Unsettling Boundaries:
Verses shared by Śrāvaka and Mahāyāna texts

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Scholarship is comfortable with neat categories, and, by corollary, it is uncomfortable with ambiguity. In Buddhist studies, tradition divides Śrāvakayāna and Mahāyāna into discrete schools, or even opposing ‘churches’. Separate chapters are devoted to ‘Hīnayāna’ and ‘Mahāyāna’: narratives of Buddhist history start with the Buddha, the ‘rise of the sects’, and the ‘rise of Mahāyāna’. Our categories segregate schools and ideas, both synchronically and diachronically. Śrāvakayāna and Mahāyāna sleep in different beds, and dream different dreams.

That this is a caricature should be obvious. Mahāyāna and Śrāvakayāna grew up together, in dialogue and contention. They shared the same monasteries and the same refectories. Above all, partisans of Mahāyāna did not reject the Śrāvaka scriptures, or even their philosophies. Mahāyānists practiced the Vinaya, often quite earnestly, and studied the Sūtras and the Abhidharma. They shared the same vocabulary, and memorized and reflected upon similar māṇḍapī. It is true that Mahāyāna authors expanded the vocabulary by adding terms and categories—such as pūdgala-nairātmya or dharmaśūnyāta, or the three svabhāva, three kāya, or ten bhūmi. But so also did the Śrāvaka theorists, who introduced their own categories: the cītta-viprayukta-saṃskāra of the Sarvāstivāda, for example, or the thirty pāramī and twenty-four conditions (paccaya) of the Mahāvihāra. Linguistic and conceptual innovation is inevitable if a religion is to remain relevant.

Not only did the Mahāyānists read—and recite—Śrāvaka texts, but they also incorporated whole passages or similes into their own texts. Mahāyāna sūtras place these passages in new contexts, and reinterpret them to elaborate
the particular message of the particular sūtra. But there is not necessarily any real hermeneutical shift—the ideas, ethics, and inspirations are common, shared.

‘The benefits of listening’

An interesting example of the practice of incorporation is found in Chapter 11 of the Bodhisattvapiṭaka, a Mahāyāna sūtra belonging to the Ratnakūla collection. The sūtra does not survive in Sanskrit; for this study I use the Tibetan translation done by Surendrabodhi, Śīlendra, and Dharmatāśila ca. CE 800 (there is also a Chinese translation done by Xuanzang in CE 645). Chapter 11 contains gāthās with counterparts in the Śrutavarga of the Udānavarga, the well-known anthology of verses, and in the Gāndhārī Dharmapada.¹

The table gives a synoptic edition of the verses. Spoken by the Buddha to Śāriputra, they form a distinct set, framed by prose narrative. The numbering of the Bodhisattvapiṭaka verses in the table is my own, for the purposes of this article only. Verses 1 to 5 have counterparts in the gāthā literature, and are the subject of my discussion. Verse 6 is unique to the Bodhisattvapiṭaka. It may be said to appropriate the ideology of the preceding verses—on the benefits of listening—to apply them to the Bodhisattvapiṭaka itself:

Having listened to the Bodhisattvapiṭaka
Dwelling in the nature of things (dharmatā)
Becoming a light for the world (loka)

¹ Byan chub sems dpal sde snod žes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo, Otani Cat. no. 760. 12, Vol. 23, dKon brtsegs, vi. fol. 181b5 foll. See Pagel, The Bodhisattvapiṭaka, p. 341. Verses 3, 4, and 5 are repeated at vi 183a2 (Pagel p. 344), also as a set spoken by the Ten-Powered One to Śāriputra, framed by prose. The translation differs somewhat.
One practices the bodhisattva practice (*caryā*).

Verses 1, 2, 4, and 5 have counterparts in Chapter 15 of the Gāndhārī *Dharmapada*, where they occur in the same sequence, with one intervening verse (15: 11) not found in the *Bodhisattvapiṭaka*. Verses 1, 2, and 3 of *Bodhisattvapiṭaka* have counterparts in the Śrūtavarga, the ‘Chapter on Listening’, Chapter 22 of the *Udānavarga*. Of the five stanzas, only one—verse 4—has a Pāli counterpart, in the verses of Mahācunda in the *Theragāthā*. None of the other verses are found in Pāli.²

The correspondence between the *Bodhisattvapiṭaka* set and the Gāndhārī *Dharmapada* sequence is striking—but one key verse, verse 3, is missing. The verse reads:

> Having listened, one discriminates moral states;
> Having listened, one turns away from wrong behaviour;
> Having listened, one rejects the harmful;
> Having listened, one obtains nirvāṇa.

