

## The Meaning of the Former Buddhas in the *Mahāpadānasuttanta*

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### I. Introduction

The major previous research argues that the legends of the former Buddhas attempted to reveal the eternity of the Dharma by providing evidence that several past Buddhas were awakened to the same Dharma as that of Gotama.<sup>1</sup> It can certainly not be denied that this is one of the purposes of the legends of the former Buddhas. Considering, however, that the main theme of the legends is rather the Buddhas than the Dharma, the present study will show that this is not the sole purpose of these legends.

The *Mahāpadānasuttanta* (= MP; Skt. Mahāvadānasūtra = MV; Chinese version 大本經) is one of the important sutras which gives a discourse on the former Buddhas. The text gives a brief exposition on the six Buddhas who preceded Gotama (i.e. Vipassī, Sikhī, Vessabhū, Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana and Kassapa) and relates in detail the legend of Vipassī. Fukita [1993], who compared MP with MV and its Chinese version, and also with the *Nagarasūtra*<sup>2</sup> (= NS), comes to the conclusion that MP describes the former Buddhas in order to make them identical and raise them on a par with the Dharma. That is, whereas in NS the former Buddhas are referred to merely as ‘the former sages’ or ‘the former rightly awakened,’ in MP the Buddhas take concrete forms, their similarities are explained and they are identified with the Dharma. Fukita’s conclusion is based on the assumption that NS was formed earlier than MP. This assumption seems to be right at first sight because the detailed and concrete content of MP, compared with the simplicity of NS, may indicate that MP was formed later than NS. However, a closer look reveals that this conclusion is not evident. For example, the doctrine of ‘causal origination’ (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) in MP and MV has only ten links instead of the usual twelve.<sup>3</sup> In addition, even if we assume that MP in its present form was completed later than NS, it is highly possible that the tradition and the concept which were the prototypes of MP already existed in an earlier period. Moreover, there is no evidence that the former Buddhas were differentiated from one to another or considered of a lower rank than the Dharma before MP was formed. Therefore, due to these obscurities, it is improper to jump to the conclusion that it is MP which made the former Buddhas identical and elevated them to the level of the Dharma.

It is true, however, that many similarities can be found between the former Buddhas in MP, and this seems to be closely related to the purpose of MP. Therefore this paper aims to make clear the meaning of the former Buddhas in MP by focusing on the Buddhas’ similarities and differences and by referring to the *Mahāpadānasuttanta-aṭṭhakathā* (= MPA) and some other Pāli commentaries. Although there are some unsettled problems as to the value of the Pāli commentaries as reliable materials<sup>4</sup>, they do represent the understanding of sutras in the Theravāda school to this present day,

and they are valuable source for understanding the sutras.

To disclose the meaning of the former Buddhas, we will proceed as follows. First, the similarities between the Buddhas will be examined according to MP and other texts. Next, referring mainly to MPA and the *Samantapāsādikā* (= Sp), we will examine how the differences are understood in the Pāli commentaries. Lastly, the nature of Buddha, as far as it can be derived from the texts, and the meaning of the former Buddhas in MP will be disclosed.

## II . The Similarities between the Buddhas

The conclusions of previous studies, which argue that the purpose of the legends of the former Buddhas is to show the eternity of the Dharma, can be confirmed by the following sources. For example, in the *Samyutta-Nikāya* (= SN) Gotama says:

Just in this way, mendicants, I have seen the ancient way, the ancient road that was taken by the rightly awakened ones of former times.<sup>5</sup>

It is also said in the *Theragāthā* (= Th):

By the very road by which Vipassī went, by the very road by which Sikhī, Vessabhū, Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana and Kassapa also (went), by that straight road Gotama went.<sup>6</sup>

These two texts emphasize that all the Buddhas followed one and the same way, which implies that their enlightenment, attained through the way, is also the same. The following words of Gotama support this implication. After having recounted his supernatural powers, Gotama says:

Sāriputta, if anyone says of me, who is a knower and a seer as aforesaid, “There are no superhuman and eminent knowledge and insight fitting the Aryan in the recluse Gotama. The recluse Gotama teaches the Dharma that has been beaten out by reasoning, based on investigation, and self-expressed.” Sāriputta, if he does not retract this speech, abandon this mind and abandon this view, he will fall into hell as if something carried is laid down.<sup>7</sup>

Here Gotama completely denies that he teaches a novel view established by his own reasoning and experimental thinking. Moreover, the following is said about ‘causal origination’ which all Buddhas realized when they became awakened:

Old age and death, mendicants, is the outcome of birth. Whether Tathāgatas come into existence or not, this principle, i.e. causally establishedness, causally fixedness, having something as a cause, is immovable. The Tathāgata fully awakens to it and fully understands it.<sup>8</sup>

These statements emphasize that the Dharma taught by the Buddhas is not thought out by an individual but is realized in common by all the Buddhas and is true at all times. These texts, saying that there have been many enlightened ones realizing the same Dharma at different times, therefore, support the conclusions of the previous studies that the legends of the former Buddhas are proclaiming the eternity of the Dharma.

