PUNYA in the *Mahāvastu*

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1. Graduated Sermon

We often come across a typical pattern of the Buddha's preaching, which is known as *ānupubbikathā* or Graduated Sermon in Pāli texts as well as in Chinese Āgamas. It consists of *dānakathā*, *śīlakathā*, *saggakathā* and *mag-gakathā*.

As a rule, the last sermon on the Four Noble Truths had never been preached before the gentle and obedient inclination has arisen to the attendance by means of the first three talks.

We find, however, a peculiar type of Sermon in the *Mahāvastu* and in the *Nettipakaraṇa*, where two more talks are added to the first three talks like this: *dānakathā*, *śīlakathā*, *svargakathā*, *puṇyakathā*, *puṇyavipākakathā* in the former (iii. 257, 408, 413), and *dānakathā*, *śīlakathā*, *saggakathā*, *puṇ-nakathā*, *puṇṇavipākakathā* in the latter (140).

Mv and *Netti* show a remarkable coincidence¹⁾ in adding these two talks.

1) Cf. E. Hardy, *Netti-Pakaraṇa*, PTS, 1902, p. 140; Ñāṇamoli, *The Guide*, PTS, 1962, p. 188, l. 2; J. Jones, translation of *Mv*, iii, 1956, p. 246, n. 4. None of them refers to this coincidence between *Mv* and *Netti*. The present writer pointed out some relations between the two texts: "*Mahāvastu* ni mirareru Nyorai no Jūriki to Jūhachi Fuguhō" (Daśabalas and aṣṭādaśāveṇīkadharmas in the *Mahāvastu*), *Tetsugaku Nempō* or *Annual of Philosophy*, no. XXVIII, Kyūshū University, 1969, pp. 35-66, especially pp. 48-50.

Well then, what is the meaning of *punya* in the Graduated Sermon? Does it mean the worldly merits? Or, does it mean such supramundane merits as the praise of emancipation from worldliness (*nekkhamme ānisaṃsaṃ*²⁾)?

It seems necessary to make an outline of *punya* in Buddhism in general, before we come to any conclusion of *punya* in question.

2. *Punya-apunya*

Punya (*puṇṇa* in Pāli) means “merit, meritorious action, virtue” (PTSD). *Apunya* and *pāpa* are the antonyms of the word, while *kuśala*, *kalyāṇa* are synonymous with it.

We may give the following verse as an instance referring *puṇṇa-pāpa* from the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (i. 97).

*Sabbe sattā marissanti maraṇantaṃ hi jīvitam
yathā kammaṃ gamissanti puṇṇa-pāpa-phalūpagā
nirayam pāpa-kammantaṃ puṇṇa-kammā ca suggatiṃ.
Tasmā kareyya kalyāṇam nicayam saṃparāyikam
puṇṇāni paralokasmiṃ patiṭṭhā honti paṇinan-ti.*

“All living beings will die, for life has death as its end. They go according to their actions. Those doing wrong go to hells, those doing good go to heavens. Therefore, make the accumulation of good deeds for the benefit of the next world. Meritorious actions become the supports of the other world for living beings.”

But, we will find a verse in a slightly different form in the *Zō agon gyō*, the Chinese Version of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*.

一切衆生類 有命終歸死 各隨業所趣 善惡果自受
惡業墮地獄 為善上昇天 修習勝妙道 漏尽般涅槃 (*Taishō. 2. 335 c*)

The first three lines are the same with the Pāli verse cited above, but the fourth line is this: “Those who maintain the excellent path become free from taints and become emancipated from all desire of life.”

There is exactly the same verse in the *Netti*. The first lines are the same

2) *Vin.* i. 15-16, 18, ii. 156, 192; *D.* i. 109-110, ii. 41; *M.* i. 379-380; *A.* iv. 186, 209, 213. Cf. also *Taishō. 1. 9 a, c (=D. ii. 41), 14 b, 19 b; 2. 363 b, 481 c.*

to the verse cited before. The fourth line is this :

apare ca maggaṃ bhāvetvā parinibbanti anāsava ti.

“After having cultivated the path, others, free from taints, become emancipated from all desire of life.”

There are three Sanskrit versions of the same verse. Two in the *Mahāvastu* and one in the *Udānavarga*³⁾. One instance is at *Mv.* ii. 424. 6-9 :

sarvasatvā mariṣyanti maraṇāntaṃ hi jīvitaṃ

yathā karma ① *gamiṣyantipuṇyapāpaphalopagaḥ* ②.

nirayaṃ ③ *pāpakarmāṇo kṛtapuṇyā ca sadgatiṃ* ④

apare ca mārgaṃ bhāvetvā parinirvāyanty ⑤ *anāśrāvā ti.*

The other instance, *Mv.* ii. 66. 3-6, has some variants : ① *kar-*, ② *h* dropped, ③ *narakaṃ*, ④ *svargatiṃ*, ⑤ *nirvāsyanti*, in accordance with which the above reading should be emended to *-syanty*.

