

Ajātaśatru: Family System and Karma

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THIS ESSAY PROVIDES an interpretation of King Ajātaśatru, a figure well known in Japanese Buddhist culture from the perspective of Bowen Family Systems Therapy. This therapeutic approach is based on concepts such as individuality and togetherness, anxiety, and the multigenerational transmission process.

FAMILY THERAPY

History of Family Therapy

Family therapy first appeared when psychiatrists who studied and treated schizophrenic clients were confronted with the need to take family dynamics into account. At that time, many psychiatrists did not regard the family as an essential factor in the etiology and treatment of schizophrenia or of other mental illnesses. Family became the object of attention after Harry Stack Sullivan (1892–1949) started to pay careful attention to the relationship between clients and their families. From the 1940s to 1950s, research on the correlation between family relationships and schizophrenia were carried out. Particularly important was the work of anthropologist Gregory Bateson. Bateson found a peculiar communication pattern in families with schizophrenics. Don Jackson (1920–1968), a psychiatrist, and Jay Haley (1923–2007), one of the initial family theory founders, participated in this research. In 1959, Jackson and Haley started to utilize family therapy instead of psychoanalytic therapy and established the Mental Research Institute (MRI), which has been one of the leading institutes in the family therapy field. Several well-known family therapies, including Bowen Family Systems Therapy, emerged from this early work.

Bowen Family Systems Theory

Murray Bowen (1913–1990), who was a psychiatrist and the founder of Bowen Family Systems Therapy, started his study of schizophrenia in the late 1940s when he perceived a common pattern of relationship between patients and their mothers. Michael E. Kerr and Murray Bowen state that Bowen's theory is based on natural systems. This makes Bowen Family Systems Therapy unique because the other family theories are based on the concepts of cybernetics, general systems theory, and communication theory, theoretical orientations that focus more on the immediate present and the prospective future. Although other family theories have a here-and-now stance toward therapy, Bowen's theory expands into past relationships including the extended family because Bowen claims that the family contains two distinct systems: "the family *relationship* system and the family *emotional* system."¹

Bowen regards the family as "a multigenerational network of relationships" and focuses his attention especially on the mother-child relationship. Furthermore, he assumes that humans are more dependent and emotionally oriented than many people have imagined. Bowen's assumptions are that "human relationships are driven by two counterbalancing life sources, *individuality* and *togetherness*,"² which combine in the family's emotional system. Four key concepts arising from this tension between individuality and togetherness are differentiation of self, emotional triangles, nuclear family emotional process, and multigenerational transmission process.³ Bowen claims that it is essential to understand the relationship in the family as a triad, rather than as a dyad. In this view human beings and their families can be observed in terms of emotional triangles. As Kerr and Bowen state, "In actuality, it is never possible to explain the emotional process in one relationship adequately if its links to other relationships are ignored. One relationship becomes intertwined with others through a process of *triangling*.... The triangle is the basic molecule of an emotional system."⁴ Bowen makes *anxiety* a core concept of triangles in the emotional system and argues that relationships, drug use, personality traits, and beliefs form important anxiety-based factors in relationships. He claims that not only does one person's anxiety infect another person in the family, but anxiety can also be transmitted to later generations. Bowen called this a *multigenerational transmission process*.

Major Concepts of Family Therapy

Some family therapies pay attention to family structure; some focus on solving problems; and some emphasize communication patterns in a system. Family therapies, however, generally share the same basis, benefiting from concepts of systems theory, cybernetics, and communication theory. The concepts of all these theories are intertwined and constitute the core of family theory. These include wholeness, homeostasis, feedback loop, and process. These concepts have influenced Bowen Family Systems Theory as well.

“The Whole Is More than the Sum of the Parts”

In family therapy, “the wholeness” of the system is emphasized over “the parts.” The parts are each family member, while families constitute a systemic whole. As Nichols and Schwartz state: “[T]he essential properties of an organism, or living system, are properties of the whole, which none of the parts have. They arise from the interactions and relationships among the parts.... The whole is always greater than the sum of its parts.”⁵ Therapists focus on relationships between a client and his/her parents, between parents, and between the parents and their parents. This view makes it possible to understand presenting problems more accurately through the relationships and power balance between the parts of the family system. Thus, the therapist focuses not only on the individual as having the problem, but rather pays careful attention to the background of the client’s family history, including extended family, so as to understand a multidimensional pattern.

