A Textual Analysis of the Description of the "Four Types of Sentient Beings"

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1. Introduction

Explanations of "triyāna (sansheng 三乘) / ekayāna (yisheng 一乘)," "nītārtha (liaoyi 丁義) / neyārtha (weiliaoli 末了義)," and "dharmacakra-pravartana" (zhuanfaxlun 轉法輪) with regard to the trisvabhāva (sanxing 三性) and triiniśvabhāva (san wuzixing 三無自性) theories are presented in chapter seven "Wuzixing xiang pin" 無自性相品 of the Samdhinirmocanasūtra (SNS). Sentient beings at different stages of comprehension are mentioned here to aid the explanation, and they are divided into four large categories based on the differences in comprehension of the teachings.

1. Sentient beings with an unvarnished comprehension of the Buddha’s teachings (7.18)
2. Sentient beings who, lacking an unvarnished comprehension of the Buddha’s teachings, are humble and unaffected (7.19)
3. Sentient beings who fixate on the Buddha’s teachings (7.20)
4. Sentient beings who cannot comprehend the Buddha’s teachings (7.23)

At the onset of each section describing these four types of sentient beings are stated whether:

- "Roots of virtue" (da shangen 大善根) has been planted
- Contaminations have been purified
- The teachings have been passed on in a full and whole manner
- Comprehension is wide and many
- (Large) provisions towards merit and wisdom have been thoroughly completed

The attainment, lack of attainment, or variations in the attainment of these five qualities determine where sentient beings fall within the four categories, and the above
five qualities are used as a sort of template at the onset of each related paragraph. The sentient beings described in 7.18, as “sentient beings with an unvarnished comprehension of the Buddha’s teachings,” are explained as being the most accomplished out of the four types.

The sentient beings in whom “roots of virtue” has already been planted, contaminations have already been purified, with teachings passed on in a full and whole manner, with comprehension that is wide and many, with thoroughly completed provisions towards merit and wisdom, when they receive the dharma-preaching they will comprehend the purpose of what I preach in an unvarnished way, and will also then attain comprehension of that dharma as well.

Hakamaya (1984) and Fujita (2007: pp. 10–24) have already touched upon the four categories of sentient beings in detail. According to them, describing the four types of sentient beings sets the “groundwork” for the three “dharmacakrapravartana” that is preached later. They also suggest that, “through the display of san weizixing shuo 三無自性説 (Jpn. sanmujishō-setsu), the ‘yitiaodao’ 一乘道 (Jpn. ichijōdō), which is the path that leads all followers of Buddha hitherto towards nirvana without regard for the differentiations between śrāvaka/bodhisattva, hīnayāna/mahāyāna, is also demonstrated.” This categorization of the sentient beings was initially based upon the differences in reaction upon receiving the teachings in the “Prajñāpāramitāsūtra.” Sentient being categorization is deeply important within the SNS.

2. “The Five Qualities” and “Three Dispositions”

The three dispositions of, “(i) one who is faithful and whose true character is also faithful, however, (ii) one who cannot consent to forsake, (iii) who does not find contentment in regarding one’s own views as being the best” are added to the aforementioned five qualities of sentient beings described in 7.19. The above suggests a being with a flexible and accepting disposition that does not cling to one’s own views. The qualities of being humble towards the teachings and having a flexible disposition are considered to be the most valuable of all the qualities of a sentient being. However, although the sentient beings of 7.19 understand the eminence of the teachings, and profess the importance of its study, they cannot understand “the deep (theory)
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intention behind the discourse” by Buddha, and as such, is considered to be at a stage where they cannot devote themselves in the way of apprenticeship to the practice.

The three dispositions are mentioned again in 7.20 and 7.23 as a way to judge the qualities of sentient beings. This means that from 7.19 onwards, the three dispositions are used along with the five qualities to help classify the qualities of sentient beings.

7.19 [L 28b2 / Ph 28a8 / S 28b7 / T 26b3] (Western recension text)

de la sms can gang dag dge ba'i rtsa ba chen po ma skyed pa/ sgrub pa yongs su ma dag pa/ rgyud yongs su ma smin pa/ mos pa chung ba/ bsod nams dang/ ye shes kyi tshogs chen po yang dag par ma bsags pa/ drang po drang po'i rang bzhin can/ rtog pa dang sel mi nus pa/ bdag gi lta ba la mchog tu 'dzin par mi gnas pa de dag gischos de thos nas nga'i dgongs te bshad pa yang dag pa ji lta ba bzhin du mi shes kyang/ chos de la mos par byed cing dad pa myong bar byed de/ mdo 'di rnam ni de bzhin gshegs pas bshad pa yin te/ zab pa zab par snang ba/ stong pa nyid dang ldan pa/ mthong bar dka' ba/ shes par dka' ba/ btag tu med pa/ rtog ge'i spyod pa ma yin pa/ zhib mo btags pa'i mkhas pa dang mdzangs pas rig pa yin no zhes mos par byed do//. . ./ de ltar nga'i dgongs te bshad pa zab mo 'di khong du ma chung pa'i phyir/ bsgoms pa'i rnam pas sbyor ni mi nus mod kyi/ de dag gzhi des bsod nams kyi tshogs kyi kyang 'bogs/ ye shes kyi tshogs kyis kyang 'bogs te/ gong du yang rgyud yongs su ma smin pa yang yongs su smin par byed do//

