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Challenging the Buddha's Authority: a narrative perspective of power dynamics between the Buddha and his disciples

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Introduction

The early history of Indian Buddhism is, to no small extent, the coalescence of hagiographies of the primary figures in the nascent monastic community (or, interchangeably, the *saṅgha*¹): Śākyamuni Buddha and his immediate principal disciples' individual life stories, their famous sayings (i.e., scriptures), and the legends of their interplay with or relation to broader social environments constitute nearly the entire contents of our knowledge of Buddhism in its formative period. However, compared to the univocal narrative in which Buddhist saints always manage to triumph over non-Buddhist challengers, stories concerning the power dynamics within this early monastic community present divergent ideas, sparking not only exciting stories but also serious polemics.

Different narratives offer varying treatments of how to represent the power structure within the monastic community—i.e., between Siddhārtha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism who came to be known as Śākyamuni Buddha, and his principal disciples, such as Śāriputra, Maudgalyāyana, and Mahākāśyapa, who are also primary objects of cultic activities. Although disciples venerated the Buddha as their spiritual father, it is a critically important tradition advanced by the *Nirvāṇasūtra* that the Buddha never regarded himself as the leader of the *saṅgha* (§5.1). In this sense, although no one seriously questions Śākyamuni Buddha's position as the first leader of the monastic community nowadays, Buddhism, in fact, never established a clear-cut, fixed power pyramid in the early monastic community.

There is little doubt that the *saṅgha* could function as a political organization in the modern sense: as a community, it must have served as a power base for individual participation and group management, and operated by distributing authority in the form of organizational and interpersonal relationships. However, the *saṅgha* cannot be purely defined in the political dimension, as it is also a concept imbued with profound religious and doctrinal meaning (§5.3). This is particularly the case when we consider whether the Buddha was the unequivocal leader in the monastic community, with an overarching authority that overshadowed [the community of] his brilliant disciples. The solution to this question

¹ The term *saṅgha* in my discussion mainly refers to the community of Buddhist followers who maintain their religious identities through Buddhist communal and institutional structures. Usually I separate the Buddha from the referent of the term *saṅgha*, although I fully realize that it is a theological controversy whether the Buddha was situated within the *saṅgha* or outside of it (§5.3). Moreover, the *saṅgha* can have a transcendental meaning, for instance, as one of the Three Jewels and as a manifestation of the body of Śākyamuni (§5.3). However, I attempt not to incorporate this level of meaning into my discussion of the narratives about the Buddha–*saṅgha* relationship, unless explicitly indicated.

requires not only a discussion of how power is exercised in these institutional structures but also sophisticated analyses on the nature and significance of both the Buddha and the *saṅgha*.²

The ambiguity between the Buddha–disciple relation applies, first of all, to the figures’ religious paths and destinations, which is embodied in my hypothesis that the connotations of the concepts of *buddha* and *arhat* were not clearly distinguished in perhaps the most distant period, (Chapter 1). Relics of the ambiguity between buddhahood and arhatship suggest that Śākyamuni Buddha may not necessarily have been regarded as superior to his disciples in terms of attaining a higher religious goal. Although the buddha–arhat ambiguity may sound not so surprising to many who are solely oriented to the Theravaṃsa tradition, this ambiguity is indeed exceptional in the eyes of people who are more familiar with doctrines of Mahāyāna Buddhism or sectarian schools that were once widely spread in Northern India (e.g., Dharmaguptaka, Sarvāstivāda, Mahāsāṅghika-Lokottaravāda). The equivalence in the Buddha–disciple power relation is presented more straightforwardly in the narrative traditions of Śāriputra and Devadatta, which have derived great vitality from the motif of competing with the Buddha. In certain narratives of the *Sūtra of the Wise and Foolish* (abbreviated ‘*SWF*.’ §2.1), Śākyamuni as the great Teacher was directly confronted by his foremost disciple Śāriputra with regard to the governance of the monastic community (Chapter 2). Narrators must have perceived that the high prestige of a disciple in the *saṅgha* could pose a theological problem, a threat to the Buddha’s authority, and therefore addressed this problem in the form of narrative. In this sense, these stories can be regarded as a literary means by which tension between the Teacher and disciples was intentionally created and finally resolved in favor of the Buddha’s superiority. If Devadatta issued presumptuous and condemnable challenges to the Buddha’s authority, Śāriputra’s rivalry should then be viewed as a gray area. It is in this gray area that Buddhist narrators, who held different personal views or different doctrinal standpoints, designed diverse models of relationships and tentatively negotiated the issue of central Buddhist authority.