In MP, however, other similarities than their common realization of the same Dharma can be found between the Buddhas. For example, the following similarities are found between Vipassī as

described in MP and Gotama as described in the *Jātaka* (= Jā): descending from the Tusita heaven into the mother's womb, being born from the mother's right side, proclaiming after taking seven steps that he is the foremost in the world, leaving the world to become a monk after having seen the aged, the sick, the corpse and the monk, becoming fully awakened by understanding the cycle of causal origination, and teaching the Dharma implored by Brahman.<sup>9</sup> In addition, MP records the occurrence of sixteen incidents upon Buddha's birth as general rules (*dhammatā*)<sup>10</sup> which are the same as in the case of Gotama according to another sutra.<sup>11</sup> The thirty-two physical features of a great man, which appear only in men who will become Buddhas or universal kings (*rājā cakravattī*), are another similarity between the Buddhas.

If the only purpose of the legends of the former Buddhas were to show the eternity of the Dharma taught by Gotama, there would be no necessity of mentioning these similarities. There are, however, some texts which seem to clarify the meaning of these similarities. These texts demonstrate the oneness of the Dharma and the Buddhas. Once Gotama pacified Vakkali who had desired to see him but could not do so because of his illness, and said:

What good will it be for you, Vakkali, to see this unclean body. He who sees the Dharma sees me, he who sees me sees the Dharma.<sup>12</sup>

This shows that the essence of Buddha is not his physical appearance but the Dharma itself. The same is said in the *Milindapañho* (= Mil):

He who sees the Dharma sees the Lord.<sup>13</sup>

This also shows that Gotama and the former six Buddhas are 'the Dharma itself' (*dhammabhūta*).<sup>14</sup>

Thus it can be inferred that, in emphasizing the similarities between the Buddhas, there is the idea that they can be identified with the eternal Dharma and are, therefore, in essence the same beings.<sup>15</sup> It seems then that the purpose of MP is to teach the equality of the Buddhas which derives from their identity with the Dharma. This will be closer examined below.

### III. The Differences between the Buddhas

In the *Kathāvatthu* (= Kv) it is said:

Do the Buddhas differ from one to another in qualities? .... It should not be said so.<sup>16</sup>

The commentary explains:

At any given time, Buddhas do not differ as to the Buddha-qualities except for the differences in body, life span and radiance.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, in Mil it is said:

Bodhisattvas differ in four respects, namely family rank, period, life span and size. .... Buddhas, however, do not differ as to the Buddha-qualities and all Buddhas are the same as to the Buddha-qualities.<sup>18</sup>

These texts support our inference in the preceding section that the Buddhas are essentially the same in MP. Actually, however, we can find more differences between the former Buddhas. For example,

the following eleven differences are mentioned in MP: ①the time in which the Buddhas appeared, ②their family rank, ③their lineage, ④their life span, ⑤their Bodhi tree, ⑥their two chief disciples, ⑦the size of the assembly of their disciples, ⑧their attendant monk, ⑨their father, ⑩their mother, ⑪their capital.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the following nine differences are added in MPA: ①their son, ②their wife, ③the vehicle by which Bodhisattvas leave the worldly life, ④their monastery, ⑤the amount of gold spent on the acquisition of land for the monastery, ⑥their lay-supporter, ⑦the size of Buddha, ⑧the exertion to become awakened, ⑨the radiance which the body of Buddha emits.<sup>20</sup> Some of these differences, for example family rank, life span, size of the assembly of disciples, size of the Buddha, exertion to become awakened, and radiance, seem to indicate differences in quality between the former Buddhas. In addition, the six Buddhas prior to Gotama differ as to whether the Brahmacariya was kept for a long time by their disciples after their death.<sup>21</sup> If the Buddhas in MP are essentially the same, how should these differences be understood? In the next part we will examine how these differences are understood in the Pāli commentaries.

### 1. The Former Buddhas and Cosmology

It has already been pointed out that the idea of the former Buddhas is closely related to Buddhist cosmology.<sup>22</sup> That is easy to understand because the idea of the former Buddhas is inseparable from the concept of the previous world. Especially in the Pāli commentaries, the differences among the former Buddhas are accepted in connection with cosmology. Therefore concrete descriptions of the birth of the world, which are not present in MP, can be found in MPA.<sup>23</sup> This commentary says that the description of the birth of the world is based on ‘the story of the former state of existence’ (*pubbe nivāsakathā*) in the *Visuddhimagga* (= *Vism*).<sup>24</sup> Since that story gives more detailed explanations on cosmology, I will summarize it hereafter.

