



Family Matters: Dramatic Interdependence and the Intimate Realization of Buddhist Liberation

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The family is widely, if not universally, considered a crucial nexus of cultural values. Indeed, it arguably forms the natal context of moral character in all societies, and is a reliable index of their health. Such claims find ready acceptance across religious, philosophical, political, and economic traditions that otherwise share very little common ground. Ironically, this is true, perhaps even especially so, in countries that are now or that have historically been Buddhist.

The irony, of course, lies in the fact that the inception of all Buddhist traditions can apparently be traced back to the crucial moment when Siddhārtha Gautama turned explicitly away from his familial and royal responsibilities, embarking on a homeless life of spiritual disciplines aimed at the realization of complete liberation or enlightenment. To be sure, having “reached” his aim and become a Buddha, or “enlightened one,” he had no qualms about allowing that laypersons—and not just those formally embarked on the homeless life—were suitable candidates for liberation. Neither did he have any difficulty encouraging his students to repay the kindness of their parents. And yet, it remains equally true that Buddhist communities have, from the very beginning, seemed to have at their “core” groups of men and women who have forsaken the householder’s life. Indeed, this was pronounced enough that one of the strongest objections of the imperial Chinese court to the spread of Buddhism among the general

population was that it would promote a rejection of the core familial value of filial piety (*hsiao*).

Chinese Buddhists did successfully lobby for the right to pursue their distinctive religious and philosophical paths, arguing that the merits earned for the family by one of its members going into the homeless life of spiritual exertion far exceeded the merely material benefits that might have been accumulated through their solely physical and social exertions. Through both repentance rituals and making offerings, Buddhists could repair or offset the ill karma made by their families and ensure more comfortable estates in this life and in lives to come. Still, the Chinese family—the acknowledged, originative matrix of all Chinese society—was never thought of as fundamentally “Buddhist.”

In other Buddhist countries—as, indeed, in the contemporary West where Buddhism is attracting increasing numbers of practitioners—much the same situation obtains. If the term “Buddhist family” is not entirely unknown, it nowhere enjoys the rich associations of the “Chinese family,” the “American family,” or the “Hawaiian family.” A Thai family can, indeed, be Buddhist in its religious inclination, but it is not in any readily identifiable or deeply significant sense a “Buddhist family.” This can be excused in part by saying that the family is a culturally-specific institution or pattern of relationships, that Buddhism is a religion, and that the lack of currency for a term like the “Buddhist family” is therefore no great mystery. Whether Thai families or American families practice Buddhism or not, they are essentially Thai and American families. But how, then, are we to explain the associative richness, conceptual complexity, and moral poignancy of the “Confucian family” or the “Christian family”? Granted that the family is the birthplace of moral character and given the centrality of *śīla* or moral cultivation in Buddhist practice, the relative shallowness of the concept “Buddhist family” is striking.

I do not believe that the problematic status of the “Buddhist family” is an historical accident or a function of it being an “imported” tradition in all of the cultural environs where it is still extant. Rather, the problem is an internal one: the Buddhist family—like all other things (*dharmas*)—has no essential nature. In a fully literal sense, it does not exist and must be understood as *śūnya* or empty. By no means, however, is this to say that the term “Buddhist family” is vacuous or that Buddhist families are necessarily and strictly speaking void of members. It is to say that in Buddhist families, interdependence is radically prior to either independence or dependence. The patterns of relationship that articulate the Buddhist family are thus ontologically prior to the “individuals” who are related as family members. For both pragmatic and heuristic purposes, I will maintain that this invites

us to see the Buddhist family as karmic—as an improvised narration, and not as a factual unit of either economic production or biological reproduction.

There is some hint of such a perspective on the Buddhist family in the fact that when students of the Buddha underwent formal ordination, they were referred to as *kulaputra* or *kuladuhitr*—that is, as sons or daughters of a good family. Having just left their birth families, of course, the “family” referred to here is clearly the family comprising the Buddha and his ordained students. This terminology suggests that the Buddha and those ordained into his practicing community acknowledged mutual responsibilities and commitments of care and that the early Buddhist community was one in which felt relationships thus played a notable role. But this tells us very little about the quality of these relationships and their meaning or dramatic valence. As is true for any other family, attending to the institutional structure of the “Buddha’s family” will reveal little about the quality of interdependence obtaining in it. Knowing, for example, that seniority in the “Buddha’s family” was not a function of years lived, but rather teachings assimilated, tells us very little about its dramatic nature—just as little as knowing that “head of the household” does not refer to the chronological elder of the American family, but rather the primary wage-earner. Insights into the emotional complexion of an American family are much more likely to be had watching certain feature films or reading novels. Likewise, insights into the dramatic nature and meaning of the Buddhist family are more likely to be found embodied in narratives rather than institutional structures.