Homeostasis

Homeostasis, a concept of the utmost importance in family therapy, means that there is a tendency on the part of the family system to seek a stable equilibrium among the parts. Jackson introduced this idea to family therapy as a model for family interaction.⁶ He describes homeostasis as a family’s resistance to change in order to maintain the steady state; when a family system is disturbed, homeostasis operates to bring the disturbed system back into balance.⁷ Nichols and Schwartz also suggest that homeostasis is “the self-regulation that keeps systems in a state of dynamic balance.”⁸ Homeostasis is one of the key

concepts for many family therapy models because family homeostasis enforces unspoken agreement or “family rules.”

As Kerr and Bowen state: “A two-person system may be stable as long as it is calm, but since the level of calm is very difficult to maintain, a two-person system is more accurately characterized as [generally] unstable. When anxiety increases, a third person becomes involved in the tension of the twosome, creating a triangle. This involvement of a third person decreases anxiety in the twosome by spreading it through three relationships.”⁹ Two people who are under stress and anxiety need a third person so that they can obtain a stable constellation in a system. Bowen assumes that a stable state in a relationship is indispensable for people, even though it may be maintained by negative emotions. Thus, homeostasis is central to Bowen Family Systems Theory, and is reflected in the concepts of triangles, nuclear family emotional process, and multigenerational transmission process.

Feedback Loop

First advocated by Norbert Wiener (1894–1964) in 1948, cybernetics is interested in patterns and communication in a system. One of the key concepts is the feedback loop, which influenced Bateson’s family therapy.¹⁰

There are two types of feedback that maintain homeostasis in a family interaction pattern: positive and negative. According to Watzlawick and others, homeostasis is generally maintained by negative feedback, which plays an important role in maintaining the stability of relationships, while positive feedback leads to change.¹¹ Positive feedback works as an amplifier, encouraging change while a family is learning and growing, seemingly in a spiral pattern. Negative feedback reduces change and maintains the status quo of the system. The pioneers of family therapy understood this mechanism by which problems are persistently maintained in a family. How to deal with this mechanism is one of the key points of family therapy.

In Bowen Family System Therapy “[t]he information of three *interconnected* relationships can contain more anxiety than is possible in three separate relationships because pathways are in place that allow the shifting of anxiety around the system.”¹² Bowen’s theory presumes that negative feedback loops are elicited from *chronic anxiety* that makes the system dysfunctional and is found in multiple generations in a family history.

Process

Family therapy is more interested in communication patterns and interaction than in the contents of communication.¹³ Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson write:

Now, if it is accepted that all behavior in an interactional situation has message value, i.e., is communication, it follows that no matter how one may try, one cannot *not* communicate. Actively or inactively, words or silence all have message value: they influence others and these others, in turn, cannot *not* respond to these communications and are thus themselves communicating.¹⁴

In systems theory, process means “to change over time and includes the ongoing functions and history of a system.”¹⁵ For Bowen’s therapy, *process* is one of the most important concepts. Bowen’s theory pays attention to the process of interaction in a family, including the extended family, because the *process* expresses patterns of behaviors and reactions within the family. Nichols and Schwartz state that “Bowenian therapy is a process of active inquiry, in which the therapist, guided by the most comprehensive theory in family therapy, helps family members get past blaming and fault finding in order to face and explore their own roles in family problems.”¹⁶ Although Kerr and Bowen state that Bowen’s theory is modeled on natural systems rather than general systems theory, it is clear that Bowen’s systems theory is also a part of the large group of systems theories.

CASE STUDY

Introduction of Ajātaśatru/Ajase

It is widely believed that Ajātaśatru (Jpn. Ajase 阿闍世), who appears in the Buddhist story of King Ajātaśatru at Rājagṛha, was a real person in India. From the second to the fifth centuries C.E., Mahāyānists compiled new versions of the Mahāyāna sutras. Therefore, it is commonly said that many extant Mahāyāna sutras are of questionable historicity. More recent research, however, has revealed that quite a number of stories included in these sutras are indeed based on historical fact. The story of King Ajātaśatru appears in both the *Meditation Sutra* (Skt. *Amitāyur-dhyāna-sūtra*, Jpn. *Kanmuryōjūkyō* 觀無量壽經) and in the *Nirvana Sutra* (Jpn. *Nehangyō* 涅槃經). The majority of this story is currently regarded as essentially historical.

