In his deep and clear-sighted historical-philosophical essays he advocates the emergence and development of humanism as the most important factor in human history for the last two thousand and five hundred years. He also considers the emergence of Buddhism in India in the middle of the first millennium B.C.E. as a manifestation of this, universal for the human history process. The young Mäll was captivated by Konrad's sweeping views of history and the humanist-inspired appreciation of the role of religions in history, which were markedly different from the highly ideologised history that was generally taught at Soviet universities at the time.

Uku Masing, a Christian (Lutheran) theologian, poet, and mystic (decades later, Linnart Mäll himself called him in such a way) of rather unconventional views, was one of the first scholars in Estonia to engage in a scientific investigation of Buddhism, write about it in Estonian, and then give lectures on the subject. It was Masing that saw the affinities and inclinations of the young Mäll and recommended that he study Buddhism in depth.

Owing to the support of Konrad, Mäll could receive further instruction in Indology and Eastern languages at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of USSR in Moscow (it was not possible to study Eastern languages and religions at the University of Tartu at the time). There he met Piatigorsky and through him, Dandaron. The latter became Mäll's main Buddhist teacher, with whom he had a close relationship in the few years leading up to Dandaron's tragic death in a Soviet concentration camp in 1974. Mäll himself has pointed out

⁷ Александр Моисеевич Пятигорский (30.01.1929–25.10.2009).

⁸ Бидия Дандарович Дандарон (28.12.1914–26.10.1974).

⁹ Октябрина Федоровна Волкова (23.01.1926–22.10.1988).

¹⁰ Юрий Михайлович Парфионович (21.09.1921–18.09.1990).

¹¹ Лев Николаевич Меньшиков (17.02.1926–29.10.2005).

that Dandaron was one of those who encouraged him to study the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*.¹²

The informal Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School that came into being in the middle of 1960s, tried to avoid the ideological pressure of the Soviet powers and brought an entirely new structuralist approach to cultural studies constituted by another influential factor that shaped Mäll's views, research methodology, and ways of interpretation. Yuri Lotman, Vladimir Toporov, Viatcheslav Ivanov and Boris Uspensky are only some of the names from that brilliant compilation of scholars who contributed to the emergence of cultural semiotics to a remarkable extent. When researchers from different fields met in summer schools near the City of Tartu, they established the main concepts of 'text', 'context', 'sign', 'sign system', 'secondary modelling systems', 'meta-language' and others, for use in the discussion and analysis of cultural phenomena. The powerful synergy created by the discussions reached far beyond the participants of the summer schools of those days. It is safe to say that they gave rise to an entirely new paradigm of cultural science that continues to this day and is developed further by a new generation of semioticians. Several orientalist, including Piatigorsky and Mäll, participated in the summer schools of that academic group in Estonia and published their own works in the publication series *Sign System Studies* that were issued under the *Acta et Commentationes Universitatis Tartuensis*. Mäll found ingenious ways to combine the new cultural semiotics theory and the Buddhist dharma-theory, especially in relation to *prajñāpāramitā*. Decades later he commented on his then decision to use semiotics:

...the terminology of the Tartu-Moscow school is fairly complicated. One of the reasons for this may of course have been an attempt to prevent the authorities from seeing the point, but a more important reason was to develop an exact description, a precise meta-terminology, which would serve to convey Buddhist concepts with the greatest possible degree of adequacy, avoiding any transfer of the ideas and terms of Christian and Western philosophy.¹³

In order to analyse Mäll's contribution to Mahāyāna studies, it would be reasonable to divide his academic heritage pertaining to

¹² For the life and works of Bidia Dandaron see: Stephen Batchelor, "The Trials of Dandaron. Buddhist Perseverance in Russia". *Tricycle*, Spring 1992 (<http://www.tricycle.com/feature/the-trials-dandaron-buddhist-perseverance-russia>), and also Batchelor 1994: 283–285.

¹³ Mäll 2005: 172.

that subject into four main topics: (1) Semiotic model for interpretation of Buddhism and the theory of dharma; (2) The problem of the emergence of Mahāyāna; (3) The structure and main concepts of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*; (4) Buddhist mythology and its role in the Buddhist lsiology. The four topics will be analysed on the basis of the most important works that Mäll published on the subject over four decades.

Semiotic Model for the Interpretation of Buddhism and the Theory of Dharma

Already in his early works, Mäll tends to create logical models, which would allow for a deeper and more creative understanding of Buddhism. Moreover, his intention was that the models should not only function in the current cultural circumstances and in the context of a broad intellectual discussion, but would also help us understand modern phenomena through Buddhism. Although Mäll's writings are based on the thorough content analysis of texts and concepts, his main purpose is to develop a Buddhist theory of knowledge that would be comprehensible and functional in today's context. As was mentioned before, he used the meta-language of semiotics to achieve that aim.

