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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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Chapter 1. The Sixth Arhat and Plural Buddhas:

A Problematization of the Buddha–Disciple Distinction¹³

“(The Sarvāstivādins hold that) *tathāgatas* and their disciples have the same cessation of delusion ... (The Mahīśāsakas hold that) all buddhas and all śrāvakas share the same path and attain the same liberation ... (The Dharmaguptakas hold that) the path of buddhas differs from that of śrāvakas.”

From Paramārtha’s *Bu zhiyi lun* ¹⁴

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Most Buddhists, past and present, just as most scholars, almost certainly hold—and held—that the attainment of the Buddha is superior to that of his disciples. Indeed, each of the Buddha’s disciples—even those as prominent as Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana—is acknowledged to be only an arhat after he attains awakening. This holds true not only in the eyes of Mahāyāna followers who generally accept the three-vehicle theory,¹⁵ but also in

¹³ In the following discussion, I print arhat and buddha without italics when used with reference to Śākyamuni and his awakened disciples, respectively, as is now widely accepted. I use italicized “*arhat*” and “*buddha*” with quotation markers when their respective meanings must be investigated, or diverge from our current understanding. Note that my discussion of disciples focuses mainly on their soteriological potentiality conveyed by the term *arhat*, rather than the connotations implicit in the term *śrāvaka* (“hearer”), another common term for the state of discipleship and also closely associated with the three-vehicle theory. Occasionally, however, I cannot avoid the term *śrāvaka* as the terms *arhat* and *śrāvaka* have become so closely intertwined in Buddhist contexts. Interestingly, the term *śrāvaka* itself is also ambiguous: grammatically speaking, it is from the causative form *śrāvayati* that means “the one who causes others to listen,” instead of from the simplex *śṛnoti* which is understood as “the one who heard the teaching (from the Buddha).” Chinese translators, when translating this word into *Shengwen* 聲聞, also hold these two different understandings of this word (e.g. *Xianyang shengjiao lun* 顯揚聖教論 T. 1602 [XXXI] 544b13–15). For academic discussions of the meaning of *śrāvaka*, Prof. Isaacson refers me to the messages in the threads on “Fwd: *śrāvaka*” and on “*śrāvaka*—a hearer or a disseminator?” in the 84000-translators mailing list, archived in <https://www.mail-archive.com/co84000-translators@lists.sourceforge.net/index.html#00006>.

¹⁴ This is cited from *Bu zhiyi lun* 部執異論, Paramārtha’s Chinese translation of the **Samaya-bhedoparacana-cakra*: (說一切有部)如來與弟子惑滅無異.....(正地部)一切佛及一切聲聞同一道同一解脫.....(法護部)佛道異聲聞道異 (T. 2033 [XLIX] 21c4–22b14). The **Samaya-bhedoparacana-cakra* is a well-known doxographical text authored by a Vasumitra, and is preserved in three Chinese translations (i.e., Paramārtha’s *Bu zhiyi lun*, Xuanzang’s *Yibu zongmen lun*, and the anonymous *Shiba bu lun*) and one Tibetan translation (edited by Teramoto & Hiramatsu [1935]).

¹⁵ The most famous case is perhaps the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra* (“Lotus Sūtra”) which regards the “three vehicles” theory as the premise for developing the one-vehicle theory. Moreover, in the Yogācāra literature, it is a popular idea that buddhahood entails something that is unachievable for *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*. For instance, the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* proposes that buddhas harbor a true love, while the other two do not: *sneho na so ’sty arihatām loke pratyekabodhibuddhānām, prāḡ eva tad anyeṣām katham iva*

canonical or post-canonical texts of “Mainstream” schools.¹⁶

That being said, we must find the Mahīśāsakas held a rather striking and peculiar proposition in the opening citation, as they argued for an equal path and destination for buddhas and their disciples. However, this proposition seems not confined to the Mahīśāsakas school. When we further explore, we encounter more cross-sectarian cases in which buddhas and their disciples share an identical goal. For instance, the above viewpoint of the Dharmaguptakas becomes ambiguous when we consider the statement, unique to Xuanzang’s translation of the **Samaya-bhedoparacana-cakra*, that Dharmaguptaka monks believed that the Buddha and his disciples adopt different paths but reach the same destination.¹⁷ In a similar fashion, the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma texts also claim that the achievements of buddhas can be attained by excellent disciples.¹⁸ Furthermore, as my

lokottaro na syāt (Lévi 1907–1911: I. 127, II. 218; Eng. Jamspal et al. 2004: 236; Chinese translation T. 1604 [XXXI] 638a21–25).

¹⁶ For instance, in Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma literature, buddhahood is generally distinguished from other types of attainment, such as those of *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*. This distinction appears in all of the three Chinese translations of the *Apidamo da piposha lun* 阿毘達磨毘婆沙論 (*Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā*); e.g., T. 1545 (XXVII) 735b4–c23 = T. 1546 (XXVIII) 277a1–b20 = T. 1547 (XXVIII) 445b29–446c22.

Moreover, in the prose auto-commentary (*Bhāṣya*) of the first verse of the *Abhidharma-kośa*, Vasubandhu distinguishes the attainment of buddhas from that of *śrāvakas* or *pratyekabuddhas* by emphasizing that while buddhas completely destroy darkness (*sarvatra hatāndhakāra*), *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas* still have undefiled ignorance (*akliṣṭam ajñānam*). Cf. Shastri 1970: 6, Pradhan 1975: 1, Eng. Jha 1983: 3–4, Fr. La Vallée Poussin 1923–1931: I. 2. This paragraph has also been translated into Chinese by Xuanzang (T. 1558 [XXIX] 1a14–19).

¹⁷ *Yibu zonglun lun* 異部宗輪論 (T. 2031 [XLIX] 17a25): “佛與二乘解脫雖一而聖道異.”

¹⁸ Kaginushi 1963: “阿毘達磨の論書によれば、聲聞の理想としての阿羅漢の位は、應供という佛の十號の一つにも相當するように、非常に高い地位にあり、利根の者でさえ三生の修行の後に達せられるものであつて、大覺・獨覺と並べられる場合はほとんど佛に等しく、聲聞の修行道とはいつても阿羅漢はもとより凡夫位としての七賢位さえも非常な努力を要求されているとみられるのである。” (Translation: According to Abhidharma *śāstras*, the stage of *arhat* as the ideal for *śrāvakas* occupies a quite high position, just as it is also suitable to be (called) *Yinggong* [“one deserving offerings,” alias *arhat*], one of the ten epithets of buddhas. Even those with sharp faculties can only attain it after three lives’ practice. It is almost equivalent to the state of a buddha when aligned with great awakened and solitary awakened. With regard to the path of the practice for *śrāvakas*, it is believed that great efforts are always required even to achieve the seven virtuous stages which are the stages for ordinary beings, to say nothing of *arhatship*.

The text on which he bases his argument, the *Apidamo shunzhengli lun* 阿毘達磨順正理論 (**Abhidharma-nyāyānusāra*), states that despite different roots and different paths, buddhas, *pratyekabuddhas*, and best *śrāvakas* all enter the sacred path. T. 1562 (XXIX) 726b9, b26–c6: 大覺、獨覺、到*究竟聲聞、依何通行入聖? 證極果大覺、唯依樂速通行, 謂以第四靜慮為依, 由極利根入正決定, 證得無上正等菩提。於獨覺中麟角喻者, 如大覺說。餘則不定。於到究竟二聲聞中, 舍利子依苦速通行及樂速通行, 入聖證極果。彼依未至入正決定, 依第四定, 得漏盡故。目連唯依苦速通行, 謂依未至入*正決定, 依

discussion will demonstrate, the connotations of the term arhatship in the Pāli tradition include the ultimate attainment of both the Buddha and his disciples.

In this chapter, through an investigation starting from the notion of the “sixth arhat,” I aim to reconstruct an early understanding of the religious attainment of buddhas and their disciples. Buddhahood and arhatship—which are now two distinct rubrics that indicate the respective final attainments of buddhas and their disciples—can not be clearly distinguished in the early history of Buddhism. The ambiguity between buddhas and their disciples in terms of their final goal is probably of great antiquity, with rich theological and historical implications.

However, in saying that the term “*buddha*” and the term “*arhat*” may not have been clearly distinguished in early days, I in no way mean to argue that Śākyamuni was regarded as being equal to his disciples in the earliest stage of Buddhism. We have no basis for any claims about the events of the Buddha’s real life (and, moreover, the historicity of this figure is beyond our ability to verify). On the basis of the Buddhist literature preserved up to now, Śākyamuni is, by all means, the founder of Buddhism and the first teacher, and his 32 *mahāpuruṣa* marks and supernatural birth cause him to overshadow his disciples to a significant degree.

無色定，得漏盡故。As for the great awakened (buddhas), the solitary awakened (*pratyekabuddhas*), and arhats who have reached the assured [attainment] (**ātyantika*), by what means have they entered [the path of] *ārya*? For great awakened who attain the ultimate fruit, they only rely on the blissful rapid attainment (**sukhā pratīpat kṣiprābhijñā*). That is to say, depending on the fourth *dhyāna*, one is fixed in truth (**samyaktva-niyata*; s.v. BHSD) by means of extremely sharp faculties, and attains *anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*. As for a *pratyekabuddha* who practices alone without company, it is the same as the great awakened. The rest is unfixed. Among the two *śrāvakas* who reached *ātyantika*, Śāriputra relied on both the painful rapid attainment and the blissful rapid attainment to enter the *ārya* path and attained the final fruit. What he relied on had not yet reached [the level of] being fixed in truth. By means of the fourth concentration, he exhausted outflows (*āsrava*). Maudgalyāyana only relied on the painful rapid attainment. What he relied had not yet reached [the level of] being fixed in truth. By means of the formless concentration, he exhausted outflows.

**Jiujing* 究竟 in Xuanzang’s terminology is often a translation of *ātyantika*. Cf. T. 1558 (XXIX) 56c15: 獲得畢竟離繫得故 = Abhidh-k-bh. 157. 18–19: *ātyantikavisamyogaprāptilābhāt*.

*正決定 (**samyaktva-niyata*): s.v. BHSD. Xuanzang also translated it as *zhengxingding* 正性定 or *zhengding* 正定 in the *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya* (T. 1558 [XXIX] 56c10–17). Cf. La Vallée Poussin 1923–1931: II. 137–138. The Sanskrit here is *samyaktva-niyata* (Abhidh-k-bh. 157. 19–20).

