The Buddhology in the *Mahābhārata śūtra*
Inherited from the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*

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1. The Buddhology in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* (**SP**)

1.1 Buddha within and beyond History

Recently an interesting idea on the Buddhology in the **SP** was propounded by Shimoda [2001] with a detailed examination into both the episode of “the God Brahman’s request” and the discourse of the second chapter of the **SP** (*Upāyakausālyaparivarta*):

*It is true that truth would not have been manifested if it had not been for the historical Buddha Śākyamuni. But this does not mean that the Buddha created the truth; he remains a discoverer of the hidden truth and a mediator to transmit it to this world. For Buddhists, truth was manifested for the first time in history by the medium of a historical personality: that of the Buddha Gotama. In addition, according to the episode of “the God Brahman’s request,” the truth was verbalized by the Buddha. All these elements considered, we can formulate the manner in which the truth appears in the Buddhist world as follows: truth in Buddhism can appear only when it has been verbalized by a specific person in a specific historical context.***

*The SP, which consciously uses the episode of the God Brahman’s request and places the idea of skillful means (*upāyakausālya*) at the outset of the sutra, actually demonstrates that words are the Buddha himself, and that the Buddha must keep being actualized in words in accordance with a changing history. The skillful means in the **SP**, in which the Buddha cannot exist without taking the form of verbalized truth, are nothing more than the ability to manifest “the Buddha in the state of potential” in the dimension of words.***

*It is noteworthy that the **SP**, totally based on these elements, prepares the stage of its opening scene for the sake of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni. This does not mean that the proponents of the **SP** try to impersonate Śākyamuni Buddha. There is no need for the author to make a disguise of Śākyamuni because Buddha’s existence is warranted in principle by the framework of Buddhist truth.***

*This attempt of the **SP** can be construed as aiming at overlapping the Buddha of the **SP** with the historical Śākyamuni Buddha who is the origin of Buddhist history and of course different from the Buddha of the **SP**. In this undertaking, the Buddha of the **SP** is gifted with “historical*
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reality" as much as the Buddha Śākyamuni, whereas the Buddha Śākyamuni who was once confined to the past world is liberated from the historical limitation and made to come alive in the present discourse in the SP. ....

It is the frame of the Buddhist truth, i.e. "truth must be manifested at a specific time in words of a specific person," that assures the SP of the justifiable ground for this attempt. This then leads us to much more important consequence: those who verbalize the Buddhist truth would naturally be regarded as the Buddha himself. It is dharmabhāṇaka, a Buddhist preacher, who comes to be keenly highlighted in this respect. Dharmabhāṇakas of course remain as narrators but they are particularly distinguished in that they are regarded as those who relate the Buddha’s voice at least within Buddhist world. ....

This in fact demonstrates that there has been a current in Buddhist history in which the Buddha’s words, which are called dharmaśāya in later time, are regarded as nothing other than the Buddha himself. The SP was written in this current as one of the ideal examples of sutras ......

1.2. dharmabhāṇaka as tathāgata or tathāgata-kṛtyakara

To reinforce this idea, I can offer another example from the 10th chapter of the SP (Dharmabhāṇakaparivarta):

[The Lord Śākyamuni addressed Bhaisajyarāja: ] "Such a son or daughter of good family, O Bhaisajyarāja, must be considered to be a tathāgata, and by the whole world, including the gods, honor should be done to such a tathāgata who keeps so much as a single stanza of this religious discourse, and far more, of course, to one who grasps, keeps, comprehends, makes known, copies, and after copying always retains in his memory this religious discourse entirely and completely."

(SP 226.1-5)

Needless to say, this does not mean that the dharmabhāṇaka is equal to the tathāgata in every respect. He can be regarded as the tathāgata only in that he relates the Buddha’s voice. This assumption is assured by the fact that the SP also calls him tathāgata-kṛtyakara, one who verbalizes the Buddhist truth instead of the Buddha himself, as can be seen in another passage of the same chapter (SP 227.1).

To sum up, Śākyamuni Buddha has been considered to be eternal in this current as long as a dharmabhāṇaka actualizes the Buddha in words by verbalizing the Buddhist truth.

2. The Buddhology in the Mahābherīsūtra (MBhS)

2.1. The Outline of the MBhS

The MBhS is one of the sūtras which contain discourses on the tathāgatagarbha / bud-
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dharmātu theory, and is the last-compiled sūtra among the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*-Group (MPNS-G), which consists of the *Mahāmeghasūtra* (MMS), the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* (MPNS), the *Āṅgulimālīyasūtra* (AMS) and the MBhS. Moreover, what has drawn modern scholarly attention to the MBhS is that it introduces teachings on “skillful means,” “oneness of the truth” and “various parables” from the SP. From this point of view, we can safely say that the SP, as well as the other sūtras belonging to the MPNS-G, had some influence on the compilation of the MBhS.

2.2. The Buddhology in the MBhS

As has been already shown by some scholars, as well as myself, the transformation of the idea of the tathāgata and the tathāgatagarbha / buddhadhātu within the MPNS-G can be elucidated as follows:

[1] Group 1 of the MPNS defines tathāgatagāta, who has a body composed of dharma (dharmakāya), as ātman in terms of their identical qualities to being eternal and almighty.