The stanza is found, so far, only in the *Bodhisattvapiṭaka* and the *Udānavarga*.³ It is not found in the Gāndhārī *Dharmapada* or Pāli *Dhammapada*. The other correspondences suggest, however, that the source from which the compilers or authors of the *Bodhisattvapiṭaka* drew the verses has some affiliation with the Gāndhārī *Dharmapada* and *Udānavarga* or their sources, against the Pāli tradition.

Verse 3 is cited and interpreted by Vasubandhu in his *Gāthāsamgraha*

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² Single lines of verse 5 do have partial parallels in Pāli: see Brough, p. 159.
³ The verse is also cited in Šamathadeva’s *Upāyikā-ṭikā* on the *Abhidharmakośa*; Otani Cat. no. 5595, Vol. 118, reprint p. 118. 5. 1. To complicate things, the verse is not found in the Chinese *Udānavarga* and in some Central Asian manuscripts.
and in his Vyākhya-yuktī. Further comments are provided by Guṇamati in his Vyākhya-yuktīṭika. The verse is also commented upon by Prajñāvarman in his Udānavargavivarana, along with the other Udānavarga verses. In his History of Buddhism, Bu ston Rin chen grub cites the stanza as from the Bodhisattvapiṭaka.

Verse 3 is instructive: important in some traditions (Bodhisattvapiṭaka, Udānavarga, the works of Vasubandhu), it is not even found in others (Pāli Dhammapada, Gāndhāri Dharmapadā). Furthermore, we have exegetical comments, in the Gāthasamgrahaśastrārtha, the Vyākhya-yuktī and its Ṭikā, and the Udānavargavivarana—all preserved in Tibetan translation only—which can be profitably consulted and compared. The last line is especially interesting, in the light of the development of an ideology which promises that hearing or listening to a text, often a Mahāyāna sūtra, will bring innumerable benefits, including nirvāṇa. Vasubandhu’s interpretations in the Vyākhya-yuktī are more prosaic: the line refers to the training in higher wisdom (adhiprajñāsikṣa) or the knowledge of the four truths (satya).

‘The Buddhas are inconceivable’

That the range of a Buddha is inconceivable is a theme upon which Mahāyāna sūtras often wax eloquent. The idea is found in the Agamas and Nikāyas, which list four inconceivabilities, one of which is that ‘the Buddha-range (buddhaviṣaya) of Buddhas is inconceivable’.

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5 rNam par bṣad pa’i rigs pa’i bṣad pa, Otani Cat. no. 5570, Vol. 114, sms tsam, i, fol. 166a7 foll., especially fol. 169b2 foll.
7 Bu ston Rin chen grub 1989, Chos ’byun, ya, fol. 3b6, byaṅ chub sms dpa’i sde snod las...; Obermiller I 9. Bu ston’s text is closer to Udānavarga than to Bodhisattvapiṭaka.
This inconceivability has many dimensions. The results of serene confidence in the inconceivable Buddhas are expressed in the following verse:⁸

\[
e\text{va}\text{ṃ hy } \text{a}c\text{inti}yā \text{ buddhā buddhadharmā } p\text{y } \text{acinti}yāh  \\
\text{acintiyē } \text{prasannānām vipākaś cāpy } \text{acinti}yāh.
\]

The verse belongs to a set of stanzas praising the benefits of making offerings to caityas of the Buddha. They are found in the Indranāmarāhmanā Avadāna (Divyāvadāna 6) and its parallel in the Bhaiṣajyavastu of the Mulasarvāstivādin Vinaya,¹⁰ in the Sudhanakumāra Avadāna (Divyāvadāna 31); and in a text on the benefits of caityas preserved in Tibetan translation, the Caityapradakṣiṇa-gāthā. In the latter, the acintiyā verse is translated as follows:¹¹

\[
dē ltar saṅg sgrigs bsam mi khyab, saṅs rgyas chos kyan bsam mi khyab,  \\
bsam mi khyab la dad rnam kyi, rnam pa smin pa'ani bsam mi khyab.
\]

