How the Sanghāta Affects its Readers

From www.sanghatasutra.net

The *Sanghāta Sūtra* unfolds from a question posed to the Buddha, who is asked whether there is any teaching that can remove the negative karma of the five uninterrupted actions simply by hearing it. The basic answer that the Buddha gives is yes, as a matter of fact, there is such a text, and this is it: the *Sanghāta Sūtra*. This is an extraordinary claim—that a text can so transform a person who hears it that their entire future is completely changed forever—and our first impulse might be to dismiss the Sanghāta's claim as preposterous. After all, how can just listening to something outweigh the act of having killed one's parents and the four other uninterrupted actions? But when you get right down to it, the idea that works of literature transform their readers, often in profound ways, is hardly outrageous.

Nevertheless, in the hands of the *Sanghāta*, this fairly innocuous claim can come to seem outrageous, because the Sanghāta takes the idea that literature or texts change people, and pushes it much farther than we may be initially comfortable taking it. By carrying its vision of the power of texts to an extreme, the *Sanghāta Sūtra* invites us—even forces us—to confront its status as a text and our own status as its readers. In the end, by getting us to reflect on our own encounter with the text, the *Sanghāta* is seeking not merely to assert its vision of how texts can change people, but also to demonstrate it.

One of the most startling of the text's attention-grabbing passages is one in which the *Sanghāta Sūtra* identifies one of the characters described within it as the *Sanghāta* itself. This happens about a quarter of the way into the sutra. The Buddha introduces this passage by announcing that he is going to describe a quality of the *Sanghāta Sūtra*, this very text in which he is speaking. He then proceeds to relate an encounter between a sage and a man driven to the brink of suicide by his remorse for the great evils he has committed. During this encounter, the sage asks the suicidal man whether he has ever heard the *Sanghāta Sūtra* and when the man answers that he has not, the sage commands him to listen and then goes on to relate to this man a story about another man, this one a king who had been in the same situation and whose suffering was lifted when the sage taught that king something called the *Sanghāta* Sūtra. If this seems confusing, that is not surprising, since at this point, what we have is a story within a story, told within a larger text, each of which is being called the *Sanghāta Sūtra*.

Later, when the Buddha is asked who this sage was, he says that the Sanghāta takes the form of the sage in order to come to light, or in order to be made visible, or in order to be explained. In other words—and this is clearer in the original Sanskrit than in the Tibetan—the sage was the *Sanghāta Sūtra* itself manifesting in the form of a sage in order to be seen or explained. The Sanskrit term used here, darshitam, can mean either exposed to view or explained. [This passage can be found on page 18 of the downloadable English translation.]

Thus we have a text called the *Sanghāta Sūtra*, and inside it there is a story told by the Buddha about a sage who teaches someone a text called the *Sanghāta*. At this point, we have a text within a text within a text, and they are all the *Sanghāta*. Then it turns out that even the sage who taught the *Sanghāta* in one of those texts was himself the *Sanghāta*.

At this point, we the readers of this text seem pushed into a position of irredeemable perplexity as to what and where exactly the Sanghāta is. Is it something inside the text? Does it exist outside the text, and then just manifests within the text as a character? Is it in front of us as we read or hear the text? Is it all around us in the world?

We may say tentatively that the S*anghāta Sūtra* creates this existential perplexity in the process of addressing an ethical perplexity that is also raised by the text. We'll have to look at this more closely in a moment, but briefly, the ethical perplexity has to do with the kind of agency that is implied for persons by Buddhist theories of karma. Specifically, the laws of karma suggest that all our actions will have consequences, and that what we experience is a result of previous actions. Yet the past is infinitely long, and the present is very, very short, so that persons continually find themselves arriving after much of their karma has been created. As a result, although karma seems to place tremendous responsibility and personal power in the hands of individual persons, it also takes that power out of their hands, and displaces it into their past, over which they no longer have any power.

In other words, while we are told by these theories that our actions are the source from which our future experiences spring, we are also told that we are living already after many of those actions have been created. Each of us is understood to have a very long and quite likely checkered personal history, spanning multiple lives of which we have no awareness, and in which we have committed various negative actions. Although we neither remember or condone those actions, we still have to experience their devastating results.

