Highly Effective Practices in the Saha World:
Similar Accounts Found in Four “Mañjuśrī Sutras” and Other Mahāyāna Sutras

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1. Introduction

As is widely known, the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī plays a significant role in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Since Hirakawa (1970) suggested that many Mahāyāna sutras with Mañjuśrī as the main character could be placed in one category, the so-called “Mañjuśrī sutras,” this new category has been gradually recognized in Japan. For example, the Shin-Kokuyaku daizōkyō 新国訳大蔵経 series identifies the “Mañjuśrī sutras” as an independent group, as does the Daijō kyōten kaisetsu jiten 大乗経典解説事典 (Guidebook of the Mahāyāna sutras), which classifies some of the Mahāyāna sutras as the “Mañjuśrī sutras.”

This paper addresses one of the characteristic accounts shared among several “Mañjuśrī sutras,” i.e., the highly effective practices in the Saha world instead of those in other Buddha-fields. This kind of description in the “Mañjuśrī sutras” has already been noted by Yinshun 印順, a great Chinese scholar monk, in his discussion of some characteristics common to several “Mañjuśrī sutras.” Although Yinshun provides some important information regarding the Chinese versions of the sutras’ titles and their locations, he does not analyze them in depth. To compensate for this gap, this study offers an in-depth examination of and comparison between the abovementioned descriptions found in some of the “Mañjuśrī sutras” and the other Mahāyāna sutras to clarify the similarities and differences among them.

2. Similar Accounts Found in Four “Mañjuśrī Sutras”

First, I examine a couple of descriptions recurring in the following four “Mañjuśrī sutras”: *Avaivartacakra (AvC), *Brahmaviśeṣacintiparipṛcchā (BrhVP), *Mañjuśrībuddhakṣetra-
guñavyāha (MBGVy), and *Ajātaśatrukañṭtyavinodana (AjKV). Here, I quote an example from the AvC.

[The Miracle of Mañjuśrī]

Then, although the Venerable Śāriputra did not think that he entered the Mañjuśrī’s house, he (= Śāriputra) realized that he was sitting in front of Mañjuśrī and saw him sitting with crossed legs. Shortly after seeing him (= Mañjuśrī) and as quickly as snapping one’s fingers or coughing, he (= Śāriputra) witnessed Mañjuśrī’s miracle and knew that he was in the ocean, and Mañjuśrī stayed in his house sitting with crossed legs. Then, [Śāriputra] saw [Mañjuśrī] heading to the east. After that, the Venerable Śāriputra sat with crossed legs and saw Mañjuśrī without opening his eyes and knew that he (= Mañjuśrī) entered the world named *Avaivarīka after passing over as many worlds in the east like the sands of the Gaṅgā River.

[The Teachings of Buddha Śākyamuni in the Sahā World]

Bodhisattva *Sughoṣa asked, “O Lord, how does that Blessed one (= Śākyamuni) explain the three vehicles?” [The Buddha in the other Buddha-field] answered, “Son of a good family, those people believe in inferior [teachings] and so he teaches in that way as an method because they do not enter only one vehicle (*ekavāṇa). That Blessed one (= Śākyamuni) appears in the era of five defilements when they (= the people) do not believe in the only one vehicle.” . . . [The bodhisattva] said, “O Lord, it is beneficial and surely beneficial for me not to be born (= Sahā world).” [b-2][The Buddha] said, “You should not say in that way.” [The bodhisattva] asked, “O Lord, why should not I say that?” [The Buddha] said, “[People] in there (= the Sahā world) can gain much more virtues during [only] one morning than [people] gain virtuous roots in [this] world for twenty thousand years. Why is that? Because only in that world [people] are stained.” . . . [The Buddha] asked, “[a]Son of good family, do you want to see that Tathāgata, Arhat, Completely Enlightened?” [The bodhisattva] answered, “O Lord, I do want to see [him].” [The Buddha] said, “Then, [you] should go with this Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī.”

Similar accounts also appear in almost every version of the other three “Mañjuśrī sutras.” These parallel descriptions basically exhibit the following structure:

(a) The light emitted by the Buddha reaches the other Buddha-field(s). [OR] Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī visits the other Buddha-field(s).

(b-1) The bodhisattva(s) feel(s) relieved or feel(s) sympathy for the people born in the Sahā world after learning that the Sahā world is filled with trouble and sufferings.

(b-2) The Buddha in the other world advises the bodhisattva(s) not to do so.

(c) The Buddha explains that unlike in the other Buddha-field(s) the people in the Sahā world get many more merits even during a much shorter period of time.
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(d) When the bodhisattva(s) in the other Buddha-field hope(s) to visit the Sāhā world, the Buddha grants permission(s) to do so.

In general, the four “Mañjuśrī sutras” share the abovementioned elements, but the order of these elements varies in some of them. In addition to these elements, the four texts share a common notion of the inferior and stained Sāhā world, which are marked with the dashed underline in the quote above.