A similar verse is cited alone as a ‘gāthā’ in the Karmavibhaṅgopadeśa.¹²

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⁸ acintiyo hi Buddhānāṃ buddhaviṣaya īty uktam bhagavatā: Abhidharmakośabhāṣya ad 2:62ab, Pradhan p. 99. 10; see also 7:48c, Pradhan 425. 12. For Pāli see Ānguttaranikāyā II 80. 17 buddhanāṃ bhikkhave buddhaviṣayo acinteyyo na cintetabbo yaṃ cinteto ummādassa vighatassā bhāgi assa. See also Šamathadeva 144. 1. 1.
⁹ Cowell and Neil, The Divyāvadāna, pp. 79. 10, 469. 5.
¹⁰ Dutt, Gilgit Manuscripts, Vol. III, Part 1, p. 78. 10. The verse that precedes our verse is also important, and is cited by Prajñākaramati in his Bodhicaryāvatārapañjika (see Vaidya, Bodhicaryāvatāra of Śāntideva, p. 202. 2). The verse is an expression of an ideology that stresses the value of offerings to the Buddha after his passing (nirvāṇa).
¹¹ mChad rten bkhor ba'i tshigs su bcad pa, Otani Cat. no. 987, Vol. 39, mdo, śu, 210a8; English translation in Crystal Mirror 12, p. 231.
evam acintiya buddho buddhadharma’py acintiyaḥ
[yadi dharma nv acintyo buddho ’py acintyo]¹³
acintyaprasannasya vipāko ’pi acintiyaḥ.

The verse is without context, although it comes at the end of a short citation of a sutra from the Ekottariya (that is, the Ekottariya-agama) which, in a Pāli parallel, the Aggappasadasutta, ends with a different set of verses, which are part of Siamese liturgy today.¹⁴

In a Sanskrit manuscript from Kutcha published by Lüders the verse occurs as follows.¹⁵

\[ \text{evam hy acittitā buddhā buddhadharmasya cittitā} \]
\[ \text{acittite prasādyeha vipākah syād acittitā.} \]

In Pāli the verse concludes the first section of the Apadāna, which bears the title Buddhāpadāniyam nama dhammadhāryam.¹⁶

\[ \text{evam acintiyā buddhā, buddhadhāmany acintiyā} \]
\[ \text{acintiyey [var. acintyesu] pasannānaṁ, vipāko hoti acintyio.} \]

Lévi notes two occurrences of the verse in the Mahāvamsa (XVII, 56 and XXXI, 125).

¹³ This unmetrical line may be an interpolation, a prose comment between the two lines of the verse: see Lévi, p. 154, n., ‘l’incise: yadi tava... est probablement une réflexion ajoutée par le commentateur de Karmavibhaṅgopadesa’.

¹⁴ Anguttaranikāya II, 34.


¹⁶ Apadāna, p. 6.
The texts cited so far belong to the Śrāvaka schools (with the exception, perhaps, of the manuscript from Kutchā). The verse is also be found in a Mahāyāna sūtra, the Mahākaraṇāpyūndarika-sūtra, as preserved in Tibetan translation:¹⁷

\[
d_{e \ l\ t\ a\ r \ s\ a\ n\ s \ r\ g\ y\ a\ s \ b\ s\ a\ m \ m\ i \ k\ h\ y\ a\ b, \ s\ a\ n\ g\ s \ r\ g\ y\ a\ s \ c\ h\ a\ s \ k\ y\ a\ n \ b\ s\ a\ m \ m\ i \ k\ h\ y\ a\ b \\
\ b\ s\ a\ m \ m\ i \ k\ h\ y\ a\ b \ l\ a \ d\ a\ d \ b\ y\ a\ s \ n\ a, \ d\ e \ y\ i \ n\ r\ a\ n \ s\ m\ i \ b\ s\ a\ m \ m\ i \ k\ h\ y\ a\ b.
\]

Lévi concludes that ‘évidemment le vers appartient à une tradition commune qui doit remonter assez haut; l’original s’en retrouvera sans doute dans les Āgamas. L’Upadeśa, comme le Divyāvādāna, a conservé une rédaction précrite.’ We may also include the stanza among the verses that are shared with Mahāyāna sūtras.