In one of his first published writings, the three-page article *The Zero Way*¹⁴, he analyses the periodisation of Buddhist history and – quite surprisingly – endeavours to solve the issue related to the concept of so-called Early Buddhism with the help of the models of mathematical and linguistic logic. Proceeding from the semiotic approach, he concludes that the concepts 'Buddhism', 'Early Buddhism', 'Middle Buddhism', and 'Late Buddhism' are merely conventional sign systems, and as such undefinable. Subsequently, he takes a step closer to the semiotic interpretation of the concept of *dharma* (which becomes the central issue of his research on Buddhism) by identifying it with the concept of the *sign* in semiotics, yet he does not offer any more detailed argumentation for this. He expresses a well-known formula¹⁵ of the four-fold Indian logic (*catuṣkoṭikā*) in the form of an algebra formula:

¹⁴ Mäll 2005: 13–15 (bibliographical data on p. 224).

¹⁵ The motto of this article, as stated by Nāgārjuna: *sarvaṃ tathyaṃ na va tathyaṃ / tathyaṃ ca-atathyaṃ-eva ca // na-eva-atathyaṃ na-eva tathyaṃ / etad*

$$A_1 = A + (-A) + [A + (-A)] + \{-[A + (-A)]\},$$

the sum of which is zero. Mäll interprets it in Buddhist terms with the conclusion: *sarva-dharma-sūnyatā* – ‘the emptiness of all signs’.

Mäll presents his main methodological viewpoints in a more reasoned way in the article *A Possible Approach Towards Understanding Śūnyavāda* that belongs to a series of writings on a similar subject.¹⁶ First, he introduces a goal, novel in the study of texts of Eastern thought:

The dialogue between East and West that has reached synthesis leads us to understand what is it that Orient can tell us, so that we can use its achievements as an important component of our own culture.¹⁷

He continues:

Oriental studies should therefore attempt to create models enabling a new approach to the understanding of Western phenomena.¹⁸

He follows the aforementioned principle himself in the same article. Proceeding from a semiotic paradigm and drawing material mainly from the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, he creates a three-level model of the functioning of sign systems in mutual interaction with the human mind, a topic that he perceives to be essential in all Buddhist doctrines. He identifies the first level as the *system*, in the meaning of a *sign system* that supports the human mind (e.g. the *abhidharma* system in Buddhism). He calls the second level *the way*, and interprets it as the transition from one sign system to another (e.g. from the *abhidharma* system to the *prajñāpāramitā* system): a practice highly recommended in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* and other *Prajñāpāramitā* texts. The third level — *the zero way* — found its culmination in the *śūnyavāda* doctrine of Buddhism. He proposes the new term of *zerology* to define the latter in more intelligible terms. Mäll provides an explanation for the term *śūnya*, which he translates as ‘zero’, since, that is the meaning of the term in Indian mathematics:

Zero in Buddhism does not mean the absence of something or negation of something but overcoming (or, rather, ignoring) the opposition between a positive statement and a negative statement, “+” and “-“. It means that all interconnections are seen as indefinable.¹⁹

buddha-anuśāsanam // (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikās*, XVIII, 8).

¹⁶ Mäll 2005: 16–24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

He proposes yet another new term – *lysiology* – for the denotation of Buddhism as the doctrine of liberation or emancipation. Although Mäll considers that at first glance the lysiological model seems to be dominating in Buddhism, further he, proceeding from the zerological point of view, i.e. the approach that nullifies all the extremes as well as the threefold scheme “original level – way – final level”, claims the following: “The lysiological model remains on the background in Buddhist studies. The main emphasis is placed on other models.”²⁰ Other models described later in the essay are the *semiotic* and the *psychological* model. According to the first, there is a dominant tendency of overcoming the dependence on signs and sign systems in Buddhism; the tendency is manifested by the zero way and characterised by the following claim from *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*: “But a Bodhisattva does not depend on any *dharma*”.²¹ The psychological model consists in a three-level hierarchical model of the states of consciousness, which are accordingly identified with the following terms from the Buddhist theory of knowledge: *avidyā* (‘ignorance’ or conventional mind), *viññāna* (‘discriminative knowledge’ or the ability to create new signs), and *prajñā* (‘awareness, wisdom’).²² According to this model, the *avidyā* and *viññāna* levels are constantly interchanging, that is inherent to *saṃsāra*, while, on the other hand, *prajñā* constitutes overcoming and transcending the change. Mäll concludes his argument as follows:

The intention of Buddhist zerological texts is to teach people how to recognize the *prajñā* state (this state has a parallel in the semiotic model: paragrammatical practical semiotics as *śūnyatā*). Sophisticated methodology has been developed for this purpose...

