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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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English Summary

This dissertation offers a narrative perspective of the “Indian Buddhist discursive world” with respect to the power dynamics between the Buddha and his disciples. It selects multiple narratives revolving around figures from the early monastic community as represented by Śāriputra, Devadatta, Ānanda, and Kāśyapa, who attempt to compete with, challenge, or succeed the Buddha. Through close and contextualized readings, the dichotomy between the two concepts—“buddha” and “arhat”—in their usage in early texts is first challenged. A comparative reading of the narratives of Śāriputra and those of the Buddha in the *Sūtra of the Wise and Foolish* presents to us a variety of buddha–disciple interactions in which disciples not only obey but also challenge the Buddha’s authority. My treatment of the Devadatta narratives in their historical development and ideological complexities reveals that the Devadatta narrative itself is a body of multilayered, ever-changing and self-reflective rhetoric, whose pivotal function is to cope with the potential problems substantialized by Devadatta’s challenges to the Buddha. The narratives of how to pass down the Buddha’s authority in the fifth chapter concern not only the theoretical question of who are theologically legitimate inheritors, but also the practical issue of how monastic economy should be managed. All of the vibrant stories I analyze here, which are wide-ranging in terms of geography and chronology, are open windows into the Buddhist self-understanding of fundamental theological questions concerning the nature and significance of the buddha and the identity of being a Buddhist, as well as practical issues such as how to maintain their authority and accommodate their updated needs in an age without a buddha. Seeking its methodological basis in philology, history, literary theory, and linguistics, this dissertation sheds light on the dynamic interplay between narratives and ideologies and enhances our understanding of the significance of narrative in reflecting and stimulating new ideologies and constructing histories of early Buddhism.