

The Erosion of Ethics in Emptiness: Infallible Teachers and Inconsequential Matricide

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Abstract

This article examines two passages taken from early Mahāyāna *sūtras* that exemplify a promotion of emptiness in a form that, I suggest, may contribute to a gradual erosion of the significance of ethical conduct. My argument proceeds by close textual analysis of these two case studies, each illustrating a distinct but related ethical dynamic.

The first of these two cases, found in the earliest complete version of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, appears to reflect an early stage in the emergence of the idea that perceived shortcomings of a Dharma teacher are reinterpreted as an expression of the latter's skill in means (*upāyakauśalya*), effectively placing the teacher beyond critique. The second passage, found in the earliest extant Chinese translation of the *Ajātaśatrukaukṛtyavinodanā-sūtra*, employs emptiness rhetoric to dismantle the dire consequences of matricide and thereby undercuts the conventional link between unwholesome action and karmic fruition. Taken together, these two passages point to an early and internally diverse set of rhetorical strategies through which discourse on emptiness could be mobilized in ways that destabilize ethically principles.

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Introduction

The present article is part of a wider research project that seeks to read early Mahāyāna *sūtras* from the viewpoint of relevant passages in *Āgama* literature.¹ My focus in this research project is particularly on early Mahāyāna *sūtras* extant in Chinese translation from the final part of the Eastern Han (東漢) dynasty, a period that came to an end in 220 of the Common Era, together with relevant Gāndhārī manuscripts. Adopting this comparative perspective makes it possible to identify shifts in doctrinal emphasis that are not yet fully systematized but already bear significant ethical implications. As a working premise, the dating of the texts taken up here implies that the tendencies toward an erosion of ethics, with their manifold ramifications for later and contemporary Buddhist traditions in the East and the West, are already evident at this comparatively early time.

The more specific angle taken in the present study is meant to complement my detailed study of teachings on emptiness in the earliest complete Chinese translation by Lokakṣema and his team of what later came to be termed the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*.² The first of my two case studies below in fact involves the same text, the 道行般若經, T 224, to which in what follows I will refer as “the *Prajñāpāramitā*,” in recognition of the fact that the qualification *aṣṭasāhasrika* would only have come into use at a later time.³ The second case study is based on a version of the *Ajātaśatrukaukṛtyavinodanā-sūtra* extant as the 阿闍世王經, T 626, to which I will refer by translating its Chinese title as “the

¹ My usage of the phrase “*Āgama* literature” comprises Pāli discourses, following a suggestion offered by Skilling 2024: 383. As far as the research project as such is concerned, the limitations mentioned in Anālayo 2025b: 130 apply here as well, in particular that my ignorance of Japanese prevents me from taking into account the wealth of research published in that language. On my usage of the phrase “early Mahāyāna” see Anālayo 2025a.

² Anālayo 2025c. My reference to “Lokakṣema and his team” is meant to leave room for the indication by Harrison 2019: 703 that the Indian Zhú Shuōfó (竺朔佛) may have taken a fairly central role in the actual transformation of the Indic original into Chinese.

³ See the comments in Karashima 2011: 1n1, Zacchetti 2015: 180, and Harrison 2022: 656n13.

Discourse on King Ajātaśatru.” Whereas the first case study concerns the authority and conduct of a teacher, the second addresses the ethical implications of emptiness rhetoric in relation to karmic retribution. The presentation in this latter discourse is most directly relevant to my exploration of an erosion of ethics. The pertinent passage from the *Prajñāpāramitā* is considerably less dramatic in comparison, although it broaches a topic that is also of considerable relevance to my main concern with identifying early indications of a diminished importance granted to ethical integrity and corresponding conduct.

The Teacher of Emptiness

The passage to be taken up from the *Prajñāpāramitā* occurs in a narrative found in the final part of the text that has the bodhisattva Sadāprarudita as its main protagonist. Sadāprarudita lives at a time when no Buddha or Buddhist monastic community is in existence. However, as Sadāprarudita will eventually find out, teachings on the Perfection of Wisdom are still available from a lay teacher by the name of Dharmodgata. Much of the narrative concerns Sadāprarudita’s gradual spiritual maturation during his wholehearted quest for teachings,⁴ which eventually culminates in him receiving teachings from Dharmodgata and being given a prediction of his future Buddhahood.⁵

The part relevant to my concerns occurs at a narratively charged moment, when Sadāprarudita has already been informed of the existence of teachings on the Perfection of Wisdom as a means for reaching Buddhahood and the cardinal direction in which he should proceed in order to encounter them. Sadāprarudita is uncertain regarding how far he needs to continue in that direction, whereon a Buddha magically manifests to give him the required information, revealing the name and qualities of his future teacher Dharmodgata, together with giving detailed descriptions of the beautiful city in which the latter lives. Right after revealing that Dharmodgata had already been his teacher in the past, the

⁴ See in more detail Anālayo 2025c: 258–264.

⁵ Karashima 2011: 531.₂ (= T 224 at T VIII 477b₁₁).

magically-created Buddha gives Sadāprarudita the following instructions:⁶

When you approach the teacher, if you see, or if you hear about his shortcomings, do not speak about them and also do not think about his shortcomings. Suppose you see them, be careful not to doubt, be careful not to become negligent. What is the reason? You do not as yet understand his skill in means (*upāyakaṣālya*). You should truly comprehend the affairs of Māra, good son of a family (*kulaputra*), and be careful not to follow Māra's teachings and not to put them into practice. The teacher is honored [even] in the depth of his mansion for his teaching; he should be revered just as one reveres the Buddha, without any difference.

Of particular importance for my exploration is the instruction to disregard any shortcomings, which are to be re-interpreted as an expression of the teacher's skill in means, a move that is further strengthened by placing the teacher on the same level as the Buddha.

By way of contextualization, the passage prior to this instruction introduces Dharmodgata as the most highly respected among local bodhisattvas.⁷ He has a large number of wives, and a high throne has been set up for him to teach the Perfection of Wisdom. In the ancient Indian setting, a layman being depicted as enjoying the company of many wives can simply serve to convey his high status and wealth; it need not be read as implying that he must be a libertine.⁸ In other words, having a large harem may

⁶ Karashima 2011: 477,₈ (= T 224 at T VIII 472a₁₀): 汝往至師所時，若見，若聞，莫得說其短，亦莫念其短。汝設見，慎莫疑，慎莫怠。何以故？汝未曉漚怱拘舍羅。當諦覺魔事。善男子，慎莫隨魔教，莫用。師在深宮尊貴教。敬當如敬佛，_[1] 無有異。 My rendering of 深宮 is merely conjectural. Other attempts to make sense of the same passage are Lancaster 1968: 242: “When the teacher is in the great palace, he is venerable,” Karashima 2011: 477n354: “Dwelling in a deep palace, the master venerates (The Buddha's) teaching,” followed by a question mark, and Giddings 2014: 288: “This teacher gives instructions in [his] deep mansion.”

⁷ Karashima 2011: 475,₁ (= T 224 at T VIII 471c₂₃).

⁸ Regarding the ancient Indian perception of women as a type of property, Bhattacharji 1987: 54f reports that “[w]oman has been a chattel in India ever since the later Vedic times when she was included in the list of *daksina* along with items like cattle, horses, chariots, etc. ... Later in the

have the same function as sitting on a throne in making him resemble a king. His sincere devotion receives a special highlight in a description of his daily acts of worship toward a written copy of the Perfection of Wisdom.⁹ When Sadāprarudita meets Dharmodgata, the latter welcomes him with kindness and freely gives him a teaching. Next, Dharmodgata enters a prolonged period of meditation, after which he gives teachings again.

There seems to be nothing evident in Dharmodgata's conduct that would warrant issuing the type of warning translated above. On the contrary, the narrative consistently portrays him as exemplary, and there is no trace of any shortcomings. From a narrative point of view, the above passage presents advice that does not seem to be pertinent to Sadāprarudita's situation.

This narrative dissonance invites exploration. As the advice is not required by the narrative context, perhaps it reflects an attempt at shoring up the role of a teacher of the Perfection of Wisdom in general—an issue that needed to be articulated somewhere—and for this reason has become part of the various pieces of information related to Dharmodgata that the magically-created Buddha gives to Sadāprarudita.

The impression that the above instruction is somewhat out of context finds support in the circumstance that later versions of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* have shifted such a type of warning to a different place. Rather than being part of information on various details related to Dharmodgata,¹⁰ the alternative setting becomes a prior instruction Sadāprarudita receives from an unidentified voice in empty space. This relocation reduces the narrative tension evident in the earlier version discussed above. Nevertheless, since Dharmodgata is Sadāprarudita's only teacher, from the viewpoint of the narrative as a whole any type of caution is not really required. Once the warning occurs in a general context

epics we have references to women as gifts ... Women also came with victories as booty ... In the royal courts and rich households ... women were kept for service and as status symbol."

⁹ Karashima 2011: 496,₁ (= T 224 at T VIII 473a₂₅).

¹⁰ This is still the context in T 225 at T VIII 504c₁ for a similar warning as part of the instructions given by a magically-created Buddha when providing various details about Dharmodgata.

and well before Dharmodgata will be explicitly mentioned, however, its lack of relevance no longer stands out so prominently.

