On the Problem of prajñā, carya and śraddhā
—in connection with the commentary upon the Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra—

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〈From prajñā to śraddhā〉

It is true that wisdom as conceived by the Asian people had a strong inclination to bear out the definition pointed out by Max Weber; wisdom is the only absolute way leading to the supreme bliss of this world as well as of the next world. But it does not mean to know the things of the world, nature, social life nor laws regulating both of them, rather it is the philosophical wisdom of the meaning of life and of the world1).

Indeed, we can say that the Buddhism originally bore the character of intellectualism; according to the theory of dvādaśāṅga-pratītya-samutpādaḥ (the twelve-linked chain of dependent origination), “avidyā” (ignorance of the law or true nature of existence) caused all illusion, so the getting possession of “prajñā” (wisdom) was required. Roughly speaking, the practice of Mahāyāna Buddhism also centered on just the point of “prajñā”, shown in the end of šaṭ pāramitāḥ (the six kinds of practice by which bodhisattvas are able to attain enlightenment) and of tisraḥ śikṣāḥ (the three types of learning which are considered to embrace all the aspects of Buddhist doctrine and practice). But, realizing this ultimate wisdom, to be supermundane would be required.

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Thus, with the popularization of Buddhism the problem of “faith”, I think, became the main current as the easy way by which people had close contacts with the principle of unworldliness. The change “from wisdom to faith” might be said to constitute one of the characteristic feature in the passage of this thought from India to Japan. Broadly speaking, emphasis on faith, of course, appeared even in Indian Buddhism. But their concept of it is extremely intellectual. Therefore, simple faith is of little significance, while an intelligent faith is of great value. Some schools of Mahāyāna—which was a popular religion that came to the fore after the Christian era—, if not all, however, advocate comprehending the absolute truth within secular life. In accepting Buddhism, the Japanese selected in particular one of such a nature, the topographical characteristics of Japan being vastly different from India.

This attitude of accepting Buddhism is clearly shown in the case of Prince Shotoku. His Commentaries upon Three Sūtras are those upon the Śrīmālā-devī-sīmhanāda-sūtra, Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra, Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra. Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra (dealt with in the next chapter) has a dramatic composition, in which Vimalakīrti, a lay believer, gives a sermon to monks and ascetics, reversing the usual order.

This commends grasping the truth in secular life. With the evolution of the Pure Land Buddhism in later ages, the significance of faith came more and more to be stressed. In accompany with the tendency above mentioned—the change from Noumena to Phenomena, from supermundane to mundane and from wisdom to faith—the character on practice naturally has transformed itself completely in Japan.

I’ll take into consideration the problem of “śraddhā” (especially a single but intense meditation in a moment) and “carya” (especially the religious acts, deeds or exercises throughout the life) in the commentary upon Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra.

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We could find easily such an original view on the Pure Land that it appears to be exceeding the literal explanation on the “Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra”. For example the author, Prince Shotoku, answers his own ten questions reading the first chapter (the chap. of Pure Land) of the sūtra3). At the seventh of ten dialogues by himself, there is a quotation from other sūtra;

“Sukhāvati-vyūha says that (if the beings of the ten quarters—when I have attained Buddhahood—blissfully trust in me with the most sincere mind, wish to be born in my country, and think or meditate ten times, and if they are not so born, may I never obtain the Highest Perfect Knowledge!) excluded, however, are those who have committed the Five Deadly Sins and who have abused the Right Dharma.” (“Commentary upon Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra” vol. 1, p. 271. line 12, Showa-Ehon)

And following on this comes the sentence in question. Opinion is divided into two contradictory interpretation to each other.

(1) Opinions laying emphasis on “carya”
Jikan Gyonen reads as this;
“…… (They are excluded) because of only a single meditation in a moment, and not keeping a lifelong practice of austerities.”