1.1 The sixth arhat

After the Buddha spoke thus, the five monks were delighted and rejoiced at the Buddha's words. Moreover, when this explanation was propounded, the minds of the group of five monks, without clinging, became released from outflows. At that moment, there were six arhats in the world.¹⁹

This episode pertains to the *Paṭhamabhāṇavāraṃ*, Śākyamuni Buddha's first preaching of the Dharma. As the tradition goes, having been persuaded by the god Brahmā to stay in the world to preach the Dharma, the Buddha chooses five *bhikṣus* (Skt. *pañcavargika*) as his first group of disciples.²⁰ Once the five *bhikṣus* attain arhatship, as the Pāli Vinaya concludes, "there were **six** arhats in the world."

Who, then, was the sixth arhat alongside the five newly awakened *bhikṣus*?

¹⁹ Vin. i. 14: *Idaṃ avoca bhagavā, attamanā pañcavaggiyā bhikkhū bhagavato bhāsitaṃ abhinandanti. imasmiñ ca pana veyyākaraṇasmiñ bhaññamāne pañcavaggiyānaṃ bhikkūnaṃ anupādāya āsavehi cittāṇi vimuccīṃsu. tena kho pana samayena cha loke arahanto honti.* Cf. also Eng. T.W. Rhys-Davids 1881–1885: I. 102; Eng. Horner 1938–1952: I. 21.

²⁰ The five monks who were the recipients of the first preaching of the Buddha are usually listed as Ājñātakaundinya 憍陳如; Aśvajit 額鞞; Vāṣpa 婆頗 (replaced by Daśabala-Kāśyapa 十力迦葉 in Chinese commentaries such as the *Fahua yishu* 法華義疏, T. 1721 [XXXIV] 509c27–28, and the *Da banniepan jing shu* 大般涅槃經疏, T. 1767 [XXXVIII] 134b17–18); Mahānāman 摩男俱利; and Bhadrīka 跋提. See Edgerton, BHSD s.v. *bhadravargiya*. Ohnuma (1998) investigates the literary function of the group of five monks and argues that "this use of the good group of five further highlights the parallel drawn between the bodhisattva's gift of his body and the Buddha's gift of dharma, since the good group of five constitute the quintessential recipients of the Buddha's gift of dharma" (p. 356).



Figure 1. Kurita No. 269. From Gandhāra. Private collection, Europe. The Buddha's first preaching of the Dharma in front of the five monks among other attendants.



Figure 2. Kurita No. 285. From Gandhāra. Tokyo National Museum. The Buddha's first preaching.

If we take the context into account, it becomes abundantly clear that the sixth arhat refers to none other than Śākyamuni Buddha himself.²¹ However, the fact that the five recently converted monks share equal status with the Buddha seems somewhat surprising, as it runs directly counter to the conventional placement of the Buddha and his awakened disciples under two different rubrics—namely, “buddhas” and “arhats.”

Nevertheless, the “sixth arhat” is not a Theravaṃsa creation.²² When we consult the *Paṭhamabhāṇavāraṃ* section of the Vinayas of other sectarian affiliations, we notice that the Buddha is mentioned as the sixth arhat in a remarkably consistent way over broad expanses of space and time: in the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya,²³ the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya,²⁴ the

²¹ The episode of the six arhats is also noted in the Pāli Vinaya commentary *Samantapāsādikā*: *Tena kho pana samayena cha loke arahanto hontī ti pañcamiyā pakkhassa lokasmiṃ cha manussā arahanto hontīti attho* (Sp. v. 965). The commentary only explains five new arhats and regards it as a precondition that Śākyamuni Buddha was the first arhat.

²² The misunderstanding and misapplication of so-called Theravāda Buddhism in conceptual and historical contexts have already been systematically elucidated by the papers collected in the book *How Theravāda is Theravāda?* (Skilling et al. eds. 2012). In the following discussion, I consistently use “Theravaṃsa” to refer to what we used to confidently call “Theravāda Buddhism,” the Buddhist traditions that were first established on present-day Sri Lanka and then expanded into the pan-Southeast Asian area.

²³ Cf. the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya 彌沙塞部和醯五分律 T. 1421 (XXII) 105a24–25: 說是法時，五比丘一切漏盡，得阿羅漢道。爾時，世間有六阿羅漢。After (the Buddha) preached the Dharma, the five *bhikṣus* exhausted all outflows and attained the path of the arhat. At that time, there were six arhats in the world.

²⁴ The Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, however, finds it necessary to explain who the six are and adds one more sentence: 四分律 T. 1428 (XXII) 789b1–4: 爾時，世尊說此法時，五比丘一切有漏心解脫，得無礙解脫智生。爾時，此世間有六羅漢。五弟子、如來*至真等正覺為六。(At that moment, when the Buddha preached the Dharma, the five *bhikṣus* became liberated from all contaminated mind and attained the cognition of liberation, which is free from hindrance. At that time, there were six arhats in the world, namely, the five disciples and the Tathāgata, Arhat, Samyakṣambuddha as the sixth.)

**zhizhen* 至真 (“ultimately true”): According to Nattier (2003: 214), it is a translation of *arhat* mainly utilized by Zhi Qian. According to her explanation, *zhizhen* derives from the expression *zhenren* 真人, a typically Daoist term that was borrowed by early Chinese Buddhist translators.

The *Fo benxing ji jing* 佛本行集經 (“*Sūtra of the Collected Past Actions of the Buddha*”), commonly believed to be affiliated with the same school, also claims that “at that time, there were six arhats in the world. One refers to the Blessed One, and the other five were the five *bhikṣus*. (T. 190 [III] 813c3–4: 當於是時，此世間有六阿羅漢，一是世尊，五是比丘。)” However, how to properly understand the nature of this text is still a controversial topic. The famous concluding lines of the *Fo benxing ji jing* lead most scholars to the conclusion that this text is a collection of the Buddha’s biographical stories in the Dharmaguptaka school, sharing the same textual nature with the *Mahāvastu* in the Mahāsāṅghika school and the *Lalitavistara* in the Sarvāstivāda school (T. 190 [III] 932 a16–21: 當何名此經？答曰：摩訶僧祇師名為大事，薩婆多師名此經為大莊嚴，迦葉維師名為佛生因緣，曇無德師名為釋迦牟尼佛本行，尼沙塞師名為毘尼藏根本). However, as Dr. Tournier pointed out to me in a personal conversation, Durt (2004: 63) challenges the validity of sectarian affiliation in the case of the *Fo benxing ji jing* as this text widely cites other biographies of the Buddha and therefore seems to be synoptic in nature (cf. also Durt 2006: 63n.30; Tournier 2017: 7. Yuyama 2000:539 also points out some

Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya(s),²⁵ and in texts belonging to the Sarvāstivāda tradition.²⁶

This is only the beginning of this phenomenon—the list of an equalized address between Śākyamuni and his disciples in the Vinaya is continued. Not only is the Buddha counted as one of the “six arhats,” but he is also included among the “two arhats,”²⁷ the “seven arhats,”²⁸ the “11 arhats,”²⁹ and the “61 arhats”³⁰ in the above Vinayas. In spite of the

connections between this text and the *Mahāvastu*). The nature of this text is plausibly much more complicated than we originally assume and definitely awaits new research. However, since several stories of this text in my study indeed reveal a clear Dharmaguptaka feature (e.g. the story in T.190 [3] 861b12-c2 expresses a typical Dharmaguptaka proposition which can be found in T. 1428 [22] 798b10-28), I temporarily place it into the corpus of Dharmaguptaka texts in this dissertation.

²⁵ The Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese versions of the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya all feature similar comments. In this text, Kauṇḍinya was the first of the five to attain arhatship. Afterwards, the Buddha preached the Dharma to the other four. “Having heard the Dharma, the other four people liberated their minds and attained the fruit of arhatship. Then there were six arhats in the world, and the Buddha was the first [among the six].” 根本說一切有部毘奈耶破僧事 T. 1450 (XXIV) 128c10–12: 爾時，世尊說此法。時彼四人等聞此法已，心得解脫，證阿羅漢果。是時，世間有六阿羅漢。佛為第一。The Sanskrit version is also preserved: *asmin khalu dharmaparyāye bhāṣyaṇāṇe avaśiṣṭanāṃ pañcakānāṃ bhikṣūṇāṃ anupādāyāśravebhyāś cittāni vimuktāni; tena khalu samayena pañca loke 'rhanto, bhagavāṃś ca śaṣṭha iti* (MSV, *Saṅghabhedavastu*, Gnoli 1977–1978: I. 139) The Tibetan version reads: *de'i tshe dgra bcom pa lnga dang drug pa ni bcom ldan 'das so* (D. 1, 'dul ba, nga, 45b5).

²⁶ It should be noted that the *Shisong lü*, a Sarvāstivāda Vinaya preserved in Chinese, omits the “six arhats” story. However, this Vinaya skips the whole biography of the Buddha—the part usually found as the opening chapter in the other Vinayas—in which the story of first five disciples’ conversion is related. It is possible that the idea of “the six arhats” was omitted for this reason.

A hagiography of the Buddha called *Guoqu xianzai yinguo jing* 過去現在因果經 (*Sūtra on the Past and Present Causes and Effects*), possibly from the Sarvāstivāda school (Okumura 2013), does contain a reference to this story, but the compilers immediately clarify the distinction between the Buddha and the five monks, possibly in order to make it more palatable to their contemporary readers: T. 189 (III) 645a11: 於是世間，始有六阿羅漢。佛阿羅漢，是為佛寶；四諦法輪，是為法寶；五阿羅漢，是為僧寶 (Therefore, six arhats appeared in the world. Buddha the Arhat is the jewel of the Buddha. The Dharma-Wheel of the Four Noble Truths is the jewel of the Dharma. The five arhats belong to the jewel of the *saṅgha*.”).

²⁷ T. 1450 (XXIV) 128b14–15: 爾時，世間中有二應供，一是世尊，二是憍陳如。The Tibetan parallel reads: *de'i tshe 'jig rten na dgra bcom pa gcig dang/ gnyis pa ni bcom ldan 'das so* (D. 1 'dul ba, nga, 44b6); the Sanskrit: *tena khalu samayena eko <loke> arhan bhagavāṃś ca dvitīyaḥ* (MSV, *Saṅghabhedavastu*, Gnoli 1977–1978: I. 138).