The relevant parts of the instruction to Sadāprarudita in the later versions encourage establishing the perception of the teacher (*śāstrīsamjñā*) toward the person from whom one receives the Perfection of Wisdom.¹¹ Skilling (2009: 73 and 76) explains “that the term *śāstrī* was hierarchically the highest term for ‘teacher’ in the early Buddhist texts and that within the Buddhist system of meaning the word *śāstrī* was soon reserved exclusively for the Buddha or for Buddhas.” Behind this stands that “in the Buddhist thought-world, Awakened Ones—Buddhas—are supreme, and *śāstrī* does not need any modifiers—the teacher is the (or a) Buddha.” The reference to the perception of the teacher can thus be understood as a direct counterpart to the injunction in the passage translated above that Sadāprarudita should revere Dharmodgata “just as one reveres the Buddha.”¹²

The later versions also warn against the deeds of Māra, which can take the form of conveying the impression that the teacher is enjoying sensual pleasures when in reality this is just his skill in means, or alternatively Māra may be responsible for disciples experiencing some form of disappointment in their relationship with the teacher. The first of these deeds of Māra correlates with the idea that Sadāprarudita does not yet understand Dharmodgata’s skill in means and for this reason should ignore any evidence of the latter’s shortcomings.

Seeing the Teacher as a Buddha

The placing of the teacher on the same level as the Buddha can be explored further based on reflections offered by Skilling

¹¹ T 220.1 at T VI 1059c₂₈ (this is a version of the Sadāprarudita tale found in the translation by Xuánzàng (玄奘) of a version of the *Śatasāhasrikā* as part of his rendering of an assembly of *Prajñāpāramitā* texts, which includes two versions of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* that do not have the Sadāprarudita tale), T 227 at T VIII 580b₁₅, T 228 at T VIII 668b₂₃, Wogihara 1932/1935: 930₉, and D 12 *ka* 262a₃ or P 734 *mi* 284b₅.

¹² In fact, T 220.1 at T VI 1059c₂₉, T 227 at T VIII 580b₁₇, and T 228 at T VIII 668b₂₄ refer to the “perception of the great teacher,” 大師想, thereby ensuring that their Chinese audiences will not fail to understand that this intends the Buddha.

(2009: 100) on the idea of *śāstrsamjñā* in general: “To identify a preacher with the Buddha invests the pronouncements of a *dharmabhāṇaka* or *dharmakathika* with authority ... It is probable that the perception of the Teacher was one of the mechanisms in the process of naturalizing new texts into the corpus of *Buddhavacana*.” Harrison (1993: 175) identifies such respect as one of the salient characteristics of early Mahāyāna *sūtras* related to Lokakṣema’s translation activities:

Of great importance in our texts is the veneration of the sacred word, both in its written form, as an enshrined text, and—more commonly—in the person of the ‘preacher of the Dharma’ (*dharmabhāṇaka*), a figure whom we may identify with the compilers and disseminators of Mahayana *sūtras*. The readers or hearers of these *sūtras* are repeatedly exhorted to honour the ‘preacher of the Dharma’ from whom they have obtained them, and to regard him or her as they would the Buddha.

From an *Āgama* perspective, such exaltation need not entail immunity from ethical scrutiny. Evidence for a deep respect toward the one who acts as a transmitter of *buddhavacana* is clearly evident in *Āgama* literature. One example occurs in a narrative in which the Buddha sends a message to a seriously ill monk. When the monk hears that the messenger has come to transmit words spoken by the Buddha, he asks his attendants to lift him off the bed and put him on the ground.¹³ The depiction implies that, even though he was so sick that he was unable to get off the bed himself—a condition that certainly excuses him from being in that position when receiving a message—he still wanted to be on the bare floor as an expression of respect toward the messenger who was going to transmit words spoken by the Buddha. The Buddha’s exceptional nature in *Āgama* literature is also evident when a Pāli discourse and its parallels indicate that the domain (*visaya*) of a Buddha is inconceivable.¹⁴ According to another Pāli discourse and

¹³ SN 22.87 at SN III 122,¹⁷ and its parallel SĀ 1265 at T II 347a₉ (another parallel, EĀ 26.10, lacks the whole messenger episode).

¹⁴ AN 4.77 at AN II 80,¹⁶ *buddhānaṃ, bhikkhave, buddhavisayo acinteyyo*, EĀ 29.6 at T II 657a₂₁: 佛國境界不可思議, and Up 7027 at D 4094 *nyu* 66a₇ or P 5595 *thu* 110a₄: *sangs rgyas rnams kyi sangs rgyas kyi yul ni bsam gyis mi khyab po* (see also Up 2082 at D 4094 *ju* 100a₄ or P 5595 *tu* 114b₁).

its parallels, even Śāriputra was unable to assess fully the qualities of the Buddha.¹⁵

At the same time, however, such indications need to be considered alongside a Pāli discourse and its Chinese parallel entirely dedicated to inviting a prospective disciple to undertake the most meticulous scrutiny of the Buddha and his conduct. The relevance of this discourse lies precisely in its refusal to exempt even the Buddha from examination at the level of ethical integrity. In other words, although the domain and qualities of a Buddha are indeed beyond the full comprehension of others, this does not apply to the basics of ethical conduct. The question of whether the Buddha exemplifies the ethical integrity that he teaches is definitely open to inspection, and the whole discourse is dedicated to encouraging precisely that.

The advice is that, if one lacks the telepathic powers to assess the Buddha, one should closely observe and examine him, based on what can be seen and heard, in order to discern whether he has defiled states of mind.¹⁶ In view of the authority with which a teacher was invested in the ancient Indian setting, such an open invitation is remarkable. The parallels do not stop at this, as they even explicitly encourage directly confronting the Buddha with questions about his ethical purity.¹⁷ This clearly conveys a substantially different attitude compared to the warning given to Sadāprarudita.

For a disciple to be revered as being similar to the Buddha manifests in *Āgama* literature in relation to Mahākāśyapa, in particular in the *Kāśyapasaṃyukta*.¹⁸ Nevertheless, as the present Pāli discourse and its Chinese parallel clearly show, granting such reverence does not entail that the teacher's ethical conduct is beyond evaluation by others. Said differently, if a teacher "should

¹⁵ DN 28 at DN III 100,¹¹ (= SN 47.12 at SN V 160,²), DiSimone 2024: 325 (16.1.4), DĀ 18 at T I 76c₁₁, T 18 at T I 255b₄, SĀ 498 at T II 130c₂₂, and Up 1002 at D 4094 *ju* 3b₅ or P 5595 *tu* 4a₅; see also DN 16 at DN II 82,²⁵, which Waldschmidt 1944: 18 identifies as a later addition that does not fit the narrative context particularly well.

¹⁶ MN 47 at MN I 318,³ and MĀ 186 at T I 731b₉; see also Anālayo 2010.

¹⁷ MN 47 at MN I 319,¹⁹ and MĀ 186 at T I 731c₆.

¹⁸ See in more detail Anālayo 2026.

be revered just as one reveres the Buddha, without any difference,” at least from an *Āgama* perspective, this does not imply that one should ignore any observed shortcomings. On the contrary, reverence and scrutiny are mutually reinforcing, insofar as ethical integrity is precisely what warrants exaltation. For a teacher to be revered in a way comparable to the Buddha, such an exalted position needs to be earned by emulating the latter as much as possible, at the very least by maintaining the basics of ethical conduct.

Turning from *Āgama* literature to the identification of a Dharma teacher with the Buddha in Mahāyāna literature, Drewes (2011: 348f) provides helpful doctrinal background by pointing out that “[b]ecoming a dharmabhāṇaka is also associated with advanced status in formal models of the bodhisattva path”; in fact, “so far as I am aware, Mahāyāna sūtras do not link any other activity or occupation to high religious attainment in this way.” In the course of examining the articulation of the above warning in the Sanskrit version of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, Drewes (2011: 356) in turn comments that

much of it seems intended as an apology for dharmabhāṇakas’ behavior ... we should not be surprised if a dharmabhāṇaka turns out to be devoted to the pursuit of wealth and sensual pleasures. In such cases we should reflect that the dharmabhāṇaka is so wise and pure that he engages in such activities solely for our benefit ... it seems that this advice can only be an attempt to justify behavior that actual followers of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*’s dharmabhāṇakas were likely to encounter.

Nance (2008: 143 and 145) notes, in relation to a tendency toward a “conflation of the figure of the preacher with the figure of a Buddha,” that elsewhere the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* recognizes that a teacher of the Perfection of Wisdom “may still be subject to certain ‘works of Māra’ (*māra-karman*) that adversely impact their ability to communicate the dharma effectively.” An example from the *Prajñāpāramitā* translated by Lokakṣema and his team would be when a teacher of the Perfection of Wisdom is intent on material gains and does not want to give teachings, or is

only willing to teach if sufficiently revered.¹⁹ Although all of this is the work of Māra, at the same time it clearly reflects a recognition that teachers of the Perfection of Wisdom do not necessarily live up to being like the Buddha.