It is only right and proper that the greater part of scholars should interpret from this point. For example;

“Commentary upon Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra” vol. 1 by Join Saeki, p. 271. line 13, (Showa-Ehon)

“The Reading with punctuation marks” by Hokei Hashimoto, p. 200, vol. 1-1 (Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies)

3) Following the general trend since Nara period, I discuss the problem on the assumption that this work was written by Prince Shotoku, because there is no evident literature to refer to about this.
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These opinions have a strong resemblance to the Gyōnen’s marks for guidance in rendering the classical-Chinese-style into Japanese. And we could find another explanation much more stressing the practice;

“...... (They are excluded) because this ‘smṛti’ or the functioning of the mind for one instant is said to be equal to only one kṣaṇa (while sometimes to sixty or ninety kṣaṇas) and is far from the whole course of one’s life. Those who have committed the Five Deadly Sins and have abuses: the Right Dharma, therefore, should continue the ‘carya’ or religious acts, deeds or exercises aimed at taking them closer to the final goal of enlightenment throughout the life.”

(“Nihon-Daizo-Kyo”, Commentaries on Vaipulya-sūtras p. 23, vol. 5)

There is no fundamental difference nor striking contrast of significance, I think, among these guiding marks. We regard them as appropriate by two reasons.

First, all through “The Three Commentaries” by Prince Shotoku, the author seeks absolute significance within each instance of practical conduct in everyday life. From the fact that the Crown Prince himself, all through his life, remained a lay believer, we are able to presume that the intention of him was to put emphasis upon the realization of Buddhist ideals within concrete human nexus and himself remaining in secular life).

Second, a meaning of “excluded” in The Eighteenth Vow of Sukhāvatīvyūha quoted here is consistent with the context of the first half in the seventh dialogue on the point that only a single meditation is not enough to eradicate serious saṃskāra.

(2) Opinions laying emphasis on “smṛti”

4) In The Commentary upon “Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra” he interprets; “Reality is no more than today’s occurrence of cause and effect”. “Ten thousand virtues are all contained today’s effect”......All the good deeds practiced in the world of life and death are eventually turned into the causes that lead men to the rank of Buddha. So he asserts; “The result of becoming a Buddha is originated from ten thousand daily good deeds”. cf. Ibid., by Nakamura.

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Seeing his view of the Pure Land, there would be found the difference of the nuance from so-called absolute Sukhāvati. He imagines an another Land of nimmita or preparatory one, which might be correspond to purgatory. But it does not necessarily follow that this kingdom is of no use. By his own explanation, it is in this land that prthag-jana should make an endeavor to realize several ideals. Therefore is compared this land to the curtilage and materials in building the house.

Some scholars read as this;

"Do reduce just ‘smṛti’ to practice! This passage never means to continue the ‘carya’ or religious exercises throughout the life.”

For example;

"Commentary upon Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra” by Daijo Tokiwa & Genjiro Nakada, p. 181, (Dai-Nippon-Bunko).


These authors are evidently giving weight to “smṛti”, not laying emphasis on “carya”. Extraordinary it may be, these explanations are also in accord with the meaning through ten dialogues; such as the second, fifth, eighth and the last questions and answers. The reason why I think them well-grounded is as follows; Let it be supposed, that, notwithstanding the premise that only a single meditation is not enough to eradicate serious samśkāra, the man of committed the Deadly Sins is not excluded, “smṛti”, indeed, becomes the first and important step and he achieves the ultimate land only by passing through the preparatory land to which is led by way of “smṛti”.

Prince Shotoku, therefore, says at the tenth dialogue;

"Uncountable ten thousand good deeds by bodhisattvas and the sattvas’ minds led by them, have their origin in the pure mind.”

The ignorant desire to be born in the land to the west. The lands of the east and the west, however, are situated in the same place. If the mind is pure, the Pure Land exists close to this world. On the contrary, if one awakens impure thoughts in the mind, it is difficult to be born in that land even if one endeavor to practice several austerities. Then I think this “pure
mind" is nearly equivalent to "bodhicitta" or aspiration to enlightenment. And "smṛti" must be one of the concrete expression to this mind. On account of this, "Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra" (the chapter of The Path of Teachings) says;

"The man of pañcāvatī-karmāṇi or the five cardinal sins has all the more favorable cause to be born in the true kingdom."

