Stūpa Worship and Dharma Evaluation in the Suvarṇaprabhāsa

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1. Background of this paper

In Buddhism, there has long been a general recognition that the Buddha Śākyamuni, who is a historical person, still ‘continues to live’ in some form even after his ‘death (parinirvāṇa)’. Stūpa worship in which the stūpa is equated with ‘the living Buddha’ and is not regarded as merely ‘Buddha’s grave’, also stems from this general recognition.

It has been already shown that the early Mahāyāna movement involves the intention of shifting the central focus of Buddhism from stūpa worship to dharma evaluation, that is, the intention of shifting the conception of ‘the living Buddha’ from stūpa to dharmakāya (Buddha having a body composed of dharma) or to dharma itself. This shift was, however, carried out in some moderate manner and was not attained completely since stūpa worship was one of the chief fundamentals of the early Mahāyāna movement. Full devaluation of stūpa worship and a complete shift to dharma evaluation was just declared in the sūtras such as the Mahāmeghasūtra (MMS), which could utilize the early Mahāyāna sūtra literature as their new foundation instead of stūpa worship.

In the second chapter of the Suvarṇaprabhāsottamasūtranirdesāraja (Suv), entitled the Tathāgatāyuḥpramāṇanirdeṣaparivarta, there exists a long series of passages concerning the idea of the Buddha. This idea can be summarized as follows: “The Buddha is composed of dharma and the meaning of the stūpa/relics is absolutely nothing.” The present author has already proved that the Suv quotes these passages from the MMS (see Suzuki [1996, 1998a, 1998b]) and also elucidated how the attitude toward both stūpa and dharma in the second chapter of the Suv altered along the variously phased compilation of the Suv from the first Chinese version (C1), through the present Sanskrit recension (S), the Tibetan version well-corresponding to S (T1),

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the second Chinese version (C₂), the enlarged Tibetan version (T₂), to the third Chinese version (C₃) (see Suzuki [1999]). In this paper, we shall attempt to extend the range of examination into the Suv entirely and consider the various phases of the conception of the stūpa/relics in the Suv in order to prepare for the further research into the conception of the Buddha in the Suv. (The way of numbering the chapters in this paper follows expediently the way in C₃.)

2. Various phases of the attitude toward stūpa/relics in the Suv

1. Chapter II has four phases (C₁ < S, T₁ < C₂ < T₂, C₃). The 1st phase simply teaches the eternity of the Buddha. The 2nd phase, as has been noted previously, quotes a long series of passages from the MMS and devaluates stūpa worship completely. This attitude toward stūpa is still followed by the 3rd phase, but the last 4th phase, on the contrary, accepts once again stūpa worship which must have been completely devaluated through the former three phases. (For further details, see Suzuki [1999].)

2. Chapter XXIV has two phases (C₁ (=C₂), S, T₁ (=T₂) < C₃), but the attitude toward stūpa remains unchanged. At the beginning of the chapter, a stūpa arose from the ground. This stūpa contains the relics of a bodhisattva named Mahāsattva, who is now Śākyamuni and had sacrificed himself for a tigress tortured by hunger and thirst. Having encouraged the audience to worship the stūpa/relics, the Buddha began to expound religious discourse on his sacrifice. It is true that we might estimate this chapter to propose stūpa worship only at first glance, but this estimation shall be denied by the following description stated at the end of this chapter:

While this exposition was being expounded, innumerable beings ... raised their thought to supreme and perfect enlightenment. And this is the reason, this the cause of the revelation of this stūpa here. And that stūpa, through the Buddha's blessing, entered the ground at that very spot. (S 240.6-9; Emmerick [1996] 100.)

We can say that it is not the stūpa itself but the exposition of dharma that encouraged people to raise their thought to enlightenment and the stūpa works as one of the 'stage effects' to lead the exposition. This kind of function of stūpa can be also observed in the Stūpasamādhasanaparivarta, the 11th chapter of the Sad-dharmapuṇḍarīka belonging to the early Mahāyāna sūtra literature, which had the intention of shifting the focus from stūpa worship to dharma evaluation. (see Suzuki
Chapter XXII keeps almost the same contents throughout the compilation. The following citation is from the utterance of the Buddha:

"Having approached the place where this sutra is preached, then he must enter, by entry into dharmadhatu, where there is the stūpa whose nature is dharma (dharmatmakastūpa), profound, well-established. And in the midst of this stūpa he will see the Buddha Sakyamuni expounding this sutra in a pleasant voice. ... All the gods continually honor the inconceivable stūpa of dharma (dharmastūpa). ... Because of a purified merit-root these men have come here, who have come here in order to hear this profound sutra, venerable men with inconceivable devotion to the stūpa of dharma (dharmastūpa). They have compassion for the world. They are working for the welfare of beings." (S 156.5-159.10; Emmerick [1996] 68-70.)

