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Can Arhats Attain Buddhahood? An Issue in the Interpretation of the *Lotus Sūtra*

Abstract

The *Lotus Sutra* is well known for its teaching of the One Vehicle. According to this teaching, although the Buddha preached that there are three paths to buddhahood (the paths of the śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas and bodhisattva), there is in fact only one path of practice in Buddhism: the teaching of the bodhisattva leading to complete enlightenment. This implies that those who have attained the goal of arhatness through the practice of the śrāvaka path must ultimately convert to the bodhisattva path and continue their practices until they attain buddhahood. However, there is a problem since arhats are said to have destroyed all the defilements binding them to continued existence within the realms of transmigration, meaning that they must necessarily enter nirvāṇa at the end of their lives and are therefore prevented from continuing their practices to reach buddhahood. In this paper, I will introduce the theories employed by Kumārajīva and Fayun to explain this conundrum. Kumārajīva, a noted translator of Buddhist texts into Chinese, engaged in an exchange of letters with Huiyuan of Mt. Lu, one of the most respected Chinese Buddhist of his age. In one exchange, Kumārajīva specifically deals with the question of how arhats can attain buddhahood and argues that, although arhats believe they have eradicated all defilements, they have not actually done so. Taking his cue from the *Dazhidulum*, Kumārajīva argues they still possess what he terms “love towards nirvāṇa and the buddha dharma.” Hence, he concludes, arhats have not actually rid themselves of all defilements but must still remain within the cycle of transmigration undertaking bodhisattva practices until they extinguish these subtle forms of defilements and achieve buddhahood. Fayun, who lived approximately a century after Kumārajīva, was a noted scholar monk who wrote an influential commentary on the *Lotus Sutra*. In this commentary, Fayun also argues that arhats are capable of achieving buddhahood since they are still encumbered by defilements. However, in making his argument, Fayun relies on the theory of five levels of defilements taken from the *Śrīmālā-simhanāda Sūtra*. According to this theory, arhats have destroyed the latent defilements, the first four of the five levels of defilements described in the sūtra, but have yet to eradicate the defilements of fundamental ignorance, the final and most profound form of defilements. By availing himself to this theory, Fayun argues that arhats are indeed capable of attaining buddhahood since they still possess the defilements of fundamental ignorance which prevents them from entering extinction in nirvāṇa, allowing them to continue their practices as bodhisattvas until they achieve complete buddhahood.

Keywords: arhat, buddhahood, *Dasheng dayizhang*, defilement of fundamental ignorance, *Fahua yiji*, Fayun, Kumārajīva, *Lotus Sutra*, One Vehicle, *Śrīmālā-simhanāda Sūtra*

The *Lotus Sūtra* is one of the most influential texts in East Asian Buddhism. At eight rolls, it is a medium length sūtra but its impact on Chinese and Japanese Buddhism has been all out of proportion to its relatively short size. In this paper, I would like to discuss one issue in the interpretation of this sūtra: the question of how arhats, who by definition have eradicated all defilements (*kleśa*) binding them to continuous rebirths within the realm of transmigration, can refrain from entering nirvāṇa and continue to practice the Buddhist path until they attain complete buddhahood, as the *Lotus Sūtra* maintains. In considering this issue, I would like to focus on two Chinese Buddhist texts, the *Dasheng dayizhang* 大乘大義章, a collection of letters exchanged between Kumārajīva (344–413) and Huiyuan 慧遠 (344–416) of Mt. Lu 廬山, and the *Fahua yiji* 法華義記, a commentary on the *Lotus Sūtra* by Fayun 法雲 (467–529) of the Liang Dynasty (502–557).