Zero was invented as a concept of zerology and then transferred from zerology to mathematics. Europe accepted zero as a mathematical concept. Is it not now time to find a more profound implementation for it?²³

The interpretation of Buddhist theory of *dharma* through semiotics is a pervasive theme in several of Mäll's later works, which follow along the lines of the development of his own views. A part of his extensive research on the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, which was mainly done in the late 1960s and published in several collections,²⁴ was dedicated to the usage of the concept of *dharma* in this text, while also providing

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 30–95; bibliographical data see p. 224–225.

an overview of the interpretations of *dharma* in European Buddhist studies.²⁵ In this work, Mäll claims that *dharma* possesses mainly two meanings in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*: firstly, that of ‘teaching’, and secondly, indirectly that of ‘element’. In its first meaning, *dharma* denotes teachings of any kind, not only those of Buddha, but also the delivering of the teachings and the different aspects the process of teaching may possess. In this respect, Mäll pays special attention to the discussion of the compound *dharmakāya*, which, taking into account the context of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, he interprets via further contemplation of the formula *buddha – dharma – saṃgha* as the ‘living body’ of Buddha’s teachings, whereas the former concept can be said to be in opposition with the relics of Buddha (*buddhaśarīra*). The concept at times is used as synonymous with *prajñāpāramitā* in the sense of a written text, and related to the vastly propagated worship of text in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*. Mäll claims that: “...the term *dharmakāya* does not refer to Buddha’s cosmic body, but as *corpus scriptorum* in Western culture, it refers instead to a written text.”²⁶

The second meaning, *dharma* as element, can be found in the sūtra text in the meaning of concepts (elements of teachings) that are represented in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* in the form of various lists of *dharmas*. The author identifies three types of operations that a person can perform with *dharmas*: *grhṇāti* (‘to grab’ or ‘to grasp’), *kalpayati* (‘to produce’ or ‘to create’), and *sākṣat-karoti* (‘make real’, ‘realise’; literally – ‘look with the eyes’ or ‘make visible’), all interpreted as destined towards the building of personality by Mäll. However, in the context of *prajñāpāramitā*, the latter cannot constitute a final goal, but is rather seen as something that needs to be transcended.

Therefore, he emphasises the concept of *śūnyatā* as the central, although not the only term of characterisation that is used to describe the attitude displayed towards *dharmas* by the bodhisattva-mahāsattva, the main personality type in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*. He concludes his arguments on *śūnyatā* with the following statement, which may be seen as a development of the earlier definition:

Śūnyatā in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* is not an ontological fact or an ‘existing state of affairs’. Neither is it the conception of a theory or an idea that should be understood and ‘realized’. It most probably means the spontaneous giving up of any operations, positive and negative, performed by a person with *dharmas* and at the same time giving up such giving up.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 30–53.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Perhaps, the authors of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* meant such an understanding in the following passage:

*yaś-ca atyanta-vivikto dharmah, na so 'sti-iti vā na-asti-iti vā upa-iti.*²⁷

(what is, after all, a separated *dharma*, is not existing nor non-existing neither both.)

The next stage in Mäll’s *dharma*-interpretation is illustrated by the article *Dharma as Text and Text-Generating Mechanism*,²⁸ which is unfortunately not published in its entirety in the cited collection. Still, parts of the article have been used in later texts, including those of the aforementioned collection, to which the author of this article has referred to for quotations used from this point onwards. A short overview of the interpretations of *dharma* by earlier scholars (O. Rosenberg, M. and W. Geiger, Th. Stcherbatsky, W. Liebenthal) reveals that researchers focused on one aspect of *dharma*, which was defined as ‘element’, a component of something. Mäll proceeds from Liebenthal’s definition of *dharma* as ‘form of element’ or ‘position’. According to Mäll’s advanced interpretation, *dharma* is an element of consciousness (a viewpoint shared with Rosenberg) and at the same time a word of scripture, i.e. an element of a text. The author claims:

Dharma, in my opinion, is both a text and an element of a text that, in its turn, is also an element of the mind – since the mind only manifests itself through an act of text-generation. I believe this can be taken even further: *dharma* can be considered a text of any length, anything from a sound or a letter (“a”, for instance), a pause, major sūtras like the *Avatamsaka* or the *Śatasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, to the whole body of Buddhist literature (Buddha’s teaching).²⁹

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 53. The quotation is from chapter XXVI of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā* (p. 217 in the Vaidya’s edition: Vaidya 1960). Following the same idea but in slightly different wording *śūnyatā* is defined on p. 10: “*Dharma* is closely related to the concept of *śūnyatā*. I continue to believe that this term could be translated as ‘emptiness’ or ‘zero’; it should never be interpreted as ‘nothingness’. In brief, *śūnyatā* does not mean an absolute non-existence; it rather refers to an infinite number of possibilities to fill what we consider as empty. An empty bottle can be filled with water, milk, sand etc.; a word, a concept or a text – in brief *dharma* – can be filled with different meanings or assessments, and as a result both negativism and absolute positivism can be avoided, since this approach allows the text to remain alive. Naturally, emptiness is also associated with the idea of dependent origination.”

