

A Study of the Mahāvastu

- I How the many buddhas appeared for the Bodhisattva and How the classification of the four Bodhisattva careers is invented ?
- II How some passages must be corrected or rightly interpreted ?

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I

“If you don't practise as I have instructed, you will see me uselessly ;
Though you were far from me, you will be really near by me, if you only
practise my law.” (1)

Such was one of the last words of the Buddha Śākyamuni, who gave contrarily his condolences to his lamenting lay pupils, the Mallas in Kuśinagara, the town of Nirvāṇa, which took place between a pair of śāla trees near by. The Buddha was always the last refuge for them all and the loss of their Buddha was not to be recompensed, unless they got his relics (śarīrāṇi), because of their boundless devotion and attachment to their Buddha, and so each of the seven neighbouring kings demanded his relics so eagerly that a war against the refusing Mallas was shunned only by the mediation of the wise brahmin Droṇa. Really they could realize their Buddha in person, as often as they worshipped his relics. But at last such a time came when they could not imagine their unseen Master, but their devotion and adoration made them even believe that Śākyamuni exerted himself not only in his last rebirth, but in his former one also under his Buddha he had expressed his bodhi wishes and he had been given the assuring prophecy⁽²⁾ to be a future buddha⁽³⁾. So it is too natural, that we have such a buddha as Dīpaṅkara⁽⁴⁾ in an earlier age after our Buddhās Nirvāṇa, and here the Bodhisattva was called Megha⁽⁵⁾ (‘Cloud’) in the Mahāvastu, and this was in the beginning of the Preserving Career (the fourth career).

The pious devotees were no longer satisfied with such one former buddha, so that after Dīpaṅkara Krakucchanda, Kanakamuni and Kāśyapa⁽⁴⁾ must have appeared, because these three are together with our Śākyamuni himself called the four buddhas in the bhadrakalpa,⁽⁶⁾ the present era. And between Dīpaṅkara and Krakucchanda many other buddhas were inserted gradually, till one must arrange them in various

orders of succession, and all these buddhas gave him their assuring prophecies, and these completed the whole Preserving Career (the fourth career).

But the pious devotees and worshippers were no longer satisfied with such buddhas, they wanted a buddha, who never⁽⁷⁾ favoured him yet with such an assuring prophecy, and that was the former Śākyamuni, under whom the Bodhisattva expressed his bodhi wishes for the first time, and it was in the Resolving Career (the second career), and hereafter such other buddhas too were to follow the former Śākyamuni and they also gave yet never⁽⁷⁾ their assuring prophecies, and it was in the Conforming Career (the third career).

Once more the devotees and worshippers were no longer satisfied with such buddhas, one more buddha had to appear, under whom the Bodhisattva led only a moral life, but not yet a religious one, and such a buddha was Aparājītatdhvaja,⁽⁸⁾ and it was in the Natural Career⁽⁸⁾ (the first career).

Finally two more buddhas are added, the present Buddha Śākyamuni and the future buddha Maitreya, that the whole lineage of buddhas may be fully accomplished. And that is why so many buddhas had to appear for the Bodhisattva and how the whole stages of his mental progression are divided as follows:

1. the natural career (prakṛti-caryā)
2. the resolving career (prañidhāna-caryā)
3. the conforming career (anuloma-caryā)
4. the preserving career (anivartana-caryā)⁽⁹⁾

Such was one of the favorite arguments of the Aṅguttara Nikāya and the Abhidharma schools. And between the two careers, the resolving and the conforming, there are no essential differences, so that we may have three careers, but as it must be just four, they count it as two: the resolving and the conforming. And this classification may be derived from the older 4 stages of the śrāvakas ('hearers') as follows:

1. srotaāpanna, he who has attained the stream to Nirvāṇa, to reach the stage of an arhant within seven redirths,
2. sakṛd-āgāmin, he who must come back once more to be an arhant,
3. anāgāmin, he who need not come back to be an arhant,
4. arhant, he who deserves alms,⁽¹⁰⁾

and this was imitated by the brahmins as the four stages of an ideal brahmin life:

1. brahma-cārin, pupil,
2. gṛhastha, householder,
3. vānaprastha, (ascetic wood dweller),
4. samnyāsīn, beggar.

