

## **The Karma of Bodhisattva Devadatta** **The Story within the Story, the Sutra within the Sutras**

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Because Devadatta was a good friend to me [Śākyamuni Buddha], I was able to become fully developed in the six transcendental practices, in kindness, compassion, joy, and impartiality, . . . and the powers of the divine way. That I have attained impartial, proper awakening and saved many of the living is due to my good friend Devadatta.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

*Canonical scriptures.* Much of the traditional view of sutra literature in East Asian Mahayana Buddhism is canonical, established according to schools of practice and sectarian lines, most easily identifiable in the system of *panjiao* and *kyōsōhanjyaku*, the hierarchical systems of interpretive classification found in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism, and to some extent in Korean Buddhism. Thus, we have the *Flower Garland Sutra (Avataṃsaka sutra)* at the canonical pinnacle of the Huayan and Kegon; the *Lotus Sutra* of the Tiantai, Tendai, and Nichiren-based schools; and the Triple Pure Land Sutras (*Jōdo sanbukyō*) of Japanese Pure Land. In these religious contexts, the working understanding is that these scriptures represent for their respective schools/sects the deepest, most essential teachings of the Buddha, and that they were expounded as complete works, each an integrated whole.

*Redaction criticism.* The academic, philological and historiographical view of these texts differs from the traditional view and regards many if not most of them as complex compilations created over several decades or even centuries, passing through many hands and languages until they were redacted into the versions we have today. While this view of philological and redaction analysis calls into question the traditional canonical view, it still remains within the model of bound texts as whole scriptures even if it takes an evolutionary or process view of redaction criticism.

*Narrative strands.* There is another approach that can be taken to the sutra literature, which is to think of them as constellations of patterns consisting of narrative threads. Populated by a multitude of historical personages, celestial beings, and creatures from various realms of existence, the stories of the pantheon of these beings weave themselves in and out of the sutra literature. As characters within the larger fabric of the sutras as a whole, they evolve and morph in a wide variety of ways. The image of the Buddha Śākyamuni of the Nikāya literature is one of a great but human teacher who faced challenges and crises while exercising his remarkable teaching and healing abilities. The Śākyamuni that appears in the *Lotus Sutra*, in contrast, is more that of an eternal, cosmic being, transcendent in his reach and omniscience. While these two images may seem incommensurable, Buddhist thought provides numerous conceptions for reconciling diverse discourses, such as the Mahayana theory of the *trikāya*, or three buddha-bodies, that range of the human physical form to the cosmic truth of formlessness or emptiness. Śākyamuni appears in many suttas and sutras, and if one were to weave together the hundreds of narratives in which he appears, the resulting tapestry would offer a colorful account. One such compilation is *Buddha-Dharma: The Way to Enlightenment*,<sup>2</sup> which combines sources from the Nikāya and Mahayana literatures in English-language translation, and contains an appendix listing all sources.

Setting aside the question of how the selections were made, this account provides a remarkably coherent narrative of the life of the Buddha. Throughout the development of Buddhism, many followers read sutras and other Buddhist literature with overlapping narratives from different sources. Thus, even if the selective compilation of narrative threads such as is found in *Buddha-Dharma: The Way of Enlightenment* is unusual in its written form, no doubt narrative strands of key figures beginning with Śākyamuni were inscribed into sacred scriptures in the mental topos of many Buddhists' imagination.

*Devadatta.* Here we examine the narrative strands of another figure that recurs in the Buddhist imaginary, that of the controversial Devadatta, the “evil cousin” of the Buddha Śākyamuni who in the early literature attempts to steal away both the authority and the members of the Buddha's sangha but in the Mahayana comes to be extolled as a bodhisattva. Inseparable from Devadatta is the story of Prince Ajātaśatru who, instigated by Devadatta, comes to murder his father King Bimbisāra and imprison his mother Queen Vaidehī. One of the keys to their accounts is the concept of karma, which can help form the conceptual framework for unifying the diverse strands of Devadatta and his unwitting co-conspirator Ajātaśatru.

*Devadatta: Individual and Collective Karma.* Generally, the most well-known narrative of Devadatta is that of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni's “evil cousin,” who seeks to usurp his religious authority and replace him as the leader of the sangha. In order to gain the financial and political backing he needs, he works his way into the good graces of Prince Ajātaśatru (Pali: Ajātasattu) by disclosing to the latter the dark story of his conception. He thereby convinces Ajātaśatru to imprison his father King Bimbisāra, take over the throne, and become Devadatta's patron. Ultimately, when the Buddha exposes him as an arrogant, prideful usurper, Devadatta plots to murder him, variously by striking him with a boulder or charging him with a thicket of poisoned thorns. However, Devadatta is the one who falls into the thicket himself, and in his agony, the earth opens up to swallow him and drop him into hell.

On the one hand, this is a cautionary tale regarding greed, ambition, and blind passion presented under the guise of exceptional karmic evil. In that sense, Devadatta and Ajātaśatru become the straw men to avoid, unusual cases of dark and insidious behavior presented for heuristic purposes, to keep the majority in the safe zone of morality. On the other, one can just as well argue that Devadatta and Ajātaśatru have the opposite function: They become emblematic of the collective karmic evil of their times, and even of all times, within the larger Buddhist narrative of the continual decline of the Dharma, collective institutional corruption, social decay, and even ecological ruin. However, there is yet another unexpected turn in the story. In the *Lotus Sutra*, and then in the hands of such interpreters as Shinran and Nichiren, these figures turn out to be Bodhisattvas, the very paragons of virtue, blazing their way to awakening.