In what follows, I intend to draw freely from a wide variety of narratives from an equally wide variety of Buddhist traditions. This approach has the clear liability that we will risk riding roughshod over great historical distances and entirely lose touch with doctrinal and practical differences that—in their original setting—very clearly “made a difference.” But there are also advantages, two of which in particular would seem to outweigh the approach’s obvious risks. The first is that very broad narrative horizons allow for developing a synthetic perspective on Buddhism’s dramatic terrain—one that promises familiarity with ecologies of meaning to which a narrower purview will not provide access. In a short paper such as this, of course, there is no question of adequately describing the “forest” that hopefully emerges as we begin making connections among various “groves” of tradition and their intervening open spaces. But it is entirely possible that we will be afforded views of the ways in which otherwise apparently disparate Buddhist paths can be brought into useful commerce. The second advantage consists of precisely these opportunities, not for accurately describing the details of historical or current Buddhist paths, but for realizing new paths or—to switch metaphors—for forging narrative alloys suited to

cutting through the dramatic impasses peculiar to our own times and places and the suffering or troubles characteristic of them.

In particular, I will be assembling a set of narratives that will persuade us to refrain from seeing Buddhist families as either fundamentally biological or essentially cultural phenomena, but rather as dramatic communities in narrative motion away from *samsāra* toward *nirvāṇa*—communities intent on *anuttara samyak sambodhi* or utmost and all-encompassing enlightenment. Such a view of the family will stand in significant opposition to the interpretation of enlightenment as a peak and private experience; to the reduction (Buddhist) teachings to texts; and to the belief that it is on the basis of valorizing individuality and equality that we are best able to realize satisfyingly human community. Hopefully, it will also encourage us to question our own prejudices for minimally defining family and community in objective and institutional terms rather than in terms of dramatically exemplary or virtuosic relationships. Clearly, then, what follows should *not* be understood as an anthropological exegesis or description of what “Buddhist” families *are* and have been, but a normative exploration of precedents for seeing our families *as* the horizonless place of truly liberating intimacy.

In the first part of the paper, I will try to establish both philosophical and textual precedents for seeing the Buddhist family as given in the irreducible interdependence of Buddha, *Dharma*, and *Sangha* and for seeing that it is finally only in the interdependence of the Three Jewels that we can truly “locate” the *bodhimaṇḍala* or place of enlightenment. In the second part, I will draw out some of the implications of seeing enlightenment as social or relational in nature, making use of Chinese Buddhist narratives of karma, repentance, and filiality. Finally, I will return to biographies of the Buddha from both Mahāyāna and Theravāda sources to make a narrative case for understanding the Buddha-work of enlightenment as that of realizing pure and clear relationships.

Buddha, *Dharma*, and *Sangha*: The Three Jewels of Buddhist Community

Every day, devoted Buddhist laypersons, nuns, and monks take refuge in the Three Jewels of Buddha, *Dharma*, and *Sangha*. This daily enunciation of commitment ritually reenacts the practicing Buddhist’s formal affirmation of *bodhicīṭṭa*—the vowed expression of a mind intent on enlightenment. The Three Jewels thus represent the functionally interdependent dimensions of truly liberating endeavor—the awakening space, as it were, of Buddhist practice.

A qualitative sense of this space can be gleaned, I believe, from a

consideration of what it means to take refuge in the third Jewel or *Sangha*. Strictly speaking, refuge is not taken in the *saṃvṛti* or “conventional” *sangha* of all ordained Buddhists—the community of monks and nuns. Rather, the Buddhist aspirant takes refuge in the *ārya* or “noble” *sangha*, the community comprising all those who have realized the estate of *srotāpanna* or “streamwinner”—those who, whether layperson or ordained, have definitively entered the stream passing from *saṃsāra* to *nirvāṇa*. Traditionally, the *srotāpanna* was understood to have no more than seven births and deaths separating him or her from—or guiding him or her to—penultimate enlightenment. Importantly, this means that all the members of this *sangha* are born in circumstances conducive to continuing the practices that will “culminate” in their full enlightenment. That is, their birth stations will be such as to provide the kinds of relationships needed for them to progress on the Buddhist path.

Put another way, the karmic context of the *srotāpanna*—the pattern of dramatic interdependence within which he or she abides—is always one favoring increasingly refined community with enlightening teachers and teachings. *Srotāpannas* are thus guaranteed residence among ensembles of dramatically supportive—although not necessarily unantagonistic—beings. In sharp distinction from the circumstances within which most sentient beings abide, *srotāpannas* enjoy relationships that are not finally obstructing and that indeed help them navigate through the kinds of dramatic impasse that would otherwise make movement from *saṃsāra* to *nirvāṇa* impossible. Taking refuge in the *ārya sangha* is thus to establish an unwavering karma for increasingly enlightening relationships.

For a variety of reasons, both historical and conceptual, the dramatic interdependence among teacher (Buddha), teaching (*Dharma*), and taught (*Sangha*) has not typically been kept at center stage, and the liberative function of the *sangha*—and thus the family—has remained largely unacknowledged. Foremost among these reasons, perhaps, is the ostensibly “individual” nature of the Buddha’s enlightenment. According to the well-known narrative—one that, as we shall see, was not without competition—Prince Siddhārtha’s journey from the royal court to full enlightenment not only involved leaving behind his family and friends, but his teachers and companions in meditative and ascetic self-discipline. Granted sufficient metaphorical depth, this narrative is perhaps best understood as stressing the counter-cultural and selfless nature of truly enlightening practice. That is, it can be seen as emphasizing the need to resist the temptations and securities of our natal traditions and to relinquish the conceit of self with its complex sundering of “subject” and “object” and its celebration of (finally private) experience.

