On the Concept of “sattva” and Its Development

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The Buddhistic concept of man in relation to other beings is completely different from the Western concept of it. Though in the West, too, some philosophers have held that the subject of ethical conduct is not to be limited to man, but as we see, judging from Kant’s idea of “vernünftige Wesen” in which angles and devils also must be included, he in reality focussed the attention on the problem of human being and ignored the consideration of living beings. In Sanskrit, there are such words as manusya, purśa or nara, which are equivalent to the English “human being”. But Indians do not like to use these words even when they mean man in particular. They think of man more as an instance of the species of “living being” than as one of the human race. So, they are likely to use such terms as prānin, bhūta, “sattva”, or jīva. (cf. The Way of Thinking of Eastern People. vol. 1. p. 207) According to them, man is equal to other animals as one of the organic beings. But these terms, when translated into the Chinese and Japanese, come to be used just the meaning of human beings with the development of Mahāyāna.

The concept of sattva

We cannot strain to apply the term “rénjiān” as seen in the Chinese translated sūtras, to the Western concept of man, Mensch, anthrōpos, homo. This word originally did not convey any such meaning, though in an ordinary sense of Japanese it has been acquiring the meaning of man. In the true sense of the word, rénjiān must be used as “das Zwischenmenschliche” i.e. between the persons, the world, society. (cf. “Dīgha-nikāya” vol. 22, p. 149 B,
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vol. 1, T. S. D.// dharma-bhāṇaka chap. of "Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra" p. 30 C, vol. 9, T. S. D. etc.) Not the "rénjiān" but the "sattva" should be the subject that is involved in the circle of transmigration and wanders about the six worlds (naraka-gati, preta-gati, tiryagyoni-gati, asura-gati, manuṣya-gati, deva-gati.) So, in the Buddhistic philosophy the problem of a human being must be set as this; "What is the sattva?"

Saying "sattva" in a word, it is of a very wide range and there are several kinds of it. So that there is no essential difference between man and a beast, as above mentioned. In the oldest Gāthās of the early Buddhists, the holy scriptures of Jains, "prāṇa" which originally meant breathing or life is used to mean living being (prānī). But in the following period, "bhūta", "jantu" or "sattva" are used in the sense of living being. Especially the word "sattva" is written very often in the Buddhists scriptures, and put into "shujo" (old translation) or "ujo" (new translation) in Chinese sūtras. In Buddhistic thought, the term "all the sattva" includes "devas" too. (cf. Sn. 521, 527) Furthermore "Buddhas and bodhisattvas" also are named "sattva" in some particular sūtras. (cf. "Wang-shēng-lun-chu" by T'an-luan. also called "Ching-t'u-lun-chu". p. 831 B, vol. 40, T. S. D.// "Mo-ho-chih-kuan" by T'ien-t'ai-ta-shih. chap. 5, pp. 52 C-53 A, vol. 46, T. S. D.) These examples show that "sattva", widely speaking, bears various meanings such as beast, human being, bodhisattva and Buddha i.e. all beings in the six planes of life. Buddhists believe that all beings can attain enlightenment by training themselves according to the Buddha's teaching, when they came into existence in the human plane of life. Thus emphasis is put on the plane of human life. I intend, therefore, to focus attention on the "sattva" as a human being, ignoring the consideration of other meanings, and to investigate the definition of it.

The definition of the "sattva" shown in several sūtras can be classified into four large groups, according to the construction on the Chinese translated term "zhòng-shēng".

(a) The human being who is closely connected and associated with other always lives together, so he could not stand alone. The same can be said with the case of our coming into this world. The Āgama-sūtra (A-han-ching)
noticed on this point.

“......Then, men and women may be called equal, having no essential difference. They are named 'sattva' merely in virtue of being born in common with the public.” (cf. "Chang-a-han" (Dīgha-nikāya), fascicle 22. p. 145A, vol. 1, T. S. D.)

Here means ‘zhòng-shēng’, to be born together.