In the context of this conference, in which we examine the contemporary as well as historical significance of the *Lotus Sutra* and related textual narratives, some may argue that we today live in a time of collective karmic darkness, a time not just of historical decline but a watershed moment in species decline for *homo sapiens*. In that light, could it be the case that Devadatta stands before us, holding forth the karmic mirror of the Dharma so that we can each see, individually and collectively, the depth of our own darkness, yet in such a way that it holds the glimmer of an awakening beyond?

## Sources of the Devadatta Narratives

In this paper, the sources of the Devadatta narratives are examined more closely than those of Ajātaśatru, which in itself is a complex topic. Many of the methodological issues could be applied to both, but for the purposes of the present, Ajātaśatru is treated as ancillary to Devadatta.

Reginald Ray has undertaken a thorough examination of the early Devadatta accounts, summarizing and building upon the earlier textual analyses provided by Biswaded Mukherjee and André Bareau.<sup>3</sup> Accounts of Devadatta appear with the Jātaka tales, in the Vinaya Pitaka, and the Sutta Pitaka. According to Ray, the earliest accounts are to be found largely in the Vinaya but excluding the later Jātaka tale accounts. The Jātaka are widely viewed as later accretions, and depending on the school, not included in the Vinaya.

Very briefly, Ray combines the findings of Mukherjee and Bareau, finding that three core episodes are found in common across five Vinaya accounts, in the first and second books, or the *Vibhaṅga* and *Khandaka* (*Cullavagga*), all ultimately deriving from the Sthavira. First, Devadatta, alarmed with the laxity of the monkhood, proposes that monks follow five precepts strictly: 1) monks should live entirely in the forest, 2) they should live entirely by alms-begging and not accept meals directly offered to them, 3) they should only wear robes made of discarded rags, 4) they should only live outdoors and not under sheltered roofs, and 5) they should follow a strictly vegetarian diet. Second, when the Buddha accepts that monks *may* commit to these precepts, but that not all are *required* to follow all of them, Devadatta instigates a schism, through which he convinces five hundred monks to follow him and to establish a separate order or sangha. Third, these monks are won back through the work of the Buddha's disciples Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana.

Ray makes the point that these three core episodes are all found in schools derived from the Sthavira – the Theravāda, Dharmaguptaka, Mahīśāsaka, Sarvāstivāda, and Mulasarvāstivāda. These core episodes are also found in the Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya but with a significant qualifier. Of the first two books of the Vinaya, the *Vibhaṅga* and the *Khandhaka*, all five schools share the accounts found in the *Vibhaṅga*. Four schools share the accounts found in the *Khandhaka* with the sole exception of the Mahāsāṃghika. In the *Khandhaka* of the Mahāsāṃghika, the core of the account is that at Upāli's request, the Buddha briefly defines *saṃghabeda*, or schism in the sangha. All of the other sources culminate with this brief exchange but lead up to it with variously detailed descriptions of Devadatta provocation, the schism in the sangha, and the return of the five hundred *bhiksus* to the Buddha's fold.

Because the *Khandhaka* of the Mahāsāṃghika contains the sparsest account, and also because the Mahāsāṃghika sources are regarded by many to be generally the oldest, Ray concludes that the villainous characterization of Devadatta is a later development, largely sourced in the Sthaviras and absent in the Mahāsāṃghikas. Of course, one must keep in mind that the only full account extant in the Pāli is that of the Theravāda, and that the canons of the other schools are derived from mostly Chinese, and in one case, Tibetan translations.

## Devadatta as the Emblem of Schism

Regardless, Ray seeks the answer to the question of why the Sthavira might have embellished the Devadatta narrative to the point ultimately of depicting him as ambitious, arrogant, vile, and evil. Taken by itself, the supposedly earlier account of Devadatta is of a monk who insists on a more disciplined and less worldly practice, one who advocates this for himself and others. While this leads to a temporary schism in

the sangha, it makes him at worst overzealous and at best one of the purest monks, one who in the *Udana*, one of the scriptures of the Khuddaka Nikāya is counted by the Buddha himself as among eleven arhats such as Sāriputta, Mahākassapa, and Ānanda who is Devadatta's brother.

Ray's answer to his own question, of the source of the later, villainous account of Devadatta, is to be found in the historical schism between the Sthavira and Mahāsāṃghika. In his view, the Sthavira represented the emergence and predominance of the city-dwelling, settled monkhood who found the more worldly image of monks who did not have to dwell in the forest alone, who could receive gifts of meals and robes, whose diet was not restricted per se, and so forth. The implication is clearly that the "evil" Devadatta is a fiction, a concoction in order to reinforce the image of the monkhood favorable to the Sthaviras whereas the true monk, the monk who lived according to the model originally established by the Buddha himself, was actually much closer to that advocated by the Mahāsāṃghika, and who risked a schism in the attempt to re-establish the pure order of the monkhood, even at the risk of alienating the Buddha himself, who in his old age had lost his edge and was out of touch with the true spirit of practice,.