But this is not the reading that it most consistently received. Although Siddhārtha's journey did *not* climax with his realization of timeless and objectless consciousness, existence, and bliss, but rather built in continuous crescendo up to and (I would argue) through his death, his six years of training have most commonly been interpreted as culminating in his solitary attainments under the *bodhi* tree. According to the familiar version of his immediate post-enlightenment repose, the Buddha was initially inclined to rest content that all that needed to be done had, indeed, been done. It was only when Brahma Sahampati, one of the highest of the *devas* or divine beings, insisted that at least some living beings would be able to understand and benefit from his teaching that the Buddha surveyed the world and—with the arising of great compassion—elected to resume full participation in it. If not for this answer to Brahma Sahampati's plea, there would have been no Buddhist teachings and the community of Buddhist enlightenment would have remained a “community” of one.

Having decided to practice renunciation *in* the world rather than *of* it, the Buddha embarked on a *Dharma* or teaching career that would last forty years. Walking from village to village and from kingdom to kingdom, publicly responding to the needs of those he met, the Buddha quickly gathered a dedicated following of men and women willing to leave behind the home-life and commit to personally realizing freedom from all suffering. It was this teaching-inspired following of monks and nuns that eventually came to be most popularly identified as the *Sangha* or Buddhist community.

The received history of the first years of Buddhist tradition thus suggests a luminous cascade from the summit of Siddhārtha's enlightening realization under the *bodhi* tree, through his various “sermons” as an itinerant teacher, and finally into the gradual building of a Buddhist community—whether narrowly construed as the community of *arhants*, the less narrow community of ordained monks and nuns, or the still less narrow community of all those lay and ordained “stream-entrants” determined to realize *nirvāṇa*. Such a history suggests that the *Sangha* is the causal consequence or fruit (*artha*) of the *Dharma*, which is in turn an effect of the Buddha's wisdom and compassion.

This understanding of the relationship among the Three Jewels is granted apparent credibility in the Buddha's identification of the *Dharma* or teachings as the “raft” by means of which all stream-entrants might cross over to the “other shore” of *nirvāṇa*. Seeing the wisdom and necessity of his own death clearly approaching, the Buddha is reported to have poignantly enjoined his disciples to “dwell making yourselves your island, making yourselves, not anyone else, your refuge; making the Dharma your island, the Dharma your refuge, nothing else your refuge” (*Dīgha Kikāya* II, pp.

61–2). Although it is possible to understand this as an explicit injunction for the Buddha’s students to understand who they are in terms of the teachings (*Dharma*) or enlightening relationships that they had enjoyed with him and one another, this was not the most common reading. Rather, the implied individualism in the Buddha’s instructions typically led to interpreting his remarks as emphasizing the strenuous and lonely nature of the Middle Way to freedom from suffering. This essentialist reading of the teachings and its associated assumption of the individual nature of Buddhist attainment inclined at least some Buddhist traditions and much of Buddhist scholarship to take the guidance of particular texts and solitary attainments in meditative discipline as crucial—an inclination, that is, to a relatively shallow appreciation of the virtuosic quality of enlightened or enlightening relationships.

By granting legitimacy to a separation of the teacher (Buddha) and the teaching (*Dharma*), significant portions of the received history of Buddhism have tended to bring about a segregation of the teacher (Buddha) and the taught (*Sangha*) and a canonical ignorance of the responsive virtuosity without which the process of truly enlightening conduct or teaching (*Dharma*) could never take place. By implicitly denying the irreducible interdependence or reciprocal conditioning of Buddha, *Dharma*, and *Sangha*, “Buddhist” history—as distinct from Buddhist karmic biographies—elides the relational function of the teachings and reduces them to a body of well-preserved, but finally inanimate doctrines.

This reduction of the teachings to doctrines violates, of course, many of the Buddha’s core teachings or demonstrations of enlightening conduct or relationship. One cannot, for instance, take seriously the injunction to see all things (*Dharmas*) as having no fixed or essential self (*anātman*), as impermanent (*anitya*), and as troubled or troubling (*duḥkha*) and still regard Buddhist teachings as doctrines delineating how the world *is* or *should be*. If all things are truly empty (*śūnya*), any conclusive declaration of what they are or how they have come about is necessarily based on ignorance—specifically, on the institution of fixed horizons for what we consider relevant or meaningfully interrelated. Having refused to take a stand on either “is” or “is-not,” and proclaiming them as the “twin barbs on which all humankind is impaled” (*Samyutta Nikāya* II.7), the Buddha has clearly rejected the interpretation of his teachings as *propositions* about “things as they are” rather than as *practices* capable of bringing about the meaningful resolution of the various forms of trouble or suffering (*duḥkha*) in which we find ourselves continuously implicated.

