

# **Meditative Attainment (*samāhita*) and ‘Sudden Enlightenment’: The Southern and the Northern Mahāsāṃghikas Compared**

Bart Dessein

## **Abstract**

After the Mahāsāṃghikas had split from the Sthaviravādins, an event that is likely to have occurred 116 years after the demise of the Buddha (Nattier and Prebish 1976-77, 239, 271-272), they were the subject of further schismatic movements. In the course of time, Mahāsāṃghika subgroups thus also moved to the South of India, where they developed their particular interpretation of the Buddhist doctrine that, in some points, differed from the interpretation of the Northern Mahāsāṃghika subgroups. The major point of controversy between the Northern and the Southern Mahāsāṃghika subgroups was the notion of the conventional and the absolute truth, and the creation of the Mahayana sutras in which these new concepts were deployed. (see Dessein 2009). Among the Northern groups, further, the concept of a “sudden enlightenment” in contradistinction to a “gradual enlightenment” that is the result of meditative attainment developed. As we do not possess a Mahāsāṃghika Abhidharma, our knowledge about this doctrinal development has to be culled from non-Mahāsāṃghika sources. These sources, as a natural result, also provide us with information on the ‘debate’ that existed on the issue of the acceptance of a ‘sudden enlightenment’ between the Mahāsāṃghika subgroups, and between the Mahāsāṃghikas and the schools to which these other sources pertain. For the issue discussed here, these are the Sarvāstivādin \**Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣāśāstra* (T.1545), and Buddhaghosa’s *Kathāvatthupparakaraṇa-aṭṭhakathā*. It is to this debate and the comparison between the Northern and Southern Mahāsāṃghikas that this paper is devoted.