² My treatment of the nature and significance of the buddha and the *saṅgha* is mostly confined to the narrative level. Although I do sometimes conduct doctrinal discussions, a pure and more devoted philosophical investigation of these issues is something far beyond the scope of the present study. The past decades have witnessed a burgeoning body of excellent scholarship with a more doctrinal approach to these questions and to pursue an interest in this direction, readers can read, for instance, Ruegg 1989, 1994, 1995, and Radich 2007 about the buddha nature; and Freiburger 2000 for the nature of *saṅgha* or being a Buddhist.

Devadatta's challenge would not cause a major controversy of value judgment and most non-Mahāyāna texts sternly castigated him as an innately evil person. However, the obstacle to comprehending the historical and ideological significance of the life stories of Devadatta comes precisely from this stereotypical reading of Devadatta: the majority of traditional Buddhists and modern scholars have too readily accepted him as an evildoer, without focusing the spotlight on the broader historical and ideological contexts. The stories of Devadatta are, however, never simple narratives of an impotent challenger/evildoer, as I argue in chapters 3 and 4. The accounts of Devadatta fundamentally reflect a schismatic narrative produced in the Vinayas, and the core image of Devadatta is that of the first Buddhist schismatic, rather than being the paradigm of an evildoer (§3.2). However, the narratives concerning Devadatta were not produced entirely within the context of the Vinaya. The scholastic traditions connected to Abhidharma also played a crucial role in the development of these stories, especially in the shift of Devadatta's image from that of a schismatic to that of a foolish and rebellious, yet impotent, evildoer. Perhaps under the sway of the scholastic anti-schism polemics, which regarded schisms as morally reprehensible acts, Devadatta's role gradually expanded to that of the embodiment of evil itself. The image of Devadatta as a separatist became only one facet of his overall image as an evildoer (§3.2.2). However, when stories created in different contexts were put together, they were apt to create tensions, because many stories were composed under various ideologies that were mutually incompatible or even contradictory. In this regard, Devadatta's stories are a matrix of self-reflective stories because the narrative itself has already noticed the tensions between Devadatta's multifaceted notoriety and proposed multiple solutions to dissolve the ideological clashes in a retrospective manner (§4.1.3).

In addition, Devadatta's image as a grave troublemaker simultaneously implies a crisis of authority on the part of Śākyamuni Buddha: when Devadatta is recounted to have briefly split the Buddha's monastic community and even to have physically injured the Buddha, he indeed became a powerful enemy and achieved temporary success when confronted by Śākyamuni (§4.2). Different Buddhist schools, both Mainstream and Mahāyāna, realized the conflicts or paradoxes resulting from the interplay between Devadatta's role as a sinner and the Buddha's authority and advanced multiple ways to resolve them. When Mainstream Buddhists found that only intensifying Devadatta's sinful nature would make many events in Devadatta's life unable to be accommodated in the *karma* law, they started to reconsider other possibilities: Had Devadatta always assumed the role of persecutor to Śākyamuni

Buddha in their previous lives? Had Śākyamuni Buddha also harmed Devadatta in the past? Had Devadatta ever accumulated positive *karmas*? (§4.2). Unsatisfied with the Mainstream proposals, Mahāyāna texts decide to take an opposite direction to solve the challenge issued by Devadatta to the Buddha's authority: Devadatta was never a bitter foe, a challenger to the Buddha; conversely, he was an aide who assisted the Buddha in attaining buddhahood and liberating sentient beings from suffering (§4.3). The development of the Devadatta narrative is a process of communication, interaction, and confrontation among heterogeneous components formed within different ideological systems and in diverse historical periods.

After the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*, another crucial issue concerning the Buddha's authority continued haunting generations of Buddhist followers: that is, how to preserve and transmit the Buddha's spiritual legacy when no unanimous provisions were made for the succession of the governance of the *saṅgha* (as evidenced by the commonly accepted "fact" that the Buddha, on his deathbed, refused to appoint a successor to lead the monastic community). Over the course of history, various Buddhist groups have devised numerous ways to demonstrate their legitimacy, claiming that their lineage constituted the authentic group of inheritors. These innately political and theological propositions have been conveyed and individualized through narratives: stories about the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*, or those between Mahākāśyapa and Ānanda in which one rivaled and outdid the other, or donation stories claiming that the *saṅgha* should collectively act as the heir of the Buddha (Chapter 5).