And why the Indians prefer the number four?⁽¹¹⁾ This is a half of 8, 8 is again a

half of 16,⁽¹²⁾ which is about a half of a lunar month. According to the Indian calendar, nights are counted instead of days, and it proves that the activities under the waxing and waning moon played a great role in the hot India.

After all the classification of the four Bodhisattva careers is justifiable, but it was found only in the Mahāvastu and its Chinese equivalents: Buddha-pūrva-caryāsaṃgraha-sūtra,⁽¹³⁾ which was revised and translated from 587 to 591 or 592 A. D. by Jhānagutta (Skt. Dhyānagupta) and the others on the following five texts:

1. Mahāvastu of the Mahāsaṃghika school,
2. Mahā'lamkāra of the Sarvāstivādin school,
3. Buddha-jāta-nidāna of the Kāśyapīya school,
4. Śākyamuni-buddha-pūrva-caryā of the Dharmagupta school and
5. Vinaya-piṭaka-mūla of the Mahīśāsaka school.⁽¹⁴⁾

This classification of the four Bodhisattva Careers is not the consistent principle of the whole Mahāvastu, as Prof. Dr. Ryūshō Hikata⁽¹⁵⁾ tells us, but it is still the enduring fundamental idea of the compiler, who enlarged the original text of the Mahāvastu, which began with the Chapter of Dīpaṃkara, in an age when the Abhidharma arguments were heated, and this classification was found now really in some Chapters of the Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra⁽¹⁶⁾ by Prof. Dr. Ryūjō Yamada of the Tōhoku University:

1. Chapter of the (noble) birth,
2. Chapter of the Bodhisattva, who expressed his bodhi wishes for the first time,
3. Chapter of the Bodhisattva, who had expressed his bodhi wishes for a long time,
4. Chapter of the Bodhisattva, who does not stride back to attain the buddhahood.

It is evident, that this classification was taken from our enlarged Mahāvastu. Prof. Yamada sent me so friendly already in 1952, when our Heft I appeared, such an astonishing and enrapturing instruction, and it decides the ages of the important texts: the Mahāvastu precedes the Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra, what is another proof of Prof. Hikata's opinion about it.⁽¹⁷⁾

II

In the Preserving Career stood the buddhas,⁽¹⁸⁾ who are described in the second part of the Sūtra of Many Buddhas III.⁽¹⁹⁾ The short passages⁽²⁰⁾ concerning the Natural Career as well as those⁽²¹⁾ which stand now after the end of the Sūtra IIa (rather after the Sūtra I)⁽²¹⁾ are ascribed possibly to the enlarging compiler. In the Resolving and Conforming Careers stand the many buddhas of the Sūtra of Many Buddhas IIa,⁽²²⁾ b⁽²³⁾ and also I.⁽²⁴⁾

Now the buddhas, who stood in the Resolving and Conforming Careers, yet never prophesied for the Bodhisattva, such buddhas were the 30 koṭis of (the former) Śākyamuni⁽²⁵⁾ etc., therefore they must have prophesied yet never for the Bodhisattva,

and we must read here 'na ca me te buddhā bhagavanto vyākareṇsuḥ⁽²⁵⁾ (but the venerable buddhas yet *never* prophesied for me). The reasons for it:

1. This coincides with the Chinese equivalents.⁽²²⁾
2. In the fragment of the Sūtra IIB,⁽²³⁾ where only 300 of Puṣya are mentioned, we find the following words of Śākyamuni, who told this to Mahā-Maudgalyāyana: 'no cāhaṃ (±tehi) vyākṛto' (but I was yet *never* prophesied [±by them]).
3. It is impossible that 'ca' stands at the beginning of a sentence.
4. 'na' was certainly dropped at first carelessly at the copy-making, as the preceding word ends in na, and there are enough of such cases.
5. Why then the words of prophecy are inserted, when the Bodhisattva got never the prophecy? In the Chinese equivalents also we find the same conventional explanatory words, which are logically not at all necessary.

