Two Parables on “The Wealthy Father and the Poor Son” in the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka and the Mahābhārīṣūtra

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1. The Aim of This Paper

The Adhimukti-parivarta (Chapter on the Mental Disposition; SP 4) has a famous parable known as “The Wealthy Father and the Poor Son” teaching the ekayāna (one vehicle) theory that any sentient being including arhat can attain Buddhahood. The abstract of this parable is as follows:

A wealthy man had a son, but the son went away from his father and lived as a poor wanderer for a long time. His father moved to another country looking for his son who had disappeared. Not knowing that the wealthy man was his real father, the poor man by chance came to the place where his father resided. Terrified by the wealthy man’s dignity he soon ran away. Becoming aware that the poor man was his son, the wealthy man sent his men and made them bring him. Since the poor man was so terrified and fainted in fear, his father let him go and later sent some other men to him and made them invite him to take a job as a night soil cleaner in the wealthy man’s house. One day the wealthy man who wore dirty clothes and pretended to be poor approached his son and assured him that he could work here safely and promised to treat him like his real son. Twenty years passed and the wealthy man came to realize that the time of his death was coming near. He called the poor man and appointed him as an administrator of the property. Finally on his deathbed he gathered the king and his relatives, and revealed the truth that he and the poor man were really father and son. Thus the poor man inherited all the property of his father.

The same parable is also found in the Mahābhārīṣūtra (MBhS), which was chiefly compiled under the influence of the SP and the Mahāparinirvānasūtra (MPNS) and is one
of the Mahāyāna sūtras teaching the *tathāgatagarbha-buddhadhātu* theory. These two parables share the same theme and core story, but at the same time there exists one great difference between them. In the parable in the *SP* the poor man, who is in fact the only son of the wealthy man and works for him not knowing that the man is his real father, never wishes for the property. Having been told the truth that they are really father and son, he unexpectedly becomes an heir. This parable is told by the following four arhats: Subhūti, Mahākātyāyana, Mahākāśyapa, and Mahāmaudgalyāyana. In the parable in the *MBhS*, on the contrary, the poor man is already eager to have the property before being told the truth, and becomes the heir as he wished after his father’s declaring the truth. This parable in the *MBhS* is told not by arhat but by the Buddha Śākyamuni. This paper attempts to elucidate the reason which brought about the difference between the two parables on “The Wealthy Father and the Poor Son” referring to the *ekayāna* theory and the idea of *mokṣa* (liberation from the world of existence) in both scriptures.

2. The *Ekayāna* Theory and the Idea of *Mokṣa* in the *SP*

The poor son in the parable in the *SP* who never wishes to have the property depicts the Buddha’s disciple, especially arhat who has already attained *mokṣa*. In India, where the idea of *samsāra* (metempsychosis; the transmigration of the soul / the endless cycle of death and rebirth) is generally believed, if those who attained *mokṣa* die, they will never come back to the world of existence, and they enter into their peacefulness. The arhats in the *SP* lament because they have been liberated from the world of existence by not attaining buddhahood but arhatthood. It is true that there exists a chance of their attaining buddhahood only if they accomplish their practice for the supreme enlightenment in this life. But they will not do so because they feel they have become very old and weakened and have little time or energy to practice in this life. If they die they will be entering into their peacefulness and no longer have a chance to practice for the supreme enlightenment. This is the reason why the arhats in the *SP* will not wish to attain the supreme enlightenment nor practice for it even if they fully know its value. Just as these arhats, the poor man in the parable in the *SP* does not wish to attain the property of the wealthy man because the poor man does not know that they are really father and son. In India normally the heir of the property of a father will be his son. Therefore the poor man has never wished for the property of the wealthy man since he believes that it is impossible for him. Thus in accordance
with the idea generally accepted in Indian society the SP tries to explain why the arhats have never wished for the supreme enlightenment even if they fully know its value.

To them the Buddha Śākyamuni in the SP reveals the ekayāna theory that all the sentient beings can attain buddhahood. As to the reasons why everyone can attain buddhahood, the SP explains that in order to lead everyone to the supreme enlightenment all the Buddhas including the Buddha Śākyamuni appear in this world and that to enable everyone to attain buddhahood is the vow of all the Buddhas. Here we can see that the SP finds the grounds of the everyone’s attainment of buddhahood outside of sentient beings.