²⁸ Vin. i. 18: *tena kho pana samayena satta loke arahanto honti*; Mahīśāsaka Vinaya: “爾時，世間有七阿羅漢” (T. 1421 [XXII] 105c7–8); Dharmaguptaka Vinaya: “爾時，世間有七羅漢，弟子有六，佛為七” (T. 1428 [XXII] 790a2–3); MSV: 於是時中，世間有七阿羅漢，佛為第一 (T. 1450 [XXIV] 129b13); *de'i tshe 'jig rten na dgra bcom pa drug dang bdun pa ni bcom ldan 'das so* (D.1, 'dul ba, nga, 48a5); *tena khalu samayena ṣaṭ loke arhantaḥ, bhagavāṃś ca saptamaḥ* (Gnoli 1977–1978: I. 143).

²⁹ Vin. i. 19. For the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya, see T. 1421 (XXII) 106a1–2. For the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, see T. 1428 (XXII) 790b28–29. For the MSV, see T. 1450 (XXIV) 130a3–4; Derge Kanjur, 'dul ba, vol. nga, 51a4; Gnoli 1977–1978: I. 147.

significant stylistic and doctrinal differences among those Vinayas stemming from the ancient Sthaviras,³¹ they each bear witness to the inclusion of the Buddha as an arhat, together with his disciples. The high degree of conformity seems to suggest that the ambiguity between buddhahood and arhatship was of great antiquity,³² perhaps even predating the schism within the Sthaviras, because it seems implausible that those Sthavira offshoots with divergent understandings of the significance of buddhas would have borrowed a notion that conflicted with their own tenets.

The list does not simply end there. There are also cases in which Śākyamuni Buddha was regarded as the “only arhat.” The *Fo benxing ji jing* 佛本行集經 includes two stories with the same motif of seeking a real arhat in the world. In chapter 42 (娑毘耶出家品, “The Renunciation of Suopiye”), a young boy named Suopiye 娑毘耶 embarks on his journey to seek real arhats. In this journey, he encounters Pūraṇa Kāśyapa 富蘭那迦葉 and Nirgrantha-jñātiputra 尼乾子, but he soon realizes their incompetence, although these two masters both claim themselves to be real arhats. The real arhat is, of course, Śākyamuni Buddha, whose teaching is the real teaching of the arhat (羅漢法), and whose path is the authentic path of

³⁰ Vin. i. 20. For the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya, see T. 1421 (XXII) 106a4–5; For the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, see T. 1428 (XXII) 790c21–22. For the MSV, see T. 1450 (XXIV) 130a316–17; Gnoli 1977–1978: I. 148. Uniquely from the other Vinayas, the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya continues to count the Buddha among the 111 Arhats: 時，世間有百一十阿羅漢弟子，佛為百一十一 (T. 1428 [XXII] 791a5–6). The Dharmaguptaka hagiography *Fo benxing ji jing* lists up to 93 arhats: 是時，世間凡成九十三阿羅漢 (T. 190 [III] 835a10–b22). Cf. also the Pāli commentary *Dhammapada-atthakathā* (Dhp-A. i. 87).

³¹ The Mahāsāṅghika side is discussed separately in the third section of this chapter. In brief, the Mahāsāṅghika texts do not mention “the six arhats.” Nevertheless, the silence does not necessarily undermine the antiquity of the ambiguity between buddhahood and arhatship. As my survey shows below, the ambiguity between the achievements of buddhas and those of the disciples also crops up in the *Mahāvastu*, and is therefore not purely a Sthavira issue.

³² This methodology is coined “higher criticism” and criticized by Schopen (1997: 23–55) in the case of the accounts of Kāśyapa Buddha’s remaining physical body after his *parinirvāṇa*. There, Schopen argues that the agreement among the majority of the Vinaya texts (viz. the Mahāsāṅghika, the Mahīśāsaka, the Dharmaguptaka, and the Theravāṃsa Vinayas) reflects not an old pre-sectarian version, but a “later, revised and conflated versions of an earlier tradition (p. 29).” The single variant account in the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya must have been older.

However, in the case of my discussion, it is hard to imagine that, if it is a “conflated” tradition, the notion of the Buddha as the sixth arhat would have been unanimously adopted by all the offshoots of the Sthaviras, since these schools, located in different regions, do not hold identical viewpoints concerning the nature of the Buddha. It is unlikely that these schools would have borrowed a story that contradicted their own ideologies.

the arhat (羅漢道).³³ The term *arhat* in this context means a man of perfect spiritual awakening and supreme intellectual capability, and Śākyamuni Buddha was regarded as the first to achieve such a state. In the same fashion, chapter 47, on the ordination of Mahākāśyapa (大迦葉因緣品), confirms again that Śākyamuni is the only arhat in the world.³⁴

So far, in the cases I have listed above, the term *arhat* is not limited to its most common referent, that is, the awakened disciples of Śākyamuni Buddha, but applies equally to Śākyamuni Buddha and his disciples.³⁵ There naturally looms a question: what does the

³³ T. 190 (III) 832c11–833a15: (天)告娑毘耶言：“汝娑毘耶，非是羅漢，亦復未入阿羅漢道及羅漢法。汝於羅漢求道之法，未有次第。”而娑毘耶問彼天言：“天是阿誰？天今復是羅漢以不？有入羅漢道法以不？頗復有知羅漢法教，能令學習得羅漢不？”爾時，彼天即便報於娑毘耶言：“汝娑毘耶！今有世尊、多陀阿伽度、阿羅呵、三藐三佛陀，現在於彼波羅捺國鹿野苑中仙人處，而彼世尊，自是羅漢，入羅漢道，自解知己，復能教他得羅漢法。” (The goddess) spoke to Suopiye: "Suopiye, you are not an arhat. You are not yet initiated into the path to arhatship and the teaching to arhatship. You don't have a correct order to pursue the teaching of the arhat." Then, Suopiye asked the goddess: "Who is this goddess? Goddess, you are the present arhat, aren't you? You have obtained the teaching to enter the path to arhatship, haven't you? Furthermore, you know the teaching of the arhat and can teach me (so that I can) achieve arhatship, cannot you?" At that moment, the goddess answered Suopiye: "Suopiye! At the present time, the Buddha, Tathāgata, Arhat, Samyaksambuddha is now abiding at Vārāṇasī, in the Mrgadāva Grove, the Abode of sages. That Blessed One himself is an arhat, one who has entered on the arhat path. Having understood liberation by himself, he can then instruct others in the way to attain arhatship."

³⁴ T. 190 (III) 866a16–25: 爾時，畢鉢羅耶取已白氎無價之衣，即時用作彼僧伽梨，即請一人，剃其鬚髮，而作是言：“世間可有大阿羅漢而出家者？我今隨其出家修道。”當於彼時，世間未有一阿羅漢，唯除如來、多陀阿伽度、阿羅呵、三藐三佛陀。爾時，世尊於晨朝時明相現已，證阿耨多羅三藐三菩提。爾時，畢鉢羅耶迦葉，當於是日，夜分已過，日始初出，尋亦出家。是畢鉢羅耶迦葉，生於大迦葉種姓之內故，於世間得迦葉名。At that time, Pippalāyāna took his priceless white woolen clothing and used it as his *samghāti* ("patchwork robe"). He asked a person to shave his hair and beard, and spoke thus: "Is there any great arhat in this world who has renounced secular life? I wish to follow him to renounce my secular life and cultivate the path." On that occasion, there was not yet any arhat except the Thus-Come-One-Tathāgata, Arhat, Samyaksambuddha. The Blessed One, at early dawn of that morning, had attained *anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*. Thereupon, on that very day, Pippalāyāna Kāśyapa also immediately renounced secular life at the first flush of dawn, after the night had passed. Because Pippalāyāna Kāśyapa was born into the great Kāśyapa family, he was known by the name Kāśyapa in the world.

³⁵ Similar cases can be widely found in the Pāli texts, but it is neither possible nor necessary to give an exhaustive list here. For instance, in the *Akkosutta* of the *Samyuttanikāya*, the Buddha is addressed as an arhat by Bhāradvāja the Reviler (Pāli, Akkosaka Bhāradvāja) when the latter verbally abuses the Buddha: "The surrounding people, including the king, believe that Gautama the recluse is an arhat. But still, the venerable Gautama became angry!" (SN. i. 162: *Bhavantaṃ kho Gotamaṃ sarājjikā parisā evaṃ jānāti, Arahantaṃ samaṇo Gotamo ti. Atha ca pana bhavaṃ Gotamo kujjhatī ti.*)

Further instances are found in DN. ii. 83, 255; MN. i. 339; SN. i. 139, v. 159, 163; AN. ii. 21, etc.

significance of *arhat*, a term referring even to the Buddha Śākyamuni, reflect?³⁶

This question has already been answered from various perspectives by different scholars. In her study, which includes virtually every occurrence of the term *arhat* in early non-Buddhist literature and the Pāli Canon, Horner proposes several levels of meaning for this term. In some early non-Buddhist texts, an arhat was believed to be associated with mystic powers (*rddhi*) or austerities;³⁷ in Jainism, arhats were understood to be *tīrthankaras*, namely, the great Jain revealers. In the Buddhist context, as I. B. Horner summarizes, arhatship, as reflected in the Pāli texts, is equal to the state of *nirvāṇa*, both of which terms essentially indicate “the finality or accomplishment of perfection.”³⁸ As she further explains, the term *arhat* can be equally applied to both Śākyamuni Buddha and his awakened disciples in Pāli texts.³⁹ In this sense, the Theravaṃsa tradition seems to lack a sharp dichotomy between buddhahood and arhatship.

Horner’s observations concurs with the conclusions of Kōtatsu Fujita (1975), who reexamines the dichotomy between the path of buddhas and that of their disciples in canonical texts outside of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Fujita argues that in the earliest layer of the extant Pāli texts, liberation was one and the same for both buddhas and disciples. The distinction of the “three vehicles” (viz. *buddhayāna/bodhisattvayāna*, *pratyekabuddhayāna*, and

³⁶ My aim is not to investigate the meaning of *arhat* in all its occurrences in early Buddhism—as has already been done by Horner (1936) and Bond (1984; 1988)—but to determine the meaning of *arhat* in relation to the term *buddha*.

³⁷ Horner 1936: 75ff. In actuality, this understanding is also reflected in the aforementioned Suopiye Story, in which the Buddhist understanding of *arhat* is contrasted with the non-Buddhist understanding. However, in the Buddhist context, the quality that makes Śākyamuni the only arhat is his intellectual capability to answer the questions asked by Suopiye, rather than any form of mystic powers.