The longest unit of time is called a great aeon (*mahākappa*) and it is composed of four incalculable (*asaṅkheyya*) aeons: the aeon of destruction (*saṃvaṭṭa*), the aeon of emptiness (*saṃvaṭṭaṭṭhāyin*), the aeon of reconstitution (*vivaṭṭa*), and the aeon of continuance (*vivaṭṭaṭṭhāyin*). The cosmos repeats the cycle of these four aeons eternally. First, world’s destruction is described. There are three kinds of destruction: destruction by fire, destruction by water, and destruction by wind. The cause of destruction is the roots of evil (*akusalamūla*; namely greed, anger and delusion), and the world is destroyed when they are in abundance. When greed (*rāga*) is more abundant, the world is destroyed by fire. When anger (*dosa*) is more abundant, the world is destroyed by water. When delusion (*moha*) is more abundant, the world is destroyed by wind. Such destructions happen in the following order. The world is destroyed by fire seven times, and by water the eighth time. This set of destructions is repeated seven times. Then the world is again destroyed by fire seven times. Sixty-three great aeons pass in this way, and at last the world is destroyed by wind. These sixty-four great aeons form the biggest cycle.<sup>25</sup>

After the world’s destruction comes the aeon of emptiness, and thereafter the aeon of

reconstitution. A great cloud appears and it rains a lot until the destroyed areas disappear. Then it stops raining and the water, compressed by the wind force, gradually subsides. As the water sinks, the divine worlds reappear in their former places; and when the water has sunk to the level of the earth, the wind force stops it and holds it stationary. In this way the earth reappears on the water. This process of reconstitution is almost the same as that in MPA.<sup>26</sup>

Vism describes also the changes of the world after its reconstitution.<sup>27</sup> People who reappeared on the earth are self-luminous and wander in the sky at first. However, after eating the primitive humus (*rasapaṭhavi*), they are overcome by craving, their self-luminosity disappears, and gradually some become handsome and some ugly. Then the former despise the latter, and the primitive humus vanishes because of this contempt; so they are compelled to eat gross food. Moreover, the division of gender gives rise to sexuality and they are seized by sexual desires. They also build houses to conceal their foul deeds and start to dispute over their food.

This is a summary of the cosmology described in Vism on which MPA is based. According to this cosmology, the world gradually degrades from its original state, and is then destroyed to be reconstituted repetitively. This cosmology is closely related to the differences between the former Buddhas as we will see later.

In addition, we find the following interesting description in MPA where the appearance of Buddhas is mentioned in connection with the cosmology.

When the water has sunk to the level of the world of human beings, it is stopped by the wind force, as if a water jar has been closed. The earth is fixed on the water like a lotus leaf in the pond. The great seat of enlightenment (*mahābodhipallaṅka*) vanishes last when the world vanishes, and it is settled first when the world is settled. After the omen arises there, one lotus bush comes out. If a Buddha appears in the aeon, it blooms, and if not, it doesn't bloom. And if one Buddha appears, one flower blooms, and if two, three, four, or five Buddhas appear, (two, three, four, or) five flowers bloom. When they are tied into a sheaf at only one stalk, Suddhāvāsa Brahmans say "let us go, friends. We will see the omen," and they come to the place of the great seat of enlightenment. At the aeon where Buddhas do not appear, the flower does not bloom; and if they find the bush having no flower, they say "oh!, the world will be dark, the state of loss (*apāya*) will be filled with souls of the dead, and six divine worlds and nine Brahman's worlds will be vacant" and they will be dissatisfied. On the other hand, when the flower blooms, they look at it and say "we will see the miracles as the ten thousand world-spheres (*cakkavāḷa*) tremble after the omniscient Bodhisattvas enter into the mother's womb, leave the household life, attain enlightenment, put in motion the Wheel of the Dharma, do the miracle of the double appearances, perform the descent of the gods, give up the vital principle, and pass away without being reborn. Then four states of loss will decay and six divine worlds and nine Brahman's worlds will be full." In this way they will be pleased and go back to their Brahman's worlds uttering solemn words.<sup>28</sup>

The first important point to be noticed about this text is that the great seat of enlightenment is described as the center of the world, because it vanishes last when the world vanishes and it is settled first when the world is settled. Second, it is ordained at the beginning of the aeon whether Buddhas will appear in the aeon which is going to be formed, and if they do appear, the number of their appearance is accounted. This means that the appearance of Buddhas is understood not as the result of a coincidence but as a matter of fatality.<sup>29</sup>

## 2. The Understanding of the Differences between the Buddhas in the *Mahāpadānasuttanta*

On the basis of the above cosmology, MPA explains that many differences between the former Buddhas derive from the differences in their times, which implies that the Buddhas do not differ in qualities.