The motif in the *Prajñāpāramitā* passage translated above of revering one's teacher of the Perfection of Wisdom just as one would revere the Buddha, "without a difference," can be related to another passage in the same *sūtra* that occurs prior to the Sadāprarudita narrative. The context depicts bodhisattvas who in prior lives have honored Buddhas. Once they hear the Perfection of Wisdom in their present life, they realize that this is just like seeing the Buddha, "without any difference."²⁰ This indication aligns with the suggestion by Peter Skilling, quoted above, that authentication is an important aspect of the motif under discussion. Someone who immediately has faith in the teachings given in the *Prajñāpāramitā*, to the extent that hearing them is experienced as equal to seeing the Buddha himself, can be sure to have had past-life encounters with

¹⁹ Karashima 2011: 241,₁₈ and 243,₆ (= T 224 at T VIII 448a₃₋₂₇): 法師意欲有所得，若衣服，財利。受經之人亦無與心 and 法師念：我是尊貴。有來恭敬自歸者，我與般若波羅蜜。若有不恭敬自歸者。我不與之。 Drewes 2011: 359 comments on similar indications in the Sanskrit version of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* that these overall "yield a picture of dharmabhāṇakas as people who presented themselves as exalted religious figures, sought to attract patrons and followers ... often sought fame and wealth, and typically required gifts, payment, and service from their students."

²⁰ Karashima 2011: 165,₉ (= T 224 at T VIII 441a₂₃): 以是復聞般若波羅蜜，自念言：我如見佛，無異； see also Skilling 2009: 90f. The importance of regarding one's teacher as similar to the Buddha emerges also in the **Pratyutpannasamādhi-sūtra*, reportedly translated in tandem with T 224 and completed at the same time. The relevant passage indicates that it will be difficult to gain the *samādhi* that forms the main concern of this text if one does not regard one's good teacher as a Buddha, T 418 at T XIII 906b₂₂: 視善師不如佛者，得三昧難. This underlines the degree to which such a high regard of one's teacher was considered indispensable. Another relevant reference in the same *sūtra* clarifies that the status of being like a Buddha applies to any monk, nun, male lay disciple, or female lay disciple from whom the bodhisattva hears this *samādhi*, T 418 at T XIII 909c₇: 是菩薩若從比丘，比丘尼，優婆塞，優婆夷所得聞是三昧，當視如佛. This further confirms the importance of the commended perception, as it overrules any hierarchical positioning based on the distinction between monastics and laity or between males and females.

Buddhas. Needless to say, the opposite of course holds for those who lack such faith.

Another relevant occurrence features at a later point in the Sadāprarudita narrative, after he has received the above warning. The relevant episode depicts the type of devotion that can accompany the perception of a teacher as being like the Buddha, and the particularly noteworthy feature is that in this case the comparison to the Buddha is applied to Sadāprarudita himself.

Within the narrative setting, Sadāprarudita had come into the presence of Dharmodgata with a following of five hundred women. At the present juncture, these are so deeply inspired by the teachings on the Perfection of Wisdom they had been able to hear that they decide to offer themselves and all their wealth to Sadāprarudita in recognition of his role in making this possible. The women state that they consider him to be their teacher and comparable to the Buddha, “without any difference.”²¹

The episode fleshes out the implications of the motif of revering a teacher in a way comparable to revering the Buddha, as here this combines with the most complete act of surrender imaginable. These women not only give up all their wealth—amounting to five hundred cart loads and thus no mean offering in itself—but even willingly reduce themselves to a status of female servants, if not slaves, 婢, a term possibly rendering an original corresponding to Sanskrit *dāsī*.²² The profound devotion and willingness to surrender that this episode associates with the perception of one’s teacher as being like the Buddha is remarkable.

Skill in Means

At this point I turn to the other theme evident in the instructions to Sadāprarudita, namely the need to ignore any shortcomings of the teacher and attribute these to his skill in means. This move introduces a qualitatively distinct ethical logic. Skill in means as such features in *Āgama* and related literature in two basic modalities. One of these refers to the ability of practitioners in monitoring their own practice; the other designates ability in

²¹ Karashima 2011: 520,₄ (= T 224 at T VIII 476a₁): 我曹持師以當佛_[5] 無有異.

²² See Hirakawa 1997: 366.

teaching others, usually concerning the Buddha's ability in this respect.²³ The former type is a prominent feature in *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, on which Pye (1978/2003: 103) comments that "skilful means is the crucial concomitant of insight [= *prajñā*] properly understood, as a result of which the bodhisattva is able to do what he is expected to do without getting caught out by it." Nattier (2003: 155) in turn offers the following detailed explanation:

In the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, for example, *upāya-kauśalya* refers to the skillful techniques employed by the bodhisattva while carrying out such practices as meditation ... Above all, it means the ability to practice states of deep meditative absorption while staving off what would be their natural karmic result: rebirth in one of the *rūpa-dhātu* heavens, or worse, the attainment of enlightenment as an Arhat. These results, while eagerly sought by other Buddhists, would delay or permanently derail the bodhisattva from his goal of attaining full Buddhahood, and were thus to be avoided at all costs. The term *upāya-kauśalya* as used in the *Aṣṭa* thus refers to what might best be described as a 'balancing act.'

With the present episode, however, the type of skill in means differs from such usage, as it more specifically serves to authenticate when—to use the wording employed by Keown (1992/2001: 157) in describing this modality of skill in means—"bodhisattvas transgress the precepts from motives of compassion and are said to do no wrong." This is a significant functional reorientation, being precisely the perspective *Sadāprarudita* should adopt: any evidence for a shortcoming in his teacher should be ignored in the understanding that it must be an expression of the latter's skill in means, which *Sadāprarudita* is unable to fathom.

This reflects a basic dimension of skill in means recognized in Mahāyāna ethics, which Jackson (2004: 871f) explains to imply that

an advanced bodhisattva or buddha not only may, but must, break conventional precepts (including monastic vows) if doing so will be beneficial. Thus, sex, violence, lying, and stealing are sometimes claimed to be permissible. This

²³ See Anālayo 2023b: 187–203.

‘situational’ ethic ... defines virtue in terms of motive rather than conduct, thereby hinting at relativism and complicating judgments regarding one’s own or others’ behavior.

In the present case, the reference point for this modality of skill in means appears to be the equation of the teacher with the Buddha, articulated explicitly in the advice given to Sadāprarudita. What from an ordinary viewpoint may seem to be shortcomings, even to the extent of conflicting with basic principles of ethical conduct, are to be reframed as an expression of skill in means if someone stands in the Buddha’s place to teach.

The advocacy of this particular perspective in the instruction to Sadāprarudita can be contextualized based on a digital search of the term used by Lokakṣema and his team to render *upāyakauśalya* here and elsewhere in the same *Prajñāpāramitā*.²⁴ This gives the impression that, except for the present case, the usage of this term consistently carries an ethically positive sense, in line with the two complementary meanings of *kuśala* as “skilled” and “wholesome.” Such usage stands in direct contrast to the single instance of *upāyakauśalya* in the advice to Sadāprarudita, where such skill instead comes to be associated with what is at least potentially unwholesome. What emerges in this way is that the idea that shortcomings of a teacher need to be interpreted in the light of the supposed exercise of *upāyakauśalya* appears to be unique within the immediate environment of the same *sūtra*. A similar situation continues when extending the digital search to other early Mahāyāna *sūtras* translated during the

²⁴ The main search term is 漚耜拘舍羅, with the alternative spelling 漚和拘舍羅 and one instance of the (perhaps accidentally) shortened form 漚耜拘舍. The searched texts are T 224, T 280, T 282, T 283, T 313, T 322, T 350, T 362, T 418, T 458, T 624, T 626, T 630, and T 807. Among these texts, T 624 and T 626 have only a somewhat tenuous relationship to the translation style of Lokakṣema and his team according to the detailed analysis of translatorship attributions by Nattier 2008: 85. Moreover, T 313 features in her analysis as a “problematic or revised text”; see also Radich 2026. Its inclusion in the present survey, mainly motivated by the wish to make the search as comprehensive as possible, has no further effect, as the search term does not feature in this text.

Eastern Han. The same holds for a reference to skill in means in the Gāndhārī manuscript of the *Bhadrakalpika-sūtra*.²⁵

In the *Prajñāpāramitā* itself, the unique nature of the advice given to Sadāprarudita becomes particularly evident in the context of a detailed exposition of Māra's deed, where several passages relate shortcomings of a bodhisattva to the absence of *upāyakauśalya*. Thus, when a bodhisattva gets angry, this indicates that he belongs to the type of bodhisattvas who lack *upāyakauśalya*.²⁶ Here, the manifestation of a shortcoming in the form of an unwholesome emotion signifies that skill in means is lacking. The same holds for a bodhisattva who develops pride. Such a bodhisattva is not only limited in wisdom but also lacks *upāyakauśalya*.²⁷ Again, a bodhisattva who is conceited on account of being irreversible and looks down on other bodhisattvas is far from Buddhahood, far from omniscience, far from the wisdom of supreme awakening, and also far from skill in means.²⁸ In yet another passage, in reference to a conceited bodhisattva the Buddha states that "this is a bodhisattva who does not possess skill in means."²⁹

Now, it is of course always possible to miss an important passage when doing a digital search. Moreover, the material taken

²⁵ Baums, Glass, and Matsuda 2016: 214 (3v₃). Strictly speaking, this manuscript falls outside of the time frame adopted in my study for Chinese sources, as Baums, Glass, and Matsuda 2016: 186 date it to the third century CE. I have nevertheless included it, as consultation of the online Gāndhārī dictionary (<https://gandhari.org/dictionary>) by Stefan Baums and Andrew Glass suggests that this may at present be the only attested occurrence of a reference to skill in means in a Gāndhārī manuscript.

²⁶ Karashima 2011: 360,₁₁ (= T 224 at T VIII 460a₂₉): 是輩菩薩無有漚想拘舍羅，瞋怒更生 (which is preceded by 反瞋志起，恚怒稍稍增多，則離薩芸若大遠，失阿耨多羅三耶三菩智).