But at the same time we can admit that the word 'na' may have been removed intentionally afterwards by the careless and misunderstanding copy-makers though against the grammatical rule. They held perhaps only the Sūtra I for belonging to the Resolving and Conforming Careers and the Sūtra IIa by mistake for belonging to the Preserving Career, (where he must have got the prophecy, and so 'na' is then of use) in a rather later age after that the Sūtra III had been forced into Vol. III, at whose cost the Sūtra of Ten Bhūmis is now interjected there.⁽²⁶⁾ Because it is still fact that none of the six MSS. has 'na' here.

In the Sūtra of Many Buddhas I the Buddha Samitāvin remembered once the five duties of a buddha,⁽²⁷⁾ and he found that the next buddha would appear after 1000 kalpa-periods, and this one then stayed as a bodhisattva among the Dīrghāyu(ṣ)ka-deva-putras, where a buddha is difficult to see and to hear. But our Śākyamuni remained yet without getting the prophecy, though he, standing in the conforming career, expressed his wishes for the second time. Therefore the words of prophecy, which our Śākyamuni himself gave to Maitreya,⁽²⁹⁾ serves only as an example of the resolution, which Samitāvin here said to himself in his meditation⁽²⁹⁾ and told to his pupils.⁽³⁰⁾ We find the same circumstances under the Buddha Ratanavat,⁽³¹⁾ and this fact also may prove my opinion that the Story of Ratanavat must be a continuation of the Sūtra of Many Buddhas I.

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- (1) Taisho Tripiṭaka IV p. 47 10-11: Aśvagoṣa's Buddha-Carita:
- (2) Our Buddha gave to each of his 1200 surviving hearers a similar assurances, concerning the stages they then stood on, Taisho Tripiṭaka I p. 26 B 13 (Dīrgh'āgama).

(5)

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- (3) This is indeed not contradictory to our Buddha's words: "I have neither Master nor affiliation with any sect. I have got the profoundest law, which no other one has ever got" (Aśvaghōṣa. IV p. 29 A 7.)
- (4) Dīpaṃkara : Mahāvastu Vol. I pp. 239, 11 ; 241, 13 ; 242, 19 ; 243, 20 ; 247, 3 ; 248, 3.
- (5) Megha : Mahāvastu Vol. I pp. 232, 1 : 241, 15 ; 242, 9 ; 245, 16 ; 246, 12. In the Nidāna tale to the Jātaka Stories he is called Sumedha.
- (3) Taisho Tripiṭaka III p. 671 A 7=Mahāvastu III p. 243, 17.
- (7) cf. Sūtra of Many Buddhas Iia : Mahāvastu I pp. 57, 10. 15 ; 58, 5=Taisho Tripiṭaka III p. 655 C 22 ff. ; Sūtra, of Many Buddhas Iib : I p. 46, 1-5 ; also Sūtra of Many Buddhas I : I pp. 51, 3. 13 ; 63, 2.
- (8) Mahāvastu I pp. 1, 4 ; 46, 8 ff.-p. 81 ff. verses 1-6.
- (9) Mahāvastu I pp. 1, 2 ; 46, 6-Taisho Tripiṭaka III p. 656 C 16 ff.
- (10) Taisho Tripiṭaka I p. 13 B 12 (Dīrgh'āgama).
- (11) Mahāvastu Vol. I p. 2, 15-16. There are four forms of ordination into the Buddhist Order.
- (13) In the Indian coinage 16 annas make one rupee.
- (13) Taisho Tripiṭaka III p. 656 C 16 ff.
- (14) Do. III p. 932 A 17 ff.
- (15) Prof. Dr. Ryūshō Hikata, A historical Study of the Thoughts in Jātakas (Tokyo 1954) p. 94.
- (16) Dr. Kōun Kajiyoshi, A Study of the original Text of Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra (Tokyo 1944 in Japanese), Contents, pp. 10-11.
- (17) Prof. Hikata, do. p. 96.
- (18) 1) Dīpaṃkara (Bodhisattva : Megha), also in Vol. I pp. 1, 13 ; 193, 13-248, 5.—
2) Sarvābhībhū (Bodhisattva : Abhijit), also in Vol. I p. 2, 3-5 : pp. 35, 13-45, 16.—
6) the former Śākyamuni—9) Puṣya—10) Vipāśyin also in Vol. I p. 2, 5.—
13) Krakucchanda also in Vol. I p. 2, 6.—14) Kanakamuni—15) Kāśyapa (Bodhisattva : Jyotiṣpāla) also in Vol. I p. 2, 6.
- (19) Mahāvastu III, cf. Note 4-Taisho Tripiṭaka III p. 663 B 19 ff.
- (20) Do. I p. 46, 8-47, 11 (=p. 81, 7-82, 7 in the Sūtra of Ten Bhūmis).
- (21) Do. I p. 63, 9-14.
- (22) Do. I p. 54, 9 ff. (=Taisho Tripiṭaka III p. 655 C 7 ff.), (gāthā p. 61, 10 ff.): 1) Śākyamuni—2) Dīpaṃkara—4) Puṣya—5) Māradhvāja—7) Kāśyapa—16) Samitāvin.
- (23) Do. I p. 46, 1-5.
- (24) Do. I pp. 47, 12-54, 7 probaly + 62, 16-63, 9.
- (25) the former Śākyamuni (I. p. 57, 10) : 800.000 of Dīpaṃkara (p. 57, 15) : 18.000 of

