

The Rhetorical Uses of Complexity in Mahāyāna sūtras

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How Mahāyāna sūtras work as texts, the purposes they serve, and the manner in which they are constructed have so far received comparatively little theoretical attention of the sort that goes beyond specific examples. This paper addresses itself to two well-known formal features of this voluminous genre which appear to have evaded systematic critical reflection. The first is a pervasive self-referentiality, taking various forms, some of them fairly straightforward, even banal, others highly challenging and paradoxical in their effect. The second feature is the use of formulas and lists, not singly, but in combination, in a way which expands a theme along two or more axes or vectors concurrently.

These two features, while by no means exhaustive of all the things that make Mahāyāna sūtras the distinctive type of scripture they are, provide evidence of a passion for complexity which seems to be part of their DNA. Intensely generative of ever greater amounts of text, these features blur and even erase the boundaries between the creators of texts, the writers and speakers, and their consumers, the readers and hearers. In this paper they are explored with special reference to the Aṣṭasāhasrikā, the Vajracchedikā, the Saddharma-puṇḍarīka, the Pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthitasamādhi, and the Samādhirāja.