²⁷ Karashima 2011: 367,₅ (= T 224 at T VIII 460c₁₄): 是菩薩如是於智中少，是菩薩無有漚想拘舍羅。

²⁸ Karashima 2011: 367,₁₀ (= T 224 at T VIII 460c₂₀): 自意念：我是阿惟越致，便輕餘菩薩。用是輕易故，離佛，遠離薩芸若，遠離阿耨多羅三耶三菩智，遠是漚想拘舍羅。

²⁹ Karashima 2011: 373,₄ (= T 224 at T VIII 461b₉): 是無有漚想拘舍羅菩薩 (the earlier description mentions 是菩薩，摩訶薩反自用是，當輕易餘菩薩。自念：誰能過我者？輕易城傍行菩薩)。

up for digital searching is simply what happens to have been translated during the Eastern Han, whatever the selection criteria informing the choice of texts to be rendered into Chinese, further complicated in some cases by uncertainties in translatorship attribution and instances where a translation has subsequently been lost.³⁰ With these caveats in place, however—and I think it is important to emphasize the provisional nature of what follows—the instruction to Sadāprarudita may reflect an important pointer at a very early stage in the development of this particular aspect of Mahāyāna ethics. Specifically, it may witness the emergence of an apologetic strategy later generalized into doctrine.

Given that the warning addressed to Sadāprarudita seems to be unrelated to its immediate narrative context, it seems fair to consider it instead in relation to indications given in the same *sūtra* elsewhere that teachers of the *Prajñāpāramitā* may at times manifest a type of conduct that is not at all inspiring. What emerges in this way adds significance to the suggestion by Drewes (2011: 356), quoted above, that associating skill in means with turning a blind eye to shortcomings “seems intended as an apology for dharmabhāṇakas’ behavior,” and that “it seems that this advice can only be an attempt to justify behavior that actual followers of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*’s dharmabhāṇakas were likely to encounter.” It would then follow that such a type of apology and justification may have had a decisive impact on the emergence of this particular modality of skill in means. What appears to have begun as a pragmatic defense of teachers’ conduct may thus crystallize into a normative ethical principle.

This, in turn, provides a perspective on the premise in Mahāyāna ethics, sketched by Jackson (2004: 872), where an advanced bodhisattva “not only may, but must, break conventional precepts (including monastic vows) if doing so will be beneficial.”³¹ From the perspective developed here, it seems possible to envisage that this aspect of Mahāyāna ethics could reflect a rationalization of a dimension of skill in means that to all

³⁰ As noted by Radich 2011/2012: 229, “we must not confuse the happenstance order of translation of ideas into Chinese with the order of their original genesis and development.”

³¹ See in more detail Schmithausen 2003.

appearances may have emerged as an apologetic. Said differently, trying to explain away shortcomings of teachers could have provided the initial input, and the idea that such shortcomings are the outcome of a duty of bodhisattvas to prioritize the benefit of others over maintaining conventional ethical conduct may reflect a subsequent justification. Such a subsequent development would align with a general tendency for an emphasis on compassion to become a more central concern in later texts.³²

In sum, the suggestion is that poor conduct by teachers may have led to the perceived need to discourage disciples from recognizing shortcomings for what they are, based on asserting the unfathomable nature of the teachers' skill in means. Since the *Sadāprarudita* tale features advice on how to approach a teacher, such a discouragement was naturally added at this place in the *Prajñāpāramitā*, an addition apparently made without recognizing that it does not fit the narrative denouement. The overall success of this maneuver could have inspired turning it into a principle of Mahāyāna ethics, embellished by being related to a compassionate intent.

In this way, the above episode from the *Prajñāpāramitā* may reveal a tendency in which the promotion of teachers of emptiness combines with a tendency toward an erosion of ethics. Whereas the ethical tension in *Sadāprarudita* tale is subtle, the next case study will show how Mahāyāna rhetoric on emptiness can more overtly destabilize conventional ethical norms. Before turning to the relevant passage, however, I first need to provide some background on the rhetoric of emptiness.

The Rhetoric of Emptiness

The onset of Abhidharma classification inevitably comes with an insistence on clearly demarcated terminology. The concern with terminological precision and systematic classification provides a background to the evolution of the notion that dharmas have an intrinsic nature, *svabhāva*, described by Cox (2025: 154) in the following manner:

³² This has been pointed out by several scholars, for examples of which see Anālayo 2025c: 9f.

The specialized meaning of Skt *svabhāva* is best understood as developing in the context of categorization, through which all aspects of experience are identified, classified, and thereby clearly discriminated. These functionally determined categories result in an elaborate taxonomy of factors (Skt *dharma*) structured in accordance with each factor's distinguishing characteristic, or 'intrinsic nature' (P *sabhāva*, Skt *svabhāva*). Just as categories in a taxonomic schema are distinct, invariably constituted by their demarcating characteristics and hence not subject to fluctuation, so also each factor thus determined by its 'intrinsic nature' is unalterably discriminated and not subject to confusion with other factors. Intrinsic nature undergoes no variation or modification, and therefore factors, which as categories are nothing other than their defining intrinsic natures, are established as stable and immutable.

This initial context of typological discrimination of factors through categorization provides the basis in later Sarvāstivāda texts for a shift of focus in the use of the term Skt *svabhāva* to refer to the ontic status of the individual factors thus categorized; that is to say, Skt *svabhāva* no longer simply discriminates the categories to which factors belong but also marks the manner of existence of these factors as real entities. This new concern with ontology led to a reappraisal according to ontic criteria of the traditional categories of factors defined by intrinsic nature; hence Skt *svabhāva* acquired an explicit and specialized ontic sense, which came to be expressed through the term 'real entity' (Skt *dravya*).

To the extent to which the rhetoric of emptiness in early Mahāyāna *sūtras* responds to this notion of *svabhāva*—Bronkhorst (2018) provides a compelling highlight on the need to keep in view Abhidharma developments when reading *Prajñāpāramitā* and related early Mahāyāna literature—to that extent the reliance on clearly defined terminology as the foundation for categorization naturally comes up for deconstruction. Hence, such deconstruction unsurprisingly relies on apparently paradoxical statements as a teaching tool. Yet, once such paradoxical formulations are considered apart from their original pedagogical context, they risk being reified or literalized. In other words, the employment of such teaching tools risks becoming the object of literary readings, and

this is precisely what appears to have happened in the passage from the *Ajātaśatrukaukṛtyavinodanā-sūtra* to be examined below.

Matricide Transformed

The passage to be studied here occurs in “the Discourse on King Ajātaśatru” (阿闍世王經), which Nattier (2008: 85), in her detailed analysis of translatorship attributions, assigns to the category of a “third-tier text,” in the sense of bearing only a distant relationship to the translation style of Lokakṣema and his team. Harrison and Hartmann (2000: 168) note that this discourse is “perhaps the most sophisticated and evolved of the Mahāyāna sūtras translated into Chinese by the Indo-Scythian master” Lokakṣema.

In line with the indication provided in the title, Ajātaśatru is a central protagonist who receives teachings from the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. Harrison (1993: 153f) explains that

the core of the sūtra consists in his [= Mañjuśrī’s] conversations with King Ajātaśatru. In these he attempts to reveal the true significance of the remorse which Ajātaśatru feels at having caused the death of his father, Bimbisāra, in order to usurp the throne of Magadha. After much discussion and practical demonstration, Mañjuśrī manages to convince Ajātaśatru that since all *dharma*s are empty, wrong actions and the retribution they incur are also empty, and do not have the power to affect the mind that sees them for what they are.

Initially overwhelmed by the thought of the infernal torment which lies in store for him, Ajātaśatru at last comprehends that there is no self to suffer any such fate; attaining the realisation that no *dharma*s are ever produced (*anutpattikadharmakṣānti*), he has his eventual rise to Buddhahood predicted for him by Śākyamuni. Behind this pious tale with its many dramatic flourishes and embellishments lies a concerted attempt to apply the doctrine of emptiness to the problems of morality.

The *sūtra* under discussion is thus an example of a concern with Ajātaśatru’s salvation, which features as the second in what Wu (2019: 51) identifies as “[f]our main narrative cycles [that] surround Ajātaśatru in South Asian Buddhist literature,” concerned

respectively with “his patricide ... his salvation ... his military activities ... and his special relationship with the Buddhist monastic community.” Overall, “[t]he image of Ajātaśatru that emerges from Buddhist literature is a paradigmatic embodiment of both violence and virtue. He is both infamous as a patricide ... and famous as a model of Buddhist faith.”

What is at stake in the episode to be examined here, which does not involve Ajātaśatru himself, is the application of emptiness rhetoric to one of the most serious ethical transgressions recognized in Buddhist tradition. On encountering a man who had killed his own mother, Mañjuśrī magically conjures up a scene where another man gets so angry with his mother and father as to kill them. The conjured man then approaches the Buddha, with the real matricide closely monitoring what takes place. The Buddha gives the conjured man a teaching on emptiness, after which the conjured man becomes a monk and an arhat, followed by entering final Nirvana through rising into space and self-cremating.³³

The real matricide then approaches the Buddha to confess his deed, whereon the Buddha gives him a closely similar teaching on emptiness. The matricide briefly experiences the heat of hell in each pore of his body. He requests the Buddha’s help, who touches the head of the matricide, immediately quelling the experience of heat. Next, the matricide receives the going forth and attains stream-entry on hearing the Buddha expound the four truths. On penetrating that teaching more deeply, he in turn becomes an arhat. With the Buddha’s permission, he also rises into space and self-cremates. This narrative sequence demonstrates a progressive neutralization of karmic consequences, showing how doctrinal teachings on emptiness can transform ethical accountability.

