Rites and Buddhism
—A Perspective from the Sarasvatī-parivarta in the Suvarṇaprabhāsa—

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1. Beyond the Term “Assimilation of Buddhism into Hinduism”

As is well known, the Suvarṇaprabhāsa (Sūtra of Golden Light; Suv) has long been worshipped in the vast areas of Asia. It has been accounted one of the Nine Dharmas in Nepal, and various habits or customs have been developed in Central Asia, China and Japan following the teachings expounded in this sūtra. It was also translated into various Asian languages such as Khotanese, Uighur, Sogdian and so on as well as Tibetan and Chinese1).

One of the reasons that made the Suv so widely accepted can be that it contains many features which seem to be rather unusual in Buddhism, all serving to accumulate merits for the proponents of the Suv. For instance,

Protection by several famous Hindu goddesses including Sarasvati and Lakṣmi in Chapter 15, 16, 17 and 302).

Adoption of ritual acts prevailing among Hindu society such as bathing for purification in Chapter 15.

Exposition of a royal textbook (rājaśāstra) in Chapter 20.

Emphasis upon faith in the mysterious power of words in many chapters.

In explaining the chief factor in adoption of these features into the Suv, most studies to date seem to have been content with interpreting it as “assimilation of Buddhism into Hinduism”3). It is true that the Suv has not a few aspects that seem to easily assimilate into the cultural customs of Hinduism including Tantrism. The compilers of the Suv, however, must have fully realized that they were Buddhists since they had compiled the Suv as nothing other than a Buddhist scripture categorized as a Mahāyāna sūtra. If we look therefore more carefully into this problem beyond contentment with the term “the assimilation of Buddhism into Hinduism,” we
will be able to shed some light on an actual practice of Buddhism, especially of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which has been overlooked before. This paper aims at presenting a hypothesis concerning actual practice of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism in about the 5-6th century C. E. 4) by focusing on the affirmative attitude toward the ritual act of bathing in Hindu society expressed in the Sarasvati-parivarta (Chapter on Sarasvati), the 15th chapter of the Sūv.

2. Brief Survey of the Sarasvati-parivarta (Chapter on Sarasvati; Chapter 15)

The Sarasvati-parivarta can be approximately divided into twelve sections (from §1 to §12) considered in form and content. Since a general survey of this chapter has been already done by Nobel [1951], we may here look into this chapter briefly.

§1: The goddess Sarasvati by name makes a vow to protect those who preach this sūtra. The chapter in the first Chinese version SūvCI rendered by Dharmaksema (般若) in the 5th century, only consists of this section.

§2: The goddess Sarasvati explains the act of ritual bathing (snānakarman) by which the practicers may quickly awaken before supreme and perfect enlightenment. This section includes two sub-sections, §2-a and §2-b, both of which only exist in the third Chinese version SūvC3 rendered by Yi-jing (義淨) in the 8th century.

§3: The Lord offers congratulations to the goddess Sarasvati.

§4: The teacher and expounder Kaundinya by name, the brahmin, encourages the audience to invoke the goddess Sarasvati.

§5: The goddess Sarasvati utters the words of her spell (mantrapadā).

§6: The goddess Sarasvati teaches the method (vidhī) to hold this sūtra. This §6 and the next §7 do not exist in the SūvS, the SūvTI nor the second Chinese version SūvC2 combined by Bāo-gui (寶貴) in the later part of the 6th century.

§7: The brahmin Kaundinya praises the goddess Sarasvati in verses; Part I. Nagano [1988] has reported the possibility that these verses in §7 and §8 might have been based on the verses appearing in Vol. 4 of the Mahābhārata.

§8: The brahmin Kaundinya praises the goddess Sarasvati in verses; Part II. This section includes two sub-sections, §8-a and §8-b, the former of which only exists in the SūvT2 and the SūvC3, and the latter of which does not appear in the SūvC3. The SūvS, the SūvTI and the SūvC2 conclude the whole chapter with this section.
§9: The Lord offers congratulations to the brahmin Kaundinya. The last four sections (from §9 to §12) only exist in the SuvT2 and the SuvC3.

§10: The brahmin Kaundinya explains the words to invoke the goddess Sarasvati.

§11: The goddess Sarasvati replies to the invocation by the brahmin Kaundinya.

§12: The Lord offers congratulations to the goddess Sarasvati again.

The structure of Chapter 15 can be tabled as follows:

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Table 1 indicates, with the single exception of §8-b, that the content of the Sarasvati-parivarta was enlarged through the four stages of formation:

Chapter 15: SuvC1 (the first stage) < SuvS, SuvT1, SuvC2 (the second stage) < SuvT2 (the third stage) < SuvC3 (the fourth/last stage)

3. Connections between Chapter 15 and Chapter 2 in the Suv

Let us now point out several interesting connections between Chapter 15 (Sarasvati-
parivarta) and Chapter 2 entitled the Tathāgatāyuhpramāṇanirdeśa-parivarta (Chapter on the Measure of Life of the Tathāgata).

Connection 1: The brahmin Kaundinya: Throughout the texts of the Sūv, the brahmin Kaundinya appears only in Chapter 15 and Chapter 2. In these two chapters, through the dialogue with another character, that is, the goddess Sarasvatī in Chapter 15 and a Licchavi prince named Sarvalokapriyadarśana in Chapter 2, this brahmin plays a central role in introducing the chapters’ main subjects.

Connection 2: Having other texts as their sources: The verses in §7 and §8 in Chapter 15 seem, as we have seen, to have been based on the verses appearing in Vol. 4 of the Mahābhārata, while Suzuki [1996, 1998a, 1998b] has shown that Chapter 2 quotes a long series of passages concerning the idea of the Buddha from the Mahāmeghasūtra belonging to the Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra-Group.