[4] After introducing the tathāgatagarbha theory from the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*, Group 2b of the MPNS interiorized tathāgata, which has characteristics listed in [3], as tathāgatagarbha / buddhadhātu, followed directly by the AMS.

[5] To separate the too-close relationship between the tathāgata and ordinary sentient beings, who have the perfect buddha within themselves, and to reconstruct a religious ethics different from those of the MPNS and the AMS, the MBhS conspicuously removes ‘almighty’ from [4] and clearly distinguishes the tathāgatagarbha / buddhadhātu from the tathāgata whose body is composed of dharma.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1 of the MPNS</th>
<th>eternal, almighty : dharma (dharmakāya)</th>
<th>tathāgata</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The MMS</td>
<td>eternal, almighty, non-empty : dharmakāya</td>
<td>tathāgata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2a of the MPNS</td>
<td>eternal, almighty, non-empty, embodied : dharmakāya</td>
<td>tathāgata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2b of the MPNS</td>
<td>eternal, almighty, non-empty, embodied, immanent : dharmakāya</td>
<td>tathāgata and tathāgatagarbha / buddhadhātu</td>
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<td>and the AMS</td>
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<tr>
<td>The MBHs</td>
<td>eternal, × non-empty, embodied, immanent : ×</td>
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Table 1 : The transformation of the idea of the tathāgata and the tathāgatagarbha / buddhadhaatu within the MPNS-G

As listed above, in distinguishing the tathāgata and the tathāgatagarbha / buddhadhaatu, the MBhS shows itself as unique among sutras which discourse on the tathāgatagarbha theory. Where then should the tathāgata / buddha itself of the MBhS, i.e., the Buddhology in the MBhS, be sought besides the tathāgatagarbha / buddhadhaatu? The following examinations may answer this question.

First, let us take a look at the context in which the Lord Sakyamuni describes how a dharinabhanaka of the MBhS in the future shall preach this sūtra. It goes as follows:

[This dharmabhanaka with skillful means shall address the audiences : ] “You all have to see that the Lord Sākyamuni resides here. The tathāgata is eternal, persistent, quiescent and indestructible in this way. This is the very meaning of the eternity and the calmness [of the tathāgata] that I have always taught.”

Buddhas from all ten directions then appear aloft and utter: “So it is (*evam etat),” and the whole world believes him by saying “his discourse is well expounded (*subhāṣita).”

(MBhS, 129b6-130a1)

What becomes most probable in this extract is that after various transformations of the idea of the tathāgata and the tathāgatagarbha / buddhadhaatu through the MPNS-G, the MBhS declares that its Buddhology is the same as none of the MPNS-G but rather that of the SP. We cannot overlook here that in this declaration the MBhS seems to evoke the following passage from the 11th chapter of the SP (Stūpasamārśanaparivarta):

[There suddenly arose a stūpa from the earth and after rising aloft, there issued this voice of admiration : ] “Excellent, excellent, Lord Sākyamuni! You have well expounded (subhāṣita) this religious discourse of the Saddharmapundarīka. So it is (evam etat), Lord; So it is, Sugata.”

(SP 240.2-4)

In the SP, this Stūpasamārśanaparivarta directly follows the 10th chapter (Dharmabhāṇakaparivarta), in which manifold features of dharmabhāṇaka are discussed most comprehensively. This fact allows us to understand that ‘what is well expounded’ in this passage may actually point rather to the discourse of the Dharmabhāṇakaparivarta, not the whole discourse of the SP. Taking into consideration here that skillful means (upāyakauśalya) of dharmabhāṇakas are the ability to manifest “the Buddha in the state of potential” in the
dimension of words, the necessity of evoking this passage for the MBhS comes to light: the MBhS should have the confidence to be an orthodox successor of the Buddhology of the SP.

Let us now consider the following quotation, which has the only example of the use of the word 'dharmakāya' in the MBhS:

[The Lord Śākyamuni addressed Kāśyapa:] “I shall manifest, O Kāśyapa, my body composed of dharma (*dharmakāya) to such sons or daughters of good families. I shall preach to them, wherever they live such as in suburbs, cities or towns, that I who am the tathāgata am eternal. I shall manifest myself evidently to those who keep in mind, read, recite, preach this sūtra to others and make known that the tathāgata is eternal, persistent, quiescent and indestructible. .......

(MBhS, 130b8-131a4)

As far as “the Buddhist truth (dharma) must be manifested at a specific time in words by a specific person,” Buddha as truth, or Buddha having a body composed of dharma (dharmakāya) comes into being when dharmabhāṇakas verbalize the Buddhist truth. We may thus estimate this passage as a manifestation of the idea of Buddhist truth in the MBhS.

3. Conclusion

Through these examinations in this paper, we can conclude that both the SP and the MBhS were compiled within the same current in Buddhist history in which the Buddha’s words, which are called dharmakāya, are regarded as nothing other than the Buddha himself. From this point of view, it can also be shown that there was some context in India in which the Buddhology of the SP was inherited by succeeding generations in an orthodox manner.