Indeed, failing to understand the *Dharma* in this way leads to a multitude of “internal” inconsistencies. For our purposes, the most prominent

of these are centered on the teachings of karma and no-self (*anātman*) and their apparently irreconcilable claims about the world. As doctrines, karma and the absence of any permanent self are in substantial contradiction. This was not infrequently brought to the Buddha's attention. If none of us has a fixed or essential self, who is subject to karmic retributions? How is karma carried over from one lifetime to the next if there is no self migrating from one life or body to others? The Buddha's reply—at least in the early canon—is that it is not possible to say that the person making a given karma and the one being subject to the fruit of such intentional activity are the same or different (for example, *Majjhima Nikāya* I.259–60). What can be said is that no intentional activity goes without experienced results—that the topography of our experience should be seen as karmically conditioned (for example, *Aṅguttara Nikāya* V.292).

Typically, it is assumed that this means a cause in the past will have certain future consequences—that karmic fruit is somehow projected into the future even as we are intentionally interacting with our present circumstances. But this linear view of time, with past, present, and future neatly separated and following upon one another, is not fully compatible with a Buddhist understanding of impermanence. The Buddha quite clearly denied intelligibility of existence—the capacity to literally “stand out or apart from” others—not only with respect to our selves, but also the so-called three times. The past is no longer, the future is not yet, and the present is passing away even as we try to capture and hold it in attention. What, then, can be made of the idea that present intentional activity will have experienced results? It is certainly not that intentions can somehow be projected unchanged and unchanging into the future (which does not exist), there to wait as effectively “permanent” seeds of conditioning until present (but never lasting) circumstances arise that bring them to fruition as the results of our pasts (which are nowhere to be found). The operation of karma, thus conceived, is a bad metaphysical joke.

In combination, the teaching of karma and no-self direct us to see ourselves—and so what is happening in our worlds—as an ever-dynamic expression of dramatic interdependence. In such worlds, causation is not a linear process, but a coalescent one. It is not that our intentions literally influence the world, but rather that they are an occasion for revised confluence or “flowing together” with it. As we revise our intentional activity, we effectively elicit new lived worlds, new patterns of dramatic affinity, aligning ourselves with different constellations of meaning, different patterns of narration. But because persons are understood in a Buddhist context as functions of patterned relationship, neither “you” nor “I” can remain the same in doing so. We are not fundamentally individuals

remaining self-identical over time, but *characters* in continuous development.

By entering into new relationships with things, we not only realize a new pattern of dramatic interdependence in the present, we reconstitute our “past,” incorporating the meaning—and so the “histories”—of our relational counterparts. That which was *not* previously *my* past suddenly becomes clearly a part of how I have come to be as I now find myself—a past, a populace, a world with which I have an undeniable affinity. It is of precisely our patterns of affinity or reciprocally meaningful confluence that our karma consists. That is, karma is not a projection or transmission of effects or information from life to life. Indeed, there is finally nothing at all that could be so projected or transmitted—not a self who experiences, not conditions defining experience, and certainly not specific happenings that blossom when conditions ripen. If all things are most truly seen as empty, impermanent, and interdependent, then the specificity of our past actions, present experiences, and future consequences is best seen as narrative—as a matter of dramatic interrelationship and not ontological identity.

Karma thus refers to the meaningful focusing of an “originally” ambiguous and yet horizonlessly meaningful world. Our past lives are *ours*, not because we are abiding entities or souls that possess or link them, but because the narrative movements—the patterns of conduct—evident within them are most meaningfully aligned with who we have been and are becoming. The continuity among lives is not a result of material or spiritual permanence, but a matter of dramatic affinities among patterns of narrative movement. (See, for example, *Aṅguttara Nikāya* I.249; *Majjhima Nikāya* III.207ff; and Hershock, 1994: 698–700.)

Such an understanding of karma—though perhaps never made explicit in precisely these terms—would seem to lie at the heart of a consistently Buddhist understanding of both the Three Jewels (Buddha, *Dharma*, and *Sangha*) and the family. To begin with, seen karmically, greatest stress should not be placed on the linear temporal sequence of: Siddhārtha’s realization of Buddhahood under the *bodhi* tree; the initiation of his teaching or *Dharma* career; the gradual building of a set of formal instructions as guides for his followers; and, finally, the institutional translation of these followers into the *Sangha*. This temporal sequence—and the ontological separation of Buddha, *Dharma*, and *Sangha* that it implies—though dramatically important, can be seen as crucial only at the cost of ignoring those patterns of meaningful coalescence that resist deterministic or “genetic” explanation. Doing so leads to conceiving of the Three Jewels in a manner consistent with the interesting, but finally prejudicial, claim that

“the child is father to the man”: the Buddha was the creator of the *Dharma* and father of the *Sangha*. Such a blatant denial of the interdependence or co-origination of *all* things is not tenable on strictly Buddhist grounds. This is so, not for purely theoretical reasons, however, but because seeing the Buddha as in some sense independently arisen is to assert his radical difference from us—a denial, in other words, of our own contribution to the realization of Buddha-nature or truly enlightening conduct. The Buddha, no less so than any other sentient being, must be seen as empty (*śūnya*).