The general outline of this story is that a king and queen, Bimbisāra and Vaidehī, are unable to conceive a child and go to a seer for advice. The seer tells them that a certain hermit upon his death will be reborn as their son, the crown prince. Unable to wait for his passing, the king and queen murder him. Thus are planted the seeds of anger, betrayal, and hatred. The hermit on his deathbed vows to take revenge upon them. Realizing what they have done, the king decides to kill the infant. However, his human love overcomes his fear, and the king dotes on the boy. As a prince, Ajātaśatru is befriended by the Buddha's evil cousin Devadatta, who convinces the crown prince to plot to take the throne and become Devadatta's benefactor. The king cedes the throne to Ajātaśatru believing that his son will reign peacefully, but the newly crowned King Ajātaśatru throws his father into prison with the intention of starving him to death. When the new king finds out that his mother, Queen Vaidehī, has been smuggling food into Bimbisāra's prison, he commands the court barber to cut open the king's feet and torture him. Bimbisāra dies in agony, but when Ajātaśatru has his own child, he asks his mother Vaidehī about his father's love for him. When he learns of his father's great love, he breaks down in agonized remorse. Both the queen and the prince seek out the Buddha's teachings for relief from their suffering, and both become devoted followers of the Buddha Śākyamuni. Variations in this story will be dealt with below.

Ajātaśatru attempts to kill Bimbisāra, Ajātaśatru's father, the former king, in malice. The main axis of human relationships in this story is father-son. The version of this story found in the *Meditation Sutra*, however, focuses on the mother-child relationship and describes how Vaidehī, who becomes an accomplice in the attempted infanticide of Ajātaśatru, suffers as a woman and is extricated from her torment by the teachings of the Buddha. While conveying Buddhist teachings, the story clearly depicts a love-hate relationship between parent and child. While such troubled relationships have been repeated throughout time and speak to fundamental pathologies of human nature, their complexities have yet to be fully elucidated, even through cutting-edge modern psychology. The particular Japanese slant on this story will be examined later on. Naoki Nabeshima states that this story, by addressing such topics as child abuse, misconduct, parricide, incitement, egoism, the sense of the accused, divination, and fatalism, depicts the socio-psychological reality of human beings across time.¹⁷

It is possible to say that this story represents a microcosm of human life in the present and shows that human nature has remained largely unchanged for thousands of years, even as specialists from different fields have searched for ways to educate people to be better. As Hiroi Takase suggests:

The human being is tormented by the gap between how he should be and the reality of how he is; he has but to anticipate what is to come, and take his chances. In *The Tragedy at Rājagrha Castle*, the same circumstances existed. Oedipus in Greek mythology meets the same fate as Ajātaśatru. Humans' agony goes on interminably. The *Meditation Sutra* is salvation for The Venerable [Buddhist Master] Honen, who sought the reason for the existence of human beings. Ajātaśatru's remorse corresponds to Shinran's statement in his *Gutokuhitanjukkai* (Hymns on Lamentation of the Bald-headed Fool), and also corresponds to the passionate wish for the Buddhist Pure Land, which is deeply embedded in the Japanese mind. One might very well find oneself in the same situation as the father king, Queen Vaidehī, and Ajātaśatru.¹⁸

By substantially increasing material abundance, modern science has brought about dramatic transformations in people's lifestyles, yet much of human nature remains unchanged and yet unexplored. The enduring vicissitudes of human nature can be seen through this story. Nabeshima has positioned this story as providing a meaning to live for when people lose sight of their goals and begin to look for the self.¹⁹

The Source of the Ajātaśatru Story

There are two perspectives from which the Ajātaśatru story may be analyzed: psychology, which focuses on Ajātaśatru's psyche, and Buddhism, which focuses on observing and construing human beings through religious discipline. Heisaku Kosawa, a pioneer of psychological studies in Japan, compared Freud's Oedipus complex to King Ajātaśatru's behavior, and he analyzed Ajātaśatru's psychological process by focusing on the notion of karmic failing. Kosawa developed the original idea of an Ajātaśatru complex, and Keigo Okonogi furthered this study.²⁰ Though the outline of this story is simple and clear, it is full of psychological subtlety. Since each scholarly interpreter tends to examine only a part of the whole story, the story is seldom covered in full detail. It seems that there are as many stories as there are experts.