In comparison with the verse of these texts, it does not seem that the Pāli verse we cited first from the *Samyutta Nikāya* is the original form. The fourth line is omitted in that verse, and then, another verse of two lines is added. On the contrary, the verse we quoted from *Netti*, *Mv*, *Ud. Skt*, seems to have kept the original form.

Netti 96 gives an explanatory note on this verse : “Those doing wrong go to hells’ is the path of demerit (*apuñṇapaṭipadā*), ‘Those doing good go to heavens’ is the path of merit (*puñṇapaṭipadā*), and ‘After having cultivated the path, others, free from taints, become emancipated from all desire of life’ is the path beyond merit and evil (*puñṇapāpasamatikkamapaṭipadā*).” The third path is called the Middle Way (*majjhima paṭipadā*) at *Netti* 95. Thus we may say that the intention of our verse is to show the third way

3) Cf. Sanskrit : N. P. Chakravarti, *L’Udānavarga Sanskrit*. Tome Premier (chapitres I à XXI), Paris 1930, I. 23-24. Tibetan : Hermann Beckh, *Udānavarga*. Eine Sammlung Buddhistischer Sprüche in Tibetischer Sprache nach dem Kanjur und Tanjur mit Anmerkungen Herausgegeben. Berlin 1911, I. 21-22. The same verse is also found among the Chinese Canons : the *Maka sōgi ritsu* or *Mahāsaṃghika Vinaya* (*Taishō*. 22. 550 b), The *Shutsuyō kyō* or a version of the *Udānavarga* (*Taishō*. 4. 618 c-619 a), the *Hōshū yōju kyō* or another version of the *Udānavarga* (*Taishō*. 4. 77 b).

beyond merit and evil besides the path of evil leading to hells and that of merit leading to heavens. It was the third way that Śākyamuni Himself followed.

3. *Punya* and *jñāna*

Śākyamuni followed the third way which was beyond merit and demerit. It does not mean that He denied the way of worldly merits radically. He granted the way for a while, and led it gradually to a higher one. This is why His preaching is called Graduated Sermon.

In this connection, we see two kinds of right view in the *Majjhima Nikāya*⁴⁾: one is the way of worldly merits and the other is the way supra-mundane (*lokuttara*), free from taints. This is the Four Noble Truths, the way of wisdom. The former is not radically denied, but it is regarded lower than the latter.

It is interesting, however, to find an instance where merit is placed on a level with wisdom from the *Ratnāvalī* IV. 83, one of the works of Nāgārjuna.

*puṇyajñānamayo yatra buddhair bodher mahāpathaḥ,
deśitas tan mahāyānam ajñānād vai na dṛśyate.*

“That Great Vehicle, in which the Buddhas have shown the great path leading to illumination and consisting in acquisition of moral merits and wisdom, is not seen (by common people) only on account of their ignorance.”⁵⁾ (*JRAS* 1936, p. 251 [ed.] and p. 432 [tr.] by G. Tucci)

It does not tell what *puṇya* means. An explanation of *puṇya* in question is given in the *Dai Chido ron* by the same author (*Taishō*. 25. 255 b):

“There are two paths of the Buddha. One is the path of merit. Those who tread the path hear of Ten Powers, Four kinds of Confidence, Four kinds of Unobstructed Knowledge, Eighteen kinds of Peculiarities of the Buddha, and then occur to them devotion and confidence in Him. The other is the path of wisdom. Those who tread the path listen to the sermon

4) MN. iii. 71-72 (117 Cattarīsakasutta), cf. *Zō agon gyō* (*Taishō*. 2. 203 a-b).

5) There is a Chinese counterpart in the *Hōgyōshōron* (*Taishō*. 32. 502 a).

preaching that, as all phenomena arise from interlocked causes and conditions, there is no self-existent nature, and then they form no attachment to all phenomena, and also never cling to the theory of *śūnyatā* or emptiness." Both paths are not contradictory. Neither of them is placed on a higher level. Both merit and wisdom make up the Path of the Buddha. Thus the *Dai Chido ron* has given a new meaning to *puṇya* 'praises of the personal characters of the Buddha', and *puṇya* (merit) is brought to the same level as *jñāna* (wisdom).