(3) Synthesis of the double opinion

Putting both account together, the sentence in question has double meaning of laying emphasis on "carya" as the external and contextual, and of stressing on "smṛti" as the fundamental attitude all through The Three Commentaries as well as ten dialogues. The one-sided view would be unreasonable in this case. But the compatible view with each other also would contradict themselves, because there is a word "not" between smṛti and carya. In spite of the matter, I think, it would be possible to make them stand together, if the characteristic principle of "a measure to check us from committing sins" and "a measure of reception" in the Pure Land doctrine.

In the forty-eight vows of "Sukhāvatī-vyūha" we see that those who have committed the Five Deadly Sins and those who have abused the Right Dharma are excluded from birth in the Pure Land. But "Amitāyur-dhyāna-sūtra" will have it, where it refers to the lowest form of life of the lowest grade, that those who have abused the Right Dharma are excluded and those who have committed The Sins also are taken in. From the Mahāyānas' point of view, not one man exists who is absolutely evil and does not possess the possibility of being saved. Shan-tao (613-681) explained it as follows;

"The reason why those who committed these sins or abused the dharma are excluded in the vow is because these two transgressions are very heavy sins and if one performs them, he will surely be born in the lowest hell and stay there for a long period of time. Therefore, Tathāgata mentioned these words as a means to stop one from committing these sins and does not mean that he
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*does not receive such evil men.*” (“Kuan-wu-liang-shou-fo-ching-su” chap. 4, p. 277a, vol. 37, T. S. D.)

He further explained why both the good and evil can be born in that land as follows;

“Amitābha or Amitāyus, in compassion, took this vow before the attainment of Buddhahood. And it is by the power of this Vow that the Five Deadly Sins and Ten Evil Deeds are cut. Therefore, those who have committed these sins can also be born in the Pure Land. Even icchantika who has abused the Right Dharma can be born in that land, if he will turn his efforts towards the land.” (“Fa-shih-ts"an” chap. 1, p. 426a, vol. 47, T. S. D.)

Adopting this principle, both opinions could be compatible. The explanation that only a single meditation is not enough to eradicate serious saṃskāra in the excess of giving weight to "carya", means a measure to check us from committing sins. In case that bad karman is much more powerful, by entering into the preparatory land of nimmita just by “smṛṭi”, “carya” also becomes possible and the door to the ultimate is made opened5).

Dogmatic explanation it may be, it has two merits at least that it solves the difficulty to interpret one-sided, and that it is in accord with the original (i.e. double) meaning of the word “excluded”.

†A consideration of smṛti in the aspects of prañā, carya and śraddhā†

It becomes more evident on reference to the thought (shown in “The Commentary upon Śrīmālā-devī-sīṃhanāda-sūtra”, “The Commentary upon Saddharma-punḍarīka-sūtra” and “The Seventeen-Article Constitution”), that the phrase discussed in the previous chapter bears a double meaning of emphasizing both carya and smṛti5).

5) To maintain this opinion, of course, the historical materials must be examined, whether Prince Shotoku directly looked over “Amitāyur-dhyāna-sūtra” or not. Though there has not been any exact record on this, it is fact that he had the knowledge of the contents of this sūtra at second hand, for he borrowed the phrases from the sūtra. cf. “Commentary upon Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra” vol. 1, p. 37r. Showa-Ehon.

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(1) The problem of *prajña* and *carya*

The Japanese are generally inclined to loathe theoretical argument. This tendency has influenced not only the character of Buddhism, but also of Japanese philosophy in the past. As a natural course of event (though the learning of interpretation and commentary was enjoyed as ornamental literature in old China), the Japanese endeavored to grasp their essentials to utilize them for practical understanding. One of the examples of this characteristic can be found in the commentary on sūtras by Prince Shotoku. It is brief and to the point, not being pedantic at all. Of course, we cannot find this characteristic in all of commentaries written by Japanese scholars. The majority of the Japanese commentaries are rather succinct summaries, compared with the general tendency of Chinese one. (For example, the Chinese reference book which Prince Shotoku made use of,—“Shêng-man-ching-pao-kû’ by Chi-ts’ang—mentions many meanings in the interpretation of just one word. So, we cannot recognize which of these is the correct one.)