India is the birthplace of the Ajātaśatru story, but as this thesis focuses on Japan, we will limit our discussion to the tradition of the Ajātaśatru story beginning with Shinran's *Kyōgyōshinshō*, in which he reinterprets the story in accordance with his own observations of human beings and his thinking on how a person might be aided in their search for salvation according to Japanese cultural sensibilities. Miki-saburo Mori also claims that although it may seem that Shinran directly takes over all doctrines from Shandao, Shinran converts the doctrines into his own style.²¹ As mentioned above, Shinran also includes numerous citations to the *Nirvana Sutra*.

Kosawa and Okonogi's Interpretation of the Ajātaśatru Story

While Freud explains the Oedipus complex on the basis of the triad relationship among father, mother, and (male) child, Kosawa and Okonogi construct the Ajase complex on the basis of the dyadic father-son and mother-son relationships. In the Ajase complex, particular emphasis is placed on the mother-son relationship, which is characteristic of Japanese thinking in general. As mentioned before, Kosawa was a devout Shin Buddhist and was clearly influenced by Shinran's thought.

In the Ajase complex, Kosawa articulates two notions of failing. Since Vaidehī, the wife of King Bimbisāra in Magadha, had still not been blessed with children, she was gradually becoming apprehensive that Bimbisāra's affection for her would diminish and fade away. Finally she consulted a diviner about a successor, and the diviner implied that she would have a baby three years later who would be the incarnation of a hermit in the mountains. She could not wait for the hermit to die because she was not young enough, and so she commanded that the hermit be killed. In his last moment, the hermit was filled with resentment; her son, who is a reincarnation of the hermit, would kill King Bimbisāra in retaliation for Vaidehī's plot. As Vaidehī was apprehensive about the hermit's deathbed resentment, she plotted to kill her newborn son, Ajātaśatru, immediately upon delivering him. Having a narrow escape from death, Ajātaśatru grew up and met Devadatta, a jealous cousin of the Buddha who had joined the latter's movement, and who had watched for his chance to usurp the religious leadership of the sangha. Devadatta revealed to Ajātaśatru the facts concerning his birth. Incensed, Ajātaśatru captured and imprisoned his father, but a loyal vassal, by appealing to reason and moral principles, prevent-

ed him from killing his mother. After Bimbisāra died in confinement, Ajātaśatru fell seriously ill, his body covered with boils, and nobody could come close because of his powerful stench. Vaidehī, however, nursed Ajātaśatru back to health; as a result, Ajātaśatru seriously reflected on his conduct.

Kosawa articulates two notions of karmic failing in his psychoanalysis of Ajātaśatru: failing based on punishment, and failing based on reparation.²² The former notion is aroused by the action of Ajātaśatru trying to kill his mother, and the latter is aroused by Vaidehī being devoted to taking care of Ajātaśatru even though she was about to be killed by him. In the former, Ajātaśatru's attempt to kill his mother is a failing or transgression that can only be righted by punishment, including as seen through the eyes of the transgressor. In the latter, recognition of karmic failing takes place *precisely because* of being embraced, in this case, by the nurturing of the mother; the primary consciousness is the desire to make reparations, not the fear of punishment. The former fear justifies punishment; the latter seeks to repair by way of being embraced.

The Ajātaśatru Story in the Sutra of Eternal Life

The description of events preceding the birth of Ajātaśatru as found in the Kosawa version outlined above differs in significant ways from that in the *Meditation Sutra*. In the version found in the latter, it was King Bimbisāra, not his wife Vaidehī, who felt anxious about not having a successor and went to see the diviner. The diviner told him that after the death of a hermit in the mountain, Vaidehī would be expecting a child because of the hermit's reincarnation. Bimbisāra could not wait for three years and demanded that the hermit be killed. Bimbisāra was apprehensive and fearful when he listened to the hermit's death-bed resentment.

Ajātaśatru was enraged and imprisoned his father after he learned the secret of his birth from Devadatta. When Ajātaśatru knew that his mother Vaidehī secretly brought some food for Bimbisāra so that he could survive, Ajātaśatru was again enraged and tried to kill his mother. While Ajātaśatru desisted from killing his mother after receiving timely moral advice from a vassal, Bimbisāra ultimately died of starvation. Ajātaśatru regretted his actions and became seriously ill when he learned of his father's death. Nobody came close to Ajātaśatru because

of a severe odor caused by his illness; however, Vaidehī took care of him sincerely. It was then that Ajātaśatru recognized his own failing.²³