‘Health is the supreme blessing’

Verses are not only shared by Śrāvaka and Mahāyāna texts—they are also shared by Tantras. In the Vidyā-uttama-mahātantra, an udāna is spoken by the Vidyā to the Bhagavat:¹⁸

\[
b\ c\ o\ m \ l\ d\ a\ n \ 'd\ a\ s \ l\ a \ l\ a\ n \ g\ s\ m \ b\ s\ k\ o\ r \ b\ a \ b\ y\ a\ s \ t\ e, \ d\ e\ i \ t\ s\ h\ e \ c\ h\ e\ d \ d\ u \ b\ r\ j\ o\ d \ p\ a \ 'd\ i \\
\ c\ h\ e\ d \ d\ u \ r\ j\ o\ d \ d\ o:
\]

\[
n\ a\ d \ m\ e\ d \ p\ a \ n\ i \ r\ ñe\ d \ p\ a \ i \ m\ c\ h\ o\ g, \ c\ h\ o\ g \ s\ ë\ s \ p\ a \ n\ i \ n\ o\ r \ g\ y\ i \ m\ c\ h\ o\ g \\
\ y\ i\ d \ b\ r\ t\ a\ n \ p\ a \ n\ i \ g\ ñe\ n \ g\ y\ i \ m\ c\ h\ o\ g, \ m\ y\ a \ ña\ n \ 'd\ a\ s \ p\ a \ b\ d\ e \ b\ a\ i \ m\ c\ h\ o\ g.
\]

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¹⁷ sNyin rje chen po'i pad ma dkar po zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo, Tōhoku No. 111, mdo sde, cha, fol. 93a5.
¹⁸ Rig pa mchog gi rgyud chen po, Otani Cat. no. 402, Vol. 8, rgyud, tsa, fol. 331a5.
The verse has a counterpart in the Udānavarga (26: 6):

ārogyaparamā lābhā, sanmūṣṭiparamā̊ dhanam  
viśvāsaparamā̊ mitraṇ, nirvāṇaparamā̊ sukham.

The Tibetan translation of Udānavarga reads as follows:¹⁹

nad med rna'i dam pa ste, chog ses pa ni nor gyi dbyig  
yid gcugs ses pa'i mchog yin te, mya nān 'das pa bde ba'i phul.

The Vidyā-uttama verse was published and translated long ago in ‘Analysis of the Gyut’, by the worthy Hungarian scholar Alexander Csoma de Körös, published in Asiatic Researches in 1839:²⁰

Health is the chief acquirement.  
Content is the best riches.  
Firmness of mind is the best kinsmen.  
Deliverance from pain is the chief happiness.

The stanza is also found in the Pāli Dhammapada (v. 204) and the Gāndhārī Dhammapada (XI. 1 [162]).

Conclusions

I do not suggest, for a moment, that there were no distinctions or conflicts

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¹⁹ Dietz and Zongtse, Udānavarga, XXVI, 6.
between the Śrāvaka schools and the Mahāyāna. There were—and this is obvious from the polemic of many Mahāyāna sūtras and śāstras. Mahāyāna had its own self-consciousness. This is clearly expressed, for example, in the Suvarṇabhūṣottama-sūtra: ²¹

\[ \text{tena ca samayena tasmiṁ jambudvīpe dvidhāṛśṭiḥ sattvānām abhūt, kecin mahāyānam abhiśraddhayanti, kecit kutsayanti.} \]

At that time, in Jambudvīpa, there were two types of view for beings. Some had faith in the Mahāyāna. Some condemned it.

But can the study of the evolution of Buddhist thought and practice be framed in such broad, and essentially atemporal, strokes as Śrāvakayāna versus Mahāyāna? Does that not entail a priori judgements? At exactly what point does Śrāvakayāna end, and Mahāyāna begin? The verses cited here—and many other examples could be cited—show that the contents of 'Mahāyāna' sūtras are not exclusively 'Mahāyāna'. There is a great deal of common ground, common imaginaire, and common ideology. Furthermore, given that Mahāyāna is not a monolith—and indeed not an institution or historical entity as such—we should pay close attention to the unique messages and values of individual Mahāyāna sūtras. The debates that they embody are not only with the Śrāvaka schools, but also with other trends within the mainstream of Mahāyāna.

