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The Buddhist “Prodigal Son”: A Story of Misperceptions

by Whalen Lai

Ever since Western scholars noticed that the *Lotus Sūtra* contains a parable of the “prodigal son” there have been suspicions about Christian influence (St. Thomas’ mission in northwestern India) in this Mahāyāna *sūtra* and also interest in the comparison of this version with that in the Bible. Unfortunately, there has been a history of misunderstanding over this, first, between those in the Buddho-Christian exchange, and, secondly, within the story itself. The *Lotus* parable is about misperceptions; ironically, it is a story of a generous father but a spendthrift son, unlike the New Testament story. In this short article, I will try to dispel some of the modern misunderstandings, and then discuss the *Lotus* parable’s intention within its own context. I will use the Kumarajiva rendition of the *sūtra* as translated by Leon Hurvitz; numbers in brackets refer to Hurvitz’ pagination (New York: Columbia University, 1976).

The Modern Misunderstanding

Questions of Christian influence aside (it is not impossible, but unlikely given the probable early dating of this stratum of the *Lotus Sūtra*), the theologian’s contrast of a warm-hearted Christian father running to greet his son and a cool-headed Buddhist father dispatching attendents to fetch his son is correct, but off the mark. The Buddha had compassion for his son too, but it would not be becoming for the Buddha if he also “ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). The biblical story is a story of reconciliation; the Buddhist one is of the gradual inducement of the son to recognize his own Buddha-wisdom. However, even so, at the right time, the Buddhist father

could as well demean himself to the son's level out of love. "Straight-way he removed his necklaces, his fine outer garments, and his ornaments, and put on instead a rough, torn, dirty, tar-stained garment and, smearing dust over his body, took in his right hand a dung shovel" (so as to work next to his hired labour of a son for the purpose of eventually revealing their true relationship) (Hurvitz: 87). So, it is not a matter of one being warm and the other deliberately cool. To counter the Christian critique, Buddhist apologists underline the fact that in Mahāyāna the acquisition of wisdom (*prajñā*) is cardinal. The son must come to his supreme understanding, and by so doing become *on par* with the father. They argue that, since Christianity still assumes a theistic distinction between God and Man, it is understandable that discovery of self-worth sadly is absent in the biblical narrative. However, this *prajñā*-ist polemic can be just as off the mark, since there is no mistaking, in the *Lotus* narrative, that the son does not deserve the lavish attention he receives for his own work (Hurvitz: 81). When the son is finally made heir to the father's tremendous fortune, it comes no less as a "godsend." It is a free gift of grace beyond his expectation, for he thinks, "Formerly I had no thought of seeking or expecting anything, and now these treasure houses have come to me of themselves!" (Hurvitz: 89). So, the difference between the two parables is not explained by the Buddhist ideology of *prajñā* and the pure self-discovery either. We must look at the two stories more closely.

Now, the Christian narrative refers indirectly to Jesus' preaching about the nature of the Kingdom of God, even though it is not formally one of the "Kingdom" parables. It is taught in the presence of "the Pharisees and scribes [who then] murmured, saying, 'This man received sinners, and eateth with them'" (Luke 15:2). It comes after other analogies: the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep to seek the one lost one (15:4), and the woman who rejoices at finding her lost silver (15:9), both of which are meant to underscore the point that "joy shall be in heaven over the sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need not repentance" (15:7). It is a subtle answer to the self-righteous opponents who are cast in the role of the other son, who fail to rejoice in the open admission of the "sinners" in Jesus' audience, "for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found" (15: 32). In this Lucan narrative, the good son is not thrown out into the darkness to weep and to gnash his teeth. The key to the whole story is the prodigal

son's repentence, his ready admission that "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee" (15: 18), his willingness to renounce all claims and suffer any pitiance shown, "And am no more worthy to be called thy son; make me one of thy hired servants" (15: 18). Although the father hugs him before he opens his mouth, the festive rejoicing—the fattened calf, etc.—come after the son's public confession. The whole story is structured according to the Judeo-Christian concern with the just and the unjust (unearned) dessert. It is about divine love showered on the repentent sinner and the open and free grace in the Kingdom that overlooks all past dues in one universal *communitas* of rejoicing.