Before taking up these texts, it is first necessary to review the *Lotus Sūtra*'s doctrine of the One Vehicle as well as the teaching of the Three Vehicles presupposed by the One Vehicle.¹ Let us first consider the teaching of the Three Vehicles. This teaching holds that there are three different paths of spiritual cultivation in Buddhism: the paths of the śrāvaka vehicle, the pratyekabuddha vehicle, and the bodhisattva vehicle. Śrāvakas (literally „listeners”) are those who strive to attain nirvāṇa by listening to, and faithfully following, the teachings of the Buddha (which they have either heard directly from the Buddha or have received through tradition). Through their practices, śrāvaka seek to destroy the defilements binding them to the cycle of transmigration and attain arhathood. Since arhats have completely eliminated their defilements, they are said to be in their final reincarnations and will invariably enter nirvāṇa when their lives end. The nirvāṇa they enter is described as a state of total mental and physical extinction and is likened to the blowing out of a flame. This state is referred to as „turning the body to ashes and eliminating knowing” (*huishen miezhi* 灰身滅知; ‘knowing’ here refers to mental activities).

Next, pratyekabuddhas are said to attain enlightenment by themselves, without the benefit of listening to the Buddha’s teachings. When they reach their

¹ A succinct definition of the three vehicles is found in the ‘Introduction’ chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*. ‘For the sake of those who sought to be voice hearers (*śrāvaka*), his preachings corresponded to the dharma of the four truths, with which to cross over birth, old age, sickness, and death into ultimate nirvāṇa. For the sake of those who sought to be *pratyekabuddhas*, [self-enlightened ones], his preachings corresponded to the dharma of the twelve causes and conditions. For the sake of the bodhisattvas, his preaching corresponded the six *pāramitās* [perfections], with which he caused them to gain *annuttara-samyak-sambodhi* and to perfect the knowledge of all modes.’ Hurvitz 2009: 13.

goal, that of pratyekabuddhahood, they too attain a state of total mental and physical extinction in nirvāṇa.

Finally, bodhisattvas are said to practice the six perfections in order to attain, both for oneself and others, supreme enlightenment (*anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*) or the perfect wisdom of the buddhas. The six perfections (*pāramitās*) refer to the perfections of charity (*dāna*), keeping the precepts (*śīla*), forbearance (*kṣānti*), vigor (*vīrya*), meditation (*dhyāna*) and wisdom (*prajñā*). These practices are conducted on the basis of insight into emptiness and the non-substantiality of all dharmas. The enlightenment attained by the bodhisattvas is said to be far superior to those attained by arhats and pratyekabuddhas. This is because it indicates, not only the destruction of all defilements which keeps one tied to the cycle of rebirths (which is also attainable through the practices of the śrāvaka and pratyekabuddhas), but also the acquisition of all of the manifold virtues possessed by the buddhas.

However, the *Lotus Sūtra* proclaims that the division of the Buddhist path into those of the śrāvaka, pratyekabuddha and bodhisattva vehicles is nothing more than an expedient device (*upāya*) and that there is, in reality, only the One Vehicle leading to the attainment of buddhahood through the cultivation of bodhisattva-practices.² Despite the earlier claim that it is possible to attain nirvāṇa through the practices of the śrāvaka and pratyekabuddha vehicles, the true nirvāṇa, the *Lotus Sūtra* maintains, is attained only by those who have reached buddhahood through the practice of the bodhisattva path. Indeed, in the ‘Parable of the Conjured City’ chapter, the *Lotus Sūtra* likens the nirvāṇa attained by arhats and pratyekabuddhas to a magically created city, devoid of ultimate reality.³ This means that, although arhats mistakenly believe they have completed their spiritual quest, they must still convert to the bodhisattva path and continue their practices until they attain complete buddhahood.

But here is a problem. If arhats (and pratyekabuddhas) have eliminated all defilements, this means that they no longer have anything binding them to the cycle of transmigration and must, by definition, enter nirvāṇa at the end of their lives. However, the *Lotus Sūtra* maintains that they must remain in the world to continue practicing as bodhisattvas until they attain complete buddhahood in the future. How can arhats, who are said to have destroyed all defilements binding them to future rebirths, refrain from entering nirvāṇa and continue their practices until they reach buddhahood? The *Lotus Sūtra* itself does not provide a clear answer and the question of how arhats can reach buddhahood became an issue that later Buddhists had to resolve.