The teaching given by the Buddha to the matricide seems to involve three main steps. The first step introduces a temporal perspective on the mind, proceeding in this way:³⁴

³³ On the narrative motif of spontaneous self-cremation see Anālayo 2025c: 269–276.

³⁴ T 626 at T XV 403b₂₃: 且觀心法，念以過去以當來今現在心。何所心殺其母者？過去心以滅盡，亦不外，亦不內，亦無處所。當來心不可說，亦未生，亦未有，亦無有想，亦無有所想。今現在心亦無所住止。心有所生，則破壞，亦無所聚，亦不見有所至處，亦不可見有所從來處；adopting the 元 and 明

You should examine the nature of the mind, considering the present mind by means of the past and by means of the future. Which mind killed that mother? The past mind, by means of being extinguished, is neither without, nor within; it has no [other] location as well. The future mind cannot be designated; it has neither yet arisen, nor yet come into existence; it neither has a perception, nor does it perceive something. The present mind, too, is without a place to stay. On being born, the mind is consequently destroyed; it neither accumulates somewhere, nor is it seen to arrive at some place, nor can it be seen to come from some place.

The main thrust of this teaching appears to be the attempt to establish a sharp distinction between the present mind and the past mind with which the matricide was committed. That past has long ceased, and the present mind is of such short duration that it soon ceases again. The above passage also relies on a standard argument from *Prajñāpāramitā* thought, in that the mind does not come from somewhere on arising and does not go somewhere on ceasing.³⁵

At this stage, however, the teaching remains largely preparatory. The overall attempt to disconnect the present mind from the one in the past that killed the mother appears to reflect the impact of the theory of momentariness and can best be appreciated based on the following explanation offered by von Rospatt (1995: 80):

By reducing the duration of momentary entities to such an extreme that it entails the denial of any duration including the time taken for coming into being and vanishing, the[ir] entire existence may be effaced. In other words, the reduction of the moment to a point-instant may be carried so far that the point itself becomes erased, too. In precisely this sense, the doctrine of momentariness functions as a gate to *śūnyatā*.

The first part of the teaching to the matricide does not yet suffice for countering the karmic results of killing one's own

variant 無 instead of 爾 also adopted by Harrison and Hartmann 2000: 199; for 且 and 心法 in the beginning phrase I rely on Karashima 2010: 364 and 542. A continuous translation of the whole teaching, as part of a translation of the entire *sūtra*, can be found in Shingan 2022: 107.

³⁵ See in more detail Anālayo 2025c: 123–132.

mother, as it only establishes the distinction between the three periods of time and the ephemeral nature of the present moment. In fact, the radicalization of impermanence through the theory of momentariness does not amount to a denial of causality. Otherwise, the result would be a series of disjointed momentary events that would no longer admit any continuity. It is precisely the operation of causality that connects these momentary events and thus is responsible for the operation of memory, karma, etc. The same holds for the nonarising of dharmas. The mind (or any dharma) does not “come from some place,” to use the formulation employed in the extract translated above, precisely because it is the result of present conditions. The same basic idea appears to inform the famous opening verse of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, according to which Nāgārjuna considered non-arising to be an articulation of dependent arising (*pratītya samutpāda*).³⁶

The second step in the teaching to the matricide expands on the nature of the present mind from the viewpoint of it being beyond apprehension:³⁷

That mind is also not blue, red, yellow, white or black. That mind does not have a shape; it cannot be seen and cannot be apprehended. It can also not be heard. Why is that? The reason is that there is no sound. It can neither be obtained nor does it have adjuncts; it is comparable to an illusion. It is

³⁶ See de La Vallée Poussin 1913: 3,₈.

³⁷ T 626 at T XV 403b₂₈: 其心者亦不青赤黃白黑。其心者無有形，不可見，不可得持。亦不可聽聞。所以者何？無有聲故。亦不可得獲，亦無有伴，譬若幻。亦不於外見身，於內亦無所得，於中間無有處。 Harrison and Hartmann 2000: 199 do not comment on the unexpected positioning of 身. My translation is based on the assumption that this would be reflecting a textual error, an assumption that receives support from the parallels in Harrison and Hartmann 2000: 194,₁₁ and 195,₂: (*cittaṃ hi bhoḥ puruṣa nādhyātme kāye avatiṣṭhate na bahirdhā viśayeṣūpatiṣṭhati nobha*)*yam aṃtareṇopalabhya{n}te* and *kye skyes bu sems ni nang gi lus la yang mi 'jug, phyi rol gyis yul du yang mi rgyu, gnyi ga med par yang mi dmigs so* (here and elsewhere, I adjust quotes to the Wylie system), and T 627 at T XV 424c₂₈: 心亦不立於身之內，亦不由外，亦無境界，不處兩間，不得中止。 The same also emerges with the similar teaching given earlier in T 626 at T XV 403a₂₈ to the illusory person: 於身亦不可見在內，亦不見在外，亦不見中間; see also Harrison and Hartmann 2000: 196. On the nature of T 628 and T 629, not included here, see the discussion in Harrison 1993: 154–156.

neither seen outside of the body, nor can it be obtained somewhere within it, and it is not in a location in between.

The indication that the mind is not only invisible but also inaudible, with the additional stress on driving home the latter fact through a rhetorical question, seems somewhat naïve. It is hardly surprising that an immaterial phenomenon does not share the properties of material phenomena, which is precisely why the four mental aggregates can be designated as immaterial,³⁸ namely because they differ in this respect from the first aggregate of material form.

The reference to the mind being comparable to an illusion shows that this part must also be indebted to *Prajñāpāramitā* literature.³⁹ However, in the *Prajñāpāramitā* the idea of not being able to apprehend, find, or obtain tends to carry a deep meaning. This can best be exemplified with the beginning of Subhūti's actual teachings in the *Prajñāpāramitā*. The introductory narration reports that a large number of bodhisattvas are in attendance.⁴⁰ On being tasked by the Buddha to give them teachings, Subhūti proclaims that he does not see any dharma at all (corresponding to) a bodhisattva and does not see any bodhisattva.⁴¹ Even though the original employs 見, which renders *dṛś*, the reference is not to

³⁸ For example, Nidd I 435,¹¹ distinguishes the *cattāro arūpino khandhā* from the first aggregate, defined by way of the four elements and thus by way of the experience of materiality; see also below note 69.

³⁹ For the corresponding statement that the mind is like an illusion see Karashima 2011: 417,³⁴ (= T 224 at T VIII 466a₁₆): 心譬如幻.

⁴⁰ Karashima 2011: 2,¹ (= T 224 at T VIII 425c₇): 摩訶菩薩無央數 (adopting a 宋, 元, 明, 宮, and 聖 variant that dispenses with 薩 after 摩訶; Karashima 2011: 2n6 explains that the corrected phrase functions as a “transliteration of Skt. *mahā-bodhisattva*”).

⁴¹ Karashima 2011: 3,¹⁰ (= T 224 at T VIII 425c₂₀): 了不見有法菩薩 ... 亦不見菩薩. The proposed significance of this passage finds support in the Gāndhārī and Sanskrit parallels, Falk and Karashima 2012: 40: *bosisatvo ṇama ṇa vedami ṇa uvalahami, avimḍamaṇa añua* ... and Wogihara 1932/1935: 31,¹⁹: *bodhisattvaṃ vā bodhisattvadharmaṃ vā avindann anupalabhamāno*. Harrison 1978: 48 explains that in *Prajñāpāramitā* and related literature “Sanskrit *upalabhate* ... refers to that mode of cognition which views its objects as existing in themselves.” In other words, the target of Subhūti's “not seeing,” 不見, is indeed the *svabhāva* of bodhisattvas, rather than the bodhisattvas themselves.

actually seeing bodhisattvas with the eyes. Subhūti's statement does not mean that the bodhisattvas in the audience have suddenly become invisible and can no longer be located anywhere. Instead, the point of this teaching must be the inability to apprehend a bodhisattva as something that has an intrinsic nature, *svabhāva*, as something that can in some way be reified.

The same meaning would in turn apply to his subsequent deconstruction of the mind. This does contain a reference to the inability to know the place of the mind.⁴² Judging from the context, this would require a nonliteral reading. Another relevant reference occurs at a later point in the *Prajñāpāramitā*, in the form of indicating that the eyes cannot see the mind to be coming from somewhere.⁴³ A closely similar indication found just a few lines earlier simply states that the mind does not come from somewhere, without any reference to the eyes or seeing.⁴⁴ In this case, too, the reference to the eyes and seeing appears to serve to provide an additional highlight on the main theme of the mind not coming from somewhere, somewhat like saying “even with the eyes one would not be able to apprehend it,” rather than implying that one should actually try to see the mind with one's eyes.

In view of these precedents in the *Prajñāpāramitā* itself, the apparent literalism evident in the above passage, whereby the profession of an inability to apprehend an intrinsic nature, *svabhāva*, becomes an inability to locate the mind physically as a visible object, is quite understandable.⁴⁵

The idea that the mind cannot be located appears to have become a significant source of inspiration for later traditions. For

⁴² Karashima 2011: 5₂ (= T 224 at T VIII 425c₂₇): 心亦不有, 亦不無, 亦不能得, 亦不能知處. Karashima 2011: 5n26 translates this as follows: “Mind is non-existent, (but at the same time) not non-existent. It cannot be apprehended. Its state/place (處) is not to be known.”

