Mundane Path and Nirvāṇa in the Śrāvakabhūmi of the Yogācārabhūmi:

With a Special Reference to its Fourth Chapter

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Introduction

The Yogācārabhūmi (YBh), the basic text of the Yogācāra school, is said to have been compiled in several stages over the centuries, due to the complexity and development of its thought and structure. The Śrāvakabhūmi (ŚrBh) is considered one of the old strata of the text. The latter half part of the ŚrBh vividly describes the śrāvaka path of practice beginning from initiation into Buddhist community and culminating in the attainment of liberation. When he or she finishes the preliminary path (under the instruction of a teacher), the practitioner chooses the mundane path (laukikamārga), which aims at rebirth in celestial realms by cultivating the eight meditative absorptions, or the supramundane path (lokottaramārga), which aims at acquirement of arhatship by observing four Truths of the Nobles.

Previous studies point out that the ŚrBh is unique in that it does not outline the path of practice that starts with the mundane path and ends with the supramundane path, but instead juxtaposes them as two independent options. They also show that it is after the ŚrBh that both paths were integrated into a single path in the YBh. One of the possible reasons for this is that these two paths are directed to different ends in the ŚrBh as mentioned above.

In this paper, I would like to draw upon the descriptions of the mundane path and the supramundane path from the fourth chapter of the ŚrBh to demonstrate that the ŚrBh presupposes that some Buddhists initially practice the mundane path before embarking upon the supramundane path in order to obtain liberation.

1. Previous Studies

There are four scholars that have studied the relationship between the mundane path and the supramundane path in the ŚrBh. Mōri (1987, 24–25) and Toyohira (1989) suggest that the
ŚrBh treats them as two separate paths of practice, tracing this formulation to the *Xiuxing dao di jing* 修行道地經. This issue is also discussed by Mizuo (1983), who shows that the two paths were integrated into a single path in the *Vastusamgrahanī* (VasSg),¹ which is said to have been composed later than the ŚrBh. Schmithausen (2007, 217–219) analyzes the relationship between these paths in terms of their respective concepts of liberation. He speculates that the attainment of the cessation of consciousness and feeling (*samjñāvedayitanirodha*), which often follows the completion of the eight meditative absorptions in canonical texts, would have originally been regarded as a path to final liberation. However, once the idea that it is impossible to be liberated without *prajñā* (insight into four Truths) became predominant, the progressive realization of the worthlessness of all mundane existence through the eight meditative absorptions could no longer be seen as supramundane.

### 2. Selection of Either the Mundane Path or the Supramundane Path

The ŚrBh describes how a yoga practitioner, finishing the preliminary path, chooses the mundane path or the supramundane path as follows:

> The novice adept who has acquired [a certain level of] contemplation [thinks,] "I shall go by the mundane way or by the supramundane way." ²

Completing the preliminary path, the adept chooses either way. As a consequence, the ŚrBh allows a *yogin* to proceed to the supramundane path without taking the mundane path. The text then enumerates four types of people who might choose the mundane path:

1. All the non-Buddhists, 2. those who are Buddhists but who[se faculties] are slow and who have practiced tranquility before, 3. those [who are Buddhists and] who[se faculties] are keen but whose wholesome roots³ have not been yet matured, and 4. *bodhisattvas* wishing to attain Awakening not in the very present life but in the future. These are the four [kinds of] persons who proceed to the mundane path in the very present life.⁴

Provided that all yoga practitioners aim to achieve liberation, the above description suggests that there are some for whom it is necessary to practice on the mundane path before proceeding to the supramundane path, whether due to their lack of ability or knowledge. In this case, they correspond to types (2) and (3). Thus, the ŚrBh posits two trajectories of practice: in the first an adept follows the supramundane path after finishing the mundane
path, whereas in the second the adept enters the supramundane path directly.

Let us consider two passages that Mōri (1987) admits contradict Mizuo (1983), Mōri (1987) and Toyohira’s (1989) hypothesis that the ŚrBh’s paths of practice are discrete.

Then, a yogācāra grasping the enumeration and explanation of four Truths of the Nobles by means of listening, who has well-cultivated contemplation or has attained both [four] basic meditative absorptions and [four] meditative absorptions [associated with] immaterial realm, perceives the characteristics of the Truth of Suffering by four aspects [such as impermanence, etc.].\(^5\)

Among [eleven distinctions of cultivation], the cultivation of the mundane path is up to undertaking the separation [of oneself] from desire of the Sphere of Nothingness by seeing the coarseness of lower levels [e.g. the sensuous realm] and sereneness of higher levels [e.g. the first absorption]. The cultivation of the supramundane path is, on other hand, up to undertaking the separation [of oneself] from desire of the Sphere of Neither Perception nor Non-Perception by non-contaminated paths such as right view and so on for [an ascetic] who contemplates suffering in terms of suffering or contemplates path in terms of path.\(^6\)

The first passage specifies the characteristics of an individual who chooses the supramundane path. While a practitioner “who has well-cultivated contemplation” refers to one who chooses the supramundane path as soon as he or she finishes the preliminary path, a practitioner “who has attained both [four] basic meditative absorptions and [four] meditative absorptions [associated with] immaterial realm” refers to one who has already accomplished the eight meditative absorptions of the mundane path. The second passage, on the other hand, intends rather to show that it is only possible to attain liberation by the supramundane path, and that one does not attain it by the mundane path. It is not necessary to see the passage as contradictory to their hypothesis.

Thus, the ŚrBh describes the mundane path as the prerequisite step for some Śrāvakayāna Buddhists whose faculties are slow or whose wholesome roots have not yet ripened. In this view, they would eventually go on to train on the supramundane path. Therefore, though both paths are treated independently, and ascribed completely different purposes (namely, either rebirth in the celestial realms acquiring arhatship), the text suggests that they are to be followed sequentially at least for some Buddhists whose skills or experience are still insufficient. They would first take the mundane path and then proceed to the supramundane one afterwards. Taking this into account, it is also possible to assume that the integration of both paths in the VasSg can be traced to the ŚrBh.

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3. Conclusion

Based on my investigation of whether or not the mundane path is considered necessary for liberation in the Śrāvaka, I propose an alternative to the interpretation suggested by Mizuo (1983), Mōri (1987) and Toyohira (1989). That said, this result might not be inconsistent with Schmithausen (2007, 200), given his claim that according to the Śrāvaka, it is possible but not imperative to enter the mundane path before undertaking the supramundane path.

Notes

1) VasSg T No. 30, 812c11–813a4; Tib. D 215a3–b2, P 248a1–b3.
2) Śrāvaka 4–1, 317.6–14. Cf. Deleanu 2006, 446.
3) According to Deleanu (2006, 474, n. 21), wholesome roots stand for catvāri kuśalamūlāni.
4) Śrāvaka 4–1, 318.1–4. cf. Deleanu 2006, 446–447.
5) Śrāvaka 4–2, 470.10–14; Wayman 1961, 130.
6) Śrāvaka 4–2, 505.7–14.

Abbreviations

Śrāvaka 4–1 Deleanu 2006, 317–354.
Śrāvaka 4–2 Śrāvaka of Ācārya Asaṅga. Ed. Karunesha Shukla, 470–511. Patna: Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research Institute, 1973. See also Wayman 1961: 130–134.
VasSg V āstusaṃgrahaṇī. T no. 30. 772b13–881c03. Tib. D 4039 zi, 127a4–335a7, P 5540 ’I, 143a1–382a5.

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