The two characters whom the sage meets are caught in the grips of precisely this ethical dilemma. They had both committed heinous crimes in the past, and then become paralyzed later by remorse. By the time we meet them as characters in the story, those crimes are already over and done with, but we see how they are overwhelmed by the very idea that those actions, irretrievably passed, will determine their future experiences. They are suffering in the narrative present, because the teachings on karma tell them that their past mistakes absolutely guarantee them future suffering, and time is carrying them forward inexorably toward that suffering. The sage's response to these two guilt-ridden characters is to say, effectively, that the total power they had exercised in the past was not as total or final as it seemed. The guarantee of karma is not absolute, because there is a text that can intervene to alter a person's karmic composition—and apparently all one has to do it is sit back and hear it. In other words, the sage claims tremendous power for the text, more power than persons themselves seem to have.

So far our discussion has been limited to the characters within the text. But the *Sanghāta* is saying that it has this effect on anyone who hears or reads it. To substantiate that claim,

the text must argue that it can transform not merely characters appearing within it, but the world around it. That argument is made quite forcefully through the narrative structure, which frustrates any effort to contain the text within its own borders or even to identify just what sort of thing the text is. In that sense, we may say that the *Sanghāta Sūtra*'s narrative structure creates an experience of existential dilemma—in which we are utterly unable to determine what the text is—to relieve an ethical dilemma—the less comfortable anxiety of suspecting that we may already have squandered the control we have over our own lives.

To see just how this dilemma-swapping works, let's move through a series of questions, to see first what sort of thing this text imagines itself to be, second, what it does to its readers, and third, what sort of agency it is thereby claiming for itself.

What *is* this Text?

First, what are we to understand this text to be? This is perhaps the most difficult question, as the *Sanghāta Sūtra* repeatedly slips our grasp and turns out to be all around us. The text itself, through its extraordinarily frequent references to itself by name—over 70—repeatedly calls attention to the puzzle as to where the referent of that name resides. A common reaction to reading the text is to begin to wonder, where is the *Sanghāta* itself? In fact, our very struggle to locate this thing called the *Sanghāta* places us in the position I find myself adopting here in describing it, in which I begin to treat it as an agent, or even as a person. Indeed, the apparently innocent ability to refer to oneself by name is ontologically very complex. Only self-aware beings are capable of referring to themselves by name. One could argue that the ability to generate self-referential discourse is a faculty unique to human beings, or at least to speakers of language. When we are confronted by the Sanghāta's facility in referring to itself by name as it unfolds, as if it were already a complete entity, it strikes us as a facility we expect only of a self-aware or sentient being. As such, the self-referentiality, or self-'awareness' of the *Sanghāta Sūtra* strongly inclines us to understand the text as sentient, or as a person. And once we do that, the claim that the text can have power and agency over other persons seems a bit less outrageous.

Then there is the question as to when exactly the *Sanghāta* begins. Four long pages after the sutra has begun, Sarvashūra, the bodhisattva who questions the Buddha throughout the first half of the sutra, asks:

> Blessed One, I too will listen to the great *Sanghāta Sūtra dharma-paryāya*; what mass of merit will I then produce, Blessed One?" [page 4, English translation]

This clearly posits the *Sanghāta* as some other teaching apart from what we have been reading, and which lies somewhere in this character's future. Then, just a few pages later, Sarvashūra is given a seat on a throne and told that, "Sarvashūra, you have heard the transformative teaching, the *Sanghāta Sūtra*, and therefore you are seated on this seat." (page 10). Was the *Sanghāta* contained in the six pages between these two passages? we might wonder.

This projection of the text ahead of and behind itself crops up again and again. The very first time the *Sanghāta*'s name is stated in the text, the Buddha announces that:

> Sarvashūra, there is a dharma-paryāya called Sanghāta that is active on this planet earth. (page 2)

The Buddha's announcement of the *Sanghāta* as an entity already existing and active in the world raises the more perplexing question of where the text has been up to the time of its circulation. If the *Sanghāta* is not this entire set of words, uttered by the Buddha and the others who spoke at Vulture's Peak, and then narrated as the text called *Sanghāta* , then what is it?

This question is raised even more forcefully in a separate anecdote, when the Buddha describes how he first heard of the *Sanghāta Sūtra* many lifetimes prior, when it was being taught by a former buddha. But this entire sutra we are hearing is itself basically a record of an extended conversation, and so this implies that the Buddha who is now one of those speaking it had originally only heard it, although what he heard were the words he is now speaking. Such an entity completely defies any efforts we might still hope to make to locate the Sanghāta in any kind of linear time or space.

