

WISDOM AND COMPASSION AS CONSTITUTIVE OF BUDDHAHOOD

A Mahāyāna and a Theravāda Treatise
in Comparative Light

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In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the ultimate point of arrival of all living beings is considered to be the attainment of Buddhahood. "All living beings are possessed of a Buddha nature" has become a generally accepted dictum, through the pervasive influence of the *Tathāgatagarbha* Doctrine which originated in India and developed further in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism¹⁾. And in this light, the ultimate aim of each and every living being is the *realization* of that inherent Buddha nature, viz., the attainment of Buddhahood itself.

In the Theravāda tradition, the ultimate end-point of all Buddhist practice is likewise understood to be the attainment of Buddhahood, but *only for a few select individuals*²⁾. The aim considered for the general run of living beings is *arhantship*, which is equivalent to the attainment of *nibbāna*³⁾. Needless to say, in the Theravāda, the Buddha *par excellence* is Gotama himself, who through his countless meritorious acts throughout his many rebirths earned for himself this superhuman state, whereby he now deserves the admiration and veneration of every living being⁴⁾.

In this paper we will examine a Mahāyāna and a Theravāda treatise respectively, to set in relief their common elements as well as their differences on this very central aspect of Buddhism, i. e. the notion of Buddhahood.

1. The *Ratnagotravibhāga* and Buddhahood

The *Ratnagotravibhāga-Mahāyānottaratantraśāstra*, as the very title suggests, is a treatise that expounds the ultimate meaning, the quintessence of the Mahāyāna teaching. It was written in India most probably by Sāramati, a later

contemporary of Vasubandhu, put into its present form approximately around the early 5th century⁵). It presupposes the doctrine of *sūnyatā*, and centers its teaching on the dictum that all living beings are (possessed of) Tathāgatarbha (*sarvasattvās tathāgatarbhāḥ*). Considering the content of the treatise as a whole we can say that its central concern is the exposition of the nature of Buddhahood as such, in which is found the quintessence of Mahāyāna teaching.

In the prefatory part of the treatise homage is given to the Three Jewels, and we find the following lines :

*yo buddhatvam anādimadhyānidhanam śāntam vibuddhaḥ svam buddhva cābudha-
bodhanārtham abhayaṁ māgaṁ dideṣa dhruvam |
tasmai jñānakṛpāsivajravaradhīrgduhkhānkuraikacchide nānāḍṛggaṇahopagūḍhavimati-
prākārabhettre namah ||
anena kiṁ darcayati |
asaṁskṛtam anābhogaṁ aparapratyayoditam |
buddhatvaṁ jñānakāruṇyaśaktyupetaṁ dvayārthavat |*

(Johnston ed. p. 7: 9-15)

To the one who has realized Buddhahood
Without beginning, middle nor end, and is tranquil,
Who, coming to realization by himself
Taught the Path, without fear, eternal,
In order to bring to realization the unenlightened /
To him who, having at hand the wonderful sword and thunderbolt
Of wisdom and Compassion, cuts into pieces
All sprouts of suffering
And breaks the wall of doubts and delusions
Concealed in the forest of various views—
To him I pay homage.

What is taught by this (verse) ?
Buddhahood itself is immutable, without effort
Having attained realization without depending on others

And is endowed with Wisdom and Compassion and Power (coming from both)
And fulfils a double benefit.

This verse is in homage to the Eternal Buddha, understood already on a metaphysical plane of existence. This verse as such (together with the subsequent commentary verse quoted in the latter part above) forms a compact summary of the entire treatise for us, as all the important elements to be expounded more in detail throughout the treatise are already alluded to here. The Teaching of the Path (i. e. *Dharma*) finds its origin in this Eternal Buddha, and the *Dharma* in turn becomes the basis for the advent of the *Saṅgha* or the community of seekers of Enlightenment. (See Verse 3, Johnston text p. 7: 1-4)

The Eternal Buddha (or Buddhahood=the realized world of Enlightenment.) which is the central topic here, is first declared to be absolutely tranquil, and *without any trace of activity or effort* (*cānta=asaṃskṛta=anābhoga*), and yet as *constantly in activity* towards the enlightenment of the unenlightened (*abudhabodhanārtha*). In passing let us note here that we are confronted with a conceptual contradiction, i. e. the application of two contradictory concepts on the same subject, viz., Buddhahood: “without any trace of activity” and yet “constantly in activity”.