⁴³ Karashima 2011: 257₃ (= T 224 at T VIII 449c₁): 其心者, 不可以眼見如所從來.

⁴⁴ Karashima 2011: 255₅ (= T 224 at T VIII 449b₁₃): 其心者, 無所從來.

⁴⁵ An example that may still be read in line with the above references in T 224 would be *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 9.103, according to which the mind cannot be obtained within, or without, or anywhere else; see T 1662 at T XXXII 559a₂₂ and Bhattacharya 1960: 212₁₀₊₁₃ (Sanskrit and Tibetan).

example, in a commentary on Tilopa's *Mahāmudropadeśa* Khenchen Thrangu (2002: 137) offers the following instruction: "you can look for a color, look for a location, look for a shape, look for a size, and so on. If you take it step by step like that, sooner or later you will definitely come to experience directly the mind's insubstantial nature." The idea appears to have gained such traction as to find advocates even among members of the Theravāda tradition. The late Sri Lankan *vipassanā* meditation teacher Pemasiri Mahāthera describes an advanced stage in the cultivation of insight, related to the fourth *smṛtyupasthāna* of contemplation of dharma, as follows:⁴⁶ "[T]he meditator ... cannot see consciousness or determine where it is, trying to search for it in vain. The meditator then comprehends that consciousness cannot be located in a specific place, that it is not a person called 'I'; the insight into non-self (*anattā*) thus deepens."

Without intending to deny that the described insights may carry considerable appeal on the subjective level for meditation practitioners, from a doctrinal perspective it is not clear why the inability to locate something should necessarily correspond to an insight into not-self or insubstantiality. If such an equation were to be granted, then what would hold for what can be located? This could hardly be proof that the thing successfully located is not empty. Is the body any less empty than the mind, just because the former can more easily be located? A misplaced item does not become emptier due to the inability to locate it, nor will its empty nature be altered when eventually it has been found and thus can again be located. In other words, it seems preferable not to make the empty nature of phenomena dependent on the ability or inability to locate them.

The second step in the teaching to the matricide thus seems to be the outcome of literalism leading to semantic flattening. This relates to the problem mentioned earlier when the precisely defined terminology employed in Abhidharma exegesis for categorization leads to attempts at deconstruction through reliance on a playful attitude toward language and apparently paradoxical formulation. Such attempts risk becoming the object of literary readings. This seems to have happened here, as the profound pointer to not

⁴⁶ Quoted in Ditrich 2024: 25.

apprehending, obtaining, seeing, or finding an intrinsic nature of the mind has turned into the rather flat idea of not apprehending, obtaining, seeing, or finding the mind as a physical object. The implicit assumption that the mind should be findable as a physical object appears to be responsible for stimulating the hardly revelatory indication that the mind has no particular color and that it makes no audible sound.

Within its narrative context, the second step seems to be particularly aimed at the worry and fear experienced by the matricide, which had motivated him to seek out the Buddha for help. By showing that the present mind is beyond being seen or heard, and that it also cannot be found anywhere, the effect would presumably be to overcome the impact of worry and fear, in preparation for the third step.

The third step in turn relies on the idea of the original purity of the mind, summed up in the dictum: “Because the mind is originally pure, it is neither defiled nor again purified.”⁴⁷ In its narrative setting, this functions as the decisive move that transforms the predicament of the matricide, as it now turns out that his belief in having so thoroughly polluted his mind through killing his mother reflects a failure to understand the true nature of the mind, which is simply beyond being defiled or purified. In this way, doctrinal rhetoric directly neutralizes karmic consequences.

That the true nature of the mind should indeed be considered the key element responsible for transforming the karmic retribution of rebirth in hell into a momentary experience of heat, with even that immediately assuaged by the Buddha, finds confirmation in an explanation given subsequently by the Buddha to Śāriputra. According to this explanation, “by means of his faith in the nature of the mind being originally pure, this person was not [liable] to fall into a lower rebirth.”⁴⁸ This identifies the central element responsible for effacing the karmic repercussions to be expected for killing one’s own mother to be faith in the mind’s original purity; it is based on such faith that with the Buddha’s subsequent teaching of the four truths the matricide was able to

⁴⁷ T 626 at T XV 403c₅: 心者本淨故，亦無沾污，亦復無淨。

⁴⁸ T 626 at T XV 404a₈: 其以信心法本淨，是人墮惡道。

attain stream-entry. What is particularly striking here is that faith in the mind's original purity becomes the central operative factor.

The matricide's ability to reach stream-entry appears to stand in dialogue with the account of the only meeting between the Buddha and Ajātaśatru reported in *Āgama* literature, which ends with the Buddha remarking that the king could have attained stream-entry on this occasion had he not killed his father.⁴⁹ Elsewhere Pāli discourses indicate that this exemplifies a general pattern, in that gaining realization while hearing the Dharma is impossible for those who have killed their own mother or father.⁵⁰ Conversely, a stream-enterer is incapable of committing either of these two deeds.⁵¹ Such an act of killing is "incurable" (*atekiccha*), and the matricide or patricide is definitely destined for rebirth in hell.⁵² These two pertain to the category of five deeds that bring immediate retribution (*ānantarya*), on which Silk (2007: 253f) offers the following comment:

These are crimes so heinous that their inevitable karmic result of descent into hell will take place immediately and necessarily in the next life, rather than at some unspecified vague point in the future, as is usual for generic karmic results, which will and must bear their fruit eventually, but for which no specific chronological framework is envisioned. Upon the death in this life of an individual who has committed one of these crimes, his or her fate will necessarily, directly and immediately be that of hell. These are the most serious crimes catalogued and studied within Indian Buddhist literature.

In other words, the power of faith in the original purity of the nature of the mind is such that it is able to counter the karmic retribution for what is recognized as pertaining to the most serious

⁴⁹ DN 2 at DN I 86,⁴ DĀ 27 at T I 109b₂₈, EĀ 43.7 at T II 764b₆, and Gnoli 1978: 252,²⁴. In T 22 at T I 276a₁₅, however, he realizes stream-entry, which according to MacQueen 1988: 186f may reflect an adjustment of the text to ensure a happy ending.

⁵⁰ AN 6.87 at AN III 436,¹⁹.

⁵¹ AN 6.94 At AN III 439,²³.

⁵² AN 5.129 at AN III 146,²⁴. No parallel appears to be known for the Pāli discourses mentioned here and in the two preceding notes.

crime one may commit, such that in the case of the matricide the prospect of having to suffer in the next life the fires of hell transforms into a merely momentary experience of heat in the present. The importance of the notion of the mind being originally pure in this respect receives an additional emphasis when the Buddha reveals that the matricide had in his past lives made offerings to five hundred Buddhas and “from each Buddha he heard that the nature of the mind is originally pure.”⁵³ This makes the revelation of such original purity a standard teaching delivered by past Buddhas.

In *Āgama* literature, the luminosity of the mind or its intrinsic purity features in a discourse in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya*; a similar presentation can be found in the **Śāriputrābhidharma*. Of particular relevance for the present context is that both versions quite explicitly refer to the *presence* of adventitious defilements.⁵⁴ “This mind is luminous, monastics, and it is defiled by adventitious defilements,” and “the mind is by nature pure; it is defiled by adventitious defilements.” In other words, although an obfuscation of causality is already to some degree evident, as despite being defiled the mind is considered to be luminous or pure, at least both formulations still recognize that the mind can be defiled.

The notion that the mind is originally pure also features in the *Prajñāpāramitā* in the context of an exposition that reveals the nature of the mind to be beyond apprehension.⁵⁵ In a passage found in the same context a little earlier, the Buddha explains that mental states with lust, anger, or delusion are originally without these.⁵⁶ In other words, here, too, the presence of defilements is not being effaced. The point of the mind’s original purity is only to indicate

⁵³ T 626 at T XV 404a₄: 從一一佛聞心法本淨; see also Harrison and Hartmann 2000: 203.

⁵⁴ AN 1.6.1 at AN I 10,10: *pabhassaram idaṃ, bhikkhave, cittaṃ, tañ ca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi upakkiliṭṭhaṃ*; T 1548 at T XXVIII 697b₁₈: 心性清淨，為客塵染。On the notion of the luminous/pure mind in *Āgama* literature see in more detail Anālayo 2017.

⁵⁵ Karashima 2011: 256,6 (= T 224 at T VIII 449b₂₅): 其心者本淨故; on the parallels see Anālayo 2025c: 374n492.

⁵⁶ Karashima 2011: 253,4 (= T 224 at T VIII 449a₂₁): 知愛欲心之本無愛欲心; 知瞋恚心之本無瞋恚心; 知愚癡心之本無愚癡心.

that these defilements are adventitious and not an integral part of the nature of the mind.

With the above episode in the Discourse on King Ajātaśatru, however, this original purity has effectively obliterated defilements. The mind can no longer be contaminated and, for this reason, also not be purified. All that is required, even by someone who has committed the most abominable crime, is to have faith in this state of affairs. In this way, the karmic effects of the most reprehensible of crimes are almost entirely obliterated, and the rhetoric of original purity becomes a mechanism for neutralizing moral causality.