4. *Lokōttara* and *lokānuvartanā*

There is a series of verses on the theme of *lokānuvartanā* (Buddhas' conformity with the world) in the *Mahāvastu* i. 167. 15-170. Among the Chinese Canons, there is a text composed solely on the same theme, that is the *Naizō hyappō kyō* (*Taishō*. 17. 751 b-753 c) translated by Shi Lukasen (Lokakṣama, -kṣema? from Yüeh-chih, 147-186- AD). There is a Tibetan counterpart of the text (Peking Edition, vol. 34, no. 866, p. 250-1-2~p. 251-5). It gives the Sanskrit title *Ārya lokānusamāna avatāra nāma mahāyāna sūtra*. Both texts in Chinese and in Tibetan mostly agree with each other.

They have nearly ninety verses of *lokānusamāna*, while *Mv* has about nineteen verses of the same theme. Six of them show a remarkable coincidence with the Chinese text as well as with the Tibetan text.

We will mention one of them which is worth noticing.

kalpakoṭim asaṃkhyeyāṃ prajñāpāramitāṃ gata,

bālabhavaṃ ca darśenti eṣā lokānuvartanā. (*Mv*. i. 170. 5-6)

"Although in the course of countless koṭis of kalpas they have attained to perfect insight, they yet wear the semblance of being ignorant. This is mere conformity with the world." (J. Jones tr.)

Taishō. 17. 751 c: —

仏從數千萬億阿僧祇劫以來。成就般若波羅蜜。隨世間習俗而入。示現小兒。
Tibetan (Peking Edition, vol. 34, p. 250-2-5):

bskal-pa bye-ba graṅs-med nas,

śes-rab pha-rol-phyin las byuñ, ...

ḥon-kyañ byis-pa-ñid ston-pa,
ḥdi ni ḥjig-rten ḥthun-ḥjug yin.

In this verse, we have to pay attention to the word *prajñāpāramitā*⁶⁾, one of the most important terms peculiar to Mahāyāna Buddhism.

There is another verse worth noticing in the *Mv*.

*kalpakoṭīm asaṃkhyeyāṃ puṇyeṣu pāramiṅgatā,
arabdhām upadeśenti eṣā lokānuvartanā.* (*Mv*. i. 169. 18-19)

“Although they have reached perfection by the merits won in the course of countless koṭis of kalpas, they make it appear as though they were at the beginning. This is mere conformity with the world.” (J. Jones tr.)

As for the latter verse, we find it neither in the *Naizō hyappō kyō* nor in the Tibetan translation. But we see similiar expressions of merits as follows.

The Tibetan text reads: —

bsod-nams pha-rol phyin-pas ḥphags,……

“They are purified with perfection of merits,……”

(Peking Edition, vol. 34, p. 250-4-8)

The Chinese text reads: —

仏功德福不可尽。……

“The Buddhas’ merits are inexhaustible,……” (*Taishō*. 17. 752 b)

Now, by the two verses mentioned above, we can point out the fact that *puṇya* or merit is treated at a level with *prajñā* or wisdom. This merit should be distinguished from such worldly merits on a lower level as *dānakathā*, *śīlakathā* and *svargakathā*. Because the merit is a supramundane one (*lokottara*) which is referred to the peculiarities of Perfect Personalities

6) *Prajñāpāramitā* in a set of six *pāramitās* occurs only twice at *Mv*. iii. 226. 2-4, and ii. 340. 18-20 (with *pāramitā* omitted). We see much more usages of *pārami(ṃ)gata* or *pārami(ṃ)prāpta* than *pāramitā*. Therefore it seems that six *pāramitās* have been known to the *Mv*, but they have not become so popular as they are among the early Mahāyāna texts. Cf. S. Takahara, “Mahāvastu ni okeru Jūji no Kōsei no Ichi Kōsatsu,” *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku Kenkyū*, III, 2, 1955, pp. 130-131.

of the Buddhas.

5. Conclusion

Puṇyapāramiṅgata as well as *prajñāpāramitā* in the *Mahāvastu* has been developed from the emphasis on the superhuman personalities of the Buddhas. In this connection, the *puṇya* in the *Mahāvastu* seems to belong to the same current of thought with the *Dai Chido ron* which treats *puṇya-mārga* at a level with *jñānamārga*.

We could not reach the conclusion of what *puṇyakathā* and *puṇyavipākakathā* mean yet. But, if the *puṇya* is the worldly one, it seems not necessary to give it redundantly after *danakathā*, *śīlakathā* and *svargakathā* which are the worldly ones. Well then, the merit mentioned on a level with wisdom seems to be a supramundane one which has been developed from the praises of Personalities of the Buddhas.

—New Publication—

Diganāga, On Perception,
being the Pratyakṣapariccheda of Dignāga's
Pramāṇasamuccaya
from the Sanskrit fragments and the Tibetan versions
(Harvard Oriental Series 47)

Translated and annotated

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Cambridge, Massachusetts
Harvard University Press, 1968