As if to confirm the historicity of this account, Ray recounts the research on the Chinese monks Faxian and Xuanzang who made pilgrimages to India and confirmed the existence of Devadatta sanghas in the fifth and seventh centuries, respectively. Faxian confirmed the existence of a sangha that paid homage to Devadatta and followed earlier buddhas but not Śākyamuni. Xuanzang confirmed the existence of Devadatta monks in Bengal who had a prohibition against milk products, suggesting the stricter set of monastic regulations advocated by Devadatta. Here, in contrast to the emphasis on the legendary nature of many of the Devadatta accounts, Ray focuses on the likely historicity of Devadatta through his followers centuries later.

### **Devadatta, Extreme Perfectionism, and Karma**

In "A Buddha and His Cousin," Richard Hayes gives the opposing point of view.<sup>4</sup> He accepts the popular account of the villainous Devadatta who ends up dying entangled in his own thicket of poison thorns, meeting the ignominious end of falling into hell as the earth swallows him up. However, Hayes' primary focus is on Devadatta's extreme perfectionism, one that is so strident as to challenge the Buddha's own ethical standing and religious authority. Since the majority of early Devadatta narratives share his advocacy of the five strict precepts, subsequent schism, and the return to the sangha of the five hundred wayward monks, Hayes is philologically on fairly firm footing in terms of the data upon which he draws. His point is that the outward perfectionism masks the inner turmoil over a sense of inferiority and the failure to attain an unrealistic ideal.

As A. M. Hocart states, this was no ordinary case of jealousy because of the familial relations involved. Devadatta and the Buddha were not just cousins, they were cross-cousins:

Anyone who has the slightest acquaintance with kinship systems will immediately diagnose the case. It is the cross-cousin system, under which a man's children are expected to marry his sister's children, but not his brother's children. In technical language a man marries his cross-cousin, a term invented to express the fact that they are cousins through parents of opposite sexes. Such a form of marriage results in a system of reckoning kin, in which the maternal uncle is the same as the father-in-law, the paternal aunt as the mother-in-law, and so forth.<sup>5</sup>

He goes on to say,

The reader will long ago have seen what we were coming to, namely to the conclusion that the rivalry of Buddha and Devadatta is an echo of the friendly and ceremonial antagonism of cross-cousins. We must leave it undecided, however, whether there existed between the Buddha and his cousin a friendly feud, which, with the disappearance of the custom, was misinterpreted as a bitter enmity; or whether in those days an originally friendly opposition had degenerated into hate; or whether, finally, there never was such a rivalry between the two, but traditions of cross-cousin rivalry became attached to the pair.

Of course, for our purposes it does make a difference what kind of rivalry it might actually have been. Yet, like Hocart, we cannot read the minds of Devadatta and the Buddha from a vantage point so far removed. One can, however, make a few observations. If, as Hocart points out, the cross-cousin rivalry was a well-established pattern within early Indian society, then this was no ordinary cross-cousin rivalry. One can only imagine being put in the position of being expected to compete with the Buddha. Could one even imagine a “friendly rivalry” with the Buddha? Whatever rivalry might have existed could also have been intensified precisely by Devadatta’s capabilities. Those who have the abilities with which he is attributed – intellectual acumen, charisma, powers of spiritual cultivation – might all the more have felt intense jealousy, rivalry, and inferiority. Hayes, in formulating his own thesis of extreme perfectionism, draws upon his own subjective experience of perfectionism and its crippling effects. There is an even further factor in play. Devadatta was Ānanda’s elder brother, so that within the family genealogical tree, Devadatta was Ānanda’s senior. However, of the two, Ānanda was the favored disciple of the Buddha, his right hand man. One can easily imagine that this only fueled Devadatta’s jealousy and fury.

This is where we begin to see the applicability of the concept of karma as an analytical tool for understanding the Devadatta narrative. Due to his social station and even his capabilities, Devadatta may have been placed in karmically volatile circumstances. Nevertheless, the intention would have to come from him. It would be his decision, his karma, as to how he would receive the moment and act upon it. Or, could it be the case that the underlying karmic momentum was so great that he could not help but be swept up by the blind passions and violent emotions that irrupted within?

### **Prince Ajātaśatru’s Karma**

Of the early narratives of the life of the Buddha that could be considered emblematic of the notion of karma, the story of Ajātaśatru certainly stands out. A prince and later king of the large Magadha empire, he figures prominently not only in early Buddhist accounts but in Jain accounts as well and is considered a major figure of early Indian history. As qualified earlier, only a few key moments of the Ajātaśatru narratives are recounted here, and we begin by noting that the early Jain and Buddhist accounts share a key component of Ajātaśatru’s early childhood karmic fate.