Ajātaśatru and His Family

In the study of human relationships or psychology, it is often appropriate to compare and contrast two factors. In some cases, however, it is more appropriate to broaden the analysis to include three or more factors. In traditional Japanese literature, there are a great many stories, ranging from classical prose fiction to modern novels, in which triadic human relationships take center stage. It is pertinent to observe and examine human relationships between two people in many cases, but dysfunctional relationships often expand to encompass three people. Kawai states in *The Hollow Center in the Depth Structure of the Japanese*²⁴ that it is a distinctive character of Japanese social structure that nobody unilaterally dominates the central position in a triadic relationship, a fact that makes this type of relationship especially stable. As mentioned *supra*, Kerr and Bowen argue that triadic relationships are typically more stable than dyadic relationships, and that when anxiety is predominant, people often intentionally form triads so that they can establish a more stable relationship.

Kosawa develops his Ajase complex theory focusing on the dyadic relationship between mother and child. In the Buddhist sutras related above, on the other hand, the focus is slightly different. Among the sutras, the *Nirvana Sutra* emphasizes the dyadic father-child relationship, and the *Meditation Sutra* emphasizes the dyadic mother-child relationship. In the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, Shinran describes the viewpoints of father, mother, and child; he deals, in other words, with a triadic relationship. The relationship between Ajātaśatru, Bimbisāra, and Vaidehī as found in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, in which Shinran interprets the Ajātaśatru relationship triad using native Japanese and Buddhist sensibilities, may be analyzed in terms of fundamental elements of Bowen Family Theory, such as anxiety, emotional triangles, and the multigenerational transmission process. Using American cultural sensibilities and psychological theory Bowen developed these concepts in his interpretation of triad relationships. Application to the Ajātaśatru story will reveal the strengths and limitations of applying Bowen Family Systems Theory, which is rooted in American social norms, to the Japanese family triad.

Bimbisāra's Anxiety

When Vaidehī was expecting Ajātaśatru, a new triad relationship between father, mother, and child arose. Following Kerr and Bowen, one could say that “the anticipated birth can sufficiently disturb the emotional equilibrium in the marriage that one of the two parents gets into an unfavorable position emotionally.”²⁵ In Bimbisāra’s case, when the hermit was about to be killed, he told Bimbisāra that he would be reincarnated as his son, Ajātaśatru, and would kill Bimbisāra. Bimbisāra felt much more anxiety than the typical father would.²⁶ Before this incident, Bimbisāra was already very impatient and anxious about failing to produce a successor, and as a result, he hastened to kill the hermit. Only at the moment when he was informed that Vaidehī was expecting a child did Bimbisāra not feel anxiety in this familial triad relationship. Apart from that moment, his anxiety gradually intensified, ultimately driving him to attempt the murder of Ajātaśatru. This reaction can be taken as Bimbisāra’s flight from his anxiety. As Kerr and Bowen suggest, “In an anxious environment, people who want to make decisions based on a broad and long-term view are pushed aside by people who want quick answers and immediate relief from problems.”²⁷ Bimbisāra, without contemplation of the repercussions, made the evil decision to try to kill his own son.

Vaidehī's Anxiety

In the *Meditation Sutra*, Vaidehī approved of her husband’s wish to kill the new born baby after she delivered him: “Through this process, anxiety that begins first in one person can eventually manifest itself in a physical, emotional, or social symptom in another person.”²⁸ Bimbisāra’s anxiety entangled Vaidehī. It is difficult to imagine that she was calm after this failed attempt at murder. As Kerr and Bowen explain, “Distress that begins in the mother about some event in her personal life may be first reacted to by her most undifferentiated child.”²⁹ In this case, Vaidehī’s anxiety is reacted to by Ajātaśatru.

The source of Vaidehī’s anxiety is that she had helped carry out the nefarious plan to kill her own son in cooperation with Bimbisāra. Her anxiety was intensified by Ajātaśatru’s immature actions as he grew up, which Nabeshima expresses as follows: “He [Ajātaśatru] was of a violent temperament and did not in the least feel pain about killing people...and he lived a pleasure-seeking life.”³⁰ It seems that Bimbisāra and Vaidehī, who had not yet overcome their own failing, were in a

chronically uneasy state, for they were frightened of their punishment. As a consequence of this, it could be said that Bimbisāra and Vaidehī brought up Ajātaśatru in an emotionally warped situation in which they showed affection, but their affection was mingled with intense anxiety.