For example, in MP it is said that Vipassī's life span is eighty thousand years, Sikhī's is seventy thousand years, Vessabhū's is sixty thousand years, Kakusandha's is forty thousand years, Koṇāgamana's is thirty thousand years, Kassapa's is twenty thousand years, and Gotama's is about one hundred years at the maximum.<sup>30</sup> MPA, however, notes that every Buddha actually has an incalculable life span, but the reason for not living this life span correlates with the life span of the human beings of that time.<sup>31</sup> As we have seen above, worlds rotate from the original state to degradation, destruction and finally reconstitution. In MPA, it is said that the life span of human beings fluctuate between ten years and incalculable years according to the state of their world. It fluctuates in the following way. When the king is righteous, all of his country, and even gods and Brahmans also become righteous. Accordingly, seasons rotate correctly, it rains at the right time, and nutritious crops can be harvested. With the intake of such food, man will grow up in good health, and his life span will increase. On the other hand, when the king is unrighteous, all of his country, and even gods and Brahmans also become unrighteous. Accordingly, seasons don't rotate right, it doesn't rain at the right time, and only inferior crops can be harvested. If man eats such food, he loses his health and is struck by various diseases and is short lived. The life span of human beings fluctuates in this way and MPA explains that the Buddhas' own life span reflects that of human beings in their own times.<sup>32</sup> Thus it is clear that the difference in their life span is dependent on the temporal states of the world and that of human beings, and does not mean that the Buddhas differ in quality.

The same principle applies to the differences in the family rank of the former Buddhas. The Buddhas are born in different social classes as a Brāhmaṇa or a Kṣatriya. MPA explains that the Buddhas are born in correspondence to the most respected family rank of the people, either as a Brāhmaṇa or as a Kṣatriya.<sup>33</sup> This difference is also regarded as deriving from the temporal state of the world in each time.

This principle is, however, not explicitly noted regarding the difference in the radiance which the body of Buddha emits. Nevertheless, MPA says that this difference did not result from the Buddhas' difference in quality. MPA mentions the difference between Maṅgala, the third of the

twenty-four Buddhas, and Gotama. The radiance which Maṅgala had emitted was equal to lighting up ten thousand worlds, but Gotama's radiance had lighted up only one fathom. MPA explains this difference as follows:

The difference in the radiance is dependent on his intention. The light from his body pervades as much space as he wishes. .... There is no difference in the qualities (Buddhas) have attained.<sup>34</sup>

### 3. The Understanding of the Difference in Retaining the Brahmācariya in the *Samantapāsādikā*

In the *Vinaya* (= Vin) we can find an important difference between the six former Buddhas, namely, the duration of the Brahmācariya among their disciples after their death.<sup>35</sup> According to the commentary, this difference is also caused by the temporal state of the world. Sāriputta once asked Gotama why, when Vipassī, Sikhī and Vessabhū were lords, the Brahmācariya was not observed long among the disciples after their death, whereas it lasted long when Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana and Kassapa were lords. Gotama replied:

Sāriputta, the lord Vipassī, the lord Sikhī, and the lord Vessabhū were tired of preaching the Dharma in detail to the disciples; and they had little of Sutta, Geyya, Veyyākaraṇa, Gāthā, Udāna, Itivuttaka, Jātaka, Abbhutadhamma and Vedalla; the code of training was not made known for the disciples and the Pāṭimokkha was not appointed.<sup>36</sup>

Due to this, the Brahmācariya rapidly disappeared after the death of the Buddhas. On the other hand, Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana and Kassapa were not tired of preaching the Dharma in detail to the disciples; they had many Sutta and the other texts, the code of training was made known to them, the Pāṭimokkha was appointed and consequently the Brahmācariya lasted long among them even after the death of the Buddhas.

The above difference seems to indicate that the former three Buddhas were inferior to the latter three. Sp, the commentary of Vin, denies this, however, by adding the following explanation. First, the commentary explains that 'tired' in this context is not due to any idleness the former three Buddhas:

It is said that "they were tired," but they were not tired out of sloth because Buddhas do not become lazy or slothful, and also because Buddhas preach the Dharma with equal energy to one person, two persons, or the whole world-sphere, they do not become lazy when finding an insignificant person in the multitude, nor become active when finding a great person.<sup>37</sup>

Actually, Vin itself says of Vipassī, Sikhī and Vessabhū:

These lords were untiring in instructing the disciples, having grasped their minds with their own.<sup>38</sup>