(b) If we took the Buddhistic position of anātman, i.e. absence of a permanent, unchanging self or soul (Non-ego or Non-self), the self that is supposed by heretics to be real (as eternal, only one, and absolutely ruling), would be unreal. The thought of non-existence of the permanent self leads to the conclusion that the body consists of transient unity of several elements such as mahābhūta (the four elements), pañca skandhā (the five aggregates), six sense-organs etc., which exist only by means of the union of conditions. On account of this, some sūtras say as follows;

“......It has been called sattva because of unity of five elements.” (cf. "Ta-chih-tu-lun" (Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa) fascicle 31. p. 286C, vol. 25, T. S. D.)

“......It is named sattva after the unity of several elements. All the matter is constituted from the real four elements (which are: earth which has hardness for its nature and can support things; water which has moisture for its nature and can contain things; fire which has heat for its nature and can bring things to perfection; wind which has motion for its nature and can cause things to mature), or the provisional four elements which are combinations of the four real elements, and form, sound, fragrance, taste, and touch. ......” (cf. "Ta-ch'ēng-t'ung-hsing-ching" (Mahāyānabhisamaya-sūtra) vol. 1, p. 642B, vol. 16, T. S. D.)

The term ‘zhòng-shēng’ here acquires a different meaning from (a).

(c) We could not discuss the vital phenomena alone, turning our attention to the fact that they could be realized only when the death which are quite contradictory to the birth, would form the basis of them. That explains the technical terms of "jāti-marāṇa" (birth and death) which limit the beginning and the end of the existence of sentient beings. The “sattva” might be regarded just as an existence who wanders about and reborn in the six worlds, repeating life and death himself. T'ān-luan, the author of "Wang-shēng-lunchu", has borrowed a few phrases from someone's saying to be
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attacked by argument.

"In the common acception of the word 'sattva', it is given the name from the reason why it has been made repeated so many life and death in the three types of existence." (cf. "Wang-shêng-lun-chu", also called "Ching-t'u-lun-chu" or "Lun-chu" vol. 1, p. 831 B, vol. 40, T. S. D.)

The term "zhông", therefore, is translated into "so many", and "shêng" into "life and death".

(d) "Pu-tsêng-pu-chien-ching" (the sutra on that which neither increases nor decreases, translated by Bodhiruci) says as follows;

"Dharma-kâya—which is the body of the highest aspect of the three-fold body of the Buddha (the absolute nature of the Budhamind) and is ineffable, unmanifested, and non-substantial (śuâyā)—is placed under restraint of so numerous kleśa (those mental functions which disturb the mind) as the sand of the Ganges River (Gaṅgâ-nadî-vâluka), and plays between life and death, affected by several conditions. Thus named 'sattva'.” (cf. “Pu-tsêng-pu-chien-ching” p. 467B, vol. 16, T. S. D.)

This definition is almost the same as (c), but makes a little differences in some points. This sutra proclaims the identity between the dharmakâya and all sentient beings on the basis of tathâgata-garbha, and declares that all beings will attain Buddhahood, though they repeat birth and death for a long time in the three worlds and six realms of existence because of the control of numerous kleśa.

The third definition, I think, certainly looks essential as an organic existence, on account of including both positive and negative moment (jâti-maraṇa) at the same time. I will accordingly grasp the problem of human being from the viewpoint "sattva in jâti-maraṇa", paying my attention to the third, and investigating the theme within the limits of The Pure Land teachings.

(The development of the concept of "sattva")

There would be several standpoints in sūtras to talk over the grasp of
“jāti-maraṇa”; “Transmigration in different forms” which is the one of the unenlightened man passing through the six realms, where the transmigrating body is limited in life according to its karman, and differentiated in form. “Transmigration of an arhat, pratyekabuddha, bodhisattva” who are free from illusion-hindrances (kleśāvaraṇa), but is still reborn because he has knowledge-hindrances (jñeyāvaraṇa), and so forth. Now I would like to discuss on the problem of “sattva in jāti-maraṇa” within an extent of The Pure Land thoughts, especially in Shan-tao and Shin-ran.