Elements (a) and (d) suggest that each of these similar accounts recurring in the four “Mañjuśrī sutras” comprises a part of the narrative about the “miracle(s) of the Buddha’s light(s)” or “Mañjuśrī’s miracle(s),” both of which are frequently found in Mahāyāna sutras. According to Kajiyama (2012), various Mahāyāna sutras, such as the Pañcavimśatiprajñāpāramitā, Avatamsaka, and Sūraṅgamasamādhi, share the account of the “miracle(s) of the Buddha’s light(s),” in which the Buddha casts light(s) on the other Buddha-field(s), and after a series of events, the bodhisattvas assemble in the Sāhā world in response to the light(s). However, in “Mañjuśrī’s miracle(s)” commonly found among the “Mañjuśrī sutras,” the Buddha’s light(s) is/are replaced with Mañjuśrī who visits the other Buddha-field(s) and brings the bodhisattvas into the Sāhā world.

These similar descriptions shared by the four texts can be regarded as variations derived from these commonly occurring narratives about the “miracle(s).” Moreover, these accounts do not seem to appear frequently anywhere else, as far as I surveyed. Thus, this fact could imply that these four “Mañjuśrī sutras” are related much more closely than we previously thought. In addition to this observation, the following examinations show that the combination of the middle three elements, (b-1), (b-2), and (c), seems to be typical of them.

3. Resembling Accounts in the Sadharmapuṇḍarīka and Vimalakīrtinirdeśa

This section examines the descriptions in the Sadharmapuṇḍarīka (Sdhp) and the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa (Vkn) that share some similarities with the abovementioned accounts in the four “Mañjuśrī sutras.”

First, I quote the example from Chapter XXIII, Gadgadasvaraparivarta, of the Sdhp.13)

(o) Then, the light was emitted from the circle of hair between the eyebrows of the Blessed one, Tathāgata, Completely Enlightened Sākyamuni, and at that time, the light brightly lighted the Vairocanaraśmipratimaṇḍita world...
Then, the Bodhisattva Gadgadasvara stood up from his seat, . . . and said to Tathāgata, Arhat, Completely Enlightened Kamaladalavimalaṇaśatrājaśamkusumitābhijñā (hereafter “Tathāgata Kvrs”), (a), "O Lord, I will go to the Sahā world in order to see, venerate, and worship the Blessed one, Tathāgata, Completely Enlightened Śākyamuni and see Mañjuśrī kumārabhūta." . . . Then, Tathāgata Kvrs said to Bodhisattva Gadgadasvara, “Son of a good family, (b-2) [even] after getting to the Sahā world, you should not think that [the world] is inferior. Son of a good family, that world has hills and dales, is made of clay, is surrounded by Mountain Kāla, and is filled with feces. That Blessed one, Tathāgata, Completely Enlightened Śākyamuni has a little body and those bodhisattvas have little bodies. Son of a good family, you have gotten a four million two thousand yojanas-high body, and I have gotten a six million eighty thousand yojanas-high body. Then, son of a good family, you are clean, beautiful, handsome, having the most splendid color, and possessed of hundreds and thousands of virtues and good fortune. (b-2) Therefore, son of a good family, [even] after getting to that Sahā world, you should not think the Tathāgata, bodhisattvas and that Buddha-field inferior.”

As underlined in (a) and (d), the quotation from the Saṭhp is also a part of the “miracle(s) of the Buddha’s light.” It also includes the teachings that the bodhisattva in the other Buddha-field should not look down on Buddha Śākyamuni and his bodhisattvas in the Sahā world, which is roughly equivalent to element (b-2) of the elements found in the four “Mañjuśrī sūtras.” However, the abovementioned quote does NOT include the descriptions that the bodhisattvas in the other world feel glad not to be born in the inferior Sahā world and that the practices in the Sahā world are far superior to those in the other worlds.

Next, I examine an example from Chapter IX, Nirmitabhojanaparivarta, in the Vkn.9)

[§6] . . . Then, that Blessed one said to these bodhisattvas the following: “Sons of a good family, there is the Sahā world, after passing over as many Buddha-fields as the sands of forty-two Gaṅgā Rivers, under this Buddha-field. There is the Tathāgata named as Śākyamuni, who explains his teachings for the beings with inferior aspirations in the Buddha-field with the five defects. There is the bodhisattva named as Vimalakīrti, living in the state of the inconceivable liberation, who explains his teachings to the bodhisattvas . . . .

[§8] Then, ninety thousand bodhisattvas departed [to the Sahā world]. [They said,] “O Lord, (a) we will go to that Sahā world in order to worship the Blessed Śākyamuni and see that Vimalakīrti and bodhisattvas.” That Blessed one said, “Sons of a good family, you should go when you think it is a good timing. However, you should enter that world after withdrawing your scent so that those beings do not fall into intoxication. You should change your forms, in order not to make those beings in the Sahā world feel embarrassed. (b-2) You should not think that world is inferior and not feel anger. Because the Buddha-fields are the fields of atmosphere, but the Buddhas,
blessed ones, do not show the entire sphere of Buddha.”