The position taken in this way appears to be another instance of literalism, whereby the original purity of the mind is misread as implying an absolute condition of purity. As a result, defilements are not just adventitious but plainly illusory, leading to the naïve belief that mere faith in this pure condition of the mind suffices to obliterate karmic retribution. The basic principle that emerges in this way finds explicit articulation toward the end of the *sūtra* in a statement by Mahākāśyapa:⁵⁷

Now I declare that those who have broken the precepts and been wicked will all be liberated through this teaching and its patient [acceptance] ... through fully understanding original purity, they will consequently all be liberated from the offences they committed.

Contextualizing the Teaching to the Matricide

In what follows I contextualize the teachings given to the matricide by first taking up relevant parts from the same Discourse on King Ajātaśatru and then turning to some relevant passages in the earliest extant Chinese translation of the *Kāśyapaparivarta*. This contextualization serves to show that the matricide episode is not an isolated narrative flourish, but part of a broader pattern.

In the Discourse on King Ajātaśatru, the matricide episode functions as a counterpart to the main concern of the *sūtra* with the

⁵⁷ T 626 at T XV 406a₁₁₊₁₅: 我今說之：其有犯逆者，從是法忍悉得解脫 ... 悉以曉了本淨者，所作罪則解脫。For a study of the role of Mahākāśyapa in early Mahāyāna *sūtra* literature in general see Anālayo 2026.

patricide Ajātaśatru. The matricide episode thereby serves to convey that Ajātaśatru's case is not unique, as the same basic absolution from what Buddhist traditions had thus far considered crimes of immediate retribution holds also for someone else who had instead killed his mother.

In leading Ajātaśatru gradually to the understanding necessary for effecting this transformation, Mañjuśrī clarifies that “all dharmas are not contaminated and not purified” and that the mind, “because of its original purity, by means of that is without contamination.”⁵⁸ King Ajātaśatru eventually reports the realization he has gained: “All dharmas are completely pure, because they are nowhere defiled.”⁵⁹ Moreover, “not-self is the truth taught by the Buddha. By means of not-self, there is consequently no person, and neither one who commits an offence, nor one who experiences [the retribution] of an offence.”⁶⁰

The report of the king's realization involves another instance of literalism, in this case by mistaking not-self to mean nobody at all. Unlike the prior two cases of literalism, however, this type of misunderstanding also features in *Āgama* literature. A Pāli discourse and its parallels report that, while listening to the Buddha expounding the absence of a self in the five aggregates, a monk wonders whom actions done by not-self could possibly affect.⁶¹ With his telepathic powers, the Buddha realizes what the monk is thinking and right away addresses this misunderstanding, which closely corresponds to the idea voiced by King Ajātaśatru. Both misunderstandings fail to realize that the denial of a self is but an affirmation of causality.

The very reason for problematizing the notion of a self or soul is its presumed permanence and autonomy. The rejection of such a notion of a self clarifies that all aspects of subjective experience are governed by changing causes and conditions. To

⁵⁸ T 626 at T XV 401a₁₇₊₂₁: 諸法一切無有垢，無有淨 ... 本淨故，以是無有垢。
The quoted passage is immediately followed by referring to 其心本者。

⁵⁹ T 626 at T XV 402c₁₅: 一切諸法悉淨，無所沾污故。

⁶⁰ T 626 at T XV 402c₇: 無我是佛之說諦。其以無我，是則無人，亦不作罪者，亦無受罪者；see also Harrison and Hartmann 2000: 191.

⁶¹ SN 22.82 at SN III 103,₂₇ (= MN 109 at MN III 19,₁₂), SĀ 58 at T II 15a₁₂, and Up 7006 at D 4094 *nyu* 56a₆ or P 5595 *thu* 98a₄.

(mis-)take this clarification as implying a rejection of causality puts things on their head.⁶² In other words, the report of King Ajātaśatru's 'realization' is part of a fairly persistent tendency to misunderstand the significance of the denial of a self as implying a denial of causality, even though the main point of the denial of a self is much rather to affirm causality.

In the case of King Ajātaśatru, the karmic retribution for his patricide is not completely obliterated, similar in this respect to the situation of the matricide. Instead of manifesting as a momentary experience of heat, it rather transforms in such a way that he will still be reborn in hell, but without experiencing any pain.⁶³ In other words, rebirth in hell is granted, but this no longer has any actual effect, to the extent that even a momentary experience of heat does not occur. In the words of Wu (2025: 54), "after hearing Mañjuśrī's exposition of emptiness, Ajātaśatru is almost entirely freed from the bad karmic consequence of his patricide."

The difference in how the karmic retribution for matricide and patricide is dealt with in the *sūtra* relates to a difference between the two respective protagonists, as the Buddha reveals that Ajātaśatru has been a bodhisattva for an exceedingly long time and will eventually become a Buddha.⁶⁴ Thus, the option of letting King Ajātaśatru reach stream-entry or even become an arhat is not available, as that would conflict with his path to Buddhahood. Hence, rather than a momentary experience of pain, he undergoes the predicted rebirth, but with the assurance that this will not result in any pain at all. Harrison and Hartmann (2000: 169) highlight that the Discourse on King Ajātaśatru is

⁶² The same confusion by mistaking not-self to mean nobody continues in contemporary times and even among scholars in Buddhist studies, an example being the following comment by Faure 2009: 46: "The Buddhist dogma relating to the absence of a soul or self makes transmigration something of a paradox ... Clearly this notion goes against the notion of karmic retribution." For a critical examination of this and other errors by the same author see Anālayo 2024: 20–27, 40–46, 51–53, 71–75, and 132.

⁶³ T 626 at T XV 404a₁₉: 雖入泥犁，泥犁名實頭，入中無有苦痛；see also Harrison and Hartmann 2000: 204.

⁶⁴ T 626 at T XV 404a₂₃ and 404b₂₀. A prediction of Ajātaśatru's future Buddhahood can also be found in T 362 at T XII 303b₉, a translation of the *Sukhāvatīvyūha* that also appears to be by Lokakṣema and his team; see Harrison 1998: 556f and Nattier 2008: 86f.

dedicated to the shocking proposition that one can commit the most appalling crimes and yet still achieve liberation. The notion of ‘emptiness’ (*śūnyatā*) is applied unflinchingly to the problems of moral responsibility and personal continuity, in short, to the central Buddhist doctrine of karma, illustrated, as it were, with the ‘worst case scenario’ represented by the patricide Ajātaśatru, the archetypal villain.

The Buddha’s revelation that Ajātaśatru had been bodhisattva for many past lives implies that his killing of his father to usurp the throne would need to be reckoned an integral part of his gradual progression toward Buddhahood. Although this is not explicitly articulated in the *sūtra*, what emerges in this way could be read as advocating that even serious breaches of ethics will no longer be an obstacle for progress to Buddhahood—provided, of course, there is faith in the original purity of the mind. The final part of the *sūtra* seems to offer support for this suggestion. The relevant indication occurs in the context of the usual self-promotion typical of Mahāyāna *sūtras*, which in the Discourse on King Ajātaśatru takes the form of advocating that having a mental state of faith and delight on hearing this teaching is superior to upholding purity of ethical conduct even for a hundred eons, as the merit of the former exceeds that of the latter.⁶⁵

The section on merit accrual through engaging with the *sutra* also shows that the promoted reasoning has not been followed through to its logical conclusion. If it indeed holds that, “because the mind is originally pure, it is neither defiled nor again purified,” then the impossibility of it being affected not only by defilements but also by practices related to purification would undermine the accumulation of merit as well. In other words, attempting to step out of karmic causality will affect positive deeds just as much as negative ones. If killing one’s parent becomes a trifling issue, then the same also applies to generating merit. Had the Discourse on King Ajātaśatru taken fully on board its own tenet, the final section on merit acquisition could have been dispensed with.

In the same vein, rather than having Ajātaśatru still be reborn in hell, albeit under conditions that turn the idea of such

⁶⁵ T 626 at T XV 405b₂₀: 若男子，女人，於百劫而持淨戒，卒聞是法信樂喜心，其福出彼淨戒功德上 (adopting the 元 and 明 variant 心 instead of 之)

rebirth on its head, it would have been more straightforward to drop the whole idea of rebirth in hell altogether. This would have been more in line with the explicit indication that, after hearing teachings from Mañjuśrī, Ajātaśatru's offences were completely extinguished.⁶⁶ Again, if it indeed applies to matricides that, "through fully understanding original purity, they will consequently all be liberated from the offences they committed," then why does the matricide even have to go through a momentary experience of the fires of hell? All of this suggests the presence of some degree of ambivalence, if not ambiguity, in relation to the main idea to be promoted. Such promotion seems to be informed by the same type of naïve mindset that appears to be responsible for the instances of literalism surveyed above.

The problem that emerges in this way does not allow a solution in reliance on the distinction between conventional and ultimate truths. The type of reasoning that relies on this distinction can be illustrated with the example of a comment on a warning in the *Mūlamadhamakakārikā* (24.11) against misunderstanding emptiness, which Nāgārjuna compares to taking hold of a snake in an incorrect manner.⁶⁷ Waldron (2023: 163) comments on those who succumb to such misunderstanding that, "[b]y taking emptiness literally and interpreting it nihilistically, they end up denying both karma and nirvāṇa. How does this nihilistic interpretation arise? It easily occurs when people misunderstand the implications of the ultimate and conventional truths." In the same vein, Gold (2015: 224) explains that "[t]he danger of nihilism is the danger of denying moral distinctions from the *conventional* perspective based upon scriptures that deny things from the *ultimate* perspective."