The emptiness of things, of course, never signified vacuity in Buddhist contexts. And especially in Mahāyāna contexts where the concept received its richest development, emptiness came to connote the mutual and horizonless relevance of all things (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24.14)—an infinite depth of meaningful interrelationship. Seeing all things as empty—that is, *practicing* emptiness—means entering into fathomless, responsive and dramatic affinity or community with all things. Contrary to the expectations of some, the emptiness of things is not something realized once-and-for-all, but a continuous process of relinquishing all horizons for what we take to be relevant or meaningfully implied in any given situation—a relinquishing of our dramatic limits. Realizing the emptiness of all things is not the equivalent of our disengagement from them, but on the contrary, brings about a realization of our shared karma. It is for this reason that in later Mahāyāna teachings, a Buddha’s field of action is represented as unlimited in extent.

With this understanding in mind, it is possible to see that when Siddhārtha leaves the environs of the *bodhi* tree and embarks on his teaching career, seeing all things as both interdependent and empty of any essential self-nature, he is revealed at every step of the way as revising the meaning of all he encounters. At the same time, he is himself being revised *by* these encounters. Put more generally, Buddhas arise in continuous interdependence with an enlightening community gathered through the activity (or karma) of their teaching. The Three Jewels of Buddha, *Dharma*, and *Sangha* are not only inseparable, but co-originating.

As Siddhārtha begins retracing the way that had led to his great realization, this path is revealed as the true Middle Way and himself as a Buddha. As he encounters in turn the group of ascetics he had practiced with and then abandoned to reach his dramatic turning point under the *bodhi* tree, the various householders who had assisted him along the way, and finally his family, Siddhārtha discovers new patterns of affinity with them and manifests his Buddha-nature through their dramatic contribution to the meaning of his journey. If he himself is not the same young man who had left home, undertaken extreme austerities, and finally attained utmost

and incomparable enlightenment, neither are these the same ascetics, daughters of merchants, kings, parents, wife, and child. Met six years after leaving home, Siddhārtha's wife is no longer a distraction from the Way, but a nascent leader of the ordained followers of the Buddha's teachings; his son, not an anchoring burden, but a dedicated traveling companion; his father, not a man selfishly trying to renounce his son's mission, but a patron of enlightened conduct and a fellow journeyer on the Way. Even Devadatta, Siddhārtha's long-time rival and disruptor of communal harmony, is finally revealed (most conclusively in the *Lotus Sūtra*) as destined for Buddhahood. The Middle Way should be seen—at least to the extent that we take the Buddha's life as exemplary—as a dramatic revision of the *meaning* of family and community, the enlightening of our relationships as such.

In this ever-growing community of those sharing an affinity for and contributing to each other's enlightenment, it is evident that objective relations—purely factual connections—are finally subordinated to those rooted in meaningful or dramatic interdependence and thus expressing our intentional coalescence. The tendency to misunderstand the intimate relationship among karma, emptiness, and enlightenment as antagonistic—that is, Buddhist practices “eliminate karma”—is inseparable from a tendency to interpret Buddhist practice and its rewards in experiential or private terms rather than social or relational ones. Institutionally, this took the form of a status-ranking of followers in various categories based on levels or states of attainment. Eventually, it also brought about a reduction of dramatically-situated Buddhist teachings to canonically preserved texts—at first orally transmitted and then written. At various points—as when Buddhist scholars attempted to determine the exact number of basic or atomic *dharma*s or the precise unit of their duration—*Dharma* came perilously close to being reduced to dogma.

The nature of Buddhist community was perhaps even more strongly affected by this misunderstanding, encouraging that community to view itself through the textual lens of the *Vinaya*—that portion of the Buddhist canon in which are collected the precepts and case rulings governing the societal or institutionally-regulated conduct of monks and nuns—and not through the ongoing improvisation of felt relations or dramatic interdependence. Falling into relative neglect, then, has been the functional implication of the *sangha* in Buddhist enlightenment as such—that is, the contributory role of *sangha* in realized liberation.

Family and the Payment of Karmic Debts

The tension between structural and felt relations in Buddhist family and community came into particularly vivid focus over the first four or five

centuries of Buddhist presence in China. Although similar tensions were almost surely a part of the growth of early Buddhism in India, in the case of China, they were relatively well-documented and we are consequently (and perhaps ironically) in a better position to critically assess their resolution.

Perhaps the best documented contribution made by Buddhism to the character of the Chinese family is the development of a karmic conception of filiality (*hsiao*) or familial responsibility. Unlike the son-father form of filial piety valorized in the Confucian tradition, Chinese Buddhists from the outset seem to have placed considerable (although not exclusive) emphasis on the highly emotive relationship of sons and mothers (see, for example, Cole 1998:129). In particular, these narratives revolved around a son's sense of indebtedness to his mother, the existence of a debt-related crisis (usually the consignment of a deceased mother to one of the lesser hells being typical), and the establishing of protocols for resolving such crises through offerings made to the monastic Buddhist community.