The present study is a historical study,³ but not in the sense of claiming historical factuality. Focusing the spotlight on a rough, enigmatic, and tricky phase of Buddhist history, namely, the early formative period of Indian Buddhism, the real concern is the varying messages the Buddhists who composed the [stories about the] early histories aimed to convey, and their understandings of the nature and significance of the Buddha and of themselves (i.e., being disciples of the Buddha), as underlying different portrayals of the Buddha-disciple relationship. Produced in varying historical, social, and doctrinal contexts, various discourses surrounding the theme of the Buddha-disciple power relation, which were imbued with contemporary Buddhists' political, social, economic, and theological appeals, shaped different narratives of the events in the early monastic community. When we place these discourses side by side on the same stage and observe how they interact with, play, or

³ Through a private communication from John Strong, in his forthcoming researches he has adopted the term "storical studies" in place of "historical studies."

even confront one another, we open the windows onto the ideological world of Buddhists. In this sense, it is a study of ideological history, about how Buddhists contemplated and refashioned the past in ways that best suited their contemporary social and religious ideals.

The textual sources upon which the research is based are taken from quite a broad historical context. On the one hand, it utilizes texts that contain a considerable number of early Buddhist elements in order to reconstruct an early understanding of Śākyamuni's authority in the relationship between the Buddha and his disciples/*saṅgha*. To this end, it quotes from many canonical texts in Pāli, Chinese, Tibetan, and Sanskrit that contain stories that touch on the power dynamics between the Buddha and his disciples and/or the hierarchy of the *saṅgha*. On the other hand, it also intends to gauge how the issue of the Buddha's authority has been understood by readers throughout its ongoing historical development. This study, therefore, cites texts belonging to different sectarian schools, with varying historical backgrounds, to shed light on how different readers received and reflected these stories in their own times. However diverse these texts seem to be in terms of historical context, reading them together results in an interactive conversation in which they respond and communicate with each other, generating multi-dimensional significance, and provoking deep thought. This approach is to construct, in Ohnuma's terminology, an "Indian Buddhist discursive world" of the Buddha-disciple power dynamics.⁴

The primary source for the second chapter is the *Sūtra of the Wise and Foolish*, a fifth-century collection of past-life stories of the Buddha and his principal disciples, compiled by Chinese monks during a *pañcavārṣika* assembly (§2.1). This text contains numerous *jātaka* and *avadāna* stories, two common genres of Buddhist narratives. However, as scholars have

⁴ This concept, advanced by Ohnuma, is her main approach to remedying the lack of historical contextualization caused by using overly broad textual materials. Since I also have to confront the same problem of too much "historical diversity," it is useful to quote her whole discussion of this methodology here (Ohnuma 2012: 6): "[an Indian discursive world] displays remarkable consistency over time in terms of narrative themes, character-types, plotlines, conventional tropes, similes, metaphors, and images. This is a consistency that stretches across the linguistic borders between Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan, and Chinese, as well as extending over many centuries and throughout a large geographical region. It is also referential and intertextual in nature, with texts from widely varying historical contexts referring to one another, playing off one another, and often seeming to 'speak to' one another in many ways that might be historically impossible ... This discourse reveals itself, however, only when one places the theme of motherhood in the foreground and allows it to determine which sources are used, rather than, —for example—looking at the local production of meaning in one particular time and place. I am aware that my methodology, which is historicist only in a very broad sense, goes against the current cult of historicity that has increasingly come to characterize both Buddhist Studies and the humanities as a whole. Nevertheless, I remain convinced of the usefulness and validity of such an approach."

recently realized, it is difficult to distinguish the two genres based on the conventional criterion, namely, *dramatis personae*.⁵ The *jātaka*, which is generally defined as the birth story of the Buddha, usually exhibits a threefold structure, namely, the story of the present (Pāli *paccuppanna-vatthu*), the story of the past (Pāli *aīta-vatthu*), and the connection that binds those life stories (Pāli *samodhāna*). While the meaning of the *jātaka* is relatively clear, far greater problems confront scholars who attempt to define the genre *avadāna*. In a long-standing academic debate, scholars have attempted to understand *avadāna* from an etymological perspective (e.g. derived from the root $\sqrt{dā}$ [“to cut”], to denote “something cut, selected,” and therefore “illustrious and glorious”;⁶ $\sqrt{dā}$ [“to connect”], to imply connection, leading to the sense of “illustration; precedence”;⁷ or from \sqrt{dai} [“to cleanse”], to mean “a pure and virtuous act”⁸), or simply from a functional perspective as “a fable, a legend” (e.g., Feer 1891 [1971]: ix–xi). Despite this controversy, it is commonly acknowledged that both genres usually narrate stories of the present and past and tell us how those life stories are bound karmically.⁹ I avoid entangling myself in this debate. No matter how the genres are artificially defined,¹⁰ I read them as the literature produced in a specific community influenced by a particular ideology to serve a specific goal, and see them as open windows onto Buddhist self-understandings.