Ajātaśatru's Anxiety

The circumstances in which Ajātaśatru was raised were dominated by anxiety, and Ajātaśatru gradually became depressed. Both Bimbisāra's and Vaidehī's anxiety would surely have spread to Ajātaśatru.³¹ These led to Ajātaśatru's depression and immature actions; Devadatta, who harbored resentment towards the Buddha, then showed up and divulged the secrets surrounding the circumstances of Ajātaśatru's birth. Ajātaśatru came to understand the cause of his anxiety, and he began to doubt the sincerity of his parents and all that they had done for him including their shows of affection. Nabeshima explains that Ajātaśatru's malice was engendered by his rage against his father's false love and by the hollowness and loneliness that Ajātaśatru felt as a result of not receiving love from a reliable mother. When Ajātaśatru lost both his emotional ties to his father and any sense of togetherness with his mother, he became tormented and lost all reason for existence; his despair ultimately morphed into resentment and murderous intent.³² It resulted in doubts about being loved by his parents and in a deep anxiety over the isolation he felt at being bound neither to his father nor to his mother. Under sudden and intense anxiety, Ajātaśatru could not maintain calm judgment. In order to resolve his discomfort and regain emotional stability as quickly as possible, he confined his father. As Kerr and Bowen state, "While quick fix approaches often do relieve the anxiety of the moment, typically the problem soon returns and the same approaches no longer work."³³ This prompt decision on Ajātaśatru's part does not provide a permanent solution. Specifically, even if Bimbisāra physically disappears from Ajātaśatru's view, the root cause of Ajātaśatru's anxiety is not truly eliminated. Ajātaśatru utilized this hasty problem-solving method twice: once when he confined Bimbisāra, and again when he allowed his father to die because of his rage against Vaidehī's support for her imprisoned husband. At the moment his father Bimbisāra departed this world, Ajātaśatru was racked with feelings of remorse; he was not emancipated from his anx-

iety but rather felt it even more intensely. Ajātaśatru thus completely erred in his attempt to relieve his anxiety.

Buddha and Devadatta

In this story, there are two persons crucial to explaining the emotional triangle: Buddha and Devadatta. Bowen proposes the establishment of a therapeutic triangle as a problem-solving technique within a family. In a therapeutic triangle, the third person who has achieved differentiation of the self ultimately possesses the power to treat all family members within a problematic family. If the third person, however, feels uneasy, the intervention will instead amplify a given problem within a family: “This anxiety in the ‘helpers’ can increase symptoms in the family.”³⁴ In Ajātaśatru’s story, it was the Buddha who established a therapeutic triangle, and it was Devadatta who amplified Ajātaśatru’s family problems.

Emotional Triangles

As stated above, upon learning that Vaidehī was expecting a baby, Bimbisāra felt uneasy about the forthcoming triad relationship between Ajātaśatru, himself, and Vaidehī. As a result of his fears about his unborn son, Bimbisāra embroiled Vaidehī in his murderous plot. If this relationship was purely dyadic in nature, Bimbisāra would have killed Ajātaśatru by himself without involving his wife. Kerr and Bowen write that under anxious situations “functioning based on principle requires a tolerance of anxiety and a willingness to focus on the self.”³⁵ Bimbisāra could not manage his anxiety by himself; he embroiled Vaidehī so that he could lighten his emotional burden.

The triadic relationship between Bimbisāra, Vaidehī, and Ajātaśatru was unstable from the beginning. It was necessary for Ajātaśatru to meet Devadatta so that Ajātaśatru could ease his anxiety and obtain stability. Moreover, Devadatta also had his own strife with the Buddha. It was necessary for Devadatta to meet Ajātaśatru in order to relieve his own uneasiness. Ajātaśatru and Devadatta thus needed one another in order to obtain emotional stability. There are four identifiable triad relationships: (1) Ajātaśatru-Bimbisāra-Vaidehī, (2) Ajātaśatru-Bimbisāra-Devadatta, (3) Ajātaśatru-Vaidehī-Devadatta, and (4) Ajātaśatru-Devadatta-Buddha.