At a societal level, these narratives had the profound effect of challenging the distinction—a culturally profound one in China throughout its history—between *nei* and *wai*, the inner or private sphere of the family and the outer or public domain of societal intercourse. In terms of Buddhist practice, they directly challenged the erroneous supposition that Buddhist practice (*hsing*) is undertaken for the purpose of individual attainments rather than for the purpose of realizing clear and enlightening relationships or truly liberating Buddhist conduct (*hsing*). It is in this sense that we best understand Hui-neng's declaration that "It is precisely Buddhist conduct/practice (*hsing*) that is Buddha" (*Platform Sūtra*, chapter 42). Buddhas occur with the realization of liberating conduct or concourse with others, not in the privacy of meditative absorption. Buddhist filiality as it developed in China thus pointed toward the sociality of Buddhist enlightenment (see Hershock, 1996) and provided a practical course or way of turning emotions and profound karmic affinities toward the *bodhisattva* work of liberating all sentient beings.

Although these narratives can be read cynically as promoting a "discourse on the family that was determined to mine the feelings between mother and son" (Cole, 1998:3) and place each generation's hopeful treasures in monastic coffers, a more neutral reading is simply that Chinese Buddhists intentionally focused on what is arguably the least ritualized of the major relationships constituting the Chinese family—and, by extension—Chinese society more broadly. Doing so, they were able to bring together the teachings of the *bodhisattva* ideal and karma with sufficient dramatic force to encourage a radical revision of the foundations of Chinese society.

That this strategy apparently was not entirely successful likely had

less to do with its authenticity than with the non-linear ramification of such a revision throughout a community over time. Although Buddhist practices work, they do so most effectively when carried out *wu-wei* or in an unprecedented, immediate, and improvised way. Unfortunately, for the majority that means they will be carried out irregularly, if at all. The typical corrective—and one perhaps most strenuously promoted in China by the Ch’an tradition—is to undertake disciplined energy-work in the form of relatively ritualized patterns of conduct that systematically direct attention-energy out of its customary paths, effectively bringing about the atrophy of our habit-complexes of thought, speech, and action and making possible truly improvised conduct. The danger is that these rituals often come to be seen as relative ends-in-themselves rather than as skillful means and are then liable to induce what the Ch’an tradition disparagingly referred to as *ting ping* or “meditation sickness.” The final result is thus a serious trade-off of truly social virtuosity for societal competency and the institutionalization of its “benefits.” In evaluating Buddhist narratives that undertake a revision of the Chinese family through redirecting the pivotal concept of filiality, it is imperative that we resist the anachronistic reading of such results back into the intentions of those responsible for first articulating the practice of Buddhist filiality in China.

For our present purposes, emphasis is best placed on the way these narratives explicitly directed Buddhist children to actively and intentionally revise the dramatic nature of their families by redirecting their emotional bonds with their parents. Given the customary skepticism of Buddhism with regard to passions and emotions, it is almost startling that these narratives of filiality do not recommend forfeiting profound emotional connections and point instead toward such connections as crucial to shifting the orientation of one’s familial karma from *samsāra* (the realm of chronic suffering and crisis) toward *nirvāṇa* (the realization of a Buddha-land where all things do the great work of enlightenment). The good Buddhist son or daughter is thus enjoined to deepen, not dispense with, their familial affinities—an injunction directed equally at those destined for the monastery and those remaining in the lay life.

That the function of Buddhist filiality was to revise one’s dramatic affinities and reorient familial and communal karma is corroborated by the parallel rise of distinctively Chinese Buddhist repentance rituals. The explicit purpose of Chinese Buddhist repentance was to resolve even the most profound suffering of one’s family members, both living and dead. As David Chappell has noted (1998), unlike repentance rituals in Indian Buddhism that were used primarily in the context of reinstating members of the ordained *sangha*, Chinese Buddhist repentance was performed

especially by laypersons as a way of correcting familial, not merely individual, karma.

As evidenced in the ritual compiled for Emperor Wu (*Cibei Daochang Chanfa* T 45), Chinese Buddhist repentance involved invoking the Three Jewels; cultivating profound confidence; affirming *bodhicīṭṭa*; explicitly acknowledging kinship responsibilities (beginning with one's immediate family and then extending to encompass all beings in a sanctified and fully empty family); and the taking of vows. If the *Vinaya* institutionalized what to avoid, vows personalized what to become (Chappell 1998:26) and provided laypersons with a concrete method of reconfiguring their personal and communal karma. That is, especially in combination with formal and profoundly emotional repentance, vows effected an inversion or reversal of those values and intentions responsible for the suffering evident in one's family and the wider community of all sentient beings. By forcefully revising one's karma, Chinese Buddhist repentance rituals served, then, to unblock the movement of familial narration or dramatic interdependence—a narration finally encompassing all beings—from *samsāra* to *nirvāṇa*.

It is no accident that the *Lotus Sūtra*—far and away the most popular of the Indian *sūtras* to become transformative landmarks in the Chinese Buddhist landscape—is replete with narratives focused on Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* who were once members of families in which husbands, wives, sons, and daughters practiced the reciprocally enlightening responsibilities of Buddhist filiality. For example, in chapter twenty-seven, the Buddha recounts the enlightenment drama of King Resplendent, his wife Pure Virtue, and his sons Pure Treasury and Pure-Eyed. The drama culminates with King Resplendent praising his sons who guided him away from heretical views and who together with him and his wife earnestly established themselves for 84,000 years on the path of Buddhist practice and liberation. The Buddha Thunder Voice Constellation Wisdom King repeats this praise and adds that by planting roots of goodness, any good sons or daughters will always obtain good friends, and that these good friends will be able to do Buddha-deeds, demonstrating, teaching, benefiting, and helping them to enter perfect enlightenment.