Now, I'll enumerate a fact in illustration of this opinion (grasping the essential of sūtra to utilize it for practical understanding, which leads to carya). In “The Commentary upon Śrīmālā-sūtra”, he takes up a problem of “*prajña* and *carya*” of kuśala or good.

“To understand the Buddhist philosophy as knowledge is not always universal method for all sattva (sentient beings), because some might have a poor understanding and be dull of apprehension while some have an excellent one. Because they understand the essential qualities of good, it does not necessarily follow that they put this *prajña* or knowledge into practice under all circumstances. Knowledge itself does not mean practice. But the doing what is good is the universal way for all sentient beings who have the will to do. (“Commentary upon Śrīmālā-sūtra”, pp. 29 L. ~30r. Showa-Ehon)

There are two types in the doing of good. One is called the reward-good in which the effect of doing is expected, the other is named the practical observance of the good where rewards are not looked forward to at all.

6) Needless to say, I’m discussing here on the assumption that Three Commentaries and The Constitution was written by the same author.
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“The practical observance of the good, not anticipating the result of it, is true and pure carya or practice.” (do. p. 91.)

And śaraṇa, faith or taking refuge in, must be lain at the basis of this conduct. (cf. do. p. 6r.) Just the “śaraṇa” and “śraddhā” must really be the ground of all and it is as the concrete expression of them, that the single “Buddhānusmṛti” or meditation on Amitāyus is shown. (cf. do. p. 291.) (In the majority of cases from the time of T‘an-luan onward, the term Buddhānusmṛti usually referred to the invocation of the name of Amitābha by the formula.) Thus the problem of “prajña” reaches to “carya” based upon śraddhā.

(2) The problem of prajña and śraddhā

He emphasize “śraddhā” in several places of Commentaries.

“The subjective and experimental grasp of the law such as the real state of all elements would be only possible for the one attained enlightenment and it is unattainable for prthag-jana. So, for all sattvas śraddhā is the only way to the truth.” (“Commentary upon Saddharma-pundarīka-sūtra” vol. 1, pp. 291–r.)

“It becomes possible for prthag-jana to know the theory of nirodharya-satya only by means of śraddhā (to believe in the truth grasped by the superior). not of his own efforts.” (“Commentary upon Śrīmālā-sūtra”, p. 56r.)

We can find there the evident drift of a current from knowledge to practice, from subjective grasp to faith, from prajña to śraddhā. (abridged)

(3) The problem of carya and śraddhā

In these commentaries, we see that prajña is turned to carya and śraddhā. The only measure left prthag-jana which partakes both of them, he says, is the smṛti or single Buddhānusmṛti.

From the earliest days of the introduction of Buddhism into this country, such a way of attitude appeared that the tendency to recognize the absolute significance in everything phenomenal leads up to the acceptance of the raison d’être of any view held in the mundane world. According to Prince Shotoku, “Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra” supposed to contain the ultimate essence of Buddhism, preaches the doctrine of the One Great Vehicle and

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advocate the theory

"that any one of a myriad of good acts lead to one thing, the attainment of Enlightenment".

(In Kamakura period, this theory is developed as this;

"Without carya or being delivered from afflictions, one attains nirvāṇa"

Therefore is preached, at the moment when one attains śraddhā or religious belief even in an everyday situation, the cause for one to be reborn into The Land has already been established.)

The word "a single Buddhānusmṛti" must be the result upon the severe self-reflection of prthag-jana. ("Constitution" 10, cf. 5, 6, 15, 17.) Very simple it may be, it has the direction to the most ultimate. (abridged)