The SP proclaims that he who has practiced śūnyatā (the emptiness) and attained arhathood has not attained the supreme enlightenment yet. Since the adhimukti (mental disposition) of śrāvakas (the Buddha’s disciples) is still inferior before attaining arhathood, they cannot understand or accept the possibility of their attaining buddhahood. Therefore the Buddha Śākyamuni in the SP shows them the tentative goal, that is, arhathood, and intentionally leads them there by such inferior teaching as the śūnyatā theory. Attaining arhathood and mokṣa, however, they at last realize the importance and the value of the supreme enlightenment. But, as mentioned above, they still remain unwilling to attain it because as the aged arhats who have already attained mokṣa they feel sure they have little time or energy to practice for the rest of this life. Seeing that they already realized the importance and the value of the supreme enlightenment and lament being unable to attain it, the Buddha Śākyamuni confirms that their adhimukti has fully developed and tells them that even arhat who has already been liberated from the world of existence can attain nirvāṇa (perfect peacefulness) and mokṣa as buddha. We can here notice two points: First, in the SP the development of the Buddha’s disciples’ adhimukti can be confirmed whether they realize the importance and the value of the supreme enlightenment and lament being unable to attain it or not. Second, the SP attempted to change the definition of mokṣa. In general understanding mokṣa is the liberation from this world of existence, and one who has attained mokṣa will never return to this world. The SP, however, in order to assure all the sentient beings including arhats who have already attained mokṣa of their possibility of attaining the supreme enlightenment challenged the general understanding of mokṣa and proposed a surprising idea that the liberation from this world of existence is not the real mokṣa.
3. The *Ekāyāna* Theory and the Idea of *Mokṣa* in the *MBhS*

Just as the *SP*, the *MBhS* insists that the goal of any religious practice in Buddhism is attaining the supreme enlightenment, that is, to become Buddha.\(^1\) The vehicle to the buddhahood is always the same throughout (*ekāyāna*), so there is no need for them “to transfer from one to the other.” Only its name varies in accordance with the development of the sentient beings from *śrāvaka*, through *pratyekabuddha* and *bodhisattva*, and to *tathāgata*.\(^2\) According to this development, the sentient beings gradually and naturally realize by themselves that their goal is buddhahood, not arhathood.\(^3\)

As to the reason why everyone can attain buddhahood, the *MBhS* explains that there exists *buddhadhātu* (the element, the essence, or the cause of the Buddha) within all the sentient beings and by this *buddhadhātu* everyone can attain buddhahood.\(^4\) Here we can see that the *MBhS* finds the grounds of the everyone’s attainment of buddhahood within sentient beings.

The *MBhS* proclaims that he who has practiced only *śūnyatā* cannot attain the supreme enlightenment since the Buddha does not declare the real meaning yet in the traditional *śūnyatā* theory.\(^5\) One can attain *mokṣa* over and over again until he attains the ultimate *mokṣa* when becoming Buddha.\(^6\) Since it is already revealed in the *SP* that the arhathood is not the ultimate goal, arhat in the *MBhS* wishes by himself for the attainment of the supreme enlightenment.\(^7\)

4. The Reason for the Difference between the Two Parables

Through the above examination in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, we seem to have acquired a clue to the solution of the problem as to the great difference between the two parables: while the poor man in the *SP* never wished for the property and became the heir after having been told that he is the one and only son of the wealthy man, the poor man in the *MBhS* already wished to have the property before being told that he is the son. The clue can be found in the difference between these two sūtras regarding why all the sentient beings have the possibility of attaining buddhahood.

Since the *SP* assures all the sentient beings of their attaining buddhahood on the grounds that in order to lead them to the supreme enlightenment all the Buddhas appear in this world and to enable them attain buddhahood is the vow of all the Buddhas, in the *SP* the
grounds for the everyone’s attainment of buddhahood lies outside of sentient beings, not
within them. Therefore they cannot know their possibility of attaining buddhahood without
the Buddhas’ instruction.\textsuperscript{24} These sentient beings denote the poor man in the parable in
the \textit{SP} who never wished for the property before being told that he is the heir.

In the \textit{MBḥS}, on the contrary, the grounds of all the sentient beings’ attaining buddha-
hood lies within themselves as \textit{buddhadhātu}. They need not be told by the Buddhas of their
possibility of attaining buddhahood. In accordance with their development of the practice
they realize by themselves that they can attain buddhahood, and they naturally wish for it.
These sentient beings denote the poor man in the parable in the \textit{MBḥS} who wished for the
property before being told that he is the heir.