This "Love, Power and Justice" drama has a unique structure that cannot be, or be expected to be, found in the Buddhist milieu. Repentance is never an issue there. However, the whole gist of the Buddhist parable is that the son does not consciously return to his father's house. In fact, the story has to do with a basic irony: the son cannot possibly recognize his father, or perceive himself as in any way the son of this "like of a king." The whole object is to get the son to perceive the father and thereby perceive himself in a totally different light from his present view. Behind this irony is the whole drama of the genesis of the *Mahāyāna* and the *Lotus Ekayāna* itself. The modern misunderstanding can only be resolved by first understanding a past, built-in, misunderstanding, not only of the *Mahāyāna* but of the *Hinayāna* as well.

The Past Misunderstanding

The *Lotus* parable is not told by the Buddha to illustrate his compassion for all men; it is told by Subhūti, Mahākātyāyana and Mahāmaudgalyāyana (in ch. 4) in response to the *Ekayāna* doctrine (Ch. 2), and to the Buddha's parable of the Burning House (ch. 3). Subhūti and others are *Hinayāna arhants*, i.e., *śrāvakas*, listeners. They are reacting to an unexpected boon, unique to the *Lotus Ekayāna* gospel, namely, that *arhants* can become Buddhas. The "prodigal son" analogy is their contribution to explaining how, unbeknownst to them, as *śrāvakas*, they are actually sons of the Buddha. Possessing Buddha *gotra* (seed, lineage) destined for *anuttarasamyaksambodhi* (the highest enlightenment, previously reserved for the *samyaksambuddha*, or the Buddha alone), these *arhants* "came home to the father" after a

long absence to find their own status changed from petty Hīnayānists to potential Buddhas. The extravagance is not in the prodigal son's spending all his inheritance in debauchery; the extravagance is the new inheritance these spendthrift absentee sons are now about to acquire. Let us review the story in the *sūtra* and the story behind the story in early Mahāyāna.

In chapter two, the Buddha declares that all his prior teachings were *upāya*, expedient means. The Ekayāna of the *Lotus* Buddha Vehicle now subsumes the Triyāna of the *śrāvaka*, the *pratyekabuddha* (the solitary or self-enlightened buddha) and the *bodhisattva* (the Mahāyāna wisdom-being). Now all three are destined for the same destiny, Buddhahood. Śāriputra, an *arhant*, rejoices, saying (Hurvitz: 49): "Formerly, when I heard such a [Mahāyāna] Dharma as this from the Buddha, I saw the Bodhisattvas receive the prophecy that they should become Buddhas: but we [the *śrāvakas*] had no part in this." That is, historically speaking, a true fact. There was the Triyāna distinction before the rise of Mahāyāna, and it was logically set up as three discrete paths. *Śrāvakas* had *śrāvaka-gotras* (seeds), destined for arhantship, that and that only; they did not change their seed-nature by becoming *bodhisattvas* or *pratyekabuddhas*. They could not; *gotra*-lineages were rationally distinct. When Mahāyāna rose in the Prajñā-pāramitā corpus and movement, it gradually dislodged the Bodhisattvayāna as Mahāyāna (Great Vehicle), and still later turned to denouncing the other two as Hīnayāna (Small Vehicle). The Prajñā-pāramitā tradition claimed to be the Dharma preserved through Subhūti, a mountain ascetic disciple of the Buddha. His foil in the dialogue that made up the *sūtra* is the venerable Śāriputra, a leader of the *śrāvakas*. So the remark of Śāriputra cited above recalls how even as Śāriputra is privileged to learn of the Mahāyāna Dharma, he has "no part" in it. Not only that, even Subhūti, himself also an *arhant*, has no part of it, though he be charged with the knowledge of *prajñā* and *śūnyatā*! Why the stewards of the Dharma, the "secret store of the Tathāgata"¹ (Hurvitz: the Dharma of the secret treasure house, p. 95), would not practice what they preached is explained in the parable itself (see infra). That the *arhants* are unable to know they are actually potential Buddhas is not the fault of Buddha. As Śāriputra confesses (Hurvitz: 49): "This is our fault, not that of the World-Honoured One." Now, as the Buddha offered as an explanation for the Ekayāna, the parable of the Burning House (ch. 3), Śāriputra's prayer for an accounting to ease the *arhants*' "doubt and uncertainty over this unheard-of boon (58) is answered.