Shan-tao (613–681), the founder of the Shan-tao school of Chinese Pure Land teachings, was greatly moved by reading the “Kuan-wu-liang-shou-ching” and vowed to be born in the Pure Land in the West. (He was also regarded as the fifth great master of the Seven Great Masters of the Shin Sect of Japan.) He reflects on himself and says;

“We lack wisdom and are actually the common mortals (prthag-jana) who flounder in the sea of birth and death. Our sins and hindrances are great and heavy, and we have been transmigrating through the six realms. Pains have been untold.” [cf. “Kuan-wu-liang-shou-fo-ching-shu”, the commentary on The Amitābha-buddha-dhyāna-sūtra, p. 278B, vol. 37, T. S. D.]

Based on this reflection, he advocates from faith in The Pure Land teachings as follows;

“But the savior (Śakyamuni Buddha) of this world Sahā (this mundane world where one cannot live without patience or forbearance), answering the call of Vaidehi, at once opens widely ‘The Essential Gate’ of the Pure Land, and Amitābha-buddha of the Land of Peace and Happiness manifests and reveals the meaning of ‘The Particular Vow’. Now the Essential Gate is none other but the two gates of the Settled and the Dispersed Gate of the Kuan-wu-liang-shou-ching (The Amitābha-buddha-dhyāna-sūtra). ‘Settled’ means ‘to cease in thinking’ and ‘to concentrate in mind’. ‘Dispersed’ means ‘to abandon evil and to practice good’. The merits of these two practices are to be directed toward birth, to seek birth. By the teaching of the ‘Vow’ is meant what is said in the Ta-wu-liang-shou-ching (Sukhāvatī-vyūha).………

……All the prthag-jana, steeped in vice or virtue, are absolved from sin and

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able to get born just by the Vow’s power of Him.” [do. p. 246B, vol. 37, T.
S. D.]

These versions of “prthag-jana in vice and sin”, might come from not a self-
affirmative but a self-negative viewpoint that the human beings have great
hindrances, their mind is coarse, so perception or ability to attain enlighten-
ment is difficult to have. He often uses the term “prthag-jana” instead of
“sattva”. We can find the latter only three times in Kuan-wu-liang-shou-
ching, while in the former twenty-one times. But in his commentary, the
latters in many passages are rewritten into “prthag-jana”. Whenever the
latters are written, he always gives them peculiar shades of difference in
expression such as the ordinary mortal, the pitiful common people both good
and bad, the common mortals filled with evil passions, the poorly gifted
and illiterate people, the ordinary men of sins and evils, everfloating or
eversinking beings,......

Shan-tao says, “There may be persons whose understanding and practice
do not go in accord and whose views are bent and who act Sundry Practices
and they may come and harass or raise various doubts and slander, saying
that birth is not possible; or they may say, ‘You beings have since long
kalpas and in the present life, in the actions of body, mouth, and mind,
committed, on the persons of common mortals and sages, minutely the Ten
Sins, the Five Deadly Sins, the Four Grave Sins, the slandering of the Dharma,
the non-repentance, the acting against the precepts, and the breaking of the
right views. And you are not away from these.” [do. p. 272B, vol. 37, T.S.D.]

After all, there would be no doubt, I think, that he was awakened to himself
who existed in close touch with the Absolute, just at that moment when he, as
an ordinary mortal, became aware of his own limitedness by feeling an eternal
truth, and that he went a step farther from “sattva” to “prthag-jana”.
Although his recognition of “prthag-jana”, accordingly, seemed to be a co-
ordinated concept of the Absolute, but we can find the serious paradox there.
He puts a unique construction on the second mind that is of deep faith (one
of the three minds of Kuan-wu-liang-shou-ching, together with the first mind
of sincerity and the third that seeks birth in the Pure Land by transferring

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the merit of virtuous deeds). There are two phases, he says, in this mind.

"First, we fixedly and deeply believe that we are actually the sin-ridden common mortals who have since unknown past ever been floundering in the sea of birth and death, never once being blessed with any prospect of getting out of it."