The construction of the eastern recension Tibetan texts have made their sections regarding the sentient beings of 7.19 and the five qualities difficult to understand. Due in part to this, a partial affirmation, as possibly qualified by the readings of eastern recension and Xuanzang’s 玄奘 translations, have been the accepted stance. This position has been a convenient one when ranking the qualities of sentient beings of 7.18, 7.19, 7.20, and 7.23 in the arranged sequence. Western recension texts indicate, however, that for the sentient beings of 7.19, all five qualities should be considered to be in the negative. This is because the sentient beings of 7.19, 7.20, and 7.23 are those who cannot understand the deep intent of the dharma preached in the “Prajñāparamitāsūtra,” and as such, would encompass the majority of sentient beings. The ways to lead this majority, who are not equipped with the five qualities, are already mentioned in 7.11–7.13 before the four types of sentient beings are explained in 7.18–7.23, and accounts such as those mentioned below can be identified.

Below are excerpts of some accounts that exist regarding the sentient beings who are unequipped with the five qualities explained in 7.11–7.13, described together with their understanding of trisvabhāva and trinīsvabhāva theories.

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7.11 [L 26a5 / Ph 26a3 / S 26a7 / T 24a7] (Western recension text)
don dam yang dag 'phags de la sems can gang dag sgon dge ba'i rtsa ba ma bskyed pa/ sgrub pa yongs su ma dag pa/ rgyud yongs su ma smin pa/ mos pa mi mang ba/ bsod nams dang ye shes kyi tshogs yang dag par ma bsgrub pa de dag la skye ba ngo bo nyid med pa la brtsams te chos ston to// de dag gis thos nas rten cing 'brel par 'byung ba 'du byed rnam la mi rtag pa nyid du 'du shes shing mi birtan ba nyid dang/ yid gzhun da mi rung ba nyid dang/ rnam par 'gyur ba'i chos nyid du shes nas/ 'byed thams cad las yid sdom bar byed/ skyo bar byed do// yid sdom ba dang/ skyo bar byas nas sdiq pa las phyir bzlog ste/ de dag sdiq pa gang yin ba de mi byed cing/ dge ba'ang spyod do// de dag dge de sphyod pa'i rgyus kyang dge ba'i rtsa ba ma bskyed pa rnam ni bskyed do// sgrub pa yongs su ma byang ba rnam kyong yang sbyong ngo// rgyud yongs su ma smin pa yang yongs su smin par byed/ gzhi des mos pa mang zhih bsod nams dang ye shes kyi tshogs yang dag par sgrub par 'gyur ro//

7.12 [L 26b3 / Ph 26b1 / S 26b6 / T 24b5]
de dag de ltar dge ba'i rtsa ba bskyed pa nas/ bsod nams dang ye shes kyi tshogs kyi bar du yang dag par bsgrubs par gyur mod kyi/ 'on kyang skye ba ngo bo nyid med pa de la/ mtshan nyid ngo bo nyid med pa dang/ don dam pa ngo bo nyid med pa rnam pa gnyis yang dag pa ji ltar ba bzhi du mi shes pas 'du byed thams cad las yang dag par skyo bar mi 'gyur/ yang dag par 'dod chags dang bral bar mi 'gyur/ yang dag par rnam par grol bar mi 'gyur te/ nyon mongs pa'i kun nas nyon mongs pa las yongs su grol bar mi 'gyur/ las kyi kun nas nyon mongs pa las yongs su grol bar mi 'gyur/ tshe'i kun nas nyon mongs pa las yongs su grol bar mi 'gyur te/ yang de bzhi gshegs pa ni de dag la 'di ltar ste/ mtshan nyid ngo bo nyid med pa dang/ don dam pa ngo bo nyid med pa la brtsams te 'di ltar 'du byed thams cad las yang dag par skyo bar bya ba dang/ 'dod chags dang bral bar bya ba dang/ rnam par grol bar bya ba dang/ nyon mongs pa'i kun nas nyon mongs pa las yang dag par grol bar bya ba dang/ las kyi kun nas nyon mongs pa las yang dag par grol bar bya ba dang/ tshe'i kun nas nyon mongs pa las yang dag par grol bar bya ba'iyin phyir chos ston to//