In chapter four, Subhūti and others show their thanks for the enlightening explanation. They now “wish to speak a parable, with which to clarify this meaning” (Hurvitz: 85). The parable of the prodigal son then accounts for the two seeming anomalies: (a) why don’t the *arhants* know they are Buddha sons, and (b) why doesn’t Subhūti practice the Mahāyāna Dharma he was supposed to have preached? The Buddhist tale has nothing to do with Judeo-Christian themes of Justice, Repentance and Forgiveness. It has to do with a natural misperception, an unsolicited stewardship and the final recognition—with the irony of Mahāyāna itself: how this original intended gospel of the Buddha is overlooked by the immediate disciples (the Hinayānists), how some of them (Subhūti and others) come to be trusted with it, and how, at long last, they realize that their *śrāvaka* destiny ends no less in Buddhahood. The technically difficult hurdle in the story is, why doesn’t the son recognize his sonship immediately? How can he be induced to change his *śrāvaka-gotra* into the *gotra* of the Buddha?

Thus, the crucial “mystery” in the story is not a prodigal son who runs off and returns but the father who, as he goes looking for him, changes his residence and outer appearance so that the son, chancing upon this alien residence, cannot recognize the owner as his father:

Suppose there were a man who was young in years and who also, forsaking his father and running off, dwelt long in another country, whether ten, or twenty, or as much as *fifty years*. Not only did he grow old, but he was also reduced to destitution, running about in all four directions in quest of food and clothing. At length, in his wanderings, he *accidentally* headed toward his native land. His father, who had preceded him, and who had sought his son without finding him, *had stopped midway in a certain city*. The father’s house was great and rich . . . [Here follows descriptions of its opulence and the father’s urgent wish to pass his inheritance to his lost son *before his own departure from earth*.] At that time, the poor son, hiring himself out as a laborer in his wanderings, by chance reached his father’s house, where, stopping by the side of the gate, he saw in the distance his father seated in a lion throne (in the opulent setting). . . . As soon as the poor son had seen his father with the great power, straightway, harbouring great fear, he regretted having come to that place, and privately thought: “*This is either a king or the equal of a king*; but at any rate, this is no place for me to hire out my labor and earn anything. . . .” (Hurvitz: 85–86. Italics added.)

The resettlement of the father and his assumption of a royal status (“... in a city, / Where he built himself a house / In which he amused himself with the objects of the five desires,”² says the verse version [90]) is an added note crucial to this story of misperception. The son cannot recognize the “like of a king” to be the father he originally left behind. This must refer to the historical idealization of the Buddha in the Mahāsāṃghika and then the Mahāyāna tradition, such that, when the process is completed (i.e., when the father is resettled), the Hīnayānist (the *śrāvaka* son and original disciple) cannot possibly recognize this transmundane, super-perfect, Buddha-figure, decked with all the sundry objects pleasing to the senses, to be the *sannyāsin* Śākyamuni they once knew. The Buddha is now fully cosmic, the like of a *cakravartin*. The absence of the “fifty years”—the mythical span between his first sermon at Benares and this *Lotus* gospel, supposed to be delivered just before his *parinirvāṇa* (thus the reference to his eagerness to reveal the secret “before his own departure”)—changes the whole scenario.