² On the *Lotus Sūtra* and the One Vehicle doctrine, see Pye 1978: 18–83.

³ Hurvitz 2009: 136.

One early Chinese Buddhist text that provides an answer to this question was the *Dasheng dayizhang*.⁴ As noted above, this is a collection of letters exchanged by Kumārajīva and Huiyuan of Mt. Lu. Kumārajīva is one of the greatest translators of Buddhist texts into Chinese.⁵ He arrived in Chang-an in December of 401 and immediately embarked on his monumental translation project that was to last until his death in 409. During these years, he rendered into Chinese a number of important Mahāyāna sūtras and treaties, including the definitive translation of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Thanks to Kumārajīva's masterly translations, the understanding of Buddhist doctrines among Chinese monks was greatly deepened and ushered in a new era in the history of Chinese Buddhism.

Kumārajīva's correspondent, Huiyuan, was one of the most erudite and highly respected Chinese Buddhist monks of his age.⁶ After he obtained copies of Kumārajīva's newly translated texts, he studied them with care and sent a series of letters to Kumārajīva asking searching questions concerning doctrinal points he found difficult to understand in the new translations.

As noted previously, the question of how arhats can attain buddhahood is one of the issues taken up in the *Dasheng dayizhang*. In the second fascicle of this text, there is an exchange entitled 'Next, Question concerning Arhat's Reception of Prediction (of Buddhahood) and Attainment of Buddhahood, with Answer' dealing specifically with this question.⁷ Like the other exchanges in the *Dasheng dayizhang*, this exchange consists of Huiyuan's question, followed by Kumārajīva's reply. The gist of Huiyuan's query is as follows. According to the *Lotus Sūtra*, arhats receive predictions of future buddhahood from the Buddha and attain buddhahood. Furthermore, it is stated that when arhats are about to enter nirvāṇa, the Buddha appears before them to preach them the 'essential Dharma' and prevents them from entering nirvāṇa. However, arhats have destroyed all love (i.e., defilements) as well as the perfuming (*vāsanā*), or the residual force, of the defilements. It is a basic Buddhist tenet that once all defilements and their perfuming have been eradicated, one is liberated from the cycle of birth-and-death and enters nirvāṇa. How can arhats, who have destroyed all defilements and their perfuming, attain buddhahood in the future?

To this question, Kumārajīva replies that arhats have not, in fact, eradicated all defilements. He argues that, according to Mahāyāna Buddhist masters, there are two kinds of defilements: (1) the defilements of common beings and (2) the more subtle set of defilement possessed by advanced bodhisattvas who have

⁴ The *Dasheng dayizhang* is found in Kimura 1960, 3–57. For a study of this issue, see Hurvitz 1960.

⁵ On Kumārajīva, see Ōchō and Suwa 1982.

⁶ On Huiyuan, see Zurcher 1959 (vol. 1.): 204–239.

⁷ This exchange is found in Kimura 1960: 31–34.

gained insight into the true mark of dharmas (i.e., have gained insight into emptiness). The former set of defilements serve to keep sentient beings bound to the cycle of rebirths within the triple realms. Arhats are said to have destroyed this set of defilements.