The original unstable triangle is the first of these. According to Kerr and Bowen, “It is not always possible for a person to shift the

forces in a triangle. When it is not possible, the anxiety spreads to other triangles in an interlocking fashion.”³⁶ Devadatta’s uneasiness regarding the Buddha requires the involvement of a third person in order for Devadatta to establish a stable state. Devadatta’s uneasiness easily connects with another unstable triangle such as (1). Consequently, the triads (2), (3), and (4) appear. Bowen calls these *interlocking triangles*. In (4), although Devadatta feels that he is in conflict with the Buddha, the Buddha has attained enlightenment; therefore, it is a unilateral dysfunction in which only Devadatta feels instability. Devadatta should have been a reliever for Ajātaśatru. However, he does not provide a solution for Ajātaśatru, but rather amplifies Ajātaśatru’s anxiety. Nabeshima also notes that Ajātaśatru’s hatred toward his parents was amplified by Devadatta, and Ajātaśatru became enraged not only because Devadatta revealed the circumstances of his birth, but also because Ajātaśatru felt emotionally insecure and unloved by his parents before he met Devadatta.³⁷

Multigenerational Transmission

Kerr and Bowen state that “If one member of a triangle dies, another person usually replaces him.”³⁸ When one individual among three who maintain an emotional triangle disappears, the emotional triangle itself will not break down but rather another person will assume the role of the lost member. In actuality, Ajātaśatru eventually fathered a son and took care of his child when the child became ill. In the same manner that Bimbisāra’s anxiety influenced Ajātaśatru, Ajātaśatru’s uneasiness would be reflected in his behavior toward his own son. After Bimbisāra’s death, Ajātaśatru would suffer for his compunction and uneasiness until he attained faith and became a Buddhist supporter. The whole of Ajātaśatru’s suffering would influence his son. Kerr and Bowen explain, “When a father gets anxious, he may direct his efforts to trying to get the child to ‘be happy.’”³⁹ This behavioral pattern will be represented by doting on his children (*kobon’nou*). Tamura elaborates,

Although “doting parents” appear to outwardly express parental love, their actions may be motivated by self-centered goals. In some cases, parents devote themselves to taking care of their children even to the point of extreme physical or emotional self-sacrifice. The sense of “my” child that permeates their behavior, however, suggests self-centeredness, and it does not seem to be genuine love in many cases.

The child, on the other hand, feels that there is a millstone around his neck and gradually develops hatred, and then the relationship between child and parent ends in tragedy.⁴⁰

It seems that Ajātaśatru burdened his son with his own sense of guilt over killing his father, Bimbisāra. It is not perhaps surprising then, as Nabeshima points out, that Ajātaśatru was later murdered by his own son. It does not seem that Ajātaśatru was stable during his son's childhood. Even though Ajātaśatru mended his ways, the seeds of dysfunction had already been sown. As Kerr and Bowen explain, "The multigenerational emotional process is anchored in the emotional system and includes emotions, feelings, and subjectively determined attitudes, values, and beliefs that are transmitted from one generation to the next."⁴¹ It is said that thereafter the pattern of patricide in the family of Ajātaśatru lasted at least three generations.

CONCLUSION

My findings in analyzing the King Ajātaśatru story through Bowen Family Systems Theory are that it is indeed possible to apply Bowen's theory to Ajātaśatru's story, which exhibits certain pathologies reflective of relationships defined in Asian and specifically Japanese Buddhist literature. However, I also find that there are key differences regarding views on the human being and human relationships between Bowen's theory and Buddhist ideas. The target of family therapy and other psychotherapies in the U.S. is an individual person and their relationships. Even though family therapy was launched while arguing against traditional psychotherapy, family therapy does not depart from the basic assumptions of mainstream Western psychology; it is based on an atomistic, scientifically-oriented outlook. Family therapists focus their intervention primarily on visible, verifiable problems of individuals seeking autonomy. Many Japanese who face personal trauma and dilemmas, however, are often less concerned with the exact nature or medical classification of their pathology and more fixated on the reason for its existence in the first place. In seeking therapy, their implicit question regarding their situation is often, "Why has this happened to me?" As Kawai explains, they really want to know "why" it happened, not "how" it happened, a question to which outward logic may never provide an entirely satisfactory answer.⁴² The Japanese are apt to observe and understand individuals in the context of their relationships among people. In the future, it will be necessary to examine whether

this inclination is particular to the Japanese, how much the Japanese have been influenced by Buddhism, and to what extent the Japanese have adopted Western ideas.