³⁸ Horner 1936: 104–105. The equation of arhatship with *nirvāṇa* finds solid canonical support. For instance, in the *Nibbānasutta* and the *Arahattasutta* of the *Samyuttanikāya*, the meaning of *nibbānam* is explained in exactly the same way as *arhattam*. See SN. iv. 251–2 = Eng. C.A.F. Rhys-Davids & Woodward 1917–1930: IV. 170–171. Another example is noted by Katz (1982: 2): the conventional formula used to describe an arhat, namely, *Khīṇā jātī, vusitaṃ brahmacariyaṃ, kataṃ karaṇīyaṃ, nāparaṃ uthattāyā* (“Birth is destroyed; the sacred life has been fulfilled; what has to be done has been finished; [there is] nothing beyond after the present life”) is originally used to describe the state of *nirvāṇa*.

³⁹ Horner 1936: 73. There are several different definitions of *arhat* in the Pāli canonical texts that can be applied to both buddhas and their disciples. Another instance is found in the *Mahāssapurasutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya*, in which the term *arhat* is described as follows: “Evil, unwholesome qualities, those connected with defilements, leading to further births, giving pain, having pain as its fruits, leading to birth, aging and dying in the future, are far from him. It is thus that a monk is a perfected one” (MN. i. 280: *āraṇṇa honti pāpakā akusalaṃ dhammā, saṅkilesikā, ponobbhavikā, sadarā, dukkhavipākā, āyatim jātijarāmarañiyā. Evaṃ kho, bhikkhave, bhikkhu araham hofi*).

śrāvakayāna) barely existed in the Theravaṃsa school, but perhaps only took shape in schools that were active in the North of India. This argument seems to be supported by the discovery of the first/second century CE Gāndhārī *Bajaur Vaipulya Sūtra*, in which the three vehicles were explicitly proposed.⁴⁰

In his translation of the *Dīghanikāya* (1899: 190-192), T.W. Rhys-Davids has already observed that in this text, two concepts, namely *buddha* and *arhat*, were in a state of fusion. Moreover, he even proposes to understand *sambodhi* as “attainment of arhatship” rather than “attainment of buddhahood.” Śākyamuni, as Rhys-Davids asserts, was an arhat, and had all the graces an arhat should have”.⁴¹

So the phrases used to describe the mental crises in Gautama’s career are invariably precisely the same as those used under similar circumstances of his disciples; and this holds good both of his going forth, and of his victory and attainment of *nirvāṇa* under the Tree of Wisdom. Further than that, in long descriptions of Gautama—such for instance as that in the *Suttanipāta*, verses 153 to 167— all the epithets used are found elsewhere applied to one or other of his disciples. The teacher never called himself as Buddha as distinct from an [arhat]. When addressed as a Buddha, or spoken of a such, by his followers, it is always doubtful whether anything more is meant than an awakened *Arahant*.

The above view, widely shared by scholars, is clearly supported by the Pāli texts. First of all, we find common connotations among the terms *tathāgata*, *samyaksambuddha*, and *arhat*.⁴² For instance, in the *Kaṅkheyyamsutta* of the *Samyuttanikāya*, when asked by Mahānāma the Śākya about the life of *tathāgatas* (Pāli *tathāgatavihāro*), the Venerable Lomasavangīsa explained as follows:⁴³

⁴⁰ Skilling 2012: 82 and 132n.65; Crujsen 2014: 39; Schlosser & Strauch 2016: 98.

⁴¹ T.W. & C.A.F. Rhys-Davids 1899–1921: II. 2.

⁴² This assertion is strengthened by the observation that in the Āgama/Nikāya texts, “*buddha*” as an appellation for Śākyamuni mainly occurs in the vocative stock phrase “*Bhagavā arahaṃ sammā-sambuddho vijjā-caraṇa-saṃpanno sugato loka-vidū anuttaro purisa-damma-sārathi satthā deva-amnussānaṃ Buddho bhāgavā*,” usually together with the appellation *arhat*.

⁴³ SN. v. 327: *Bhikkhū arahanto khīṇāsavaṃ vusitavanto katakaraṇīyā ohitabhārā anuppattasadatthā parikkhīṇabhavasamyojanā sammadaññā vimuttā, tesam ime pañcanivaraṇā pahīnā ucchinnamūlā tālavatthukatā anabhāvakatā āyatim anuppādadhammā*.

Monks! Arhats are those who have exhausted *āśravas* (“outflows”), have achieved perfection, have finished what ought to be done, have laid down the burden, have reached the highest ideal, have destroyed the fetters of rebirth, and have been liberated by means of perfect knowledge; for them, the five obstacles have been abandoned, the root has been cut off, like a Tāla tree without earth, and not liable to come into existence in the future.

As we can discern from this dialogue, the two terms, *tathāgata* and *arhat*, form a pair of synonyms and are used interchangeably. In fact, the above passage is a formula that spreads widely throughout the Pāli Nikāyas,⁴⁴ which no doubt reflects a common understanding of being an arhat in the canonical Pāli texts.

In addition, one Pāli text provides us with a more straightforward case in which *arhats* are called *buddhas*. In the Pāli *Samyuttanikāya*, under the *Arahantasutta* section, it is stated that they (viz. arhats) are *buddhas* (“the awakened”) in the world (*Buddhā loke anuttarāti*).⁴⁵ However, we should be aware that the definition of *arhats* given in its Chinese parallel is not entirely in agreement with the Pāli version. The Chinese parallel in the *Madhyamāgama*, a Sarvāstivāda text perhaps translated from Gāndhārī,⁴⁶ differentiates arhatship from buddhahood by distinguishing *laukika* (“worldly”) attainment from *lokottara* (“supramundane”) attainment. Arhatship, according to this Sarvāstivāda text, is a supremely high, albeit worldly, existence.⁴⁷ This information is noteworthy since it reflects how the

However, the Chinese parallel does not use the term *arhat*, but replaces it with the term *tathāgata* here. It is unclear whether the discrepancy is due to the different transmitted versions or occurred during the Chinese translation, but we often observe that the Chinese texts are rigorous in maintaining a clear division between *arhat* and *buddha/tathāgata*. Cf. *Za ahan jing* 雜阿含經 T. 99 (II) 207b12–14: “如來住者，於五蓋已斷已知，斷其根本，如截多羅樹頭，更不生長，於未來世成不生法。”

⁴⁴ DN. iii. 133; MN. i. 4, 141, 235, 339, 477, 490, 522, 523; ii. 43; iii. 4, 80; SN. i. 71; iii. 161, 193; iv. 124; v. 144, 194, 205, 208, 302, 327, 328; AN. i. 144; iii. 358; iv. 361, 369, 371, etc. This list is by no means exhaustive. Cf. also Katz 1982: 3.

⁴⁵ SN. iii. 84.

⁴⁶ Karashima 2017; von Hinüber 1982; Enomoto 1986: 20.

⁴⁷ T. 26 (I) 609c10–17: 多聞聖弟子作如是觀，修習七道品，無礙正思正念。彼如是知、如是見，欲漏心解脫，有漏、無明漏心解脫。解脫已，便知解脫。“我生已盡，梵行已立，所作已辦，不更受有。”知如真。若有眾生，*及九眾生居，乃至有想無想處行餘第一有，於其中間，是第一、是大、是勝、是最、是尊、是妙，謂世中阿羅訶。(**ji* 及 *naizhi* 乃至 correspond to the Pāli word *yāvata* which appears twice in the SN. parallel.)

Translation: Fully learned noble disciples (**āryabahuśruta*) reflect in such way, practice seven categories of the Path, and establish right consideration and mindfulness (**samprajāna-smṛti*) in an unobstructed way.

understanding of arhatship varies among different schools. The Chinese *Madhyamāgama* expression possibly demonstrates a tendency to depreciate arhatship in the Sarvāstivāda tradition.

Besides being undistinguished from the terms *tathāgata* and *buddhas*, the term *arhat* is also seen to be indistinct from the term *samyaksambuddha* in the Pāli tradition. The *Arahamsutta* of the *Samyuttanikāya* contains a section that describes *arhats*:⁴⁸

Arhats, samyak-sambuddhas, in the past, had a full understanding of things as things really are; all of them had a complete understanding of the Four Noble Truths as they really are.

Here, the term *samyak-sambuddha* (the fully awakened) functions syntactically and semantically in apposition to the term *arhat*, and both refer to people who attain the highest state of spiritual achievement.

Another case of ambiguity between *arhat* and *samyak-sambuddha* occurs in the context

Knowing and perceiving things as real (**yathābhūta-jñānadarśana*), their mind is liberated from the outflow of sensuality (**kāmasrava*), from the outflow of existence (**bhavāsrava*) and from the outflow of ignorance (**avidyāsrava*). After liberation, they know they have been liberated: “My existence has been exhausted. My pure practice has already been established. All my duties have been accomplished. I will undergo no rebirth (Pāli *khīṇa jāti, vusitaṃ brahmacariyaṃ, kataṃ karaṇīyaṃ, nāparaṃ itthattāyā*).” They know this is real. If there are sentient beings, as far as the nine abodes of beings (**nava-sattvāvāsāḥ*) up to the sphere of neither ideation nor non-ideation, whose residual *saṃskāras* are the supreme of existence (Pāli *bhavaggaṃ*), among these beings, even the best, greatest, supreme, utmost, most venerable, most marvelous are [still] arhats in the physical world. Why? Because arhats in the world can gain tranquility and bliss.

As can be read between lines, arhats are still beings belonging to the nine abodes that constitute the three realms of existence (i.e. *kāma-dhātu, rūpa-dhātu, arūpadhātu*). The text underscores this point later by calling them “arhats abiding in the physical world” (“世中阿羅訶”), which implies that they are not abiding in the supernatural realm.

Concerning the attainment of “neither ideation nor non-ideation” (Chin. 有想無想處, Pāli *nevasaññānāsaññāyatana*), the *Vimuttimagga* explains that it is the highest realm that can be reached by worldly beings (cf. Vm. 698–702 = Eng. Nāṇamoli 1979: 730–734 for differences between the attainments of worldly beings [*puthujjana*] and noble beings [*ariya-puggala*]). This attainment, although supreme (cf. **Vimuttimagga* T. 1648 [XXXII] 418a8–422a28 = Eng. Ehara et al. 1961: 99–120; Vibh. 263–269 = Eng. Thittila 1969: 344–351), will not lead people to complete deliverance because they cannot remove the root of suffering (Gunaratana 1980: 262), and beings of this level are still subject to residual activities (*xingyu* 行餘, Pāli *saṃkhārāvasesa*; cf. Vibh. 263: *nevasaññānāsaññī ti: taṃ yeva ākiñcaññā-yatanam santato manasikaroti saṃkhārāvasesasamāpattiṃ bhāveti, tena vuccati neva-saññī-nāsaññī ti* = Eng. Thittila 1969: 343).