However, there is a second, more subtle, set of defilements, which Kumārajīva calls ‘love towards nirvāṇa and the buddha dharma.’ Because arhats still possess this second set of defilements, they can refrain from entering nirvāṇa and remain in the world after converting to the bodhisattva path to continue their practices until they attain complete buddhahood.⁸ In another exchange in the *Dasheng dayizhang*, Kumārajīva argues that these defilements consist of the bodhisattva’s deeply rooted love, arrogance and ignorance towards the buddha dharma. First, love of the buddha dharma refers to their profound attachment to the buddha dharma, for which they would gladly give their lives. Second, ignorance refers to their inability to penetrate the dharma to its furthest depth. Finally, arrogance means that when bodhisattvas are not settled in the *samādhi* of the patience of the non-arising of dharmas, they can still have prideful thoughts that they have attained nirvāṇa unobtainable by ordinary people.⁹ Hence, because arhats still possess ‘love towards nirvāṇa and the buddha dharma’ (i.e., the second set of subtle defilements), they can remain in the world without entering nirvāṇa, convert to the bodhisattva path and continue their practices until they reach complete buddhahood.

It may be noted in passing that Kumārajīva derives his idea of the two kinds of defilements from the *Dazhidulun* 大智度論, the massive 100 fascicle commentary on the *Large Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* attributed to Nāgārjuna.¹⁰ However, there is one major difference between the theories propounded by Kumārajīva and the *Dazhidulun*. Whereas the former speaks of two kinds of defilements, the *Dazhidulun* speaks of defilements and their perfuming. In other words, the second set of subtle defilements spoken of by Kumārajīva is defined in the *Dazhidulun* as the perfuming of defilements, and not actually defilements themselves.

The second text to be considered is the *Fahua yiji*. This is an eight fascicle long commentary on the *Lotus Sūtra* composed by Fayun, famous as one of the so-called ‘three great masters’ of the Liang period.¹¹ In his commentary, Fayun does not explicitly take up the question of how arhats can attain buddhahood. However, at the beginning of his commentary, he explains why the *Lotus Sūtra* is superior to other sūtras, and it is in this connection that he explains the mechanism whereby arhats can attain buddhahood. Huiyuan’s argument is that earlier

⁸ Kimura 1960: 32.

⁹ Kimura 1960: 10.

¹⁰ On the *Dazhidulun*’s theory of defilements and their perfuming, see Lamotte 1974.

¹¹ On Fayun, see Kanno 1996: 22–25.

sūtras only taught the way to destroy defilements that bind beings to the triple realms, while the *Lotus Sūtra* teaches the way to eradicate defilements both of the triple realms and those beyond the triple realms. Moreover, he argues that earlier sūtras only taught the way to eradicate the four static defilements, while the *Lotus Sūtra* teaches the way to eradicate both the four static defilements and the defilement of fundamental ignorance.¹²

Fayun's argument is based on the *Śrīmālā-simhanāda Sūtra* (hereafter *Śrīmālā Sūtra*) and its doctrines of the two kinds of birth and death and five levels of defilements.¹³ Both of these doctrines are introduced in the sūtra in order to explain its theory of the One Vehicle. Like the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Śrīmālā Sūtra* states that neither arhats nor pratyekabuddhas are completely liberated from the cycle of birth-and-death. According to the *Śrīmālā Sūtra*, only the tathāgatas have truly attained nirvāṇa. Although the Buddha taught that arhats and pratyekabuddhas have attained nirvāṇa, these words are merely expedient devices. In fact, they both still possess defilements which keep them tied to future rebirths.

However, it is not completely false to say that arhats and pratyekabuddhas have been liberated from birth-and-death. This is because there are two levels of birth-and-death: the discontinuous birth-and-death (*fenduan shengsi* 分段生死) and birth-and-death of inconceivable transformation (*busi yi bianyi shengsi* 不思議變易生死). The former refers to birth-and-death within the triple realms gained as a result of past karma. The latter refers to birth-and-death experienced by those who have been liberated from discontinuous birth-and-death but have yet to remain in the world to continue their practices until they reach final buddhahood. Beings that are still subject to the latter type of birth-and-death include arhats, pratyekabuddhas and bodhisattvas of great power (i.e., advanced bodhisattvas). Although they are no longer born in gross corporeal bodies (because they have exhausted all defiled karma which results in their beings born anew in such bodies), they are born with 'mind-created bodies' (*manomaya-kāya*).