The commentary verse above mentions the twofold purpose or benefit (*dva-yārtha*) of the activity of the Eternal Buddha, and turning to the main verse we see this in the distinction between the act of self-enlightenment and the activity towards the enlightenment of others (*svayaṃ buddhvā cābudhabodhanārtha*). This twofold benefit of the ceaseless activity of the Eternal Buddha is elaborated further in the later part of the treatise dealing with the Qualities of Buddhahood (*buddhaguṇavibhāga*).

*svārthaḥ parārthaḥ paramārthakāyaś
tadācṛitā saṃvṛtikayatā ca |*

(Johnston text p. 91: 5-6)

“Self-benefit” and “benefit for others”

(That is to say,) the Body of Supreme Truth

And the Worldly Bodies which are based upon this.

The distinction between the bodies of the Buddha, developed into the classic Threefold Buddha-body Doctrine, is thus explained here based on the twofold benefit of the ceaseless activity of the Quiescent and Eternal Buddha. In the cited text above we read “self-benefit” as applying to the Body of Supreme Truth, understood as the Essence of Buddhahood or Enlightenment Itself, and “benefit for others” as something applied to the Bodies of Worldly Emanation, which appear in the different worlds to lead others to the Supreme Enlightenment. This verse is still indicative of that stage of thought *before* the differentiation into the threefold-body doctrine, wherein a twofold-body theory was sufficient for explanation.

The further division into the three bodies, however, is also found in our treatise in prose commentary in the second chapter dealing with Enlightenment (*bodhi*).

*yā savāsanakleṣajñeyāvaraṇavimokṣād
anāvaraṇadharmakāyapṛāptir iyaṃ ucyate
svārthasāmpattiḥ | yā tad ūrdhvaṃ ā lokād
anābhogataḥ kāyadvayena saṃdarśanadeśana
vibhūtvadvayapṛavṛttir iyaṃ ucyate
parārthasāmpattir iti |*

(Johnston text p. 82: 7-9)

(That which, due to its being liberated from obstructions due to defilements and to knowable things along with their latent forces, is the Attainment of the undefiled Body of Truth, is here called the “fulfilment of self-benefit.” That which comes subsequently as the manifestation of twofold power in the appearance of the two bodies and the teaching by means of them, continuing as long as the world exists, and without effort, this is called the “fulfilment of benefit for others.”)

Thus in the division of the threefold Buddha-body, the first body which is the attainment of the undefiled *dharmakāya* is understood as the fulfilment of self-benefit (*svārtha sampattiḥ*) and two subsequent bodies which make their appearance in the world exhibiting a twofold power for the sake of teaching others the way to Enlightenment is understood as accomplishing “benefit for others” (*parārthasāmpattiḥ*).

From another set of verses (in the third chapter of the treatise) we are taught the distinction between the two subsequent bodies as mainly related to their place of activity: for those ignorant living beings still far from enlightenment the Apparational Body (*nirmāṇakāya*) takes on various forms *in the world* for the guidance of these living beings, while the Enjoyment Body (*sambhogakāya*) has for its place of activity the *sphere of bodhisattvas* (*jinamaṇḍala*) who are well advanced in their practice and are nearing the attainment of Enlightenment. (See Johnston text p. 97: 13–14)⁶

This twofold benefit then (*svaparārtha*) is a key notion in understanding Buddhahood in its perfected state, and the commentary verse to our main verse above in homage to Buddhahood explicitly relates this twofold benefit with the power of Wisdom and Compassion⁷).

2. *Paramatthamañjūsā* (Commentary on the *Visuddhimagga*):

The Buddha's Qualities

The *Visuddhimagga* is a classic compendium of Buddhist teaching written by Buddhaghosa in the mid-fifth century, and the *Paramatthamañjūsā* of Dhammapāla is a hitherto little-noticed commentary on this classic work⁸). The seventh chapter of the *Visuddhimagga* is devoted to a description of Concentration centered on the six recollections (*cha-anussati-niddesa*), the first of which is the recollection of the Enlightened One⁹). In commenting upon this recollection the *Paramatthamañjūsā* (henceforth, Pm.) gives us a description of the qualities of the Buddha based on the attribution to the Buddha of the phrase *vijjācaraṇasampanno*, (endowed with vision and action).