²⁸ Mäll 1987.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. ; see also Mäll 2005: 9.

It is characteristic of *dharma*-as-text to generate new texts: Mäll defines this tendency as a text-generating mechanism. The presence of the mechanism is also reflected in the title of Buddha's first written sermon – *Dharmacakrapravartana*, which Mäll interprets as follows:

The DCP [i.e. *Dharmacakrapravartana* – M.L.] heading is a compound word comprising of three stems: *dharma* (in Pāli: *dhamma*), *cakra* (*cakka*) and *pravartana* (*pavattana*). One possibility for a translation of the heading could be “Putting the *dharma* wheel into motion” or “Starting up the *dharma* wheel”. However, considering the fact that the word ‘wheel’ in many languages (and the Pāli and Sanskrit are no exceptions in this) also has the meaning of a moving mechanism, and that the meaning of the word *dharma* also contains ‘text’, the heading of the sūtra could be translated simply as *Starting up a text-generating mechanism*.³⁰

In relation to this context, Mäll emphasises two aspects of *dharma*-as-text: the *external text*, i.e. the text that is fixed into some kind of written form (e.g. a book), and the *internal text*, i.e. a state of mind:

Since the mind in Buddhism (actually, states of mind, since “pure” mind is considered to be indescribable) is also seen as text – “internal text” – the creation of a new state of mind is then interpreted as the creation of a new “internal text”, where “external text” (this concept does not only include written texts but also others, e.g. the oral teachings of the Teacher, and his gestures and facial expressions) works as an impulse which starts up the text-generation mechanism of internal texts. An internal text occasionally became fixed (either mnemotechnically or in written form) and this meant the creation of a new “external text”.³¹

The approach can be concluded with the following statement:

It is the interpretation of *dharma* as a *text* and as a *text generating mechanism* that enables us to integrate all the meanings of *dharma* that, until now, have been viewed separately (an element of existence – *nirvāṇa* – Buddha etc.).³²

In his final stage of *dharma*-interpretation, Mäll arrives at an even greater level of generalisation and starts to see *dharma* as *culture*, whereas he claims that the new interpretation does not exclude or invalidate earlier definitions “...because *culture* can also be considered as a *text* in its broadest sense”.³³ In order to provide further proof to the claim, we find it necessary to reproduce a longer paragraph from Mäll's writings, which will also conclude this subsection of the article:

³⁰ Mäll 2006:181.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

³² Mäll 2005: 9.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Everything that I had earlier interpreted as the smallest element of a text, and that most Buddhist scholars after Stcherbatsky still interpret as an element of existence, can now also be seen, to put it simply, as an element of culture. Modern psychology has widely established that a person's outer shape (*rūpa*), feelings (*vedanā*), and the consciousness (*viññāna*), are partly dependent on a specific state of culture. When influenced by Buddhist culture (*buddhadharma*) these features appear somewhat different from when influenced by some other culture (*dharma*); if a human being grows up in an environment completely void of any culture (*adharmika*), i.e. among wild animals, it is not logical (*yukti*) to refer to his *rūpa*, *vedanā* etc. as *dharmas*, i.e. elements of culture.³⁴

The Problem of the Emergence of Mahāyāna

When Mäll as a young scholar was only starting research on the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, considered by him to be one of the core texts in Mahāyāna, he was immediately fascinated by the cluster of issues related to the emergence and development of Mahāyāna as a Buddhist cultural phenomenon. He finds that Mahāyāna sūtras are key sources that could shed light on the issue and lead one to an understanding of Mahāyāna-related questions; he also regrets that the sources have received little attention so far:

It is quite likely that no other problem in modern Buddhist studies is as exciting as the problem of the emergence of Mahāyāna. Although researchers of Buddhism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were mostly interested in the so-called Southern Buddhism (Hīnayāna), remarkable results were also achieved in studying Mahāyāna. These are associated with such outstanding researchers as Th. Stcherbatsky, O. Rosenber, M. Walleser, D. T. Suzuki, etc. They provided us with a certain number of highly valuable translations and studies of Mahāyāna texts. Unfortunately, there are still very few such works. A great number of texts in Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan are still unknown to researchers. This has resulted in the current primary drawback for Buddhist studies since each researcher has his or her own Mahāyāna model that is not based on a complete analysis of the texts but on partial and prejudiced knowledge which is, in turn, influenced by some later Indian and Tibetan śāstras. At the same time, it is impossible to solve the problem if we do not consider Mahāyāna sūtras. So far there have

