Apadāna and the Genzai Jippobutsu

Karen Katsumoto

1. Genzai jippobutsu 現在十方仏 (present Buddhas and their lands in the ten directions) is unique to Mahāyāna Buddhism. In Theravāda Buddhism, only one Buddha can exist in a single world at any given time. However, since the Apadāna (Ap) is a Pāli scripture transmitted by the Southern Sthaviravāda, i.e., the Theravāda, the title of my paper may seem to contradict its doctrine. However, Ap contains ways of thinking that are very close to that of Mahāyāna philosophy. The main theme of this scripture is to illustrate the cause and effect between one’s behavior in the past and its current retribution. Most of the scripture is devoted to episodes concerning the Buddha’s disciples, but the first paragraph in chapter one is about the Buddha’s Apadāna. The story consists of 77 gāthās (PTS ed.), some of which seem to be indicative of the Genzai jippobutsu. Annotations to these gāthās in the Apadānaṭṭhakatā (Visuddhajanavilāsini=ApA) contain rather questionable parts. Therefore, I would like to examine certain terms used in the scripture in detail while comparing the scripture’s content with the annotations.

2. I will provide a brief overview of the story. The Buddha declares the initiation of his teaching to his disciples (vv.1-2). Then he tells his disciples that when he was a Bodhisatta in his past life, he built a pavilion with seven treasures and gave alms to the various Buddhas who gathered there (vv.3-62). The Buddha claimed, as a result of this merit, that “I became the Buddha in this world” (v. 63d). Then he says:

Disā dasavidhā loke vāyato n’atthi antakam
tasmiṇ ca disābhāgamhi buddhakhettā asaṅkhīya. (v. 64)

There are ten directions in the world, and there is no end whichever direction one goes to.

There are countless buddha-khettas in each direction.

The question is where and when the “buddha-khettā (skt. -kṣetrāṇi, -lands)” in the
above phrase existed. Let us first look at the time frame. “vāyato” is the genitive of the present participle and can be interpreted as “there is no limit to the one who is going.” However, the annotator in the ApA interpreted it as a past participle and says, “cakkavattikāle (at the time ⋯ king [in the former⋯ Buddha])” or “māyā ga-
tagataṭṭhāne (wherever I went).” The next gāthā preaches, “Light would be (bhāve) extensive in this world.” The annotator interprets this also as the time of the wheel-
turning king. As a result, despite the fact that the verb bhāve in the original was optative, he changed it to ahosi, an aorist. This is quite unnatural because the word cakkavattirājan does not appear at all in the original text. In addition, the gāthā immediately before gāthā 64 discusses enlightenment. That is to say, following gāthā 64, the Buddha is preaching about how he exists in this world and therefore, these gāthā do not refer back to the past.

I will consider geographical factors next. The ten directions means all directions. However, which boundary does “loka” refer to? As far as the gāthā 64 is concerned, it is possible to think that the “loka” is expands boundlessly in all directions, and countless buddha-kheattas exist inside that. However, the annotator says that the “loka” is “cakkavāḷaloke.” That is, it is a limited world surrounded by cakkavāḷa (skt. cakravāda) with Mt. Sumeru at the center. In the Pāli scriptures, this loka is considered one world, and when ten thousands of them are gathered together, then a dasasahassilokadhātu is created. 6) If we follow this theory, then the above mentioned interpretation will be invalid. Thus, according to this annotation, both this world=cakkavāḷaloka and another one cakkavāḷaloka that exists in a different space are buddha-kheattas, 7) and there are countless numbers of such buddha-kheattas.

3. If that is the case, are there Buddhas in the buddha-kheattas? According to the Abhidharmakośa, the Sarvāstivādin believes that the teachings of a Buddha appearing in one world can influence the ten directions. 8) Therefore, they think that there should be only one Buddha in a single world. On the other hand, the Mahāsāṃghika believes in “many Buddhas in many realms 多界多佛,” claiming that different Buddhas may exist in different realms. There are no records concerning this point transmitted among the Southern Theravāda. In the Pāli tipiṭaka, the synthetic term “buddha-khetta” appears twice in the plural. 9) However, since we do not know whether the “buddha” as mentioned in the prior part of this compound was singular.
or plural, we may interpret the terms as referring to either many worlds of one Buddha or many worlds of many Buddhas. ApA only provides the comment “buddhavisaya” without dividing it into two words. In the story of the Buddha Apadāna, the word “buddha” appears eight times in the plural. In addition, these Buddhas come to the present gatherings for preaching (v.76), not only to the gatherings in the stories of the past. The annotator interprets these Buddhas as paccekabuddhas (self-enlightened ones) who are inferior to the perfectly enlightened Buddha. He commented in this way because, otherwise, many Buddhas would exist simultaneously in a single world, which would disagree with basic Theravāda doctrine.

4. I have discussed the point that some of the contents in the Ap may be indicative of Genzai jippobutsu, depending on how we interpret them. Although I cannot draw any conclusion about the relationship between the Mahāyāna and other schools from these examples alone, from what I have studied so far, I can say that Mahāyāna elements are frequently found in those scriptures that concern the previous life of the Buddha. I intend to continue with my research on this topic.

1) AN (I, pp.27-28); DN (II, p.225; III, p.114); MN (III, p.65); Vibh (p.336).
3) Conventionally attributed to Buddhaghosa, but this is questioned now.
4) According to ApA, this was during the time of cakkavattirajan. Refer to the annotations to vv.2; 11; 42; 44; 48; 64; 65; 69 (pp.103; 110-112).
5) The view of the pavilion that the Bodhisattva built and the surrounding scenery are strikingly similar to those of the pure land of the Amitābha / Amitāyus.
6) Vin (I, p.12); DN (I, p.46; II, pp.12; 15); SN (V, p.424); J (I, pp.17; 30-32; 34; 63; 75); Nd (I, p.272); Ps (II, p.149); Br (pp.3; 6; 14; 66); Kv (p.561).
7) See the annotations to vv. 3; 39 (ApA, pp. 104; 109).
9) Ap (pp, 1; 404). Cf. Visuddhimagga (II, p. 44). Including singulars, there are 12 appearances in the tipitaka, but most of them are in Ap.