

Interpretations of the “Rootless Faith” of the Patricide Ajātaśatru in the  
\**Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā[-śāstra]* and Other Relevant Sources

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The patricide Ajātaśatru, a king of Magadha, is one of the most fascinating figures in the early history of Indian Buddhism. He is particularly well known for his personality transformation from an *ānantarya* criminal to a pious Buddhist layman. He is credited as a model of “rootless faith” (Chin. *wugen-xin* 無根信, Tib. *gzhi* [or, *rtsa ba*] *med pa'i dad pa*, Skt. *amūlakā/amūlikā śraddhā*) in a number of Buddhist texts. The term “rootless faith” has usually been construed by modern scholars as referring to the faith which the Buddha has brought about in Ajātaśatru despite the fact that his roots of goodness (*kuśalamūlāni*) had been extirpated by himself through the act of patricide. However, it should be noted that not all Buddhist texts espouse the idea of extirpation of Ajātaśatru’s roots of goodness. In fact, the \**Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā[-śāstra]* (henceforth *Vibhāṣā*) and Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* explicitly state that although Ajātaśatru committed patricide, his roots of goodness have not been cut off. The *Vibhāṣā*, moreover, gives five interpretations of Ajātaśatru’s “rootless faith”, but in none of them reference is made of the total eradication of his roots of goodness.

In this paper, I will explore possible reasons why the authors of the *Vibhāṣā* do not consider Ajātaśatru’s roots of goodness as being totally extirpated, and how their interpretations of Ajātaśatru’s “rootless faith” are related to other Buddhist sources (including both Pāli and Sanskrit texts and those texts extant in Chinese and Tibetan translations). Such an exploration may help us appreciate the ways in which the authors of the *Vibhāṣā* recycled (and assembled) existing narrative materials and adapted them into their own doctrinal contexts.