NOTES

1. Michael E. Kerr and Murray Bowen, *Family Evaluation* (New York: Norton, 1988), 11.
2. Michael P. Nichols and Richard C. Schwartz, *Family Therapy: Concepts and Methods*, 6th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2004), 119.
3. Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*; Nichols and Schwarz, *Family Therapy*.
4. Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 134.
5. Nichols and Schwartz, *Family Therapy*, 95.
6. Don D. Jackson, "The Question of Family Homeostasis," *Psychiatric Quarterly Supplement* 31 (1954): 79–90.
7. Paul Watzlawick, Janet B. Bavelas, and Don D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1967).
8. Nichols and Schwartz, *Family Therapy*, 95.
9. Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 135.
10. Nichols and Schwartz, *Family Therapy*, 95.
11. Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication*.
12. Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 135.
13. Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication*.
14. *Ibid.*, 48–49.
15. William C. Nichols and Craig A. Everett, *Systemic Family Therapy: An Integrative Approach* (New York: Guilford Press, 1986), 75.
16. Nichols and Schwartz, *Family Therapy*, 129.
17. Naoki Nabeshima, *Ajase ō no sukui* (Tokyo: Hōjōdō shuppan, 2004), 12.
18. Hiroi Takase, *Butsuon to Nihonjin*, trans. M. Yoshida (Tokyo: PHP Kenkyūjo, 2003), 248–249.
19. Naoki Nabeshima, *Ajase ō no sukui*, 13. When Kosawa developed his theory, he also changed the original story in order to interpret it as primarily a mother-child relationship, which better reflects the Japanese social context at that time, and which would make it easier for Japanese people to understand his theory. The Ajātaśatru story that Kosawa uses to explain his Ajase complex is not the same as that which appears in the Buddhist sutras transmitted from India to China and then Japan via Chinese translations. In the original Buddhist story, Bimbisāra, Ajātaśatru's father, plotted to kill Ajātaśatru because Bimbisāra was seized by the anxiety that Ajātaśatru might kill him. In Kosawa's version, Vaidehī, Ajātaśatru's mother, plotted to kill Ajātaśatru because

of her anxiety that her son might kill her. However, the story presented by Kosawa in which the mother attempts to kill her son cannot be found in any Buddhist sutra. Thus, it is thought that the story in Kosawa's Ajase complex theory was, by and large, of his own creation. Although there is some criticism in Japanese Buddhist circles regarding such an amendment of scriptural authority, Kosawa himself was a devout Pure Land Buddhist and, according to Okonogi's research, many parts of Kosawa's Ajase story were referred to in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, written by Shinran, the founder of Shin Buddhism, the largest sect of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan. Akihiko Sakurai, on the other hand, claims that Kosawa's story is very much like that found in the *Zangeroku* (Record of Repentance), a text written by Jōkan Chikazumi, a Pure Land Buddhist priest (Akihiko Sakurai, "Zaiakuishiki no Nisyu no Bukkyōteki Haikei," in *Ajase Konpurekkusu*, ed. Keigo Okonogi and Osamu Kitayama [Osaka: Sōgensha, 2005], 108). In either case, Kosawa would develop his theory based on a rearranged Ajātaśatru story so that he could more readily focus on the mother-child relationship, which was more intimately reflective of the typical pattern of parent-child relationships at that time in Japanese society.

20. Naoki Nabeshima, *Ajase ō no sukui*, 13.
21. Mikisaburo Mori, *Rōsō to Bukkyō* (Tokyo: Kodansya Gakujutsubunko, 2003), 274.
22. Keigo Okonogi, "Ajase Konpurekkusu ron no Tenkai," in *Ajase Konpurekkusu*, ed. Keigo Okonogi and Osamu Kitayama (Osaka: Sōgensha, 2005), 12.
23. Naoki Nabeshima, *Ajase ō no sukui*, 48–82.
24. Hayao Kawai, *Chūkū kōzō Nihon no shinsō* (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1982).
25. Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 114.
26. Naoki Nabeshima, *Ajase ō no sukui*, 70.
27. Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 132.
28. *Ibid.*, 129.
29. *Ibid.*, 124.
30. Naoki Nabeshima, *Ajase ō no sukui*, 84.
31. Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 129.
32. Naoki Nabeshima, *Ajase ō no sukui*, 12.
33. Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 133.
34. *Ibid.*, 141.
35. *Ibid.*, 132–133.
36. *Ibid.*, *Family Evaluation*, 139.
37. Naoki Nabeshima, *Ajase ō no sukui*, 176.

38. Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 135.
39. *Ibid.*, 125.
40. Yoshio Tamura, *Gendaijin no Bukkyō: Nehangyō* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1966), 33. My translation.
41. Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 224.
42. Hayao Kawai, *Yungu Shinrigaku Nyumon* (Tokyo: Baifukan, 1967).