⁴⁸ SN. v. 433–434: *aññam addhānam arahanto sammāsambuddhā yathābhūtam abhisambujjhimsu, sabbe te cattāri ariyasaccāni yathābhūtam abhisambujjhimsu*. Eng. C.A.F. Rhys-Davids & Woodward 1917–1930: V. 367 with my revision.

of the first turning of the Dharma wheel. The Pāli *Ariyapariyesanāsutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya* relates an encounter between an Ājīvaka ascetic and Śākyamuni Buddha on the latter's way to seek his first group of disciples. When the Ājīvaka asks the Buddha who his teacher is, Śākyamuni responds that he is “the arhat in the world,” “the master unsurpassed,” and “the *samyak-sambuddha*, pacified with the *nibbāna*,” implying that he does not have a teacher.⁴⁹

In addition, the equation of the term *arhat* with the supreme ideal persists into the commentary tradition. In the eighth chapter of the *Kassapasīhanādasutta* of the *Dīghanikāya*, one sentence states:⁵⁰

There is no other state of blissful attainment in conduct and heart and mind that is,
Kassapa, higher and sweeter than **this**.

In the commentary, Buddhaghosa explains that “*imāya* (this [attainment])” here means “arhatship”:⁵¹

By ‘this,’ he [the Buddha] means arhatship. For the doctrine of the Exalted One has arhatship as its end.

If the states of being an arhat and being a buddha are not radically distinguished in these texts, how should we then approach the difference between the Buddha and his enlightened disciples in the Theravaṃsa tradition?⁵² One Pāli text also directly addresses this issue. The

⁴⁹ MN. i. 172: *na me ācariyo atthi, sadiso me na vijjati; sadevakasmiṃ lokasmiṃ, natthi me paṭipuggalo. Ahaṃ hi arahā loka, ahaṃ satthā anuttaro; eko 'mhi sammāsambuddho, sītibhūto 'smi nibbuto.*

Translation: “For me, there is no teacher. No one is equal to me. In the world together with its gods, nobody equals me. I am the arhat in the world, and I am the master unsurpassed. Alone, I am perfectly awakened, pacified with *nibbāna* I have attained.”

⁵⁰ DN. i. 74: *Imāya ca, kassapa, sīlasampadāya cittasampadāya paññāsampadāya aññā sīlasampadā cittasampadā paññāsampadā uttaritarā vā pañītatarā vā natthi.* See also T.W. & C.A.F. Rhys-Davids 1899–1921: I. 236–7.

⁵¹ Sv. ii. 358: *Idaṃ arahattam eva sandhāya vuttaṃ; arahatta-pariyosānaṃ hi bhagavato sāsana.* See also T.W. & C.A.F. Rhys-Davids 1899–1921: I. 237.

⁵² Another way to approach this issue is the 18 *āveṇikas* (s.v. BHSD).

Sammāsambuddhasutta of the *Samyuttanikāya* explains the very difference between the Buddha's awakening and that of his disciples as follows:⁵³

Now, monks! What is the difference, the distinction differentiating a tathāgata, arhat, perfect buddha, from a monk who is liberated by wisdom? [...]

Monks, a tathāgata, arhat, perfect buddha is the one who has brought about the way of arising that had not arisen before; the one who has created the way not created before; the one who has proclaimed the way not proclaimed before; the knower of the way, the one acquainted with the way, the one skilled in the way. Now, monks, *śrāvakas* are living as the followers of the way, going after him. This, monks, is the difference, the distinction distinguishing a tathāgata, arhat, perfect buddha, from a monk who is liberated by wisdom.

As indicated by the citation, the difference between the Buddha and *śrāvakas* lies not in their destination, but their course. The Buddha initially created and inaugurated the “way,” and all the *śrāvakas* followed his way to awakening. Śākyamuni, the founder of Buddhism, was the teacher and guide of his disciples and of course occupied a unique and irreplaceable position.

From another perspective, we can perceive the ambiguity between the state of being a buddha and that of being an arhat from the stock epithets (viz., *tathāgata*, *arhat*, *sammābuddha*, and so forth) that belong to buddhas.⁵⁴ The fact that *arhat* is frequently a part of a buddha's epithet⁵⁵ is used by Ruegg to question the antithesis between arhatship and

⁵³ SN. iii. 65, 5–6; 66, 10–11: *Tatra kho, bhikkhave, ko viseso ko adhippayāso, kiṃ nānākaraṇaṃ, tathāgatassa arahato sammāsambuddhassa paññāvimuttena bhikkhunā ti? ...*

Tathāgato bhikkhave arahāṃ sammāsambuddho anuppannassa maggassa uppādetā, asaṅgātassa maggassa saṅjanetā, anakkhātassa maggassa akkhātā, maggaññū, maggavidū, maggakovido. Maggānugā, ca bhikkhave, etarahi sāvakā viharanti pacchā samannāgatā. Ayaṃ kho, bhikkhave, viseso, ayaṃ adhippayāso, idaṃ nānākaraṇaṃ tathāgatassa arahato sammāsambuddhassa paññāvimuttena bhikkhunā ti.

T. 99 (II) 19c3–c10: 比丘！如來、應、等正覺，阿羅漢慧解脫，有何差別？如來、應、等正覺，未曾聞法，能自覺法，通達無上菩提，於未來世開覺聲聞，而為說法，謂四念處、四正勤、四如意足、五根、五力、七覺、八道。比丘！是名如來、應、等正覺，未得而得，未利而利，知道、分別道、說道、通道，復能成就諸聲聞教授教誡。如是說正順、欣樂善法，是名如來、羅漢差別。

⁵⁴ For a study of the metrical formulas of a buddha's stock epithets, see Bechert 1988.

⁵⁵ Moreover, Buddhist texts also contain a self-conflicting tradition concerning how to properly address the Buddha, which hints that the status of the Buddha must have gone through a rising in historical development. To be specific, in Pāli Nikāyas, Śākyamuni's interlocutors used to address him “*samaṇo Gotamo*” more frequently than as “Buddha.” This observation, however, contradicts a statement found in the *Majjhimanikāya* that, after awakening, Śākyamuni instructs his first five disciples that a buddha should not be addressed by his

bodhisattvahood/buddhahood.⁵⁶

In sum, the common notion of “six arhats” as found in the Sthavira offshoot traditions—namely, Theravāṃsa in particular and sporadically in Dharmaguptaka, Mahīśāsaka, Sarvāstivāda and Mūlasarvāstivāda schools—suggests an ancient tradition in which Śākyamuni and his disciples were believed to have attained the same ultimate goal. Although not all Sthavira offshoots preserved and accepted this kind of ambiguity in their later development, the Pāli traditions nevertheless inherit it, approaching Śākyamuni’s distinction primarily by means of his position as the founder and the first teacher of Buddhism, rather than through the attainment of a higher liberation.

If Śākyamuni can be called an arhat and attain the same level of awakening as his disciples, can his enlightened disciples likewise be called buddhas in the early Buddhist texts?

1.2 Plural “buddhas”

The preceding section mainly discusses the historical ambiguity between the concepts of *buddha* and *arhat* based on the consideration of whether Śākyamuni can be considered as an arhat. The following section addresses the matter from the opposite angle: whether arhats—awakened disciples—can be regarded as buddhas. As my evidence demonstrates, the ambiguous usage also applies in this direction.

Although the Buddha’s disciples, even those as eminent as Śāriputra, are only acknowledged to be arhats,⁵⁷ there indeed exist some cases in which the term *buddha* has a

personal name, nor by the term *āvuso*, but rather by the terms “arhat,” “tathāgata” or “perfect buddha.” (MN. i. 172 = Eng. Horner 1954–1959: I. 215: *mā bhikkhave tathāgataṃ nāmena ca āvusovādena ca samudācarittha. Araham bhikkhave Tathāgato sammābuddho.*) Another common term to address the Buddha, *bhante* (e.g., DN. ii. 97, 98; MN. iii. 253), is also frequently applied to the Buddha’s disciples in Pāli and BHS texts.

⁵⁶ Ruegg 2004: 8: “Secondly, even if ‘Arhat’ and ‘Bodhisattva’ appear as contrastive, antithetical, terms and if the types of persons referred to by these two expressions are not only distinct but opposable, it has nevertheless to be recalled that *arhant*—alongside *bhagavant* and *samyaksambuddha*—is a regular and altogether standard epithet of a buddha. In other words, it cannot correctly be held that, in all circumstances, the ideal of arhatship is antithetically opposed to (and even contradictory with) that of bodhisattvahood or buddhahood. This well-established and essential fact is sometimes lost sight of in discussions of the denotation and connotations of the terms Bodhisattvayana and Mahayana.”

Ruegg (ibid., 8n.9) further points out a word such as **arhad-yāna* has never been attested.

⁵⁷ As Fujita (1958: 378) notes, “佛陀とか如來とかいふ語の複數形はニカーヤではしばしば現れ、それらも又覺者一般・理想の人格者一般をあらはすものではあるけれども、特にそこに三世諸佛以外の特定人を意味せしめるやうな形で用ひられてゐる例は極めて稀なのである (Terms such as *buddhas*

broader range of referents. Nakamura (1968; 1996: 18–19) argues on more than one occasion that the use of the title *buddha* was not restricted to Śākyamuni in the early history of Buddhist, but applied to any person who attained spiritual and religious achievement. Namikawa (2005: 24–36) provides more convincing research with concrete evidence in support of such a broad range of referents in Pāli texts—not only referring to Śākyamuni or other buddhas of the three times but also the chief disciples of buddhas. As Namikawa’s work is published in Japanese, it is worthwhile to introduce his discoveries in the process of building my own thesis.

In this research, Namikawa lists the possible cases in which buddhas’ epithets, viz. *buddha*, *tathāgata*, *sugata*, *buddhaseṭṭha*, and *anubuddha*, can denote the Buddha’s awakened disciples.⁵⁸ One especially convincing piece of evidence comes from the *Suttanipāta*, a text believed to preserve some quite old information in Buddhist literature:⁵⁹

A *bhikṣu* should indeed not wander at the wrong time but should wander into a village for alms at the right time. For attachments attach to the one wandering at the wrong time. For that reason, *buddhas* do not wander at the wrong time.