Ettha ca vijjā-sampadāya satthu
pañña-mahantaṃ pakāsitaṃ hoti
caraṇa-sampadāya karuṇā-mahantaṃ |
Tesu-paññāya Bhagavato dhamma-rajjappavatti
Karuṇāya dhamma-samvibhāgo |
Paññāya saṃsāra-dukkha-nibbida
Karuṇāya saṃsāra-dukkha-sahanāṃ |
Paññāya para-dukkha-parijānaṃ

Karuṇāya para-dukkha-patīkarārambho |
Paññāya parinibbanābhīmukhadhāvo
Karuṇāya tadadhiḡamo |
Paññāya sayāṃ taraṇaṃ
Karuṇāya pasesaṃ taraṇaṃ |
Paññāya Buddha-bhāva-siddhi
Karuṇāya Buddha-kicca-siddhi |
Karuṇāya vā Bodhisatta-bhūmiyaṃ sāmsārābhīmukha-bhāvo
Paññāya tattha anābhīrati |
Tathā karuṇāya pasesaṃ ahimsāpaṇaṃ
Paññāya sayāṃ parehi abhayaṇaṃ |
Karuṇāya paraṃ rakkhanto attānaṃ rakkhati
Paññāya attānaṃ rakkhanto paraṃ rakkhati |
Tathā karuṇāya aparantaḡo
Paññāya anattaṇaḡo |(abbrev.)
Tathā karuṇāya loka-nāthata
Paññāya attā-nāthata |
Karuṇāya c'assa ninnatabhāvo
Paññāya unnamābhāvo |(abbrev.)
Yathā hi karuṇā bhagavato sineha-soka-virahita
Evam paññā ahamkāra-mamīmkāra-vinimuttā ti |

(Pm. 192-3, Sinhalese Vidyodaya ed.)¹⁰⁾

(Here the Teacher's possession of vision (*vijjā*) shows the greatness of his wisdom,
 and his possession of action (*caraṇa*) the greatness of his compassion /
 It was through wisdom that the Blessed one reached the Kingdom of the Truth,
 and through compassion that he became the bestower of the Truth (*dhamma*) /
 It was through wisdom that he felt revulsion for the round of rebirths, and
 through compassion that he bore it /
 It is through wisdom that he fully understood others' suffering, and through com-
 passion that he undertook to counteract it.
 It was through wisdom that he was brought face to face with *nibbāna*, and through
 compassion that he attained it /
 It was through wisdom that he himself crossed over, and through compassion that

he brought others across.

It was through wisdom that he perfected the Enlightened One's state, and through compassion that he perfected the Enlightened One's task /

Or it was through compassion that he faced the round of rebirths as a Bodhisattva, and through compassion that he took no delight in it /

Likewise, it was through compassion that he practiced non-violence with regard to others, and through wisdom that he himself was fearless of others /

It was through compassion that he protected others to protect himself, and through wisdom that he protected himself to protect others /

Likewise, it was through compassion that he did not torment others, and through wisdom that he did not torment himself /(abbrev.)

Likewise, it was through compassion that he became the world's helper, and through wisdom that he became his own helper /

It was through compassion that he had humility, and through wisdom that he had dignity /(abbrev.)

For just as the Blessed One's compassion was without sentimental effection or sorrow, so his wisdom was freed from the thoughts of "I" and "mine".)

The passage as such is quite luminous in intent and has no further need of analysis or commentary: wisdom and compassion as the twofold and most-central attributes of the Enlightened One come out to the fore.

The referent of all these verse is of course Gotama Buddha, the Blessed One, "the accomplished, fully enlightened, endowed with vision and action, sublime, knower of worlds, the incomparable leader of men to be tamed, the teacher of gods and men, enlightened and blessed."¹¹) The *Visuddhimagga* takes up each of these appellations attributed to the Blessed One and elaborates on them, while the Pm. further develops on this, as we see above.

This section on the recollection of the Enlightened One of the *Visuddhimagga* that the Pm. bases its above delineation belongs under the treatment of *samādhi*, and is not meant as a metaphysical inquiry into the "nature of the Buddha" or "Buddhahood" as such, but as an aid to the Buddhist disciple in following the Path of Purity through the threefold way of virtue, concentration, and wisdom (*sīla, samādhi, paññā*) in liberating himself from his attachments and attaining *nibbāna*. This very practical and ascetic-oriented nature

of the treatise makes it quite alien to metaphysical speculation for its own sake. And we can see how the content of the verses of the Pm. likewise follows this intent: the attributes of the Buddha are written in an inspirational way as items of recollection (*anussati*), rather than of speculation.