So, the question remains why the three Buddhas did not preach the Dharma in detail. Sp gives the reason:

Why was it? It was because people had less defilement. In their times, people had a longer life

span and little defilement, and they understood the Dharma merely by hearing one verse about the four truths. Therefore the Buddhas did not preach the Dharma in detail. And that alone is the reason why “ they had little of Sutta, .... and Vedalla.”<sup>39</sup>

In short, the reason why the three Buddhas did not preach the Dharma in detail was because people at that time understood more readily. People, therefore, had few sutras and other texts to pass on to the disciples of the second generation and the Brahmachariya was lost rapidly. In this way, according to Sp, the world’s state at that time influenced the outcome of the preservation of the Brahmachariya after the death of the Buddhas, and the latter was not due to differences in the qualities of the Buddhas.

#### IV. Conclusion

Previous research concluded that the legends of the former Buddhas intended to reveal the eternity of the Dharma. Observing that many similarities are found between the former Buddhas and that some texts describe the identity of the Buddhas with Dharma, we argued that another important idea was that the Buddhas were in essence the same because of their identity with the Dharma. An examination of the differences between the Buddhas according to the Pāli commentaries showed that most of these differences were just differences in name or were the result of temporal factors. Apart from these secondary differences, nothing can be found by which the Buddhas are distinguished. Hence, it can be said that, at least in the Theravāda school, the Buddhas are understood as essentially the same except for the difference in their appearances. We conclude, therefore, that the purpose of MP is to show not only the eternity of the Dharma as pointed out by the previous research, but also the equal nature of the Buddhas.

This equal nature of the Buddhas, i.e. essentially the same Buddhas appear in the world according to the state of the world, seems to be related to the concept of ‘conformity to the world’ (*lokānuvartanā*) in the *Mahāvastu* and the Mahāyāna-sutras. Previous research tended to emphasize the difference in the concept of Buddha between the Theravādin and the Mahāsaṅghikā or Mahāyāna. A closer examination of the legends of the Buddhas in the Theravāda school, including some of their commentaries, might reveal more similarities between their concept of Buddha and that of the Mahāsaṅghikā and Mahāyāna.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

Akbh	<i>Abhidharmakośabhāṣya</i> , edited by P. Pradhan, Patna, 1967.
AN	<i>Aṅguttara-Nikāya</i> , 5 vols., London, 1885-1900.
DN	<i>Dīgha-Nikāya</i> , 3 vols., London, 1890-1911.
Jā	<i>Jātaka with Commentary</i> , 6 vols., London, 1877-1896.
Kv	<i>Kathāvatthu</i> , London, 1894; repr. as one vol., 1979.
Kva	<i>Kathāvatthupparāṇa-aṭṭhakathā</i> , London, 1979.



- Mil *Milindapañho with Milinda-tīkā*, London, 1880; repr. as one vol., 1986.
- MN *Majjhima-Nikāya*, 3 vols., London, 1888-1902.
- MP *Mahāpadānasuttanta*, Dīgha-Nikāya, vol. II, pp. 1-54, London, 1903.
- MPA *Mahāpadānasuttanta-aṭṭhakathā*, Sumaṅgalavilāsini, vol. II, pp. 407-480, London, 1931.
- MV *Das Mahāvadānasūtra*, edited by E. Waldschmidt, Berlin, 1953.
- NS *Nagarasūtra*, Fünfundzwanzig Sūtras des Nidānasamyukta, pp. 94-106, edited by C. Tripāṭhī, Berlin, 1962.
- Pd *Paramatthadīpanī Teragāthā-aṭṭhakathā*, 3 vols., London, 1940-1959.
- SN *Samyutta-Nikāya*, 5 vols., London, 1884-1898.
- Sp *Samantapāsādikā*, 7 vols., London, 1924-1947.
- Sv *Sumaṅgalavilāsini*, 3 vols., London, 2nd ed, 1968-1971.
- Th *Theragāthā*, London, 2nd ed, 1966.
- Vin *Vinaya-piṭaka*, 5 vols., London, 1879-1883.
- Vism *Visuddhimagga*, edited by H. C. Warren and D. Kosambi, Harvard Oriental Series Vol. 41, Massachusetts, 1950.
- 大本經 Taisho, No. 1.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See for example Mizuno [1972, p. 61], Yamada [1959, p.339], Takemoto [1959, p.49], Nakamura [1961, p.134], etc. The meaning of ‘eternal Dharma’ remains, however, vague in these studies. This important problem needs to be examined more closely.

Gombrich [1980, p.71] observes that “the original function of former Buddhas was to authenticate the Buddha’s message; and they later acquired the function of ensuring the availability of that message by launching Bodhisattvas on their careers.”