Once we understand this basic point, the confusion or unnecessary comparison with the biblical version should end. The rest of the story is the re-education of the child. First, the father secretly hires him, and because the son has petty aspirations (being a “Hīnayānist”), he has to be so humoured and placed in a mean job, cleaning the stables. The *arhant* son is, however, clearly conscientious. The father himself, as he finally puts on similar clothing to be near his heir, says, “Whenever you work, you are never guilty of lying or cheating, of anger or resentment, or of hateful words. I have never seen you guilty of these evils, as are the other workmen” (Hurwitz: 87). The father lavishes upon the son all necessities, working at putting this once-frightened son at ease. He ends the above remark with “From now on you shall be like my own son!” and straightway he gives him a new name. This granting of a name, a new one apparently, signals the admission of the *śrāvakas* into their true identity as *buddha-gotrakas*, sons of the Buddha lineage.

And, true to “history,” the Hīnayānist son keeps at his diligent task under the master’s encouragement of future reward, removing the defilements (*kleśa*: here probably symbolized by the painful task of removing the dung from the stable). The father in his lowly attire sets an example, as Śākyamuni did in history. Meanwhile, there is the continual inducement. In the verse version:

He spoke to him sternly:
“You must work hard!”
He also used gentle words:
“You are like my son.” (Hurvitz: 93)

Slowly the son grows in confidence, even as he remains steadfastly committed to a low assessment of himself, never once truly presuming sonship or even enjoying the comfort that increasingly comes upon him. Finally, the father charges him with the stewardship of all his treasures. Like the biblical steward, the son makes good his charge even as he himself would “have none of these (luxurious) things” (Hurvitz: 94). The good stewardship, however, is not meant to show how his final enlightenment comes as a result of good works. It is meant to explain the second seeming anomaly mentioned earlier. Now as Subhūti and others comment:

The Buddha also in this way (as the father in his)
Knowing our fondness for the petty,
Has never before told us (*śrāvakas*,)
“You shall become Buddhas!”
On the contrary, he told us
To achieve freedom from outflows,
To achieve the Lesser Vehicle,
To be voice-hearing disciples.
The Buddha [also] commanded us
To say of the Unexcelled Path [i.e., Mahāyāna]
That those who cultivate it
Shall be able to achieve Buddhahood.
....
Merely for the bodhisattvas’ sakes
Did we set forth these matters,
Not for our own sakes
Preaching these essentials.
Just as the poor son
Was able to approach the father,
And, though responsible for his father’s things,
Had no thought of taking them. . . .

Thinking low of themselves, Subhūti, *et al.* never presume Mahāyāna

credentials, at least, not until the *Lotus* Dharma removes this stigma of the discrete Triyānas that even the Prajñā-pāramitā *sūtras* presupposes. (See endnote 1.)

Finally, of course, the father summons his entourage and publicly reveals to them, as to the son too, the true heir to his kingdom. So, the son finds himself with a godsend he did not expect, just as Subhūti and others, who offer this parable, did not. This is the original intention of the Buddhist parable.

Conclusion

The Biblical and the Buddhist parable are only similar in certain formal aspects, not in their separate larger contexts. The difference, however, is not between God's Love and Buddha's Wisdom. In fact, the Buddhist father is very compassionate, and the self-acquisition of wisdom is not the real drive of the narrative. Rather, the Buddhist story was meant as a specific case commentary, the *śrāvaka*'s, on the abolition of the Triyāna distinctions. In many ways, the motifs of the Buddhist tale coincide more with the Gnostic myth about the "messenger and the secret" than with the repentence-and-forgiveness drama of the Lucan narrative.

NOTES

1. I came to this analysis of this chapter in the *Lotus Sūtra* by way of Kumārajīva's assessment of the *Lotus Sūtra* as the *ju-la-pi-tsang* (secret store of the Tathāgata): that its admittance of the *arhants* as Buddhas excelled over even the Prajñā-pāramitā *sūtras*.

2. In an earlier draft, I took the word "amused" too literally and too readily dubbed the father as "prodigal" one. I am grateful for the corrections by Professor Andrew Rawlinson (University of Lancaster; letter of 11/29/80).