[916] Those bodhisattvas [in the Sarvagandhasugandha world] said, “The blessed Śākyamuni is astonishing, because he leads the unmanageable beings by poor inferiority while withdrawing the Buddha’s greatness. Those bodhisattvas living in such a bad Buddha-field also have inconceivably great compassion.” Vimalakirti said, “Wise men, it is exactly as you said. The great compassion of the bodhisattvas born in this [Sahā world] is solid. In this [Sahā] world, they will make greater profit for beings during one life. In that Sarvagandhasugandha world, however, [they cannot make such great] profit for beings for thousand kalpas.”

Instead of the traditional “miracle(s) of the Buddha’s light(s),” the background of this quoted account is that a bodhisattva created by Manjuṣrī is dispatched to the other Buddha-field called Sarvagandhasugandha to bring the bodhisattvas to the Vimalakirti’s house (= (d)) in that world, which is a variation of “Manjuṣrī’s miracle(s).” Similarly to that in the Sdhp, in this sutra, the Buddha of the other Buddha-field explains that the Sahā world should not be scorned (= (b-2)) and that the bodhisattvas in the other world should NOT feel sorry for the poor condition of the Sahā world. However, similar to the four “Manjuṣrī sutras” (= (c)), the quote from the Vkn describes that the practices in the Sahā world can produce many more merits for the beings. However, that is not the reason why the Sahā world should not be disdained. The reason is because the bodhisattvas in the Sahā world possess great compassion.

4. Concluding Remarks

As examined in the previous section, the examples from the Sdhp and Vkn demonstrate the similarities and differences between the accounts in the four “Manjuṣrī sutras.” I summarize the elements of the descriptions in the four “Manjuṣrī sutras” in the following table. The table omits the elements (a) and (d) because all the examples in the abovementioned sutras share the “miracle(s) of the Buddha’s light(s)” or “Manjuṣrī’s miracle(s)” as their common background.

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(b-1) Sympathy for the Sahā world</th>
<th>(b-2) Advice to the bodhisattvas</th>
<th>(c) Highly effective practices in the Sahā world</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Four “Manjuṣrī sutras”</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓ (the reason of (b-2))</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saddharma-puṇḍarīka</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vimalakirtinirdeśa</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓ (not related to (b-2))</td>
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In conclusion, I examine which account remains in the primitive form and which one shows a more developed style among those surveyed. The following discussion focuses exclusively on the accounts provided in this article and does NOT intend to clarify the respective ages of the sutras. As the table above shows, the simplest account in the Sdhp includes only element (b-2) shared by all these texts, so it could be regarded as the most primitive one. However, the four "Mañjuśrī sutras" contain all the elements, and they are organically related; therefore, they must be in the most developed form. The description in the Vkn is also more developed than that in the Sdhp, because it includes elements (b-2) and (c). The example of the Vkn, however, seems to belong to a different line compared to those in the four "Mañjuśrī sutras," because it does not contain element (b-1) and does not show a direct connection between (b-2) and (c). In short, the example from the Sdhp apparently preserves the primitive form and the other two show the more developed forms, even though they do not seem to be directly related.

Notes


5) The quotation from the AvC is translated from its Tibetan version: D no. 240, mdo sde Zha 242a3–243b4.

6) The oldest Chinese version of the MBGVy, Wenshushili fotu yanjing jing 文殊師利佛土嚴淨經, T no. 318, has a simpler description than the others. The other versions of the MBGVy explains each of the Buddha-fields in the four directions, where the Buddha's light reaches. However, the Dharmarakṣa's oldest version of the MBGVy lacks such a detailed description and elements (b-1) and (b-2). The Fangbo jing 放銘經, T no. 629, is an independent text of Chapter III of the AjKV. This version of the AjKV has quite a different account from the accounts in the other examples. Specifically, elements (b-1), (b-2), and (c) in T no. 629 are closer to those in the other three sutras than that in the AjKV. Additionally, the Fangbo jing includes (d), which does not appear in the other
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versions of the AjKV. See notes 2 and 5.
7) In the BrhVP, (d) appears after (a); The AjKV omits (d) except for the Fangbo jing (T no. 629). See notes 4 and 6.
8) The quotation is based on the Sanskrit version of the Sdhp: Saddharmapuṇḍarīkam, ed. P. L. Vaidya, Buddhist Sanskrit Texts 6 (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute of Post-Graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning, 1960), pp. 244.8–245.6; T no. 262, 9: 55a23–b17; T no. 263, 9: 127a18–b22.

Bibliography

Key words  Avaivartacakra, *Ajātaśatrukaḥpyāvinodana, *Brahmaviśeṣacintrapīrccchā,
*Mañjuśrībuddhakṣetragunavyāhā, Sahā world, Mañjuśrī, Saddharmapuṇḍarīka,
Vimalakīrtinirdeśa, “Mañjuśrī sutras”

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