<sup>2</sup> The corresponding Pāli text is the *Nagara* (Samyutta-Nikāya = SN II pp. 104-107).

<sup>3</sup> MP p. 31ff; MV p. 135ff. The Chinese version has twelve links. Norman [1983, p. 36] admits that MP includes some elements which suggest a late origin for this sutra, but points out that *paṭiccasamuppāda* in MP has only ten links and that the word ‘*apadāna*’ as used in the title of this sutra is different in meaning from that found in the late canonical text called by that name.

<sup>4</sup> See Mori [1984] for a representative study of this issue.

<sup>5</sup> *Evam eva khvāham bhikkhave addasaṃ purāṇaṃ maggaṃ purāṇañjasam pubbakehi sammā-sambuddhehi anuyātaṃ* (SN II p. 106). This sentence is discussed in detail in the *Milindapañho* (= Mil) p. 217. The corresponding sentence is found in NS p. 103 etc., but there the former Buddhas are called ‘the former sages’ (*pūrvaka ṛṣi*) instead of ‘the rightly awakened ones of former times.’

<sup>6</sup> *yen’ eva maggena gato Vipassī yen’ eva maggena Sikhī ca Vessabhū Kakusandha-Koṇāgamano ca Kassapo ten’ añjasena agamāsi Gotamo* (Th v. 490).

<sup>7</sup> *Yo kho maṃ Sāriputta evaṃ jānantam evaṃ passantam evaṃ vadeyya: n’ atthi samaṇassa*

Gotamassa uttarim manussa-dhammā alamariya-nāṇa-dassana-viseso, takka-pariyāhatam samaṇo Gotamo dhammam deseti vimaṃsānucaritam sayam paṭibhānan ti, tam Sāriputta vācam appahāya tam cittaṃ appahāya tam diṭṭhim appaṭinissajitvā yathābhatam nikkhitto evaṃ niraye (Majjhima-Nikāya = MN I p. 71).

<sup>8</sup> Jāti-paccayā bhikkhave jarā-maraṇam uppādā vā Tathāgatānam anuppādā vā Tathāgatānam, ṭhitā va sā dhātu dhamma-ṭṭhitatā dhamma-niyāmatā ida-ppaccayatā. Tam Tathāgato abhisambujjhati abhisameti (SN II p. 25). The same statement is found in the *Aṅguttara-Nikāya* (= AN) I p. 286.

<sup>9</sup> The battle against Māra is not mentioned in the story of Vipassī.

<sup>10</sup> *Dīgha-Nikāya* (= DN) II pp. 12-15. The meaning of the word ‘*dhammatā*’ is discussed in Rahula [1974], Tamaki [1977], Fukita [1993], Kajiyama [1996], etc. The similarities and differences between Buddhas described in Pāli texts are also mentioned in Endo [1997] pp. 207-216. Endo says that the concept “*dhammatā*” is “an extension of the acute desire of the Buddhists to establish the supremacy of the Buddha’s teaching” and arose from the necessity to perpetuate the Dharma. This view is close to the conclusion of the previous research on the former Buddhas.

<sup>11</sup> MN III pp. 118ff.

<sup>12</sup> Alaṃ Vakkali kiṃ te iminā pūti-kāyena diṭṭhena. Yo kho Vakkali dhammam passati so mam passati, yo maṃ passati so dhammam passati (SN III p. 120).

<sup>13</sup> yo dhammaṃ passati so bhagavantam passati (Mil p. 71).

<sup>14</sup> Th v. 491. The Pāli commentary explains the word ‘*dhammabhūta*’ as follows:

dhamma-bhūtehi ti, dhamma-kāyatāya dhamma-sabhāvehi, nava-lokuttara-dhammato vā bhūtehi jātehi, dhammaṃ vā pattehi (Paramatthadīpanī = Pd II p. 205).

‘The Dharma itself’ means having the Dharma as his own nature by having a body which is the Dharma, or being brought forth, i.e. being born from the transcendental Dharma of nine modes, or having reached the Dharma.

The word ‘*dhammabhūta*’ is also found in DN III p. 84; AN V p. 226.

<sup>15</sup> Tamura [1975, p.373] also admits the Buddha’s identity with the Dharma in early Buddhism.

<sup>16</sup> Atthi Buddhānam Buddhehi hinātirekatā ti? .... Na h’ evaṃ vattabbe (Kv p. 608).

<sup>17</sup> Thapetvā tasmim tasmim kāle sarīravemattataṃ āyuvemattataṃ pabhāvemattatañ ca sesehi buddhadhammehi buddhānam buddhehi hinātirekatā nāma natthi (Kathāvattahuppakaraṇa-aṭṭhakathā = Kva p.192).