⁵ Some classical and conventional discussions of the concepts of the two genres can be found in Feer 1891 [1971]: xi–xiii; Speyer 1909: vii–viii; Winternitz 1930, which is developed and re-examined in Iwamoto 1962: 96–103, Matsumura 1980: xi–xviii, Tatelman 2002: 4–12, Straube 2015: 489–491, and Fukita 2018. However, recent scholars challenge the validity of distinguishing the two genres based on the primary figure of the life stories, e.g., Strong 1983; Ohnuma 2007: 38; and Appleton 2010: 5–7; 2015.

⁶ Handurukande 1967: xx–xxi; Müller 1881: 50n.183.

⁷ Fukita (2018: 144–145) argues that the original meaning of *avadāna* as occurring in early Buddhist Sūtras (e.g., *Mahāvadānasūtra* in the *Dirghanikāya*) is “illustration” or “precedent” (fr. *ava* [away]– $\sqrt{dā}$ [to connect])

⁸ Handurukande 1967: xx–xxi; Speyer 1909: iii–iv.

⁹ The oddness of placing Gāndhārī Avadānas (stories without evident karmic connection) into this definition is widely noticed by Gāndhārī specialists, for instance, Lenz (2010: 6–14) and Neelis 2008 (151–153).

¹⁰ I tend to distinguish the two genres based on the following criteria: *jātakas* are birth stories of the Buddha, while *avadānas* should simply be defined as karmic stories in which the protagonist could be the Buddha or other figures. Therefore, there can be an overlap between these two genres when the Buddha is in the leading role (such as the second and fourth decades of stories of the Avś. Cf. Appleton 2013 & 2014).

The logical fallacy inherent in defining a genre is described by Strong (1983: 2): “[the description and definition of genres] is basically a circular process. As Paul Hernadi has put it: How can we define a genre without knowing on which works to base our definition, yet how can we know on which works to base our definition before we define the genre?”

This understanding can also be applied to biographical stories, which comprise the dominant source for the other chapters of my dissertation. Narratives about governance in the early monastic community, especially about the interpersonal relationships between these primary figures, are actually biographical stories. Transcending their fictional appearances, biographies are generally consecrated as sacred history in Buddhist communities. In this sense, these narratives can formulate normative statements in contextualized, concrete, and even “legitimate” fashion,¹¹ and serve as the templates for different power structures.¹² Indeed, the biographies of great saints and their interactions as told in this dissertation encompass a variety of propositions concerning the central authority in Buddhist communities and open a window to the Buddhist self-understanding of how they are related with their spiritual patriarchs, their past, and future.

This dissertation is divided into five chapters and organized as follows. Chapter 1 sheds light, in a more theoretical sense, on the ambiguity between buddhahood and arhatship, which are now two distinct rubrics for the respective final achievements of buddhas and their disciples; Chapter 2 focuses on different models of the Teacher–disciple interaction contained in the *SWF*’s stories about Śāriputra, and demonstrates the fluidity of Śāriputra’s image from a renowned disciple to that of a potential challenger; and Chapters 3 and 4 turn their attention to Devadatta, the notorious challenger to the Buddha’s authority in Buddhist literature, and shed light on the broad ideological and historical backgrounds of the Devadatta narratives. The dissertation concludes with Chapter 5, which discusses several proposals about how to pass down the Buddha’s authority in post-*parinirvāṇa* times. As we can see, the structure(s) of the power dynamics in the institutional life of the Buddhist monastic community is a puzzle to be solved, one with complicated theological, historical, and social issues at stake.

¹¹ Woodward (1997: 42) observes that, “doctrine teachings and monastic regulations are contextualized by references of events in the life of Buddha Gotama, one of his contemporaries and/or precursors. The extensive use of biographical frames in doctrinal and philosophical texts suggests that paradigmatic speculation requires narrative legitimation.”

¹² Just as Schober (1997: 2), in her introductory essay of the volume *Sacred Biographies in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia*, has already argued, stories about the lives of the great figures “helped define the framework for the development of Buddhist texts and practice because they depict fundamental religious and cultural modes that are paradigmatic for the tradition as a whole and inform the construction of religious practice, texts, and cultures. The structure of sacred biographies, the process of their compilation, and their proliferation throughout the Buddhist tradition convey more than merely moral tales for religious instruction ... highly evocative and polysemous, sacred biographies depict and contextualize the lives of those who emulate these ideals in religious texts and practices.”