In both the Jain and Buddhist accounts, Queen Vaidehī (in actuality probably referring to two different consorts of Bimbisāra in the Jain and Buddhist accounts) has a dark premonition at the time of conception, due to her desire to partake of King Bimbisāra’s flesh or blood. She feels that somehow this demonic desire to consume her husband would manifest in the child, and so the infant boy is discarded in the trash. The baby Ajātaśatru develops a boil on his finger, and the King, discovering his son in such a sorry state, saves him, sucks the bloody boil, and raises him with love. Karmically, this episode is

emblematic of an ambiguous love-hate relationship between parent and child. In the early Buddhist account, Ajātaśatru goes on to become a follower and patron of the Buddha whereas in the Jain account, he becomes a follower and patron of Mahāvīra.

The early Jain and Buddhist accounts differ on one significant episode, that of Ajātaśatru's demise. In the Buddhist account, Ajātaśatru is assassinated by his son Udayabhadra who thus perpetuates the karmic cycle of suffering. In the Jain account, Ajātaśatru is struck down by the guardian Deva Krutamāl in the king's ambition to join the ranks of the elite cakravartin or world-rulers. Regardless, later accounts recount up to ten generations of regicide at the hands of the crown prince, reinforcing the narratives of samsaric suffering. Thus, Ajātaśatru's spiritual transformation under the guidance of Mahāvīra or Śākyamuni Buddha, respectively, while sufficient to turn a life of karmic agony into partially successful kingship, is not sufficient to entirely extinguish the momentum of destructive karma.

The karmic parent-child love-hate relationship at the core of this negative karmic momentum is elaborated in later Mahayana Sutras. In particular, in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, the accounts of the *Meditation Sutra on Eternal Life* (*Kan muryō jukyō*) and *Nirvana Sutra* come to play key roles, due to their citation by Shinran, founder of Shin Buddhism, in his *magnum opus*, the *Kyōgyōshinshō*.

### **Ajātaśatru in the *Kyōgyōshinshō***

Marie Yoshida has summarized the account of Ajātaśatru in the *Kyōgyōshinshō* as follows:<sup>6</sup>

The general outline of this story is that a king and queen, Bimbisāra and Vaidehī, are unable to conceive a child and go to a seer for advice. The seer tells them that a certain hermit upon his death will be reborn as their son, the crown prince. Unable to wait for his passing, the king and queen murder him. Thus are planted the seeds of anger, betrayal, and hatred; the hermit on this deathbed vows to take revenge upon them. Realizing what they have done, the king decides to kill the infant. To make a long story short, his human love overcomes his fear, and the king dotes on the boy. As a prince, Ajātaśatru is befriended by the Buddha's evil cousin Devadatta, who convinces the crown prince to plot to overtake the throne and become his benefactor. The king cedes the throne to Ajātaśatru believing that his son will reign peacefully, but the newly crowned King Ajātaśatru throws his father into prison with the intention of starving him to death. When the new king finds out that his mother, Queen Vaidehī, has been stealing food into Bimbisāra's prison, he commands the court barber to cut open the king's feet and torture him. Bimbisāra dies in agony, but when Ajātaśatru has his own child, he asks his mother Vaidehī about his father's love for him. When he learns of his father's great love, he breaks down in agonized remorse. Both the queen and the prince seek out the Buddha's teachings for relief from their suffering, and both become devoted followers of the Buddha Śākyamuni.

The key features of the earliest Indian accounts are retained. The effect of additional elements, such as the dramatic account of the murder of the hermit, simply amplifies the karmic ambiguity indicated in the earlier accounts and provides needed explanatory narrative.

What becomes explicit in the expanded account is the karmic burden of the parent-child relationship. Social pressures and personal desire dictate the need to have a child, the boy who would be heir to the throne. For this reason, he is not loved or seen for who he is, just this human being, Ajātaśatru. He is rather a means-to-an-end. He, in turn, is not able to see or accept his parents as necessarily fallible,

finite human beings.

For the purposes of the present, the effect of this account is to accentuate the theme of karma not only in the account of Ajātaśatru but Devadatta as well. Within this narrative Devadatta, whether fully conscious or not, sees the “opportunity” to exploit Ajātaśatru’s karmic vulnerability. Of course, Devadatta has his own blind spots, does not recognize his own karmic vulnerability to jealousy, ambition, and greed, and he sets off a fateful turn of events that carries consequences for generations to come.

### **Karma and Liberation**

Historically, Buddhism has been a religion of liberation, but of course, “liberation” is an English word with its own history and connotations. It is a translation for *mokṣa*, which in the traditionally Buddhist context has carried a distinct religious meaning, having to do with release from suffering, of all kinds, but in particular the karmic suffering of existence itself, defined as release from the continual cycle of rebirth. Liberation in the Western context has also signified release from suffering, but in the modern context the suffering from which one becomes liberated has often carried the connotation of liberation from social, political, and economic oppression.

These two senses of liberation are not mutually exclusive. There have been a significant number of Asian Buddhists throughout its history that have variously worked to liberate suffering beings from forms of worldly oppression within the larger framework of its soteriology. In the modern context, Western forms of social and environmental activism have combined with Buddhist thought and practice, resulting in what has come to be known as Engaged Buddhism.

This has led to the development of Buddhist movements to address social concerns of gender, class, and sexual orientation inequality, the creation of specific programs to address areas of need that include Buddhist chaplaincy and hospice, the ordination of Buddhist nuns freed from the strictures of male-dominated institutions, and the creation of Buddhist-influenced schools and medical facilities. Many of these developments have occurred in Asia as well as in other parts of the world.