<sup>18</sup> kulavemattatā addhānavemattatā āyuvemattatā pamāṇavemattatā. Imehi kho mahārāja catuhi ṭhānehi bodhisattānam bodhisattehi vemattatā hoti. .... kevale ca buddhadhamme natthi vemattatā, sabbe pi buddhā buddhadhammehi samasamā ti. (Mil p. 285).

<sup>19</sup> DN II pp. 2-7.

<sup>20</sup> Sv II pp. 421-425.

<sup>21</sup> *Vinaya* (= Vin) III pp.7-9.

<sup>22</sup> Gombrich [1980] p. 65.

<sup>23</sup> *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* (= Sv) II pp. 411-412.

<sup>24</sup> Sv II p. 412. This probably means the ‘*Pubbe-nivāsānussati-ñāṇa-kathā*’ in the *Abhiññā-niddesa* of Vism pp. 349-356. The cosmology in Vism is also introduced in Tambiah [1984, pp. 49-52]. Tambiah discusses it in connection with ‘*jhāna*.’

<sup>25</sup> This way of the destruction closely corresponds with that of the cosmology in the *Abhidharma-kośabhāṣya* (= Akbh) pp. 178-191. For a detailed explanation, see Sadakata [1973].

<sup>26</sup> Sv II pp. 411-412.

<sup>27</sup> This description is based on the ‘*Aggaññasuttanta*,’ DN III pp. 80-98.

<sup>28</sup> Manussa-loka-tṭhānaṃ pana patte udake dhamma-karakassa mukhe pihite viya vāta-vasena taṃ udakaṃ santiṭṭhati. Udaka-piṭṭhe uppalini-pattaṃ viya pathavī saṅṭhāti. Mahā-bodhi-pallaṅko vinassamāne loke pacchā vinassati, saṅṭhamāne paṭhamam saṅṭhahati. Tattha pubba-nimittaṃ hutvā eko padumini-gaccho uppajjati. Tassa sace tasmim kappe buddho nibbattissati pupphaṃ uppajjati, no ce na uppajjati. Uppajjamānā ca sace eko buddho nibbattissati ekaṃ uppajjati. Sace dve tayo cattāro pañca buddhā nibbattissanti ... pañca uppajjanti. Tāni ca kho ekasmim yeva nāḷe kaṇṇikā-baddhāni hutvā, Suddhāvāsa-brahmāno: Āyāmā, mayaṃ mārisā pubba-nimittan passāmā ti, mahā-bodhi-pallaṅka-tṭhānaṃ āgacchanti. Buddhānaṃ anibbattana-kappe pupphaṃ na hoti. Te pana apupphakaṃ gacchaṃ disvā: andha-kāro vata bho loko bhavissati mata-matā sattā apāye pūressanti, cha deva-lokā nava brahma-lokā suññā bhavissantī ti, anattamanā honti. Pupphita-kāle pana pupphaṃ disvā: sabbaññu-bodhisattesu mātu-kucchim okkamantesu nikkhamantesu sambujjhantesu dhamma-cakkaṃ pavattantesu yamaka-pāṭihāriyaṃ karontesu dev’ orohanaṃ karontesu āyu-saṅkhāraṃ vissajjantesu parinibbāyantesu dasa-sahassa-cakkavāḷa-kampan’ ādini pāṭihāriyāni dakkhissāma, cattāro apāyā parihāyissantī, cha deva-lokā nava brahma-lokā paripūressantī ti, attamanā udānaṃ udānentā attano attano brahma-lokaṃ gacchanti (Sv II pp. 412-413).

<sup>29</sup> This corresponds to the descriptions of the Buddhas’ birth in the legends of the Buddhas. The future enlightenment of the Bodhisattvas is there described as a matter of fatality. It is said, for example, that many peculiar events occur before the birth of Bodhisattva; that the Brāhmana prophet, having seen the Bodhisattva’s thirty-two physical features of a great man, announces that he will be a Buddha or an universal king; and that in Jā p. 47ff, Gotama in the Tusita heaven, replying to the entreaty of gods to appear in the world as the Buddha, declares: “the time has come for me to become a Buddha.”

<sup>30</sup> DN II pp. 3-4.

<sup>31</sup> Sv II pp. 413-415.