Māradhvaja (p. 58,5); — p. 57, 7-12: abhiñāmi khalu punar ahaṃ Mahā-Maudgalyāyana triṃśad buddha-koṭiyo Śākymuni-nāmadheyānāṃ, ye mayā sa-śrāvaka-saṃghāḥ sat-kṛtā guru-kṛtā mānītāḥ pūjitā apacitā rājñā cakravarti-bhūtena āyati-saṃbodhim abhiprārthayamāna, na ca me te buddhā bhagavanto vyākareṇsuḥ :

“bhaviṣyasi tvam anāgatam adhvānaṃ tathānato ’rhaṃ samyaksambuddho vidyā-caraṇa-saṃpanno sugato loka-vid anuttaraḥ puruṣa-damya-sārathiḥ śāstā devānāṃ ca manuṣyānāṃ ca.”

- (26) The original Sanskrit text of the Chinese translation must have consisted of the Sūtra IIa and the Sūtra III, and afterwards the Sūtra I and the Sūtra of the Ten Bhūmis must have been added, and the latter indeed at the cost of the Sūtra III, which was transferred into Vol. III.
- (27) Mahāvastu I p. 51, 3 ff. : pañca ca buddha-kāryāṇi avaśyaṃ kartavyāni, katamāni pañca ? — 1) dharma-cakraṃ pravartayitavyaṃ, — 2) mātā vinetavyā, — 3) pitā vinetavyo — 4) buddha-vineyakā sattvā vinetavyā — 5) yuva-rājā abhi-siñcitavyo :

“eṣo mamātyayena buddho loke bhaviṣyati, yathā etarhi ahaṃ, tathā eṣa Ajito bodhisattvo mamātyayena buddho loke bhaviṣyati” ti, “Ajito nāmena Maitreyo gotreṇa Bandhumatyāṃ rājadhānyāṃ.”

p. 51, 13; pañca me buddha-kāryāṇi avaśyaṃ kartavyāni, yo ca so sattvo yuva-rājā’bhisīñcitavyaḥ, so Dirghāyukehi devehi upapanno.

- (28) Mahāvvyutpatti § 120, 4.
- (29) Mahāvastu I p. 51, 5.
- (30) Do. I p. 51, 13.
- (31) Do. I p. 63, 4-5=51, 5-7 (Samitāvīṇ of the Sūtra I). p. 63, 2 ff.; tāni mayā tasya bhagavato niryātetvā bodhāya anuprañihitaṃ, na tāvad buddhā bhagavanto pari-nirvāyanti, yāvad yuva-rājā anabhiṣikto bhavati :

“eṣa mama anantaram buddho loke bhaviṣyati, yathāitarhi mayā Maitreyo vyākṛto eṣo mamāntaram buddho bhaviṣyati” ti.