Based on the context, the term “*buddhas*” in the plural form is just another way of addressing *bhikṣus*—possibly limited only to these awakened monks—who traveled around seeking alms. No obvious connection can be established with the so-called buddhas of the three times. This supposition is supported by its commentary, the *Paramathajotikā*, in which the “*buddhas*” are precisely described as the noble ones who are awakened to the Four Noble Truths.⁶⁰

In another compelling piece of evidence offered by Namikawa, the referents of the term

and *tathāgatas* in the plural form are very common in the Nikāyas, and they furthermore represent the awakened people, the ideal personality, in general; however, there are extremely few examples in which they are seemingly used to indicate, in particular, specific persons apart from the buddhas of the three times). ”

⁵⁸ Some of the cases Namikawa lists carry equivocal connotations and cannot be used as convincing evidence here (e.g. Sn. No. 351; Th. No.3, No. 679, No. 1271, No. 1246; SN. i. 110, etc.). Therefore, I choose not to discuss them in the main thesis body.

⁵⁹ Eng. Norman 1992: 42. Sn. ii. 68, No.386:

no ve vikāle vicareyya bhikkhu, gāmaṇ° ca piṇḍāya careyya kāle;
akālacāriṃ hi saṅgā, tasmā vikāle na caranti buddhā. (gāmaṇ: DPG cāriṇ)

⁶⁰ *Paramatthajotikā* II (Smith 1916–1918: i. 374): *buddhā tasmā, ye catusaccabuddhā ariyapuggalā.*

buddha can also be directly identified as the principal disciples of the Buddha. As recorded in the *Udāna*, the Buddha pronounced the following verse to applaud his principal disciples, and Śāriputra, Maudgalyāyana, and Mahākāśyapa were among them:⁶¹

Those who have already exhausted the evil dharmas continuously conduct themselves in the correct ways; those **buddhas** whose fetters are destroyed are the true brahmins in the world.

Namikawa's close reading of the referents of the term *buddha* is constructive and insightful: his scrutiny demonstrates a high possibility that our past reading of *buddha* is oversimplified and biased in certain cases.

In fact, the above interpretation of *buddha* is precisely confirmed in Dhammapāla's *Theragāthā* commentary, which was composed approximately one thousand years after the Pāli *Theragāthā* itself was produced. In verse 280 of the *Theragāthā*, the plural form *tathāgate* occurs: *mā purāṇam amaññittho, māsādesi tathāgate; sagge pi te na rajjanti kim aṅga pana mānuse* (Th. 34, No. 280).⁶² According to the commentary, *tathāgate* precisely denotes noble *śrāvakas* (*tathāgate, ariya-sāvake*; Th-A. ii. 117).⁶³

As another example, in verse 1205 of the *Theragāthā*, Māra was admonished as follows: *evam eva tuvaṃ Māra āsajja naṃ tathāgataṃ, sayam dahissam attānaṃ bālo aggiṃ va samphusaṃ* ("Even so, Māra, having assailed a **tathāgata** you will burn yourself, like a fool touching fire").⁶⁴ But "*Tathāgata*" here, as the commentary explains, is *ariya-sāvakaṃ*, the noble *śrāvaka*.⁶⁵

Moreover, in verse 1207, the term *buddha* also occurs: *Māra nibbinda buddhamhā āsaṃ mā kāsi bhikkhusu* ("Keep away from a **buddha**, Māra; place no hope in bhikkhus").⁶⁶

⁶¹ Ud. i. 4, No. 5: *bāhitvā pāpake dhamme ye caranti sadā satā; khīṇasaṃyojanā buddhā te ve lokasmiṃ brāhmaṇā 'ti*.

⁶² Eng. Norman 1969: 33: "Do not think much of bodies; do not offend the Tathāgatas. They are not interested in heaven; how much less in human existence?"

⁶³ In fact, C. A. F. Rhys Davids (1913: 179) has noticed this explanation but K.R. Norman (1969: 176) just discards it because he does not see a particular reason to accept the "unusual" interpretation of *tathāgatas* as "*śrāvakas*."

⁶⁴ Th. 107, No. 1205 = Eng. Norman 1969: 110. Cf. also de Jong 1972: 299–300.

⁶⁵ Th-A. iii. 179, No. 1205: *Tathāgataṃ ariya-sāvakaṃ*. Cf. Norman 1969: 288.

⁶⁶ Th. 107, No. 1207 = Eng. Norman 1969: 110. Cf. Norman 1969: 288.

In the same fashion, *buddha* here is interpreted by the commentary as a Buddhist *śrāvaka* who has realized the Four Noble Truths, rather than Śākyamuni Buddha: *nibbinda buddhamhā ti catu-sacca-buddhato Buddha-sāvakato nibbinda* (“to keep away from a *buddha*, that is, to keep away from the one who has realized the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha’s disciple”; Th-A iii. 179, No. 1207).⁶⁷ Although Norman did not accept this interpretation in his translation, the above evidence at least informs us that in the late period of the Theravāṃsa school, there still existed an interpretative tradition in which epithets such as *buddha* and *tathāgata* were also used to denote the disciples.

Further evidence is found in this commentary. One compound, *sugatavara*, occurs in verse 305,⁶⁸ and Dhammapāla offered two interpretations for it:⁶⁹ one is *sugatassa varassa*; the other, *sugatesu varassa Sammāsambuddhassa*. While K.R. Norman tends to accept the first interpretation (“the best of the well-farers”) of *sugatavara*, de Jong argues for reading the compound as a *karmadhāraya*, meaning “the best/supreme *sugata*.” The reason de Jong refuses the second interpretation is that “it seems unlikely that the Buddha would have been considered the best of buddhas” (de Jong 1972: 300). In other words, de Jong simply understands the plural form *sugatesu* as “multiple cosmic buddhas,” and believes that this expression would create a hierarchy among buddhas, which raises theological problems. However, if we know that Dhammapāla sometimes explains buddhas as *śrāvakas*, the second interpretation becomes also possible: “*sugatesu varassa Sammāsambuddhassa*” means “of the fully awakened one, who is the best among those who are faring well.” The Buddha is just merely compared with his awakened disciples, and no hierarchy among buddhas is implied there.

The same consideration applies to another term, *buddhaseṭṭha*,⁷⁰ for which Dhammapāla also offers two explanations: (1) *Buddhassa sambuddhassa tato eva sabba-satt'uttamatāya seṭṭhassa*; (2) *Buddhānam vā sāvaka-buddhādinaṃ seṭṭhassa*.⁷¹ The first

⁶⁷ See also Norman 1969: 288.

⁶⁸ Th. 35, No. 305: *dhamme ttiṭṭa sugatavarassa sāvakā niyyanti dhīrā saraṇavaraggagāmino* = Eng. Norman 1969: 35: “Standing in the doctrine of the best of the well-farers the disciples are led on, firm, going to the top of the best of refuges.”

⁶⁹ de Jong 1972: 300. Th-A. ii. 129.

⁷⁰ Namikawa 2005: 26–27. The Chinese parallels always render this term “如来” (e.g. T. 99 [II] 363a1 = SN. i. 209).

⁷¹ Th-A. 50. Th. 23, No. 175.

explanation means “of the Buddha, the fully awakened, who is the best among beings,” while the second reading is “of the best of the awakened ones (*buddhas*), (the best) of *śrāvakas* and *buddhas*.” In the second interpretation, *śrāvakas* are also called *buddhas*. However, it is not clear to me whether Dhammapāla’s interpretation of *buddha* as *śrāvaka* was an ancient legacy transmitted to him, or was created by him under other, unknown circumstances.

If the awakened disciples as a collective group can be called *buddhas* in the plural, can an individual monk be called a *buddha* after he attains awakening? In rare instances, we find such usage. In the Jain text *Isibhāsiyāim*, one figure named Sātiputta/Sāiputti is addressed as *buddha*, *arhat*.⁷² According to Nakamura, Sātiputta should be a Middle Indic form of Śāriputta, who should be identified with Śāriputra the Buddhist monk.⁷³ This Jain reading may reflect [memory of] the position of Śāriputra in contemporary Buddhist society. Another piece of evidence comes from the Pāli text *Dasa-bodhisatta-uddesa*, possibly composed by a Cambodian Buddhist at a late date.⁷⁴ In this text, Śāriputra engages in a conversation with Maitreya, in which the latter figure consistently calls Śāriputra the King of the Dharma (*dharmarāja*), the same epithet applied to Śākyamuni.⁷⁵

In addition, in the Pāli text *Apadāna*, Mahāprajāpatī, Śākyamuni’s aunt and foster-mother, is treated almost like a female counterpart to the Buddha. In Walters’ analysis

⁷² Schubring 1942: 543–545; 1974: 8, 10, 84–88.

⁷³ Nakamura 1966: 458–459. Nakamura’s argument for this identification is based on the following evidence: 1. Sātiputta can be the Prākṛit variation of Śāriputta; 2. The text emphasizes that Sātiputta was a *buddha* and *arhat*; 3. After Sātiputta, the text immediately mentions Saṃjaya, the same name for Śāriputra’s previous non-Buddhist teacher. On the basis of this text, Nakamura further proposes that there existed one school headed by Śāriputra rather than Śākyamuni, and that the cult of Śākyamuni was a later development in the Buddhist history.

⁷⁴ Martini 1936: 287: “Aucun de ces manuscrits ne nous fournit d’indication au sujet de la rédaction de l’original, de la date des copies, des noms des scribes. Cependant il y a toutes les raisons de croire que l’auteur est Cambodgien. Cet ouvrage de basse époque contient à foison des négligences, des libertés et des fautes qui trahissent l’origine indochinoise de l’auteur et des copistes.” The exact date of composition of this text is still uncertain.

⁷⁵ See Martini 1936: 297–336. It is worthwhile to mention a Sinhalese text named *Dasa-bodhisatta-uppattikathā*, which is most likely of the same origin as the Cambodian text. However, in the modern publication of this Sinhalese text, Śāriputra’s epithet *Dharmarāja* does not occur. This might be a consequence of the multiple reproductions it underwent in the course of its transmission, or perhaps due to its 1926 redaction. With respect to this point, Martini (ibid., 291) said: “Cependant C^e (the *Dasa-bodhisatta-uppattikathā*) et K (i.e. the *Dasa-bodhisatta-uddesa*) offrent deux divergences particulièrement notables. Dans le dernier, Śāriputta reçoit le titre de Dharmarāja, et c’est de la bouche même du Buddha. C^e a reculé devant cette hérésie et supprime la qualification non conforme à l’usage des Ecritures pālies.”