Connection 3: Several stages of the formation: Both chapters have already existed in the SūvC1, the oldest version ever known, which consists of nineteen chapters, and both are enlarged to the extent seen in the SūvC3 which consists of thirty one chapters, through several stages of formation. Both chapters also have the number of the stages, four, in common.

Chapter 2: SūvC1 (the first stage) < SūvS, SūvT1 (the second stage) < SūvC2 (the third stage) < SūvT2, SūvC3 (the fourth/last stage)

Even all these factors considered, it may be too much to say that both chapters have been compiled by the same compilers. But, at least, there may be no denying that the compilers of one chapter must have had information on the other chapter.

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In spite of these connections between the two chapters, however, their aims seem to be strongly different. For Chapter 2 aims at expounding doctrinally, partly in parables, the eternity of the Buddha, whereas the aim of Chapter 15 is, from the second stage to the last stage, to explain the act of ritual bathing with its detailed method. Since these two chapters must have been compiled and transmitted with at least some degree of mutual connection, the compilers or the proponents of the Sūv might have been concerned to demonstrate not only what they thought scho-
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lastically but what they practiced ritually in their daily lives.

Recent studies making full use of Vinaya literature and inscriptions by several scholars, for instance Schopen [1997], revealed that ritual acts and institutions had been widely accepted and practiced in the Buddhist communities of India, both monastic and lay. Based on these studies, it may be natural even for some Buddhist scriptures to affirm in detail such ritual acts as bathing.

What is essential here in the Sarasvati-parivarta are two points. The first is that those who compiled this chapter adopted ritual bathing into Buddhism which they might have practiced already before in their daily lives, and that they granted the act a new meaning consistent with Buddhist doctrine. If we admit calling rites or institutions in religion the “substructure” and doctrine or meditation the “superstructure,” Buddhism was, as has been already suggested, concerned with the superstructure solely in its earlier stratum, while the substructure, which is seldom expressed in the scriptures, might have been left to the ritual acts or institutions of Hindu society. If one becomes more pious in his religious life, however, it may be more possible that he wishes not only to have faith in the superstructure of his religion but eagerly to practice the substructure of that religion. This first point may therefore be translated as an attempt in accordance with the wish of Buddhists to justify the rites or institutions which have been practiced by them.

The second is that their expression on ritual bathing was made not in Vinaya literature nor inscriptions but in a scripture categorized in Mahāyāna Sūtra literature which had been supposed to deal with more sophisticated realms such as doctrine or meditation. Recent studies call our attention to the report by Fā-xiān (法顯), an ancient Chinese pilgrim to India in the 5th century C.E., which tells that in those days the distinction between Mahāyāna and what is called “Hinayāna” was nothing more than the distinction of the objects they had worshipped. And as for the scriptures, it has been already pointed out by several scholars that Mahāyāna has long done without Vinaya literature of its own and that one of the chief reasons for it is illustrated that rules of conduct in Mahāyāna might have been based on those in “Hinayāna.” Supported by the fact that Mahāyāna Sūtra literature is little concerned with the substructure, this assumption inevitably made us suspicious about the independence of Mahāyāna from traditional Buddhism.

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Taking all these factors into consideration, it may be possible to build up such a hypothesis as follows:

[A Hypothesis] Owing to the account of the Sarasvati-parivarta, the compilers or the proponents of the **Suv** who realized themselves as Mahāyāna Buddhists, became able to practice their daily religious rites as “Buddhist substructure” without any assistance by *Vinaya* literature or Hindu rites. We can therefore interpret the features appearing in the *Sarasvati-parivarta* not as a token of “the assimilation of Buddhism into Hinduism” but as one of the attempts to bring about “the independence of Mahāyāna from traditional Buddhism” and “the independence of Buddhism from Hinduism.”

It goes without saying that there is much room for further examination, but the report suggesting that the first inscription belonging to Mahāyāna dates back to no earlier than the 5-6th century C.E. might partly justify this hypothesis.

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2) The way of numbering the chapters in this paper follows expediently the way in the **SuvC3**.

3) The word “Hinduism” here is used in a narrow sense.

4) Opinions are still divergent as to the rise and spread of Mahāyāna Buddhism as well as its definition, and to discuss them as a whole is beyond the scope of a brief paper.

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**Texts, Abbreviations and Notes**

- **Suv**  *Suvarnaprabhāśa* or *Suvarṇa[-pra-]bhāsottamasūtrendrarāja*.
- **SuvC1** 『金光明經』四卷, 暗無譯譯. T. No. 663.
- **SuvR1**  ‘phags pa gSer 'od dam pa mdo sde'i dban po'i rgyal po žes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo, ārya-Suvarṇaprabhāsottamasūtrendrarāja-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra, tr. unknown. Q No. 176.
- **SuvC2** 『部合金光明經』八卷, 寶貴合糅. T. No. 664.
- **SuvR2**  ‘phags pa gSer 'od dam pa mdo sde'i dban po'i rgyal po žes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo, ārya-Suvarṇaprabhāsottamasūtrendrarāja-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra, tr. Jinamitra, Śilendra-bodhi and Ye šes sde. Q No. 175.
- **SuvC3** 『金光明最勝王經』十卷, 義淨譯. T. No. 665.
- **SuvR**  *Suvarṇaprabhāsottamasūtra*, ed. J. Nobel, Leiden, 1944. (T. Taisho Tripitaka ; Q Peking bKa’ gyur)

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**Key words** 儀礼と仏教, 金光明経大弁才天女品, 律文献と大乗経典, 碑文・刻文, 大乗仏教の独り立ち

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