It is true that the parable on “The Wealthy Father and the Poor Son” in the \textit{MBḥS} may
seem unnatural in Indian society where the birth (caste, \textit{jāti}) is very highly regarded. In
the light of “the common sense in Indian society,” the poor man’s demand that he wants to
become an heir of the wealthy man before being told the truth that they are really father
and son seems thoughtless and against the common sense among the lay people in India.
But Indian Buddhism which has been transmitted and practiced by the renouncers such as
monks traditionally has had an idea of the supermundane relationship between father and
son, that is, the Buddha and his disciple are in Indian Buddhist context really father and
son.\textsuperscript{25} While the parable in the \textit{SP} is still based on the mundane common sense of Indian
society (because as the pioneer and introducer of this parable the \textit{SP} must have done so),
the \textit{MBḥS}, which inherited this parable from the \textit{SP}, became able to interpret this parable
within the supermundane Buddhist context. In the light of “the common sense of Indian
Buddhism,” the parable in the \textit{MBḥS} can be said to be “more suitable to a supermundane
context,” and we can say that the idea shown in the parable in the \textit{MBḥS} belongs to the
mainstream of Indian Buddhism which has been based not on one’s birth, but one’s action.

5. Another Reason for the Interpretation in the \textit{MBḥS}

As mentioned above regarding the reason for the difference between the two parables,
the present author proposed the idea that the \textit{MBḥS}, as one of the Mahāyāna sūtras which
 teach the \textit{tathāgatagarbha-buddhadhātu} theory, assumes the ground of all the sentient be-
ings’ attaining buddhahood within themselves, and therefore without the instruction by the
Buddha they will gradually come to seek buddhahood. We also see that the \textit{MBḥS} attempt-
Two Parables on "The Wealthy Father and the Poor Son" in the Saddharmapundarika and the Mahābhārata (T. Suzuki)

ed to interpret the parable first introduced from the SP along the traditional context shared by the Indian Buddhist renouncers and to adjust it to the supermundane common sense of Indian Buddhism.

There seems another reason for this interpretation in the MBhS. Whether the tathāgatagarbha-buddhadhātu theory is taught or not, the Buddha in both the SP and the MBhS knows from the very beginning that the Buddha and his disciples are really father and sons. From the Buddha's point of view the wealthy man and the poor man in the parable are from the very beginning really father and son whether the son is told the truth or not. The previous studies have already pointed out that the tathāgatagarbha-buddhadhātu theory is based on the Buddha's point of view, not on that of the ordinary people. As one of the scriptures that teach this theory there is the possibility of interpreting the parable from the Buddha's point of view in the MBhS. While the parable in the SP is told by the disciples of the Buddha, the parable in the MBhS is told by the Buddha Śākyamuni himself. This difference of the teller of the parable between the two scriptures may account for the hypothesis proposed in this paper.

1) SP 100.1-120.9, SP 45a1-53b3, SP 16b7-19a11.
2) (Texts and Abbreviations)

SP Saddharmapundarika.
SP Tibetan version of the SP, P No. 781 (Dam pa'i chos pad ma dkar po).
SP Second Chinese version of the SP, T. No. 262 (Miaofa lianhua jing 妙法蓮華經), trans. Kumārajīva.
MBhS Mahābhārata.
MBhS Tibetan version of the MBhS, P No. 888 (rNā bo che chen po'i mdo).
MBhSC Chinese version of the MBhS, T. No. 270 (Da fagu jing 大法鼓經), trans. Guṇabhadra.
VKN Vimalakirtinirdesa.
(T. Taisho Tripiṭaka; P Peking Kanjur)
3) SP 101.11-108.15, 111.1-115.12, SP 45b8-49a6, 50a8-52a3, SP 16b25-17b17, 17c13-18b10.
4) MBhS 116a6-117a2, MBhSC 297b22-c14.

— 1268 —
5) In the prose part these four arhats tell this parable. But in the verse part it is only told by Mahākāśyapa.


7) SPs 60.3–61.1, 100.8–101.5, SPr 28a5–b6, 45a5–b5, SPs 10c1–11, 16b13–20.