(1993), Mahāprajāpatī attained not the state of *nibbāna* but *parinibbāna*, and the description of her death can be interpreted as an imitation of the Buddha's death. Walter further lists many descriptions common to both Mahāprajāpatī and Śākyamuni. Gotamī, as Mahāprajāpatī is addressed in the *Gotamī-apadāna*, specifically connotes that Mahāprajāpatī is a female equivalent of Śākyamuni.⁷⁶

As the above discussion demonstrates, in the early Pāli literature, the term *buddha* could serve as a general indicator for people who have attained awakening, which is indeed its most basic meaning as a derivative of the root \sqrt{budh} .⁷⁷ The Āgamas in Chinese do not preserve much evidence of this kind. But this is not surprising: as far as evidence suggests, the Āgama translations in Chinese came from Northwest India, and the Buddhist schools there (e.g., Mahāsāṅghika and Sarvāstivāda) had a well-established tradition that maintained the transcendental nature of buddhas.⁷⁸

The notions of the Buddha being the sixth arhat and his disciples being buddhas are two sides of the same coin: they collectively reflect the historic ambiguity between the states of buddhahood and arhatship, which is sporadically preserved in texts of various affiliations. Terms such as *arhat* and *buddha* all have undergone significant semantic shifts, alongside the systematization and elaboration of Buddhist ideologies in the course of their long history.

1.3 The *Mahāvastu*'s uncommon usage of “buddha”

We now turn our attention to the Mahāsāṅghika sources. Neither the Chinese Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya *Mohe sengqi lü* 摩訶僧祇律 nor the Mahāsāṅghika-Lokottāravāda *Mahāvastu*⁷⁹ mentions the story of “six arhats.” However, the silence of the Mahāsāṅghika sources does not necessarily exclude the possibility that the ambiguous usage of “buddha” and “arhat”

⁷⁶ See Walters 1993: 371–375.

⁷⁷ We have to admit that there are many cases in which *buddhas* in the plural indicates the buddhas of the three times. Such descriptions are located within numerous texts, e.g., Sn. 108 = Eng. Norman 1992: 64; Dh. xiv. 51–52, No. 181–185 = Eng. Norman 1997: 28; Dh. xiv. 54–55, No. 190, 194–195 = Eng. Norman 1997: 29; Ud. iv. 43 = Eng. Masefield 1994: 7; Ud. v. 49 = Eng. Masefield 1994: 89; Ud. v. 57 = Eng. Masefield 1994: 101; Ud. v. 72–73 = Eng. Masefield 1994: 144–146; SN. i. 139; J. No. 159, No. 415, 479, 500, 514; Th. 26, No. 204; Th. 53, No. 509; Th. 79, No. 829.

⁷⁸ In the Sarvāstivāda texts, for instance, the *Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā*, the *dharmakāya* (“dharma body”) of buddhas is transcendental and completely without *āsravas*, while the *rūpakāya* (“form body”) of buddhas can contain *āsravas* (T. 1545 [XXVII] 392a3–c6).

⁷⁹ On the nature of this text and its date of compilation (the composition was closed by ca. the sixth century), see Tournier 2012a: 95.

could have predated the schism between the Sthaviras and the Mahāsāṅghikas, considering that the absence of testimony can be explained in several ways. The most apparent reason is that the Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya(s) may not contain a counterpart of the *Skandhakas* that is found in the Vinayas of the Sthaviras, and therefore may skip the story of Śākyamuni's first conversion of disciples.⁸⁰ An additional possibility is that the expression “the six arhats” was intentionally avoided at a later time. To be specific, the Mahāsāṅghika monks, especially those belonging to the Northern schools represented by the Lokottāravādins, might have intentionally omitted the relevant information because they held a more radical view concerning the transcendental nature of the Buddha.⁸¹ Their belief in a “supramundane buddha” led to an “exaltation of the Buddha corresponding with the lowering of the status of the arhat.”⁸² Nevertheless, as my ensuing survey shows, the ambiguity between the terms *arhat* and *buddha* is not purely a Sthavira issue, but also appears in the *Mahāvastu*.

One case of ambiguity in the connotations of the terms *buddha* and *bhikṣu* is found in the *Mahāvastu*. In the chapter “Questions of Sabhika (*Sabhikaspraśna*),” Sabhika asks Śākyamuni: “What should one attain to be called a monk? How does one come to be gentle, to be disciplined and to be called a buddha?”⁸³ Śākyamuni answers those questions in sequence:

⁸⁰ The textual organization of the Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya is radically different from that of the Vinayas of the Sthavira traditions, a fact that has been widely observed by Buddhist Vinaya scholars (e.g. Frauwallner 1956: 198; Clarke 2004: 78; 2015). When reexamining the proposal of Frauwallner (1956) with regard to the structural differences between various Vinayas, Clarke (2004) advances a hypothesis that the structure of the Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya and the Sthavira *Māṭrkās* are similar. As such, *Māṭrkās* might have represented a core Vinaya text that predated the development of sectarian literature.

⁸¹ On the studies of the Northern and Southern schools of the Mahāsāṅghikas and their respective views, see Nattier & Prebish 1977: 258–264.

⁸² Williams 1989: 18.

⁸³ Eng. Jones 1949–1956: III. 395 with my revisions = Mvu. iii. 395: *kiṃprāptam āhu bhikṣuṇaṃ, °suvrataṃ kiṃ kathaṃ ca dāntam āhu, buddho ti kathaṃ pravuccati. suvratam°*. Jones argues that it is an error for *sūratam*, “being gentle and mild,” based on the Pāli *Suttanipāta* parallel *sorata*. See Eng. Jones 1949–1956: III. 395n.1.

The one who, through the path created by himself, completely attains liberation and overcome all doubts, who knows nonexistence and existence, who, having finished his life in the world, destroys further existence, is a monk.⁸⁴

Ever patient and mindful, he never harms anything in the world. Having crossed (the stream), this mendicant is immaculate. Not being excessive, he acts gently.⁸⁵

He has developed his faculties both inwardly and outwardly in the world; having penetrated this world and the world beyond, he watches his time: he is cultivated and disciplined.⁸⁶

The one who has destroyed all the fancies, sufferings in the transmigration and disappearance and reappearance of lives, who has exhausted stain, passion, and blemish and has reached the end of life, is called a monk.⁸⁷

In light of the answer given to each question, there is essentially not much difference between the four concepts. The above verses may not reflect the typical Mahāsāṅghika position but are probably a vestige of a more ancient idea shared by texts of different sectarian affiliations. The interchangeable usage of the terms *bhikṣu* and *buddha* highlights their indistinguishable connotations.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Eng. Jones 1949–1956: III. 395 with my revisions = Mvu. iii. 395: *padyena °kṛtana ātmanā, abhinirvāṇagato vitṛṇakāṃkṣo; vibhavaṃ ca bhavaṃ ca jñātvā loke, uṣitavāṃ kṣiṇapunarbhavo sa bhikṣuḥ. kṛtana.*

⁸⁵ Eng. Jones 1949–1956: III. 395 with my revisions = Mvu. iii. 395: *sarvatra-upekṣo smṛtimāṃ, na ca so hīṃsati kaṃci loke, tīrṇo śramaṇo anāvilo, utsanno yo na karoti °āśravaṃ.* I accept Jones’s reading °āśrava as *sūrata*, as mentioned in above n. 83.

⁸⁶ Eng. Jones 1949–1956: III. 395 with my revisions = Mvu. iii. 395–396: *yasyendriyāṇi bhāvitāni, adhyātmaṃ vahirdhā ca loke, nirvidhya imaṃ paraṃ ca lokaṃ, kālaṃ rakṣati bhāvito dānto.* The Pāli parallel of *kālaṃ rakṣati* is *kālaṃ kaṃkhati*, “abides one’s time; waits for death.”

⁸⁷ Eng. Jones 1949–1956: III. 395 with my revisions = Mvu. iii. 396: *kalpāni vikīrya kevalāni, saṃsāraduḥkhāni °catūpapātaṃ, vigatamalaṃ virajaṃ anañgaṇaṃ, prāptaṃ jātikṣayan tam āhu bhikṣuṃ.*

°catūpapātaṃ: Based on the Pāli *Suttanipāta* parallel (BHSD s.v. *upapāda*), I take this as an error for **cyutopapātaṃ* (Skt. *cyuti-upapāta*). Moreover, in his English translation, Jones reads “*jātikṣayantam*” as “*jātikṣaya-antam*,” which I instead understand as “*jātikṣayan tam*.”

⁸⁸ The parallel of the above verses in the *Suttanipāta* (Sn. 94–95 = Eng. Norman 1992: 57) is as follows: *kappāni viceyya kevalāni, saṃsāraṃ dubhayaṃ cutūpapātaṃ, vigatarajaṃ anañgaṇaṃ visuddhaṃ, pattaṃ jātikkhayaṃ tam āhu buddhan ti.*

There are also cases in which buddhas are not sharply distinguished from *pratyekabuddhas*. In the Mālinī chapter of the *Mahāvastu*, a *pratyekabuddha* goes to a village for alms but earns nothing. Having seen what occurred, a villager deplores that people are so ignorant that they do not even venerate this awakened one. Here, the *pratyekabuddha* is addressed as a buddha, sambuddha, tathāgata, and bhagavat, all of which are common epithets of buddhas.⁸⁹ Then, the villager persuades other people to make offerings to the *pratyekabuddha*, who thereafter enters *nirvāṇa*. Subsequently, the villager builds a *stūpa* and performs various offerings to the *pratyekabuddha*.