It is in fact a recurrent theme, not only in Mahāyāna *sūtras* like the *Lotus*, but throughout the Buddhist Canon that such “good friends” travel together over the course of many lives in the common enactment of utmost and incomparable enlightenment. If the *Lotus Sūtra* is at all unique, it is in the relative transparency of its central revelation (in chapter sixteen) that Buddhahood is not a status achieved by some individual at some particular point in time, but rather a quality of enlightening relationship that has obtained in countless myriad worlds for innumerable billions of eons.

Although it is possible to understand this revelation in more individualistic terms as declaring the presence of *the* Buddha in all times and places as various Buddhas and *bodhisattvas*, this is to desist at once from seeing all beings as having no essential or fixed self and to ignore the unmistakably narrative quality of the Buddha's temporally and spatially unrestricted enlightenment. In all times and places, Buddhas are members of a community—a *sangha*, very broadly construed—where the seeds of *bodhicitta* have been well-planted and liberation is blossoming.

Family and the Concerted Making of Enlightening Karma

If this is so, the best examples of *sangha*—whether in the wider sense of Buddhist community or the more focused sense of Buddhist family—are likely to be found in narratives of the Buddha's exemplary life. Indeed, the majority of enlightenment stories found throughout the Jātaka tales of the Buddha's prior lives, in both Theravāda and Mahāyāna scriptures, and especially in the biographies of the Buddha pivot dramatically on the fruition of karmic connections among the members of a community moving together through time. Rather than being a once-and-for-all event taking place only at some specific time and place, Buddhist enlightenment would appear to more closely resemble a dramatic standard improvised through by the “same players,” again and again, in different settings. Buddhist biographies do not, that is, focus solely on the individual pursuit of and attainment of enlightenment, but also on “ongoing karmic nexuses” (Strong 1997:114) or character ensembles moving together through time toward the dramatic realization of an incomparable Buddha-land.

Interestingly, in many of these narrative movements, characters in the dramatic lineage that eventually passes through Buddha Siddhārtha Gautama are not always the most morally or spiritually advanced. In the *Abhiniṣkramaṇa Sūtra*, for example, we find the Buddha explaining how his own selfish actions, prevarication, and outright lying in a previous life lay at the roots of Yaśodharā's inability to hear a promise from his lips or receive a gift from his hands without smirking and feeling sour (T 190:707ff). But more importantly for our present discussion of the Buddhist family, he is frequently not the sole locus of attainment in the enlightenment drama. On the contrary, there are strong precedents for suggesting that it is not any particular individual, but rather the *sangha* or karmic ensemble that should be seen as the dramatic body of enlightenment.

Nowhere, perhaps, is this more graphically illustrated than in a relatively late text, the *Sanghabhedavastu* section of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* (T 1450). Here, for example, and in sharp contrast with the standard Pāli version of his great departure from the homelife, Siddhārtha hesitates

on the threshold, thinking that if he leaves Yaśodharā as she is—childless and still in the bloom of youth—she will be accused of being incapable of bearing him a child and of being a cause for his fleeing the palace. Out of compassion, he decides to lay beside her one last time, and it is on this night that Rāhula, his son, is conceived. As in the familiar narrative, he leaves before dawn. But in the *Sanghabhedavastu*, Siddhārtha is not wholly out of touch with his family during his six years of ascetic training. Instead, relatively frequent reports about his whereabouts and actions are carried back to his father, step-mother, and wife. These deeply affect the family—so much so that Yaśodharā is moved to subject herself to the same austerities as her departed husband.

The pregnancy goes into effective remission, and for six years she and Siddhārtha engage in parallel ascetic regimens. At just the point that Siddhārtha realizes the limitations of extreme asceticism and the purely selfish release afforded by the states of consciousness to which it provides access, his parents realize that Yaśodharā and her child will not survive much longer on so little food and rest. For her sake and that of their unborn grandchild, they impose a moratorium on any further communication from their son, telling Yaśodharā that he has quit his ascetic ways—which, without their knowing it, he has—and resumed a more balanced way of life. She returns to a normal diet just as Siddhārtha himself breaks his fast with rice gruel and milk. The pregnancy resumes, and Siddhārtha settles into the grove where he will sit and practice until truly crossing over horizon of *samsāra* and putting an end to all trouble (*duḥkha*).

The karmic parallels do not stop here, however. Rāhula is born on the eve of Siddhārtha's realization of *nirvāṇa*—a fruition of his and Yaśodharā's familial and enlightening endeavor. The *Sanghabhedavastu* details the trials that ensue for both Yaśodharā and Siddhārtha as they negotiate this dramatic turning point in their shared and enlightening narration. She is accused by members of the royal court of sleeping with someone other than the long-departed prince and delivering a bastard child. He is accused of taking the soft road of “spiritual adultery” or hedonistic indulgence. Each, however, finally demonstrates the truth of their shared attainment: the Buddha, by the intimate force of his teachings; Yaśodharā, by entrusting Rāhula to Siddhārtha's exercise stone, placing it upon the waters of a pond, and announcing that if he is not the prince's child, then he will surely drown as it sinks. Instead, the stone and the baby Rāhula float across to the other shore of the pond and then back again. All questions of authenticity and paternity are laid to rest.