³⁴ *Ibid.*

been few academic studies on Mahāyāna sūtras in Western languages (one of the few examples that could be given is the excellent study by Suzuki³⁵).³⁶

Nowadays, nearly half a century later, when the study and translation of Mahāyāna sūtras has made a great leap forward³⁷, scholars agree with Mäll emphasising the importance of the sources mentioned by him in the study of the history of Mahāyāna.³⁸ Since Mäll had chosen *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* as a special subject of his research, it is quite natural that his discussions on the emergence of Mahāyāna are first and foremost based on observations made on that text. In the paper quoted in the previous paragraph, Mäll underlines the polemical nature of *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, which reflects its authors' "passionate desire to prove something to Buddhists (but not to non-Buddhists as in most sūtras), to prove that this and nothing else complies with the requirements of Buddhist lysiology".³⁹ He also expands upon the theory that a period of so-called prajñāpāramitic belief, that went back to Buddha's original disciple Subhūti, must have predated the writing down of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* and speculates on the reasons why the text was written down relatively early (he even thinks that it was the very first Buddhist text to be written down). He concludes the paper with a singular hypothesis according to which *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* was a deliberate manifesto of the Mahāyāna that "was specially written for the Kaniṣka's Council".⁴⁰ He has not deliberated on the theory in later works, most probably because he did not find substantial support to the argument.

Moreover, Mäll emphasises that *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* openly opposes to the worship of the relics of Buddha probably ubiquitous at the time. On the

³⁵ Here he quotes Suzuki's work: *The Studies in the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, London, 1931.

³⁶ Mäll 2005: 25. The paper titled *Some Aspects of the Emergence of Mahāyāna* was originally written in Russian in 1968 for a report presented at the International Conference of *History, Archeology and Culture of Central Asia in the Kushan Period*, Dushanbe, 27 September – 6 October 1968 and first published in 1975. For bibliographical data see Mäll 2005: 224.

³⁷ The best and most recent overview of this subject can be found in: Ruegg 2004.

³⁸ Paul Harrison, for example, has pointed out: "...these texts reflect more fully the religion which produced them, compared with, say, a Buddhist treatise on logic, which reflect narrower or more focussed intellectual concerns, and that therefore Mahāyāna sūtras will tell us more about Buddhism than a work by Dignāga would." (Harrison 1995: 51).

³⁹ Mäll 2005: 27.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

contrary, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* provides the alternative option of text worship, i.e. *Prajñāpāramitā* worship, which is of eminently greater merit:

The worship of the *Prajñāpāramitā* is not confined just to these means of worship but involves new and more important means: copying, spreading and explaining the text. Thus, at the level of performance the worship of the *Prajñāpāramitā* is expressed in a greater number of means, whereas the additional means are not in fact means of worship any longer.⁴¹

Therefore, in Mäll's interpretation of the emergence of Mahāyāna (at least inasmuch as it is reflected in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*) it could be understood as the reaction of intellectual monks against the worship of mere relics that was gaining more and more influence in the Buddhist congregation at the time. He emphasises the central role of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*:

What concerns *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, I believe that this text marks a breakthrough in Buddhism, since it provides an explanation for the emergence of written text, which gradually replaced the previously predominant oral tradition.⁴²

Further on he says, however, that every particular sūtra may have its own specific structure and message:

I am convinced that, as in any other Mahāyāna sūtras, the structural semi-otic approach would enable us to see aspects that until now have remained hidden. When studying a sūtra, its own specific structure should be followed; what has been found in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* should not be transferred to other sūtras. I am deeply convinced that the Mahāyāna is not a uniform teaching, that there are many texts in the Mahāyāna that are relatively independent. The reader – wanting to understand these texts – should follow specific procedures described in a particular text.⁴³

Today, several of the thoughts and opinions on the development of the Mahāyāna expressed in those fragments have become generally acknowledged and given rise to extensive discussion.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

The Structure and Main Concepts of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*

Let us now move on to the discussion of the subject that constitutes the most thoroughly researched and the most momentous part of Mäll's scholarly heritage. In the previous sections of the current article I have already demonstrated that Mäll considered the role of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* to be of high importance in the rise and development of the Mahāyāna and its doctrines. He was of the opinion that the key to understanding the textual corpus and the history of the Mahāyāna lies in the understanding of that very text. He thinks highly of the contribution of Edward Conze, his predecessor, to that field of study:

My favourite text has been the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*. Here I would like to pay homage to Edward Conze whose works have inspired me enormously. Naturally, I cannot agree with him in every point but I have never forgotten that he is the founder of modern *Prajñāpāramitā* studies.⁴⁴

As a semiotician, he was of the opinion that in order to reach an adequate understanding of a text, it is necessary to focus on the analysis of its inner structure and key concepts – the elements that support the structure of the text. His research structure follows the analysis of the three main substructures of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* text while each of the substructures is supported by one central concept:

I found three substructures in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* guided by three concepts. I already mentioned the first concept, *dharma*. The main concept of the second substructure is *bodhisattva*. I find descriptions of *bodhisattvas* who have reached different levels to be quite interesting. However, the principal concept of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* is, without a doubt, *prajñāpāramitā* – a word that refers both to a text created according to certain rules and to an aspect of the highest state of mind.⁴⁵

Mäll's treatment of the concept of *dharma* has already been discussed earlier in this article. The author wishes to point out the theoretical framework, within which Mäll interpreted the treatment of the concept in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*. He finds that the latter differs substantially from the treatment of *dharma* within the *abhidharma* system that was most probably dominant in Indian Buddhism in that time when the text of *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* was created. In the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, the concept of *dharma*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

is examined from the position of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), expressed with the formula *sarva-dharma-śūnyatā*, as we already found out earlier. Mäll is of the opinion that:

...this formula is more likely to reflect the idea that emerged as a result of certain development of theoretical thought: *dharmas* themselves (rather than the teaching about *dharmas*) are considered from the point of view of *śūnyatā*. This means that the *Prajñāpāramitā* teaching can be considered in relation to the *Abhidharma* as a parallel rather than contradictory phenomenon. Since we also find in the *Abhidharma* terms of *Prajñāpāramitā* that are not subject to criticism but are considered as terms of *Abhidharma*, this assumption seems to be quite accessible.

Thus, *Prajñāpāramitā* and the *Abhidharma* can be considered as parallel phenomena of the same level, i.e. the level of theoretical development of the Buddhist teaching.⁴⁶

In his analysis of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā dharma* lists, Mäll does not share the opinion of his predecessor E. Conze, who considered the interpretation of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā dharma* to be merely a critique of *abhidharma*. Mäll thinks that although some of the items in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā dharma* lists do coincide with these of the *abhidharma* lists, the items should be viewed as specific elements of the *Prajñāpāramitā* system: "...and in this case they will not necessarily have an analogy in *Abhidharma* texts".⁴⁷

A discussion of the three types of operations performed with *dharmas* - 'grasping' (*grahaṇa*), 'creating' or 'constructing' (*kalpanā*), and 'making real' or 'realizing' (*sākṣat-karaṇa*), as well as on the meaning of *dharmas* from the point of view of *śūnyatā* was given in the previous sections of this article, and will not be repeated here.⁴⁸

The second main subject of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, as well as the central concept in one of the substructures can be said to be the concept of *bodhisattva*. Mäll considers that the later Mahāyāna tradition (e.g. works of Asaṅga, Śāntideva, Candrakīrti et al.) presents a simplified and generalised understanding of *bodhisattva*, whereas studies on the subject have been a major influence on the views of modern scholars. Yet, he emphasises that:

"...the concept of *bodhisattva* was not uniform even in Mahāyāna. The image and ideal of the *bodhisattva* were considered differently in different schools and texts and the development of it has a long history."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30–31.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁴⁸ The subjects in question were discussed in detail in Mäll 2005: 45–53

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

Mäll considers that *bodhisattva* is defined in details in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* and the text also highlights the specific characteristics of this personality type. A hierarchy of the subtypes of *bodhisattva* is created in *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*. It is important to keep in mind that the *bodhisattva* type is not set in direct opposition with *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas* (unlike in the later Mahāyāna and several other sūtras); the two are rather taken as subtypes of *bodhisattva*; thereby *bodhisattva* is linked with the three *yānas* called *śrāvakayānika bodhisattva*, *pratyekabuddhayānika bodhisattva*, and *mahāyānika bodhisattva* respectively.⁵⁰ Neither is *mahāyānika bodhisattva* viewed as a unified personality type; it is divided into the three subtypes of *bodhisattvayānika pudgala*, *bodhisattva*, and *bodhisattva-mahāsattva*. The highest and most advanced *bodhisattva* subtype is distinguished from other subtypes of the next level by the *bodhisattva-mahāsattva*'s ability and speed of comprehending *prajñāpāramitā*. The text lists the following important types: *vyākṛta bodhisattva-mahāsattva* ('predicted [by Buddha – M.L.] bodhisattva-mahāsattva') and *avinivartaniya bodhisattva-mahāsattva* ('unreturnable bodhisattva-mahāsattva'). An important characterisation of the latter is that the type has achieved a state of *prajñāpāramitā* to the full extent and does not perform the aforementioned operations with the *dharma*s, having realised their emptiness. On the other hand, chapter XVII of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* is dedicated to the practically illimitable characteristics and attributes of the *avinivartaniya bodhisattva-mahāsattva*. Mäll draws the following conclusion:

According to the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, the fact that a bodhisattva has reached the level of an unreturnable Bodhisattva-Mahāsattva does not mean the formation of the highly developed but at the same time narrow-minded personality. On the contrary, the bodhisattva becomes a comprehensive person who represents all personological types of any classifications.⁵¹

In conclusion, it can be said that Mäll was one of the first Buddhist scholars (if not the very first one) to identify a hierarchical and dynamic model of the *bodhisattva* personality type by analysing a specific text. The model most probably had a significant influence on the later Mahāyāna as well as other Mahāyāna sūtras, which attribute special importance to individual types (e.g. the secular *bodhisattva*-type of *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtras*) or reiterate the diversity of *bodhisattvas* in various ways (e.g. in the *Nidānaparivarta* of the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

Thorough analysis of the aforementioned substructure – *prajñāpāramitā* – makes up the largest part of Mäll's research on *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*. He constructs his interpretation model around the central meta-term of *ultimate state of mind*, which is an interpretation of an individual aspect of the concept that lies in the sūtra's name. The ways of achieving *Prajñāpāramitā* – the ultimate state of mind – and the nature of the state are core subjects of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*. Mäll states: "If we use the traditional meta-language of Buddhist studies, we may determine our task as the description of *nirvāṇa*".⁵² However, Mäll considers that the concept of *nirvāṇa* is not a part of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* structure and therefore not relevant in the context of that text. Indeed, importance is attributed to concepts that belong to the same level with *prajñāpāramitā* (in its definition of ultimate state of mind), i.e. to *anuttarā samyaksambodhi*, *sarvajñatā*, and *tathatā* that contribute to the description of the various aspects of *prajñāpāramitā*.

The volume of this article does not allow us to undertake a detailed analysis of Mäll's research, and it is not considered necessary, as the full text of it is now available in English. Here I would merely like to draw attention to only a few of the more important details.

The semiotic model mentioned earlier in this article creates a framework for the interpretation of *prajñāpāramitā*, firstly as a *state of mind* (the definition 'ultimate' is justified here), and secondly, as a *text* created by that state able to give rise to similar states of mind in others. Mäll claims that:

...the Buddhist who participated in the creation of the *Prajñāpāramitā* sūtras saw both meanings as equal: the text meant for him the objectivized mind or the objective aspect of the mind, the ultimate state of mind – the subjective aspect of the structure that was meaningful for him in the *Prajñāpāramitā* sūtras.⁵³

Another essential aspect of the text is that it strongly advocates text worship instead of the earlier relics of Buddha worship. Mäll interprets this in the following way:

The authors of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* saw the *Prajñāpāramitā* as the only embodiment of the teaching of all Buddhas, i.e. as *dharmakāya*. Therefore, all the respect that should have been paid to the Buddhas was transferred to the *Prajñāpāramitā*. The worship of the *Prajñāpāramitā* text is something that exceeds the worship of all other objects, mainly the worship of relics.⁵⁴

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

The third aspect that deserves to be highlighted: *the process of subjectivisation of the text* has been described in detail in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* and Mäll has dedicated a large part of his research to the analysis of the conceptual system related to the subject. In a separate article,⁵⁵ Mäll sets out from the premises laid out in the process and discusses text as a teacher. He points out how the composition of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* intends the reader to advance from one position to another; while the text itself contains detailed instructions on the ways of advancement and the possible reactions (including negative) the reader may have in response to the text.

In conclusion, it can be said that by the standards of today, Mäll's research on the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* may not be sufficiently grounded in the historical context (although the importance of understanding of the latter in the analysis of given text was often emphasised by Mäll himself, and is mentioned in the current article too) and may not engage in a great deal of juxtaposition with other Mahāyāna sūtras, but to modern scholars it could still be a paragon of the study of a Buddhist text with its brilliant conceptual analysis and attempt at interpreting the doctrines and ideas of the text using the means of modern meta-language offered by semiotics. As the research on Mahāyāna sūtras advances covering a wider range of subjects and sources, the laconically formulated views and positions of Mäll (especially these related to methodology) may turn out to be relevant and groundbreaking both today and tomorrow. This also applies to another line of research Mäll contributed to: i.e. his studies on Buddhist mythology.