Now may be an opportune moment to re-examine some of the assumptions behind what “liberation” signifies as Buddhism continues to evolve in its many forms. In particular, this is because global society may be situated at a critical historical juncture that calls into question some of the assumptions that have driven the development of human culture. It is not news to say that we face many challenges: climate change, peak oil, overfishing, water shortages, top soil erosion, chemical pollutants, nuclear radiation fallout, overcrowding, global financial crises, military conflicts, and the list goes on. Even compared to a few decades ago, many experts and scientists concur that the challenges we face today are formidable. Leading researchers and organizations, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), have delivered assessments that it is already too late to avoid drastic, negative consequences for the human biosphere in the near term.<sup>7</sup> Even if we were able to implement the best available technology in the shortest realistic time frame, it would not be enough. Add to this the social, cultural, and political obstacles that need to be overcome, and there appears to be limited hope of stemming the tide of destructive consequences that the human species has set in motion over the past century and a half.

## **A Problem of Karma**

The modern mindset is a problem-solving one, or as Charles Taylor has noted, a mindset based on procedural reason.<sup>8</sup> In many ways, the human species in our technological, information, and internet age has become the most successful problem-solving species in the history of evolution. Yet, it may very well be the case that we are reaching the limits of our problem solving or procedural approach to life.

Among the millions of species that have come and gone on the face of the earth, we have come to dominate its lands and waters in an unprecedented manner. What took the earth's ecosystem hundreds of millions of years to produce - crude oil - we have likely consumed half or more within just a century or two. We are the largest force bringing accelerated changes to the climate, changes that are occurring so quickly that we as a species are unlikely to be able to adapt to them. Each year, scientists are surprised to find that the scientific evidence indicates changes are occurring even more quickly than estimates made just a few years ago.

Is the human species so exceptional that we can consume and dominate planetary resources to such an extent, and expect to continue on our current trajectory for the foreseeable future? It is not as if we did not have foreknowledge of the many crises we face, or even the technology to address them. Why have we placed ourselves in such a difficult situation?

From a Buddhist perspective, the current historical situation can be understood in terms of karma. Although we knew of many of the impending problems decades ago, and may have had the necessary technology or methods to address them, as a species we have failed to take sufficient action. In a word, we have failed to address our karmic circumstances. Whether due to greed, ignorance, or generally negative karmic inertia, we have failed to act, in our own best interests and in the interests of the biosphere as a whole. If, then, the problems we face are reframed in terms of karma, will we be able to address our dilemmas? Buddhist conceptions of karma suggest that there are possibilities, but perhaps not in the way that one might suppose.

## **Time and Karmic Evolution: The Long View**

When we look back at the history of Buddhist thought, what is interesting is that the current turn of events is not entirely unexpected. Both in the early teachings of the Nikāya literature,<sup>9</sup> and in the later Mahayana, the predominant theme has been not of karmic progress over time, but rather of karmic decline. This stands in contrast to the modern Western view of history, which has generally been progressive. The current crises appear to be overwhelming because they raise serious questions about our progressive expectations that we will always be able to solve our problems and create a continually better future for our species as a whole. In that sense, the Buddhist view of decline may be easier to reconcile with current trends in such areas as climate change and resource depletion. Yet, how can Buddhists remain optimistic and look towards a promising future if their dominant narrative has been one of continual karmic decline?

In order to answer this question, it is first necessary to understand the assumptions behind the modern Western view of time, which is that 1) time is real, 2) it is linear, and 3) it is progressive. 1) Time, and in particular history, for the modern consciousness, is imbued with a sense of ontological reality. That is, historical events really happen in a permanent way, so that once something happens it is a fact that cannot be undone. 2) Time is linear, so that once something happens, it becomes a permanent part of the past, and the future is built upon it. 3) Although there are ups and downs, the predominant tone of



Western history is that there is real progress, in technology, economic prosperity, and social equality. These views are deeply imbedded in our culture and are not easily dislodged, even when there is evidence to the contrary.

Buddhist views of time, especially as found in East Asian Mahayana, tend to emphasize that 1) time is illusory, a human construct, and therefore not fixed, but fluid. 2) In the long view, time is generally described in cyclical terms, so that events in time have a repetitive, rather than unique, character. 3) In the current phase of time (time since the Buddha Śākyamuni), we are in a period of karmic decline rather than of ascent or progress. References to karmic decline begin with the early Nikāya literature and become formalized in later Mahayana Buddhism with the notion of the Three Dharma Ages culminating in the Final Dharma Age (Ch. *mofa*; Jpn. *mappō*):<sup>10</sup> The period of the True Dharma, followed by the Semblance Dharma, and then the Final Dharma Age in which there is not even the semblance of proper practice. In this Final Age, there is corruption in Buddhist institutions, breakdown of Buddhist practice, social disorder, and even disruptions in climate (!), all caused by human folly and excess. Exceptional individuals may be quite enlightened; it is the *collective* karma of the species that dooms it to self-destruction.<sup>11</sup>

In Buddhism the long view of human karmic evolution is a positive one, since all beings eventually attain buddhahood, having exhausted the karmic inertia of rebirth. By “long view” is meant a very long time, time that is potentially cosmic in scale. This combination of shorter term karmic decline but longer term awakening can have a salutary effect on present awareness, since all karmic actions still matter. That is, no matter what one does, actions still carry consequences. Good actions beget positive results. Destructive actions beget suffering. However, one simply cannot predict when these consequences will result. They could occur within one lifetime, or they could take many lifetimes. One may not even be reborn as a human being by the time the benefits of good actions are realized. Or, these actions may benefit the self in the sense of the larger web of interdependence from which the finite self is inseparable. Regardless, actions, good or bad, inevitably have consequences.