At this point, we seem forced to admit that we cannot fully answer the first question we have been examining—what kind of thing is this text called *Sanghāta*? Try as we might to contain the *Sanghāta* within the boundaries of its own text, it repeatedly eludes our grasp.

What Does the *Sanghāta* Do?

We come now to our second question, what does this text do? We have seen that the *Sanghāta* continually frustrates our attempts to find any ground from which to exclude it, preventing us from refuting the claims it makes about the tremendous power it has over those who encounter it. In the process, the *Sanghāta* is forcing us to try to come to terms with what it is doing to its readers. The *Sanghāta* does this by pushing us as its readers to become what Umberto Eco calls 'model readers of the second-level,' that is, readers interested in watching how the text does what it does, as opposed to first-level readers enjoying it as it flows by. Indeed, the *Sanghāta*'s first-level reading seems precisely aimed at turning us into second-level readers. The *Sanghāta* seems to be training its readers to examine their own experiences.

We can watch this training happening in the way that the Buddha and Sarvashūra appear to point out from within the *Sanghāta* to us readers in the world in front of the text by discussing, again and again, what it does to the people hearing, or reading, it—that is, to us. Its impact on its audience is in fact a dominant and recurring theme within the *Sanghāta*. This thematization of the condition of the reader situates us readers both in the world in front of the text as witnesses, and in the world inside the text where we appear as objects of discussion and concern, and there seems no way to keep these two worlds apart. This is another instance in which the text seems to be blurring its own boundaries, but here the effect of that blurring is to problematize the location of us readers in relation to the text.

To put this slightly differently, the world that the *Sanghāta Sūtra* is perhaps most interested in describing is the world receiving the text—copying it, reciting it or even hearing its name mentioned. Since we as readers occupy that very world—at the very least because we are encountering the name *Sanghāta* right here—we are encouraged to wonder how to situate ourselves in relation to the world that the text describes around itself. That is, the *Sanghāta Sūtra* is openly inviting us to think about what it does to its readers.

Within the text, most of the impact that the *Sanghāta* presents itself as having on living beings is invisible and latent, coming in the form of positive merit that will ripen in future lives or as the elimination of negative karma from past actions. Obviously, this makes it hard for us to perceive the way the text is acting on us. However, we do have a number of episodes within the *Sanghāta* depicting how it effects those who come before it. And here, one advantage of having a text as its own main character is that the interactions between the readers within the text and the text can serve as a sort of model for how the text imagines itself as interacting with its readers outside the text, that is with us.

In one such sub-story, a group of non-believers pays a visit to the Buddha. They show him all the common signs of courtesy, much as we ourselves might. But in response, the Buddha tells them they are foolish and should not expect happiness—messages that the text is sending us as well, as we'll see in a moment. After dazzling them with displays of his powers, the Buddha gives a brief teaching on suffering in which suffering is presented as fear about the future:

> "Friends, birth is suffering. Even birth itself is suffering. Having been born, there occur many fears of suffering. Having been born, fears of sickness occur. From sickness, the fear of aging occurs. From aging, the fear of death occurs….
> Having been born as a human, many fears occur. Fear of the king arises. Fear of thieves occurs. Fear of fire occurs. Fear of poison occurs. Fear of water occurs. Fear of wind occurs. Fear of whirlpools occurs. Fear of the actions one has done occurs." (page 8)

By listing the potential harms that threaten all those who are born, this teaching seems designed to generate the experience of fear that it describes. Indeed, we are told that those who heard these words of the Buddha became 'utterly terrified.' That is, the Buddha points out all there is to fear and thinking of this brings on fear.

The *Sanghāta* in this section works to transform its listeners into people looking ahead with concern to their own futures, even as they recognize that the immediate cause of that fear lies in birth, that is, in something that has already happened. The last fear, the fear of the actions one has done, links directly to the teachings of karma that state that one's own actions are the cause of the experiences one will have. This teaching on karma takes fear, ordinarily a forward-looking emotion, and inverts its temporal dimension, making of it a fear of what is already done but still lingering on in latent form, as uncompleted karma. Fear understood as an orientation towards the future may lead to action to transform that pending future. But fear understood as an orientation towards the past leads nowhere but self-recrimination and guilt, and so can be disabling, as we see in the examples of the king and the man taught by the sage, both of whom are debilitated by anxiety and

remorse over actions they have done in the past. In short, knowledge of the theory of karma itself seems to be causing suffering, and so appears to be a problem and not merely a solution.