Buddhist Mythology and its Role in the Buddhist Lysiology

When the Soviet Encyclopaedia Publishing House began preparations for an extensive two-volume encyclopaedia of mythology titled *Myths of the Peoples of the World*,⁵⁶ the entire *crème de la crème* of the humanities of these days' Soviet Union was involved in the project, and the entry on Buddhist mythology was written by none other than Linnart Mäll. The section on the general subjects in Buddhist mythology has

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 88–95.

⁵⁶ The encyclopaedia was published between 1980–1982: *Мифы народов мира*. Том 1–2. Москва: Советская энциклопедия, and reprinted several times.

also been published in English in Mäll's article collection⁵⁷ cited in the current article, but he also wrote over 60 headword entries on specific concepts and characters of Buddhist mythology for the encyclopaedia thus being the first author presenting a comprehensive survey of the subject in Russian.

It is important to draw attention to some of the theoretical emphases of Mäll's treatment of Buddhist mythology that highlight the interconnection of mythology with Buddhist philosophy, psychology, and the doctrine of emancipation, i.e. lysiology. Firstly, Mäll underlines the anthropocentrism of Buddhism and the ultimate position of human among all beings, including mythical ones:

In terms of its attitude towards mythology, Buddhism is quite different to other religions. This is related to the main concept of Buddhism, according to which humans (and only humans) have a special place in the hierarchy of all (including mythological) beings, since only they have a chance to liberate themselves from the burden of beginningless *saṃsāra* (i.e. become an Arhat or a Buddha). All the others (including gods and other mythological figures) cannot directly attain *nirvāna* (for this purpose they should be born as humans), and in this sense their status is lower than that of humans, although they may possess some qualities that humans do not have (the Buddhas and bodhisattvas surpass all other beings in this respect as well).⁵⁸

Secondly, he discusses the issue of the reality or unreality of mythological figures from the Buddhist point of view and comes to the conclusion that the question has been transcended at least on the level on philosophical Buddhism, since mythology was considered to be a measure that allows for human emancipation.

Buddhism also has a special attitude to the reality of mythological figures. While in popular Buddhism, they were considered to be quite real, philosophical Buddhism saw them as creations of the human mind and thus in fact eliminated the question of their reality or unreality. This attitude provided opportunities for the unlimited expansion of the Buddhist pantheon and the enrichment of its mythological content.⁵⁹

Thirdly, Mäll underlines the symbolic nature of Buddhist mythology, which illustrates views important in the Buddhist worldview and philosophy and conveys them in a figurative and mythopoetic manner.

The relationship between the theoretical, philosophical and mythological levels is also quite special in Buddhism. Buddhist philosophers who

⁵⁷ Mäll 2005: 138–150.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 139–140.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

were aware of the difference between abstract, theoretical and mythopoetic thinking did not deny the importance of the latter since they saw it as a means of attaining *nirvāṇa*. Therefore, ideas and concepts of Buddhist philosophy and psychology were often filled with mythological content (which, in particular, was supposed to simplify their comprehension). On the other hand, some mythological features (for example, the form and details of the images of *yidams*) were explained as the symbolic representations of one or another theoretical conception.⁶⁰

In another article, Mäll was opposing to the views of some Russian Tibetologists on the *yidam* Yamāntaka from Vajrayāna Buddhism and came to the conclusion that the deity provides a typical example of myth creation in the Mahāyāna: the mythological figure is at first artificially created and thoroughly described as a meditative symbol. It is only afterwards that it will become a character in popular Buddhism as folk religion, who takes on a part in the legends and fairy tales. In the introduction of the article, Mäll asks the following question:

What came first, the anthropomorphic symbol of Yamāntaka or the Tibetan legend retelling the myth about the origin of the deity Yamāntaka?⁶¹

Based on the analysis of *Sādhanamāla*, the handbook of the iconography of Vajrayāna, Mäll is certain that: "the anthropomorphic symbol of Yamāntaka came before the Tibetan legend telling the myth about the origin of the deity Yamāntaka".⁶² Moreover, he moves on to the conclusion of an even greater level of generalisation on the creation of myths in Mahāyāna:

...in the case of Yamāntaka...the myth emerged on the basis of the anthropomorphic symbol, i.e. meditative thinking existed before mythological thinking. However, since anthropomorphic symbols were created consciously within quite scientific (Buddhist) psychology, we can say that, in this case, scientific thinking came before mythological thinking.⁶³

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Estonian translations of several important Mahāyāna texts (*Diamond sūtra*, *Heart sūtra*, and Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*),⁶⁴ as well as the

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Unfortunately Mäll could not finish the translation of his favourite text *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*.

creation of Estonian Buddhist and buddhological terminology by Mäll as a Mahāyāna scholar, interpreter and translator deserve separate treatment, but are not the subject matter of this article.

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