⁸⁹ Mvu. i. 303–304: *pratyekabuddho grāmaṃ piṇḍāya upasaṃkrame, yathādhautena pātreṇa tato grāmāto niṣkramet. tam enaṃ grāmiko dṛṣṭvā sambuddham idam abravīt: “kiñci arogo bhagavāṃ labhyate piṇḍayāpanaṃ?” tato 'sya bhagavan pātraṃ grāmikasya praṇāmaye, na cātra adarśi bhikṣāṃ daurmanasyaṃ grāmikasya 'bhūt. “andhabhūto ayaṃ loko mithyā dṛṣṭihato sadā, etā dṛṣṭāṃ dakṣiṇīyaṃ na pūjenti yathārahaṃ!”*

grāmāntaṃ upasaṃkramya sthīhivāna catuspathe, “avidhāvidhaṃ” ti krandati tato sannipate janāḥ. mahājano samāgatvā istriyo puruṣā pi ca, grāmikaṃ upasaṃkramya: “kiṃ karoma avidhāvidhaṃ ti?”

grāmiko āha: “yaṃ nūnaṃ koṭi yuṣmākaṃ na saṃvibhāgarato jano, eṣo hi etasmiṃ grāmasmiṃ eko bhikṣu vihanayati.”

grāmikasya vacanaṃ śrutvā sarvo grāmo sa-istriyo, sārāyaṇīyaṃ karensu sambuddhasya punaḥ punaḥ.

tam enaṃ grāmiko vaca sabhāryāko saputrako. sarvasukhavihāreṇa nimantremi tathāgataṃ. grāmikasya svakā dhūtā śucivastrā suvāsānā, ācāraguṇasampannā upasthīya tathāgataṃ.

grāmikasya prasādena tasmīṃ grāmasmiṃ suvrato, sambuddho parinirvāyi ṛṣi kṣīṇapunarbhavaḥ. taṃ nirvṛtaṃ dhyāyetvāna stūpaṃ kāresi grāmiko, nṛtyavāditagītena pūjāṃ kāresi maharṣiṇo.

My rendering is based on Eng. Jones 1949–1956: I. 253–254 with revisions:

A *pratyekabuddha* went to a village for alms but left with his bowl as clean as when it was washed. A villager saw this and spoke to **the perfect buddha**: “What alms for sustenance has this healthy blessed one received?” The blessed one held out his bowl to the villager. Then, after the villager saw no alms there, he became distressed. “This world is always blind and is ruined by wrong belief! Men do not pay homage to such a person who is worthy of offering!”

Coming to the edge of the village, he stood at a crossroad and shouted “Ahem! Ahem!” to assemble people. After a large crowd of people, both women and men, gathered together, they approached the villager and asked: “What should we do to comfort (you) (after your exclamation) ‘Ahem! Ahem!’?”

The villager said: “You are groups of people who do not delight in sharing a portion. For now in this village there is a mendicant who is suffering!”

After they heard the villager’s words, all the inhabitants of the village, including women, showed hospitality to **the perfect buddha** again and again. The villager, with his wife and children, spoke to him: “I invite the **tathāgata** to live wholly in comfort.” The villager’s own daughter, well-dressed in clean clothes, virtuous in her conduct, approached the *tathāgata*.

Because of the kindness of the villager, **the virtuous one, the perfected buddha, the seer** who has exhausted further existence, entered *parinirvāṇa*. After his death, the villager cremated him, built a *stūpa* and made an offering to the great seer with dance, music and song.

On another occasion, two boys encounter a *pratyekabuddha* whose remarkable deportment is described in almost the same way as that of the Buddha, and the offering made to him likewise generates exceptional merit.⁹⁰ Nevertheless, there is one significant difference between the *pratyekabuddha* and the buddha implied in this case, namely that the *pratyekabuddha* does not preach the Dharma here.⁹¹

As an additional piece of supporting, albeit circumstantial, evidence, the *Mahāvastu* preserves relics of the non-Buddhist usage of epithets that are usually applied to Śākyamuni. This is found in the Kinnarī chapter, in which the term *bhagavat* is not confined to the Buddhist context, but used to address Vedic seers.⁹² This piece of evidence recalls the aforementioned Jain text *Isibhāsiyāim*, in which the Jain sages are addressed with the appellation “buddha.” It is already widely known that terms such as “buddha” and “bhagavat” were not the innovations of Buddhists, but conveyed a more general meaning before they became particular terms for Śākyamuni and other cosmic buddhas.

Finally, it should be conceded that, with respect to depictions of the figure of Śākyamuni, the *Mahāvastu* contains rich disparities compared to the early Pāli Nikāyas and Chinese Āgamas. While the Pāli and Chinese texts include much information about Śākyamuni’s mortal limitations—for instance, his backaches and old age—the *Mahāvastu*

⁹⁰ It is the *Gaṃgapāla-jātaka*, in which two poor boys were impressed by the noble deportment of one *pratyekabuddha* and thus offered food to him. Having accepted the alms, the *pratyekabuddha* flew through the air, and the two boys took this opportunity to make vows that came true in their next lives. A verse is inserted afterward:

“Because any offering is not insignificant, as long as [made] with a pure mind, to tathāgatas, perfect buddhas or the disciples of buddhas” (Mvu. iii. 183: *na hi cittaprasannena svalpikā bhavati dakṣiṇā, tathāgate ca sambuddhe ye ca buddhāna śrāvakā*).

⁹¹ This recalls the famous saying that the *pratyekabuddha* refuses to preach the dharma. Barely found in the early Pāli Nikāya and Chinese Āgama, this idea should have been more prevalent among the Sarvāstivādins and the Mahāsāṅghikas. Cf. the Sarvāstivāda *Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā* (T. 1545 [XXVII] 905c7–906b15) and the *Abhidharma-kośa* (T. 1558 [XXIX] 64b9–12: 言獨覺者，謂現身中離棄至教，唯自悟道。以能自調，不調他故。何緣獨覺言不調他？非彼無能演說正法，以彼亦得無礙解故); the *Shouxinsui jing* 受新歲經, a Mahāyāna parallel of the *Pavāraṇāsutta* of the Pāli SN (T. 61 [I] 858b4–5: 辟支無此法，無歲無弟子，獨逝無伴侶，不與他說法; cf. Iwamatsu 2001). The rare occurrences of this saying in Chinese Āgamas include the one in the **Ekottarikāgama* (T. 125 [II] 676c18–19: 辟支無此法，無歲無弟子，獨逝無伴侶，不與他說法).

⁹² Mvu. ii. 95–96: *yena bhagavantaḥ purastimadakṣiṇapaścimottarāye diśāye ṛṣayo caturdhyānalābhino paṃcābhijñā maharddhikā mahānubhāvā antarīkṣacarās tān ahaṃ yajñavāte nimantrayāmi* = Eng. Jones 1949–1956: II. 92–93, with my revisions: “To the sacrificial enclosure I shall invite the seers, the blessed ones in the directions of east, south, west, and north, who have attained four meditations and five supernatural knowledges, who possess great magic and might, who can travel through the air.”

tends to omit the mortal aspect of the Buddha, and instead emphasizes his status as a supernatural being, which reflects the crucial tenet of the Mahāsāṅghika-Lokottāravāda school.⁹³ For instance, in the *Mahāvastu*, the superiority of buddhas to *pratyekabuddhas* and *śrāvakas* is highlighted by the statement that buddhas possess supernatural knowledge from the time they are born, and their physical body is as immaculate as their dharma body.⁹⁴ Not surprisingly, the *Mahāvastu* places buddhas at the highest level of the hierarchy of the cosmos, far above *pratyekabuddhas* and *śrāvakas*.⁹⁵

In summary, the ambiguity between the notions of buddhahood and arhatship is not merely a Sthavira issue, but also common to the Mahāsāṅghikas. However, the vestiges of this ambiguity in the Mahāsāṅghika traditions are much less evident than in the Theravaṃsa tradition. This situation can be explained by the fact that arhatship did not undergo an obvious devaluation in the Theravaṃsa school as it was in many other schools.⁹⁶

1.4 Conclusion

The three sections above aim to shed light on a possible pre-sectarian notion in which buddhas were not superior to their disciples in terms of having attained a higher religious goal. The relics of the ambiguity between buddhahood and arhatship can be traced in various sectarian schools, not only those stemming from the Sthaviras, but also those originating

⁹³ In the *Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā*, one view held by the Mahāsāṅghikas is that even the physical body of the Tathāgata is untainted: 佛身無漏，如大眾部。問：彼何故作此執？答：依契經故。如契經說：“苾芻當知，如來生在世間，長在世間，出世間住，不為世法之所染污。”彼作是說：“既言如來出世間住，不為世法之所染污，由此故知佛身無漏。” T. 1545 (XXVII) 391c27–392a3. See also Dessein 2009: 46–47. In addition, Bareau (1955: 57–59, 76, and 301–302) and Harrison (1982: 227) both express the opinion that the Mahāsāṅghika schools also commonly hold this idea, not exclusively confined to the Lokottāravāda.

⁹⁴ See Mvu. i. 142–143 = Eng. Jones 1949–1956: I. 112–113.

⁹⁵ Fujita (1975: 95–104) carefully investigates how the three vehicles have been described in different schools and texts. As his survey demonstrates, the Pāli literature later obtains distinct conceptions of *buddha*, *pratyekabuddha* and *arhat*, but the connotation of each term in the early Pāli literature is still distinct from the Mahāyāna three-vehicle theory. In fact, Fujita’s stance on the early understanding of buddhas and arhats agrees with my conclusion.

As for *pratyekabuddhas*, Fujita argues that in Pāli scriptures they do not refuse to preach the Dharma. In light of this, the view that *pratyekabuddhas* live in solitude and do not preach does not represent early thought but a later development in the course of sectarian history. On the origin of *pratyekabuddha* in Buddhism, cf. Norman 1991.

⁹⁶ The notion of arhatship has also undergone changes within the Theravaṃsa tradition, as has been investigated by Bond (1984; 1988). According to him, arhatship evolves from an attainment achievable within this life into a more remote ideal, attainable only after several lives.

from the Mahāsāṅghikas; we find the most evidence in the Pāli tradition and, in a rather less obvious way, in the early Chinese texts. There is no solid evidence for tracing the distinction between Śākyamuni and his disciples in terms of their religious achievement back to early times.

This is only the beginning of a series of questions. If the Buddha's final destination was not inaccessible to his disciples, and if the gulf between Śākyamuni and his disciples was not unbridgeable in the early phase of Buddhism, is it possible that some groups of Buddhists may have challenged the Buddha's authority by promoting the importance of the *saṅgha* or individual disciples [as the patriarchs in their lineages]? Audacious as this question may seem, within it lie the seeds of substantial disputes, pertaining to questions of the nature of the figure of Śākyamuni, the significance of the Buddha to the *saṅgha*, and the central authority of Buddhism. As my study develops in the following chapters, I will adduce more evidence highlighting the diversity of Buddhist views on the Buddha–disciple relationship and the central authority of Buddhism. In fact, Buddhist narratives provide us with rich sources to approach the Buddha–disciple power dynamics. The stereotype that Śākyamuni Buddha is believed by all Buddhist schools in every period to possess an overarching authority that overshadows the whole *saṅgha* becomes untenable. This is the main argument I shall develop in the following sections.