This theory of the two kinds of birth-and-death is closely related to the sūtra's innovative theory of defilements. According to the sūtra, defilements can be divided into two types: latent defilements (*zhudi fannaο* 住地煩惱) and defilement of fundamental ignorance (*wuming zhudi huο* 無明住地惑). Among them, the latent defilements are of four kinds: latent defilement based on a particular viewpoint, latent defilement based on attraction to desire, latent defilement based on attraction to form, and latent defilement based on attraction to

¹² T 33.1715: 573b–c.

¹³ The two kinds of birth and death and the five levels of defilements are discussed at T 12.0353: 219c–220a. For an English translation, see Paul and McRae 2004: 31–32.

mundane gestation. These four kinds of static defilements produce innumerable individual defilements, called active defilements' (*qi fannao* 起煩惱).

However, there is an even more basic defilement underlying the four latent defilements. This is the defilement of fundamental ignorance. This defilement is said to be far more deeply rooted than the static defilements and is, in fact, the root source of our deluded existence.

These two kinds of defilements—static defilements and defilement of fundamental ignorance—are, according to the *Śrīmālā Sūtra*, correlated to the two kinds of birth-and-death. Arhats, pratyekabuddhas and bodhisattvas of great power have destroyed the former set of four static defilements (and, as a consequence, from all mobile defilements that arise from them). For this reason, they are said to be liberated from discontinuous birth-and-death. When arhats are said to have eliminated all defilements, what is really meant is that they have destroyed this, more superficial, type of defilements. However, they still retain the defilement of fundamental ignorance and are thus still bound to the birth-and-death of inconceivable transformation. Although the sūtra admits that they have attained 'partial nirvāṇa,' it is not the complete nirvāṇa. They are only said to be 'directed to the nirvāṇa realm.' Buddhahood and complete nirvāṇa are attained only when the defilement of fundamental ignorance is thoroughly eliminated. And since only the tathāgatas have eradicated this type of defilement, only they possess perfect nirvāṇa.

These ideas form the basis of the *Śrīmālā Sūtra's* understanding of the One Vehicle. According to the sūtra, the śrāvaka and pratyekabuddha vehicles are, up to a certain point, valid ways of practice because they lead to the destruction of static defilements. However, they are not complete paths of practice, because they do not provide the means to destroy the most profound defilement, the defilement of fundamental ignorance. Thus these two vehicles are expedient devices, provisionally valid but devoid of ultimate efficacy. The final and supreme attainment, the attainment of buddhahood, can only be gained by eliminating the defilement of fundamental ignorance through the practice of the buddha vehicle. In the final analysis, all Buddhist practitioners—whether they have previously been śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas or bodhisattvas—must convert to the buddha vehicle to gain complete nirvāṇa. In this sense, the buddha vehicle is the One Vehicle, which both includes and transcends the śrāvaka and pratyekabuddha vehicles.

As noted previously, Fayun does not specifically take up the question of how arhats can attain buddhahood in the *Fahua yiji*. However, judging from the fact that he uses the *Śrīmālā Sūtra's* theory of the two kinds of defilements and two kinds of birth-and-death in his exegesis, it is clear he understood that arhats have destroyed the static defilements and have been liberated from discontin-

uous birth-and-death but have yet to eradicate the defilement of fundamental ignorance and are not yet liberated from the birth-and-death of inconceivable transformation. Hence, like Kumārajīva, Fayun understood that arhats have not yet eliminated all their defilements and are consequently able to convert to the bodhisattva path and remain in the world to work for the benefit of sentient beings without entering nirvāṇa.

References

Abbreviation

- T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經. 85 vols. Eds. Takakusu, Junjirō 高楠順次郎 – Watanabe, Kaikyoku 渡辺海旭. Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–1934.
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