One might suppose that, since all beings inevitably attain enlightenment, it does not matter what one does in the present. One can do anything one wants. Yet, anyone with a conscience surely wants to do good, and for one’s efforts to make a difference. For most people, as long as one is concerned about one’s own destiny, consequences do matter. Ultimately, expanding the scope of the consequences of one’s actions into future lifetimes, out to a cosmic scale, makes one realize that the worthiness of the action in and of itself is what matters, not the expectation for an immediate result. Because one cannot control when the consequences will bear fruit, one can only focus on the *quality* of the action and the attention one gives it in the present moment. It is not that results don’t matter; rather, results will take care of themselves.

### **The Buddha: The Great Hesitation and Karmic Revolution**

This view of human karmic limitations in the present that complements the long view of karmic consequences became formalized in the theory of the Three Dharma Ages, but precursors can be seen in the earliest history of Buddhism, in the period immediately following the Buddha’s enlightenment. The moment of awakening itself is described in vivid terms, according to the words the Buddha himself is said to have uttered,

“Through many a birth in samsara have I wandered in vain, seeking the builder of this house (of life). Repeated birth is indeed suffering! O house-builder, you are seen! You will not build this house again. For your rafters are broken and your ridgepole shattered. My mind has reached the Unconditioned; I have attained the destruction of craving.”<sup>12</sup>

As dramatic as this statement is, just as intriguing is the suspense that followed, as the Awakened One contemplated his future direction. When, after six long years in search of enlightenment, Siddhartha Gautama awoke from his meditation under the Bodhi tree and became Śākyamuni Buddha, his first impulse was not to go out and share his realization of liberation. Rather, his initial reaction was to remain silent, living out his days as a wandering mendicant, having broken the bonds of attachment to a self that he discovered never existed in the first place. According to the account found in the Nikāya literature,

When the Blessed One was newly Self-awakened . . . this line of thinking arose in his awareness: "This Dhamma that I have attained is deep, hard to see, hard to realize, peaceful, refined, beyond the scope of conjecture, subtle, to-be-experienced by the wise. . . . For a generation delighting in attachment, . . . this/that conditionality and dependent co-arising are hard to see. This state, too, is hard to see: the resolution of all fabrications, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; Unbinding. And if I were to teach the Dhamma and if others would not understand me, that would be tiresome for me, troublesome for me."<sup>13</sup>

This was the moment of the Buddha's Great Hesitation, which, if he had remained there, would have resulted in a world without Buddhism. One way to interpret this moment of hesitation is to see it in terms of his karmic awareness. On the one hand, he may have understood the karmic limitations of his circumstances, the inability of those he would teach, as well as his own inability to lead and to teach: "For a generation delighting in attachment, . . . this/that conditionality and dependent co-arising are hard to see. . . . And if I were to teach the Dhamma and if others would not understand me, that would be tiresome for me, troublesome for me." On the other, the Buddha's awareness of karmic limitations may have gone hand in hand with his awareness of karmic responsibility. The deeper he became aware of others' and his own attachments (his own attachment to his enlightenment), the more he became aware of his responsibility for liberating all beings from their attachments. Finally, he made the determination to go forth and teach, taking cosmic responsibility for the unending chain of karmic consequences.

The concerns he expressed in his moment of great hesitation turned out to be prescient. As the sangha grew, and the Buddha continued to teach, he faced many difficulties. He witnessed the invasion of his father's kingdom by the larger, neighboring kingdom of Kosala. At first, the Buddha was successful in peaceably turning back the Kosala army. However, the Kosala army returned again and again, and eventually they would not be denied.<sup>14</sup> Within the sangha, his own cousin Devadatta plotted to usurp the Buddha's authority and to steal away his monks.

Of course, the Kosala army's aggression was not his fault; neither were his cousin's jealousy and ambition. Yet, in a deeper sense, one could say, the Buddha saw them as belonging within the larger circle of his karmic responsibility. If he had been the perfect teacher, the complete teacher, might he been able to show the Kosala army the meaninglessness of their aggression? If he had been a truly great teacher, might he been able to diffuse Devadatta's jealousy and lead him instead to enlightenment? Could

it even have been the case that, had Siddhartha not become the Buddha, Devatta also would not have become the jealous cousin in the first place? If it is true that even the Buddha had his karmic limitations as a teacher, then how much more so the sangha as a whole as it grew larger, more complex, composed of individuals with varying degrees of spiritual maturity.