All of these karmic parallels, like lines in relativistic space, eventually converge on the recurrent dramatic climax of enlightenment. When the

Buddha returns to his ancestral home, Rāhula immediately recognizes his father, joins the order of monks, and quickly becomes an *arhant*—an enlightened saint—and one of the Buddha’s most faithful and long-lived disciples. Yaśodharā, too, upon hearing the Buddha teach, immediately attains enlightenment and also joins the ordained community. The message would seem to be clear: “[T]he Bodhisattva’s Great Departure was not... the solo quest of a solitary seeker after enlightenment; it was also, at least in part, a family affair” (Strong, 1997:122). On the Middle Way, progress consists of the moment-by-moment realization of pure and clear relationship.

There is no way, of course, to “prove” that this version is any more factually accurate than the more familiar account of the Great Departure and the Buddha’s first twelve years of practicing and teaching. If anything, the late composition of the text (most likely somewhere between the first and fifth centuries C.E.) would seem to suggest its purely “apocryphal” nature. What its existence nevertheless makes evident, however, is that as the *bodhisattva* ideal comes into prominence—and with it the explicit need for exemplars of practices for socially engaged liberation—radically alternative understandings began to ferment regarding the context of enlightenment and of the roles played by intimate relationships and family in Buddhist liberation. The *Sanghabhedavastu* narrative goes much further than most other biographies in stressing the inseparability of enlightening practices and familial relationships, but it is not entirely unique in that regard. In the Jātaka tales and scattered throughout the scriptures of both the Theravāda and Mahāyāna canons, there is a consistent and apparently evolving focus on the irreducibly karmic nature of our horizonless interdependence. From the perspective of such narratives, distinctions among the Three Jewels are justifiable only on heuristic grounds, not ontological ones. Finally, there is no way of separating individual Buddhas from their teachings, their karmic families, and all the other beings in their Buddha-realms—realms where all things do the great work of enlightenment.

Conversely, a liability of the more familiar version—one corrected for in part by Chinese Buddhist practices of filiality and repentance and the Ch’an emphasis on virtuosic responsiveness—is an occlusion of the contributory importance of the *sangha* as a *constituent* dimension of Buddhist enlightenment. As epitomized in the karmic nexuses traveling from *samsāra* to *nirvāṇa* throughout the Jātaka tales and other canonical narratives, the most basic Buddhist community is not an institutionally defined body—a *sangha* in the very most formal sense. Rather, the root Buddhist community is one that arises through dramatic partnership and improvisation. Central to such a community are not institutional forms, but patterns of intentional coalescence. Thus, in a past life, the Buddha and

Rāhula were not always father and son, but also twin brothers working out the responsibilities of enlightenment in the everyday world. Devadatta and the Buddha were not always rival cousins and enemies, but at one time were related as sage and king respectively, with the sage (Devadatta) guiding the king in the practice of the Six Pāramitās and the perfection of loving-kindness, joy, and compassion. If anything is continuous in these stories, it is not relational structure, but the meaning of relationships rooted in karmic affinities for mutual responsiveness and enlightening contribution. A whole that is systemically greater than the sum of its ostensibly individual parts, Buddha, *Dharma*, and *Sangha* together constitute a dramatic community moving concertedly away from chronic conflict and narrative impasse toward horizonless and liberating intimacy.

If the ordained community is at the “core” of Buddhist community, and if all things—communities included—have no essential self, the ordained community must be seen as empty. The true pivot or core of Buddhist community is just enlightening interdependence as such. Of course, the interdependence constitutive of human community is not the purely scientific variety made use of by ecologists and post-modern economists who assert the factual impossibility of isolated self-existence. Rather, it is interdependence constituted through the medium of meaningful, interpersonal relationships or the realization of intimacy. Human community arises, in other words, through our dramatic interdependence, our karmic affinities. Members of the ordained community are at the “center” of Buddhist community, not because of their homelessness as such, but because of the strength of their vow—the strength of their expressed commitment to cultivating *bodhicitta* or relationships intent on enlightenment.

If we take the *Dharma*—the teaching encounters of Buddhas and their students—seriously, the key to realizing such superlative and liberating relationships is the cultivation of truly robust expressions of compassion, loving-kindness, and joy in the happiness of others. Crucially, this does not mean feeling *for* others, but *with* them in the context of dramatically responsive relationships. The Buddha’s Great Departure is only metaphorically an abandonment of home. Through it, he discovers what it means to be truly at home: whether sitting under the *bodhi* tree or strolling beside a river or while abiding in a ten-hut village or a royal court, eliciting with appreciative virtuosity the realization of enlightening relationships. Home and family are not rejected, but opened in such a way that they become a dramatic womb of relationships contributing in great and small ways to the Buddha-work of liberation. Finally, it is only through felt community—the “formless” *tathāgatagarbha*—that a Buddha’s compassion and wisdom can together be fully realized.

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