3. Conclusion

In our brief examination of the RGV and the Pm. on their respective teachings on the attributes of the Buddha, we have noted the centrality of wisdom and compassion as well as their inseparability. For the RGV it is the distinction of self-benefit and benefit for others that gives the perspective for understanding this centrality and inseparability. The Pm. on the other hand does not categorize in this way but the content is nevertheless clear on the twofold benefit as the differentiating factor for the respective functions of wisdom and compassion in the total activity of the Enlightened One.

The Mahāyāna text elaborates this twofold benefit into the doctrine of the three bodies of the Buddha, acting on a supra-historical level, i. e. *transcending* time and space for the field of activity, and yet also *immanent* in history, in that Buddhahood itself is the very ground or underlying nature of all living beings, making appearances in the sphere of time and space to enlighten living beings as to their true nature. The Pm. on the other hand is not prone to any such metaphysicalizing, yet in its own poetic way expounds on how the Enlightened One as full of wisdom and compassion serves as the Guide and Inspiration for all who would follow the path toward *nibbāna*.

In sum, the Mahāyāna treatment of the Eternal Buddha lends to a *devotional approach*, advocating adherence and faith in the All-wise and Compassionate One who enlightens all living beings in ceaseless yet effortless activity¹²⁾, while the Theravāda treatment is a *practical and ascetical-oriented approach*, urging the disciple on the path to *nibbāna in the emulation of the attributes of the Enlightened One*¹³⁾.

1) See Takasaki Jikido, *Nyoraizō-shisō no Keisei* (Formation of the Tathāgatagarbha Theory), Tokyo, Shunjūsha, 1974.

2) Ven Walpola Rahula makes this correction as against the prevalent generaliza-

- tion that Theravāda practice aims not at Buddhahood but merely at arhantship. See his *Zen and the Taming of the Bull*, London: Gordon Fraser, 1978, pp. 71-77.
- 3) See Dr. Chinda Chandrkaew, *Nibbana: The Ultimate Truth of Buddhism*, Bangkok: Mahachula Buddhist University, 1982, pp. 70-87.
- 4) Nakamura Hajime, "Ningen Gotama no Shinkaku-ka" (The Divinization of the Man Gotama), *Gotama Buddha*, Tokyo, Shunjū-sha, 1969, pp. 487-525.
- 5) J. Takasaki, *A Study on the Ratnagotravibhāga (Uttaratantra) Being a Treatise on the Tathāgatarbha Theory of Mahāyāna Buddhism*, S. O. R. 33, Roma, Is-MEO, 1966, p. 62.
- 6) The RGV's version of the threefold Buddha-body theory is not in full agreement with the Vijñānavāda version. See R. Habito, "Daijōshōgon-kyōron to *Ku-kyōichijō-hōshoron* no Busshinron" (The Buddha-body theory of the *Mahāyanasūtrālamkāra* and the *Ratnagotravibhāga*) *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies*, Vol. XXVI No. 1, Dec. 1977, pp. 453-450.
- 7) Another commentary verse supports this reading of *çakti* as applying to both *jñāna* and *karuṇā*. See Johnston text, p. 8: 5—*çaktir jñanakṛpabhyām tu duḥkha kleṣanirbarhanāt.....*
- 8) See Aloysius Pieris, "The Colophon to the *Paramatthamañjūsā* and the Discussion on the Date of Ācariya Dhammapala" in Heinz Bechert, ed., *Buddhism in Ceylon and Studies in Religious Syncretism in Buddhist Countries*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1978, pp. 61-77.
- 9) Bhadantācariya Buddhagosa, *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, tr. by Bhikkhu Nāṇamoli, Colombo: R. Semage, 1956, pp. 206-230.
- 10) There is no present P. T. S. edition as yet available of the Pm., and for this present quotation I referred to M. Aloysius Pieris, *Some Salient Aspects of Consciousness and Reality in Pali Scholasticism as Reflected in the Commentaries of Ācariya Dhammapāla*, an unpublished Doctoral Dissertation for the Vidyodaya University of Ceylon, 1971. Cf. pp. 64-68. An English translation is also provided by Bhikkhu Nāṇamoli in his *Path of Purification* (op. cit.), p. 215, note.
- 11) *Majjhima Nikāya* III, 37; *Āṅguttara Nikāya* III, 285.
- 12) See Minoru Kiyota, "Tathāgatarbha Thought: A Basis of Buddhist Devotionalism in East Asia" in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 12, Nos. 2-3 (combined), June-Sept. 1985, pp. 207-231.
- 13) This paper is but a partial presentation of the author's ongoing research in the development of thought concerning the notion of Buddhahood throughout the history of Buddhism.

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