Taking into account both the context and two words 'dharmatmakastūpa' meaning 'the stūpa whose nature is dharma', and 'dharmastūpa' which has the same meaning as the former, we can see that this citation proposes that true nature of the stūpa should be sought in dharma rather than in the stūpa itself. Furthermore, we can notice that the attitude toward stūpa worship of this chapter is the same as that of the early Mahāyāna sutra literature since both of them, while not denying stūpa worship completely, share the intention of shifting the focus from stūpa worship to dharma evaluation.

Chapter XVIII has two phases (C₁ (=C₂), S, T₁ (=T₂) < C₃), and description on stūpa worship can be observed only in the 2nd phase (C₃):

[The earth-goddess Drdhā addressed the Lord:] "I have special spells (*dharani), O Lord, and can benefit all sentient beings. ... Those who wish welfare or wealth and so on should adorn a purified room, purify themselves, put on purified garments and sit on the seat. Then they should honor the stūpa (or caitya), in which the relics (*śarīra, dhātu) is deposited, with perfumes, flowers and foods." (C₃ 440c2-441a1)

This citation may tell us that stūpa worship has already become one of the daily events in this phase and is accepted to the same or larger extent than in the 4th phase of Chapter II.

Chapter V only exists in T₂, C₂ and C₃ with its contents almost unchanged, we may thus say that this chapter itself is one of the latest phases in the compilation of the Suv.
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[The Lord addressed Śāriputra:] “Suppose that some young man or lady of good family honors the pratyekabuddhas with garments and foods and so on, and that after their entering into parinirvāṇa he or she builds a stūpa (or caitya) for them ten yojanas in height which is made of gold and silver and so on and honors it with every umbrella and flag. Do you think, O Śāriputra, that he or she will produce much pious merit?”

[Śāriputra replied:] “Yes, Lord; yes, Sugata.”

[The Lord said:] “Any young man or lady of good family, O Śāriputra, who shall keep, comprehend, read, explain to others this sūtra and raise his or her mind to perfect enlightenment, that young man or lady of good family will produce far more pious merit.” (T 232.28-233.15)

Needless to say, we find the same kind of assertion in the Aṣṭasāhasrikā-Prajñāpāramitā which is one of the representative early Mahāyāna sūtras; the assertion that stūpa is still precious but dharma is much more precious.

Chapter VI, in the same way as Chapter V, only exists in T2, C2 and C3 with its contents almost unchanged.

[Assemblies said:] “We will approach the place, O Lord, where this excellent Suvarṇaprabhāsa, king of sūtras, is being expounded. Having approached the place we will become the audience of the preacher. We will protect, satisfy and honor him. ... For, the place where this dharma is expounded is caitya (chos ’di bsad pa’i gnas ’di ni mchod rien lags). It must be therefore honored with umbrellas, flags, flowers, perfumes and ornaments.” (T 259.3-17)

None of us may read this citation without recalling the phrase ‘sa prthivipradeśaḥ caityabhūto bhavet’ in the Vajracchedikā, which is one of the early Mahāyāna sūtras, though this citation does not mention ‘caityabhūta’ but ‘caitya’ directly. It may be thus true to estimate that (6) shows a more developed form than the Vajracchedikā on account of the loss of the word ‘bhūta’. Compared with the Mahāparinirvānasūtra, however, which identifies the preacher itself, not the place, with caitya and tries to introduce the tathāgatagarbha theory (see Shimoda [1993, 1997]), we must say that the extent of the development appeared in (6) is somewhat trivial.

3. Explanation of the various attitudes toward stūpa/relics in the Suv

Various attitudes toward stūpa/relics in the Suv can be summarized as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similar to the early Mahāyāna sūtra (from stūpa to dharma)</th>
<th>The 1st phase of (1); (2)356 (23 are the 1st and last phases; 56 are the last phases)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Full devaluation of stūpa worship</td>
<td>The 2nd and 3rd phase of (1)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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We should not overlook here that in the last phase of the compilation of the *Suv* there coexist two opposite attitudes toward *stūpa* worship; one, like the early Mahāyāna *sūtras*, devalues it and the other encourages it. This means that even in the last phase there may have been no agreement among the proponents of the *Suv* either on what they considered the Buddha to be and on what form of the Buddha they believed in. What may draw our attention is the fact that the *Suv* was compiled and has been maintained as a single text in spite of the discordance of the thought and the faith, both of which must be essential to the Buddhist. It is not so strange that the theme or editorial plan of one *sūtra* is changing during the compilation, but as to the *Suv* two declarations which contradict each other on both the thought and the faith were added in the same phase, that is, almost at the same time in the compilation, and they have been continued to coexist without one being eliminated by the other.

We may have to notice here the hypothesis that the change of definition of the *samghabheda* (from *cakrabheda* to *karmabheda*) must have caused the variety of the Buddhist forms including the Mahāyāna (see Sasaki [2000]) for the sake of explaining sufficiently the various attitudes toward *stūpa* relics in the *Suv*. There is also the possibility that the *Suv* can illustrate the validity of this hypothesis. In further research into the conception of the Buddha in the *Suv* by the present author, this possibility will be examined in detail.

† (Texts, Abbreviations and References) had to be omitted for want of space.
† (Key Words) 金光明経, 仏塔・仏舍利信仰, 大雲経, 極楽経, 法華経

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