8) SPs 40.13–15, 46.11–12, 91.7–8, 118.7–12, SPr 19b5–6, 23a3–4, 42a3–4, 52b7–53a2, SPs 7b2–4, 8a17–18, 15a14–15, 18c15–19, and so on.

9) SPs 40.3–9, 53.3–4, SPr 19a4–b2, 25b3, SPs 7a23–28, 9b3–5.

10) SPs 43.11–13, 61.1–2, 62.15–63.2, 91.9–12, 100.12–101.3, SPr 21b8–22a2, 28b6–7, 29b3–5, 42a4–5, 45b1–3, SPs 7b29–c3, 10c11–13, 11a12–17, 15a16–20, 16b16–19.

11) SPs 104.8–105.2, 109.10–110.7, 113.9–10, 116.1–2, SPr 47b1–2, 49b6–50a4, 51a5–6, 52a3, SPs 16c29–17a4, 17b29–c8, 18a14–15, 18b11–12.


13) SPs 60.3–6, SPs 28a5–8, SPs 10c1–4.

14) SPs 100.8–101.3, SPr 45a5–b3, SPs 16b13–19.

15) SPs 91.9–12, 92.7–12, 137.5–9, 140.7–10, 142.3–4, 186.3–8, 186.12–187.1, 189.5–11, 197.9–198.10, SPr 42a4–5, 42a8–b3, 60b5–8, 61b7–8, 62a7, 82a4–8, 82b2–3, 83b2–7, 86a5–b2, SPs 15a16–20, 15a28–b7, —, —, —, 25c13–19, 25c22–23, 26a18–21, 27a23–b8.

16) For example, we can see the general understanding of mokṣa in the VKN 37b6.

17) MBhSs 110b7–111a1, 117a3–4, MBhSc 295c28–296a6, 297c18–21.

18) MBhSs 110b7–111a1, 112a7–b1, MBhSc 295c28–296a6, 296b3–5. The former is influenced by the MPNS, and the latter is by the SP.

19) MBhSs 110b7–111a1, 116b4–117a2, MBhSc 295c28–296a6, 297c4–14.

20) sems can thams cad dañ/ srog chags thams cad la sans rgyas kyi khams yod de (*asti buddha-dhātuh sarvasattvapraṇāṣu)/ mtshan dañ dpe byad bzar po mtha’ yas pas brgyan pa na sna bar ’gyur žin/ khams des (*tena dhātunā) sems can mams kyis mya nyā las ’das pa ‘thob par ‘gyur ro/ (MBhSr 115a8–b1, MBhSc 297b1–2)

21) MBhSs 112a7–113a4, MBhSc 296b3–21. This idea on śūnyatā was already proposed in the SP, the Mahāmeghadūtra, the MPNS, and the Angulimālīyaśūṭra.

22) MBhSs 110b1–111a1, 112a7–b1, MBhSc 295c20–296a6, 296b3–5. This idea on mokṣa was already proposed in the SP.


24) After the Buddha Śākyamuni’s having entered into his perfect peacefulness (parinirvṛta), the SP itself or the preachers of the SP themselves will be taking over the role of the Buddha Śākyamuni telling people their possibility of attaining buddhahood. We can see here the idea of dharma-kāya, the idea of the eternalness of the Buddha Śākyamuni, and the idea of the identification of tathāgata and the preacher of the SP. See Suzuki [2006]. Suzuki Takayasus 鈴木隆泰 [2006], “Tathāgato Veditavyāḥ:
Two Parables on "The Wealthy Father and the Poor Son" in the Saddharmapundarika and the Mahābhārata (T. Suzuki)

Nyorai de aru to shirinasai 如来であると知りなさい, in Hokeyō to Daijō kyōten no kenkyū 法華経と大乗経典の研究, ed. Mochizuki Kaishuku 望月海淑 (Tokyo: Sankibō Busshorin).


26) Takasaki [1974] is the representative.

(Key words) Miaof lianhua jing, 妙法蓮華經, Fahua jing, 法華経, Saddharmapundarika, Xinjie pin, 信解品, Adhimukti-parivarta, Da fagu jing, 大法鼓經, Zhangzhe qiongzi yu, 長者窮子喻, parable on “The Wealthy Father and the Poor Son,” the reasons why all the sentient beings can attain buddhahood, the one vehicle theory, the tathāgatagarbha-buddhātu theory

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