Ultimately, it might not make much difference who the “actual” historical Devadatta was: the pure monk who sought to rejuvenate the sangha with greater discipline or the evil one who plotted to displace the Buddha out of greed. If one sees a certain truth to the Buddhist narrative of decline deeply rooted in its earliest history, then Devadatta merely becomes the emblematic character that illustrates this decline. If he is pure, then those who turn away from his purity, in the early sangha, and among the Sthaviras, are the ones who initiate and are implicated in this decline. If he is evil, then he is the one who carries the burden of the image this narrative for later generations.

Perhaps the Buddha, in the moment of his awakening, had already anticipated the potential troubles that would follow, and the eventual decline of the sangha and its wider social and ecological ramifications. Regardless, what began as a narrative moment of Great Hesitation became the moment of Karmic Revolution, the Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma, in which the Buddha took the long view, the cosmic view, of his karmic responsibility, and the fact that each karmic action, however great or small, would bear the stamp of his commitment to help liberate all sentient beings.

### **Bodhisattva Devadatta**

The figure of Devadatta, the Buddha’s evil cousin, became emblematic in Mahayana Buddhism of the sense that the karmic chain of cause and effect ultimately includes everyone, and that one’s own liberation is inseparable from the liberation of all sentient beings.

For example, in the *Lotus Sutra*, Devadatta appears as a holy seer who becomes a bodhisattva. The Buddha expounds:

“Throughout those many eons I was a king who vowed to seek unexcelled awakening. Never faltering, and wanting to become fully developed in the six transcendental practices, the king diligently and unstintingly gave alms . . . not sparing his body or life. . . .

“Then a seer came to the king and said: ‘I have a Great Vehicle sutra named the *Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Dharma*. If you will obey me, I will explain it for you.’ Hearing what the seer said, the king became ecstatic with joy and immediately went with him, providing for his needs, . . . even offering his body as a seat and bed yet never feeling tired physically or emotionally. . . .

“The king at that time was me and the seer was the present Devadatta. Because Devadatta was a good friend to me I was able to become fully developed in the six transcendental practices, in kindness, compassion, joy, and impartiality, . . . and the powers of the divine way. That I have attained impartial, proper awakening and saved many of the living is due to my good friend Devadatta.”<sup>15</sup>

If we read this account of Devadatta as the Buddha’s teacher or bodhisattva and reflect back on the earlier accounts, one might say that, in the moment of the Buddha’s karmic revolution, in his commitment to the turning of the Wheel of the Dharma, deep down he vowed to follow his cousin until he could see his cousin’s karma as his own, their lives karmically inseparable, such that the Buddha’s true liberation could not occur without Devadatta’s liberation. Of course, at a practical level, it would not do to condone

Devadatta's insurrection, for either the sake of the sangha or for Devadatta himself. At the religious level of awareness, however, to simply treat Devadatta as incorrigibly evil (and the Buddha as pure good) fails to take into account the deep karmic intertwinings between the Buddha's own life and that of his cousin.

In the same vein, Shinran, the Japanese Pure Land teacher, interpreting the story of Devadatta as related in the Pure Land scriptures, states in the "Preface" to his major work, the *Kyōgyōshinshō*:

I reflect within myself: The universal Vow difficult to fathom is indeed a great vessel bearing us across the ocean difficult to cross. The unhindered light is the sun of wisdom dispersing the darkness of our ignorance. Thus it is that, when conditions for the teaching of birth in the Pure Land had matured, Devadatta provoked Ajātaśatru to commit grave crimes. And when the opportunity arose for explaining the pure act by which birth is settled, Śākyamuni led Vaidehī to select the land of peace. In their selfless love, these incarnated ones - Devadatta, Ajātaśatru, Vaidehī - all aspired to save the multitudes of beings from pain and affliction, and in his compassion, Śākyamuni, the great hero, sought indeed to bless those committing the five grave offenses, those slandering the dharma, and those lacking the seed of Buddhahood.<sup>16</sup>

Like the rendering of Devadatta in the *Lotus Sutra*, the Buddha's cousin who appears to Shinran does so against the cosmic background of the Buddha's karmic responsibility to "transform our evil into virtue" of those "lacking the seed of Buddhahood." As teachers who bring this lesson to sentient beings, both Devadatta and Ajātaśatru are said to act out of "selfless love."

This is also the manner in which Nichiren interprets the figure of Devadatta as he appears in the *Lotus Sutra*: "Devadatta represents the world of hell. The '*dragon girl*' represents the Buddha realm. However, the ten worlds are mutually possessed, which equal a hundred realms, a thousand realities and three thousand realms."<sup>17</sup> The deepest truth of karma is to be found in the interpenetration of Buddha and Devadatta, of awakening and delusion.

Thus, the moment of karmic revolution is the moment in which the separation between the saint and the sinner, the Awakened One and the Evil Cousin are dissolved in the mutual embrace of karmic responsibility. It is also the moment in which one is able to take the long view of karmic evolution that renders meaningful each act of karmic responsibility and its lasting consequences. Whatever good is done will not go wasted, whatever destructive action is taken will inevitably bear consequences.

Following this interpretation, in terms of the great challenges we face today, each of us individually and all of us collectively are responsible for the difficulty in which our species finds itself. That we are in this together, and that we vow to take this journey together, not blaming one another, but rather embracing our collective karmic responsibility, with a long view to its positive outcome, may be one way to approach the path to our liberation and our work together.