²¹ Nobel, Suvarṇabhūṣottamasūtra, p. 192. 7; Emmerick, The Sutra of Golden Light, p. 84.
Table. *Bodhisattvapitaka* verses with parallels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>Bodhisattvapitaka</em></th>
<th><em>Udānavarga</em> Tib. (Chap. 22, <em>Thos pa'i tshoms</em>)</th>
<th><em>Udānavarga</em> Skt. (Chap. 22, <em>Śrutavarga</em>)</th>
<th><em>Gāndhāri Dharmapada</em> (Chap. 15)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(dkon brtsegs, wi, 181b5)</td>
<td></td>
<td>yathā hy agāraṁ succhannam</td>
<td>yadha akara suchana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[1] ji ltar mun pas khyab</td>
<td>ji ltar khyim ni legs g'ygos pa mun pas khebs pa'i nañ ’ugs na</td>
<td>praviśya tamasā spuṭam vidyamāṇaṁ rūpāṇi</td>
<td>praviśi tamasarṇudu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bsgribs pa'i khyim du žugs par gyur na ni yod par gyur pa'i gzugs rnams kyañ</td>
<td>gzugs rnams yod par gyur kyañ ni mig ldan bžin du mi mthoṅ ba</td>
<td>caksuṣmāṁ hi na paśyati [3]</td>
<td>vijamaṇa vi ruveśu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mig giś mthoṅ bar mi ’gyur ro</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>cakhkṣuma vi na paśadi [9]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[2] de bžin du ni ’di la yañ la la'i mi dag skyes gyur kyañ dge ba dañ ni sdig pa'i chos ma thos par ni šes mi ’gyur</td>
<td>de bžin ’di ni rigs skyes pa'i mi ni bio gros ldan gyur kyañ sdig pa dañ ni dge ba'i chos ma thos bar du šes mi ’gyur [4]</td>
<td>tathaiveha naro nityaṁ jñānavān api yo bhavet aśrutvā na vijnāti</td>
<td>emam eva idh-ekacu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>dharmāṁ kalyāṇapāpakān [4]</td>
<td>jadima vi ca yo naro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>aşutva na vi’aṇadi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>dhama dhama kalaṇa-pavaka [10]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[3] thos nas chos rnams rnam par šes</td>
<td>thos pas chos rnams rnam par šes</td>
<td>śruttvā dharmāṁ vijnāti</td>
<td>[deest.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thos nas sdig pa sten mi byed</td>
<td>thos pas sdig las ldog par 'gyur</td>
<td>śruttvā pāpaṁ na sevate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thos nas gnod pa spoṅ bar byed</td>
<td>thos pas don med spoṅ bar byed</td>
<td>śruttvā hy anartham varjayate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thos nas mya ſan 'da' pa 'thob</td>
<td>thos pas mya ſan 'das pa 'thob</td>
<td>śruttvā prāpnoti nirvṛtim [6]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Gāthāsamgraha 13

thos pas chos ni bye brag śes
thos pas sdig las ldog par byed
thos pas don ma yin pa spoṅ
thos pas mya ṅan 'das pa thob

[4] thos par 'dod pas thos pa
'phel
thos pas śes rab 'phel par
'gyur
[byañ chub] 1 śes rab kyis ni
don rnams spyon [read: sbyon]
don thob nas ni bde 'thob 'gyur

[5] don thob de ni yid gzuṅs te
tshe 'di la ni mya ṅan 'das
chos la sbyor žiṅ gtsaṅ la
mkhas
šin tu bde ba thob par 'gyur

[6] byañ chub sems pa'i sde
snod ni
thos nas chos ŋid la gnas te
'jig rten gyi ni snaṅ gyur nas
byañ chub sems dpa'i spyad pa
spyod

[1] 'byañ chub' is an interpolation, to be deleted.

Theragāthā 141

sussūsā sutā-vaḍḍhanī
sutaṁ paññāya vaḍḍhanāṁ
paññāya atthāṁ jānāti
ñāto attho sukhāvaho

suṣuḍa ṣuḍa-vaḍḍhana
ṣuḍa praṇāya vaḍḍhadi
praṇa artha viṣodhedi
artha śudho suhava'ū [12]

so artha-ladhu medhavi
praṇa-śīla-samahidu
ṣuḍa-dhamu suyi-drakṣu
panodi paramu suhu [13]
REFERENCES

Unless otherwise noted, references to Pāli texts are to editions of the Pali Text Society. Pali and Sanskrit texts are cited by page and line number (00.00) or by chapter and verse (00:00). Unless otherwise noted, references to Tibetan texts are to D. T. Suzuki (ed.), The Tibetan Tripiṭaka, Peking Edition, kept in the library of the Otani University, Kyoto, Tokyo-Kyoto: Tibetan Tripitaka Research Institute.


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