Without intending to dispute the relevance of these comments in other settings, the distinction between conventional and ultimate does not resolve the present dilemma. A chief obstacle is that in the Discourse on King Ajātaśatru the one

⁶⁶ T 626 at T XV 404b₁₄: 從文殊師利聞諸法，聞已則歡喜信忍，所作罪應時盡索 (the narrative context takes the form of the Buddha Maitreya relating this outcome to his disciples); on the reference to 歡喜信忍 see the discussion in Wu 2023: 168n3.

⁶⁷ See de La Vallée Poussin 1913: 495₁; the simile of wrongly grasping a snake to illustrate wrong grasp of teachings occurs in MN 22 at MN I 133₃₃, MĀ 200 at T I 764a₁₈, and EĀ 50.8 at T II 813a₂₂.

responsible for a denial of karma is the Buddha himself, and the narrative denouement unmistakably shows that the relevant statements are meant to be taken at face value.

The matricide indeed almost entirely escapes the karmic retribution to be expected for his deed and becomes an arhat. Ajātaśatru's rebirth in hell takes a form that completely undermines the nature of hellish rebirth, which in the ancient Indian imagination calls up vivid scenarios of utterly horrible pain so excruciating as to defy description. In other words, this is not the case of some dull-witted member of the audience misunderstanding profound statements on emptiness, but much rather the central authority of the *sūtra* makes such statements. When an exchange with Mañjuśrī leads Ajātaśatru to the nihilist conclusion that the Buddha's teaching of the truth of not-self implies that there is "neither one who commits an offence, nor one who experiences [the retribution] of an offence," Mañjuśrī does nothing to sort out this serious misunderstanding. It seems important to recognize that the main responsibility for arriving at a nihilist position does not lie with the recipients of these teachings, be it Ajātaśatru and the matricide within the narrative framework of the *sūtra* or later audiences encountering its teachings.

As mentioned earlier, Nattier (2008: 85) assigns the Discourse on King Ajātaśatru to the category of a "third-tier text." From the viewpoint of the element of uncertainty that results from this assessment, it is of interest to note that similar teachings can be found in the earliest Chinese translation of the *Kāśyapaparivarta*, T 350, which Nattier (2008: 84) assigns to the second-tier texts among Lokakṣema's translations, in the sense of bearing a close relationship to the style of translation adopted by him and his team. The *Kāśyapaparivarta* reports teachings on the bodhisattva path given by Śākyamuni to Mahākāśyapa, who functions as his main interlocutor.

The distinction drawn in the Discourse on King Ajātaśatru between the three periods of time recurs in the *Kāśyapaparivarta* as well, when the Buddha queries with which mind one enters into one of the three root defilements: "Is it with the mind of the past, of the future, or of the present that one enters them? The past has ceased; furthermore, the future has not yet arrived, and the present

has no place to be established.”⁶⁸ A literalist reading of the idea that it is not possible to apprehend the mind, rather than intending just an apprehension of its intrinsic nature, seems to be reflected when this inability leads the Buddha to the conclusion that, “if it cannot be apprehended, then it does not exist,” as well as when he explains to Mahākāśyapa that “even Buddhas do not see the mind, which originally exists nowhere and is nowhere caused.”⁶⁹

Moreover, the Buddha informs Mahākāśyapa that “it is just like poison in the hand of a person that will not harm that person, even being amidst love and lust a bodhisattva who takes hold of wisdom will not enter a lower rebirth.”⁷⁰ In fact, even if a bodhisattva has been amidst love and lust for very a long time and has been veiled by lust, “on hearing the Buddha’s discourse just

⁶⁸ T 350 at T XXII 192a₁₁: 持過去，當來，今現在心入耶？過去為盡，復當來未至，今現在無所住也 (adopting the 聖 variant 復 instead of 甫). The quoted passage is preceded by the following: 何等心入婬？何等心入瞋怒？何等心入癡？

⁶⁹ T 350 at T XXII 192b₁ and 192a₁₄: 雖不可得，是為無有 (which is preceded by 心索之了不可得) and 諸佛亦不見心者，本無所有，無所因也. The Sanskrit version, Pāsādika 2015: 63,₆ (§98), indicates that *cittaṃ hi kāśyapa nādhātmaṃ na bahirdhā nobhayayamantareṇopalabhyate, cittaṃ hi kāśyapa arūpy anidarśanam apratigham*, etc. Thus, after pointing out that the mind cannot be apprehended within, without, or in between, the Buddha next informs Mahākāśyapa that the mind is immaterial, invisible, and not resistant. The passage thereby explicitly highlights that the mind is an immaterial phenomenon (see also above note 38). Once this is recognized, however, it is not clear why anyone would attempt to locate what is immaterial within, without, or in between, and then consider such attempts as conveying a deeper meaning. Conversely, if the issue at stake is that a *svabhāva* of the mind is beyond apprehension, then its immaterial nature is irrelevant, because an intrinsic nature of what is material, visible, and resistant is also beyond being apprehended. Yet, the Sanskrit version continues by proclaiming that even Buddhas are unable to see the mind. This seems to reflect the same basic unclarity also evident in the above quotes from T 350, thereby confirming that this is not just a problem of the translation by Lokakṣema (and his team). When another passage in the Sanskrit version (§102) affirms that, when the mind is searched for, it is not found and not apprehended, Steinkellner 1992: 402 comments that it “remains unclear as to whether it is due to its non-existence or to its imperceptibility.”

⁷⁰ T 350 at T XXII 190c₁₁: 譬如毒藥在手中，不害傷人；菩薩雖在愛欲中，持智慧不入惡道.

once with mindfulness of what is wholesome, the offences will be immediately extinguished.”⁷¹ Taken together, these passages show that the Discourse on King Ajātaśatru may not be an outlier and is probably best understood as a particularly explicit articulation of a broader tendency, particularly a concern with karmic retribution and the providing of an easy means to avoid the repercussions of bad deeds.⁷²

The net result, however, amounts to what from the viewpoint of *Āgama* literature comes rather close to wrong view, in particular in the form of denying that there is fruition of bad karma (which by implication would also apply to good karma).⁷³ According to the same type of literature, even just upholding such a wrong view will lead to a lower rebirth.⁷⁴ This sharp contrast underscores the extent to which the rhetoric of emptiness, when read literally, can undermine foundational ethical principles. With the Discourse on King Ajātaśatru, this amounts to a complete undermining of basic principles of ethics based on a literalist understanding of emptiness. The present instance thereby appears to conform to the pattern identified by Gombrich (1996: 21), in that “unintentional literalism has been a major force for change in the early doctrinal history of Buddhism.”

Conclusion

The present article has surveyed evidence suggesting that shortcomings of teachers may have provided the starting point for

⁷¹ T 350 at T XXII 191b₃: 聞佛經一反念善，罪即消盡，which is preceded by 菩薩數千巨億萬劫在愛欲中，為欲所覆。

⁷² This in turn suggests that the concerns identified by Schopen 2012: 289–292 in mediaeval texts already manifested earlier. On his hypothesis regarding what motivated such concerns see Anālayo 2023a: 12–17.

⁷³ MN 17 at MN III 71_{,27}: *n’ atthi sukata dukkaṭāṇaṃ kammānaṃ phalaṃ vipāko*, MĀ 189 at T I 735c₁₆: 無善惡業報, and Dhammadinnā 2023: 66_{,14} (= Up 6080 at D 4094 *nyu* 44a₅ or P 5595 *thu* 83b₆): *legs par spyad pa dang nyes par spyad pa’i las rnam kyī ’bras bu rnam par smin pa med do*; see also the discussion of right and wrong view in Dhammadinnā 2023.

⁷⁴ SN 42.2 at SN IV 307_{,22}: *micchādiṭṭhikassa kho panāhaṃ, gāmaṇi, purisa-puggalassa dvinnam gatīnaṃ aññataram gatim vadāmi: nirayaṃ vā tiracchāṇayoniṃ vā*, SĀ 907 at T II 227a₂₇: 若邪見者，應生二趣，若地獄趣，若畜生趣，and SĀ² 122 at T II 420a₂₆: 邪見之果，生於二處，若墮地獄，或墮畜生。

the evolution of a modality of skill in means where compassion authenticates ethical breaches. Another finding is that a literalist reading of the rhetoric of emptiness appears to have led to a denial of the principle of karmic retribution, poignantly articulated in relation to what Buddhist tradition recognizes as the most abominable of crimes: intentionally killing one's own parent. Both trajectories emerge in the context of emptiness teachings and result in a significant erosion of basic ethical principles.

What emerges from the two case studies examined here is not merely a loosening of ethical constraints, but a structural shift in how authority, emptiness, and moral accountability are related to one another. In both instances, ethical transgression is neutralized through reinterpretation. Seen in this light, the developments traced here exemplify a broader dynamic: doctrinal profundity comes to authorize exemptions from ethical norms that earlier Buddhist discourse treats as non-negotiable. The resulting tension between emptiness and ethics calls for closer attention to how rhetorical strategies, once detached from their original function, can acquire unintended normative force.

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Abbreviations

AN	<i>Āṅguttara-nikāya</i>
D	Derge
DĀ	<i>Dīrgha-āgama</i> (T 1)
DN	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125)
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26)
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
Nidd I	<i>Mahāniddesa</i>
P	Peking
SĀ	<i>Saṃyukta-āgama</i> (T 99)

- SĀ² *Samyukta-āgama* (T 100)
 SN *Samyutta-nikāya*
 T Taishō (Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association)
 Up *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-tīkā*

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