7.13 [L 27a2 / Ph 26b7 / S 27a5 / T 25a3]
de dag gis chos de thos nas gzhain gyi dbang gi ngo bo nyid la kun brtsags pa'i mtshan nyid du mgon par ma zhen pas/ skye ba ngo bo nyid med pa de la mtshan nyid ngo bo nyid med pa dang/ don dam pa ngo bo nyid med par mos shing shes nas ji lta ba bzhi du khong du chud pas 'di ltar ste/ tha snyad kyis yongs su ma bsgos pa'i shes pa dang/ tha snyad dang rab tu ma 'brel ba dang/ tha snyad bag la nyal ba med pa'i shes pas/ tshe 'di la shes pa'i stobs bskyed pa dang/ phyi ma la yang rgyu yongs su chud pas gzhain gyi dbang gi mtshan nyid de 'gog par byed do// gzhi de las kyang 'du byed thams cad las yang dag par skyo ba dang/ yang dag par 'dod chags dang bral ba dang/ yang dag par rnam par grol par grol bar 'gyur te/ nyon mongs pa'i kun nas nyon mongs pa dang/ las kyi kun nas nyon mongs pa dang/ tshe'i kun nas nyon mongs pa las yongs su grol bar 'gyur ro//

These three paragraphs first begin with the sentient beings who are not fully equipped with the five qualities, and follow with identifying how sentient beings,
through wisdom, can correctly follow the path towards nirvana. Firstly, 7.11 explains the necessity of preaching dharma to those unequipped with the five qualities by relying only on the “upatitiniṃsvabhāva” (sheng wuzixing 生無自性). It is demonstrated that the five qualities would be systematically achieved through this method. “Relying only on the sheng wuzixing” means to preach dharma based on a reliance on prātityasamutpāda (yuanqi 縁起). What is meant by prātityasamutpāda in this case is paratantrasvabhāva (yitaqi xing 依他起性), and the question here is whether there is an understanding of this paratantrasvabhāva within the trisvabhāva theories (sanxing shuo 三性說). As such, despite the fact that there are differences in achievement, the sentient beings of 7.19, 7.20, and 7.23 can all be understood as belonging to this same level, as those who cannot comprehend in an unvarnished way the dharma preached within the “Prajñāpāramitāsūtra.”

The necessity of comprehending in an unvarnished way both the laksāṇaniḥsvabhāva (xiang wuzixing 相無自性) and paramārthaniḥsvabhāva (shengyi wuzixing 勝義無自性) for those equipped with the five qualities are explained in 7.12 and 7.13, with dharma preached based on the laksāṇaniḥsvabhāva and paramārthaniḥsvabhāva. The sentient beings receiving that dharma would then begin to comprehend the laksāṇaniḥsvabhāva and paramārthaniḥsvabhāva per the upatitiniḥsvabhāva.

It can be seen that past researchers, with the aforementioned understanding of this section, concluded that three or four qualities would be in the affirmative for the sentient beings. An intention to overlap the sentient beings who are still at the stage of only understanding the upatitiniḥsvabhāva out of the trinniḥsvabhāva, with the superior sentient beings of 7.19 can be observed. However, as can be concluded from the content of 7.11–7.13, in the Tibetan translation, the issue is not with those who are only partially equipped with the five qualities. Those who are only partially equipped with the five qualities are only briefly mentioned between 7.11–7.13, and in any case, it would already have been understood that the paragraphs 7.19, 7.20, and 7.23 are the sections that discuss those who do not possess the five qualities at all.

3. Conclusion

The phrase “third dharmacakra that is equipped with a well classified method” appears in 7.30. It is clear that this “classification” specifically has in mind the sentient beings
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divided into the four categories in 7.18, 7.19, 7.20, and 7.23. It can be further deduced that this is a summary of the five qualities of sentient beings that are stated at the beginning of each of the paragraphs. What is being said, is that due to the differences in the qualities possessed by the sentient beings, they are different at the beginning stages. Once they begin their journeys, however, the path towards achieving tranquil nirvana is “one pure path, and a second does not exist,” as preached in 7.17 of the SNS. This means that even the examples in the sections regarding śrāvaka (7.14, 7.15, 7.16) are not derived from an attempt to allocate them within the “śrāvakayāna of the three dharmacakra,” but are simply presenting that “this is how śrāvaka is, and further, this means that it is also present in pratyekabuddha and Buddha.” It can be understood that this classification of sentient beings via the use of the five qualities and three dispositions, is what is meant by “a well classified method” as preached within the third “dharmacakra.” There are distinctions within all varṇas as presented from 7.18 through 7.23, and it should be understood that the purpose of this chapter is to lead them towards enlightenment through the path of training presented in 7.11–7.13.

Note
1) This article makes use of the chapter and paragraph numbers given in the SNS. E.g., 7.1 (chapter 7, paragraph 1), 7.2, 7.3, . . .

Abbreviations
L London manuscript of the SNS, Na, 1b1–74a6.
Ph Phug-Brag manuscript of the SNS, Tsha, 2a1–72a7.
S sTog Palace manuscript of the SNS, Na, 1b1–80b1.
T Tokyo manuscript of the SNS, Na, 1b1–70b1.

References

Key words Saṃdhinirmocanasūtra, sattva

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