<sup>32</sup> Another text says that Buddhas appear when the life span of beings is less than one hundred thousand years and more than one hundred:

Tattha vassa-sata-sahassato uddham vaḍḍhita-āyu-kālo kālo nāma na hoti. Kasmā? Tadā hi

sattānaṃ jāti-jarā-maraṇāni na paññāyanti, Buddhānaṃ ca dhamma-desanā nāma tilakkhaṇa-vinimuttā n' atthi. Tesam: Anicca-dukkham-anattā ti, kathentānaṃ: Kiṃ nāma' etaṃ kathenti ti, n' eva sotuṃ na saddahituṃ maññanti. Tato abhisamayo na hoti. Tasmīṃ asati aniyyānikaṃ sāsanaṃ hoti, tasmā so akālo. Vassa-satato paṭṭhāya ūna-āyu-kālo pi kālo na hoti. Kasmā? Tadā hi sattā ussanna-kilesā honti, ussanna-kilesānañ ca dinno ovādo ovāda-tṭhāne na tiṭṭhati, uduke daṇḍa-rāji viya khippaṃ vigacchati. Tasmā so pi akālo. Vassa-sata-sahassato pana paṭṭhāya heṭṭhā vassa-satato paṭṭhāya uddhaṃ āyu-kalo kālo nāma (Sv II p. 429).

Herein it is not the time when the life span is more than one hundred thousand years. Because in such times, beings will not know birth, decay, and death, and the teaching of the Buddhas will not free (sentient beings) from the three properties (i.e. anicca, dukkha, anatta). Even if the Buddhas speak of impermanence, suffering, and selflessness, they will say “why do they say so” and will not take it into consideration. Therefore, there will be no clear understanding. Without it, the teaching will not lead to salvation. Accordingly it is not the time. It is not also the time when the life span is less than one hundred years. Because in those times beings have overflowing desires, and the instruction given to them will not remain in the place of instruction and disappear immediately, similar to a line drawn by a stick in water. Accordingly, it is not the time too. It is the time when the life span is less than one hundred thousand years but more than one hundred years.

The same description is found in Jā I p. 48.

<sup>33</sup> Sv II p. 429. The same is said in Jā I p. 49.

<sup>34</sup> rasmi-vevattaṃ ajjhāsaya-paṭibaddhaṃ. Yo yattakaṃ icchati tassa tattakaṃ sarira-ppabhā pharati. .... Paṭividdha-guṇesu pana katthaci vevattaṃ nāma n' atthi (Sv II p. 425).

<sup>35</sup> Vin III pp. 7-9.

<sup>36</sup> bhagavā ca Sāriputta Vipassī bhagavā ca Sikhī bhagavā ca Vessabhū kilāsuno ahesuṃ sāvakānaṃ vitthārena dhammaṃ desetuṃ appakañ ca nesam ahosi suttaṃ geyyaṃ veyyākaraṇaṃ gāthā udānaṃ itivuttakaṃ jātakāṃ abbhutadhammaṃ vedallaṃ, appaññattaṃ sāvakānaṃ sikkhāpadaṃ, anuddiṭṭhaṃ pātīmokkaṃ (Vin III p. 8).

<sup>37</sup> Tattha *kiḷāsuno ahesu* ti na ālasiya-kiḷāsuno ahesuṃ, na hi buddhānaṃ ālasiyaṃ vā osanna-viriyatā vā atthi, buddhā hi ekassa vā dvinnaṃ vā sakala-cakkavālassa vā dhammaṃ desentā samaken' eva ussāhena desenti, na parisāya appa-bhāvaṃ disvā osanna-viriyā honti, nāpi mahanta-bhāvaṃ disvā ussanna-viriyā (Sp I p. 185).

<sup>38</sup> akilāsuno ca te bhagavanto ahesuṃ sāvake cetasaṃ ceto paricca ovadituṃ (Vin III p. 8).

<sup>39</sup> Kasmā. Sattānaṃ appa-rajakkhatāya. Tesam kira kāle dighāyukā sattā appa-rajakkhā ahesuṃ, te catu-sacca-paṭisaṃyuttaṃ eka-gātham pi sutvā dhammaṃ abhisamenti, tasmā na vitthārena dhammaṃ desesuṃ. Ten' eva kāraṇena *appakañ ca tesam ahosi suttaṃ* .... *vedalla* ti (Sp I p. 185).

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The purpose of this article is to examine the meaning of the former Buddhas in the *Mahāpadānasuttanta* (= MP). Previous research argues that the legends of the former Buddhas attempted to reveal the eternalness of the Dharma to which Gotama awakened. Considering, however, that the main theme of the legends is rather the Buddhas than the Dharma, the present study will show that this is not the sole purpose of these legends. We conclude that the purpose of the MP is to show the essential equality of the Buddhas except for the difference in their appearances.

We proceed as follows. First, the similarities between the Buddhas, which are emphasized in the MP, are examined. Next, referring mainly to the *Mahāpadānasuttanta-aṭṭhakathā* and the *Samantapāsādikā*, we examine how the differences between the Buddhas are understood in the Pāli commentaries. Lastly, the nature of the Buddha, as far as it can be derived from the texts, and the meaning of the former Buddhas in the MP are revealed.