If we grant that the text is creating for itself a community of readers who have been made painfully aware of the potential that they have stores of negative karma waiting to explode into experience, then those readers effectively are placed in the position occupied by the man who had come before the sage full of anxiety over that pending explosion.

The sage's treatment of the man then demonstrates the form of relief that the *Sanghāta* offers. And this brings us to our third and final question, that of the sort of power that the text posits for itself.

How Can the *Sanghāta* Do What it Does?

If we want to see an example of how the *Sanghāta* works on its readers, we have only to look at how the sage works, since, as we recall, the sage is actually the *Sanghāta* that has taken the form of the sage in order to be visible. What we do not see the sage doing is give the remorse-filled man a teaching that would put tools into his hands so that he can turn his own karma around. The sage does not even allow him to confess, initially. What the sage does instead, until the man finally sits down and takes it, is to feed him delicious foods and drink, and then tell him a story.

In this brief interaction with the suicidal man, the sage insists that the man cease acting as a powerful agent seeking out his salvation, and accept instead the role of passive beneficiary that the text has been pushing all its imagined readers into from the beginning. In the process, the man gains access to the teaching by means of which, as the sage puts it, all his negative karma will be removed. (page 16). This teaching works not because the man implements its instructions, but simply because he has heard it. How can this be? According to the idea that past actions bring future suffering, the only way that the man could stop fearing and regretting is if there were some way to undo or purify the wrongs he did in the past, and such an undoing could only be accomplished by a force more powerful than his own intensely evil deeds, or a force able to counter the uni-directional flow of time. That force, according to the *Sanghāta Sūtra*, if only the man will sit and let it do its work on him, is the *Sanghāta Sūtra* itself.

With this move, the text is arguing in favor of a far more complex understanding of personal responsibility and agency than the theory of karma might otherwise seem to suggest. It does so in large part by both asserting and demonstrating a textual power that we are not in a position to understand, much less refute. The assertions speak to us on the level of first-order readers; the demonstration takes place when we shift to a second-order reading, as the text's repeated self-referentiality and its fabulously complex narrative structure strongly encourage us to do.

We may not be able to figure out just how the text as powerful agent of change is working, or even what sort of entity it is. But nor, the Sanghāta tells us, do we need to.

The bulk of the work that the Sanghāta repeatedly says it does takes place on the imperceptible level of karma, which we are not in a position to perceive or assess anyway.

As if in compensation for the condition of perplexity that the *Sanghāta Sūtra*'s vision of its own power places us in, the Sanghāta addresses the ethical dilemma that is rooted in the very unfolding of a human life, uni-directionally, through time. This ethical dilemma is experienced by the man and the king as remorse to the point of despair—reasonable enough responses to a bad situation for which one is responsible but that one is not in a position to change. This dilemma is created by notions of karma that demand us to assume total responsibility for actions that we no longer control, because they are already in our past and so beyond changing. The way out of this dilemma, the Sanghāta suggests, leads to narrative, in the ontologically perplexing way that it acts on us and exists outside strictly linear time. And so, after the man accepts the authority of the sage and finally eats, the sage comforts him:

> 'Being, I will be your refuge. I will be your support. I will be your helper. Therefore, listen to the Dharma in my presence without fear. Have you heard even a little of the dharma-paryāya called Sanghāta?' (page 15)

When the man says he has not, the sage (who, remember, is the Sanghāta manifesting as the sage) proceeds to relate the anecdote of the king who had similarly committed harmful actions, and who had similarly had the karmic consequences of those actions completely removed by hearing the *Sanghāta*. Thus the text portrays its own activity not as simply offering knowledge to empower us, but as offering stories about people much like ourselves who are cured by submitting to the text's command that we sit down, eat and listen to more stories.

As to exactly what happens to us when we do so, well, that is another story.

This paper was adapted from a talk delivered at a Buddhist studies conference at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor in April, 2003, by Damchö Diana Finnegan (aka Ven. Lhundup Damchö).

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