### **Concluding remarks**

Historiography is not always just about discovering the "facts" of the past. People often become interested in history because it has a bearing on how we understand ourselves in the present, and how that bears on future possibilities. As Eric Cunningham suggests, the concept of "history" may itself be a modern construction, an invention of sorts. Historical narratives, then, may be compelling because their stories convey the force of a truth that is present, that illuminates the present moment in the trajectory

from possible pasts into potential futures.<sup>18</sup>

According to the Buddhist narrative presented here, which is one of only many possible, we cannot “fix” the world or “save” the planet anymore than we can save ourselves from our collective folly in the near term. Rather, by seeing through the illusion of a separate world in need of fixing, to a world beyond the categories that separate ourselves from others, we may be able, each in our own small way, to attend to each being and situation within the great circle of our larger karmic responsibility. That does not mean abandoning any of our efforts to contribute to a world in need, or to go back to a traditional view of Buddhism that refuses to recognize the suffering in this world. Whether one takes a more traditional approach, or an approach such as that of Engaged Buddhism, this essay simply aims to provide some food for thought for considering the significance of what narratives of karma and liberation might mean in light of the Buddha’s Great Hesitation, and of the long and short of karmic r/evolution.

Today, many of us take for granted the daily negotiation of our lives using smart phones, the wireless internet, and all of the convenience appliances at our disposal as if we have always had them, and that we will always have them. But really, they are recent inventions, as is the human species itself, and our time on this planet may be briefer than we think. What will we do with our moment as *homo sapiens*, within the larger scope of our karmic trajectory, our human story?

Big Bang: 13.7 billion years  
Milky Way galaxy: 13.2 billion years  
Planet Earth: 4.5 billion years  
*Homo Sapiens*: 500,000 years  
Human civilization: 6,000 – 10,000 years  
Industrialization: 100-250 years  
High Tech and Information Age: 40 years  
Internet Era: 20 years  
Mobile Web: 12 years  
Today: the blink of an eye

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gene Reeves, trans., *The Lotus Sutra: A Contemporary Translation of a Buddhist Classic* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008), 254. Diacritical marks are provided for terms that have not entered the English vernacular. There are some cases where the judgment could be made either way, such as in “Mahayana” versus “Mahāyāna,”

<sup>2</sup> *Buddha-Dharma: The Way to Enlightenment*, rev. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Berkeley: Numata Center for Translation and Research, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Reginald Ray, “A Condemned Saint: Devadatta,” in his *Buddhist Saints in India*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004. 162-178.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Hayes, “Chapter 2: A Buddha and His Cousin,” *The Psychology of Mature Spirituality*, ed. Polly Young-Eisendrath and Melvin Miller (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> A. M. Hocart, “Buddha and Devadatta,” *Indian Antiquary*, vol. 52, Oct. 1923, 267.

<sup>6</sup> Marie Yoshida, “An Analysis of Ajasatru’s Family Using Bowen Family Systems Theory: Commonalities and Differentia in Japanese Buddhism and Family Therapy,” M.A. Thesis, School of Education (University of Oregon, 2007), 22-23.

<sup>7</sup> IPCC, [http://www.ipcc.ch/publications\\_and\\_data/ar4/syr/en/spm.html](http://www.ipcc.ch/publications_and_data/ar4/syr/en/spm.html), accessed January 8, 2012.

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<sup>8</sup> See, Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> *Samyutta Nikya: An Anthology* by M. O'C. Walshe, SN 16.13,

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/walshe/wheel318.html#passage-23>, accessed January 7, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, D. M. Brown and I. Ishida, trans., *Future and the Past: Translation and Study of the "Gukanshō", an Interpretative History of Japan Written in 1219.*

<sup>11</sup> It is not only Buddhism that takes a declining view of time. In fact, many Asian religions including Hinduism, Confucianism, Daoism, as well as Buddhism take a similar view, harkening back to a Golden Age in the past, and describing a trajectory of spiritual and social decline thereafter.

<sup>12</sup> Acharya Buddhārakkhita, trans., *Dhammapada*, verses 153-154,

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/dhp/dhp.11.budd.html>, accessed January 7, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Thanissaro Bhikkhu, trans., "Ayacana Sutta," *Samyutta Nikāya* 6.1,

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn06/sn06.001.than.html>, accessed January 7, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Kosambi D.D. (1988). *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, pp.128-9

<sup>15</sup> Gene Reeves, trans., *The Lotus Sutra*, 247-254.

<sup>16</sup> Dennis Hirota et al, trans., "Preface", *The True Teaching, Practice, and Realization of the Pure Land Way, The Collected Works of Shinran* (Kyoto: Honganji International Center, 1997), 3.

<sup>17</sup> Shū Chū *Hokkekyō Ongi Kuden*, *Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings of Nichiren Daishonin.*

<http://nichiren.info/ongikuden/text/Chap12.htm>, accessed February 2, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Eric Cunningham, *Hallucinating the End of History: Nishida, Zen, and the Psychedelic Eschaton* (Bethesda, Maryland: Academica Press, 2007), 35.