"Second, we fixedly and deeply believe that the forty-eight vows of Amitābha or Amitāyus take us in and that we can unfailingly be born in His land, as we trust upon the power of His vows with not a speck of doubt and with no apprehension." [do. p. 271A-B, vol. 37, T.S.D.]

He links the two into closer relations with each other, while at the first, "sattvas" are regarded as the mortals of the lowest capacity with the most gravely sinned, at the second, this lowest mortals of "prthag-jana" are dexterously related to the salvation, by looking upon this capacity connected with the highest and the best Dharma. Thus the concept of "sattva" is greatly changed from the original meaning of "living being", and turns to bear the particular meaning of "prthag-jana" in Shan-tao.

According to the Eighteenth Vow in Sukhāvatī-vyūha, Amitābha will save the whole of mankind out of his great benevolence, excepting only "those who committed five great sins and those who condemned the Right Law of Buddhism". Shan-tao interpreted this phrase to mean that even great sinners, under the condition that they be converted, could be reborn into the Pure Land. Introduced into Japan, these exceptions were later considered as problematic, and came to be completely ignored by Japanese Pure Land Thought; Salvation includes all that are embraced in the great benevolence and the real vow of Amitābha, even the ten evils and five deadly great sins not being excluded, and those who excel in those practices other than that of invocation of Amitābha being also included. Out of such an inclination of thinking was formulated, the theory of the eligibility of the evil ones for salvation (the view that the evil are rightfully eligible for salvation by the Absolute).

The concept of "prthag-jana" is accepted as "an evil ones" in Shin-ran.
When we looked into the actual state of human beings in relation to the Buddhistic practice, the reflection would not satisfy us. We may well have a self-satisfaction that we have done some good, or we may have a self-consolation of a reminiscence that we at least had a will to do good. But the actual amount of credit on our part is too insignificant to talk of. Of course, an endeavor is better than nothing. But a mere better-than-nothing is not perfect. Besides, it is other than the solution of pain itself. It is no reaching the absolute realms and no making-away with this sea of illusion under the weight of which we suffer. So, he had to regard the mortals (himself) as “evil ones”. His moral self-reflection is extremely acute.

"Truly I've come to realize, and it is deplorable, that I am idiotic vulture, drowned in the boundless sea of carnal desires, lost in the enormous mountains of worldly ambitions, not being pleased with becoming entitled to be saved, and taking no pleasure in approaching the True Evidence. Shame on me; woe is me!" (cf. "Kyō-kyō-shin-shō" part 3, p. 609C, vol. 83, T. S. D.)

In Buddhistic philosophy, the realization of the impermanence of the phenomenal world is used to be predominating rather than that of man's sinfulness. In the case of him, in contrast, little is said about the impermanence of this world. The controlling motivation for him is the sense of sinfulness of man. It is not that man is simply changeful. A more fundamental thing about man is that he is a sinner, obsessed with afflictions, yielding to evils. Realizing as he does that things are impermanent, he still clutches at these impermanent things. The human being is so deeply immersed in sins that he could never be saved but for the miraculous power of the vow of Amitābha.

The thought of "prthag-jana" is greatly transformed by these factors of ethical self-reflection into the philosophy of "an evil ones". Shan-tao, in explaining “the mind that is genuine and true (the first of three minds)” which the ascetic should always observe, says;

"You should not assume outwardly the appearance of wisdom, goodness and religious abstinence, while embracing illusions inwardly.” (cf. "Kuan-wu-liang-shou-fo-ching-shu" pp. 270C–271A, vol. 37, T. S. D.)
According to Shin-ran, this sentence of Shan-tao’s commentary written in classical Chinese should be read as follows:


From the profound ethical self-reflection that manifold are the phases of avarice, anger, vileness, falsehood, cunningness and cheating, not only the evil nature which is as with snakes and scorpions is hard to away with, but also there’s no end of it. He accordingly says;

“The three actions (trīni karmāṇi) are urged, but all are virtues impregnated with poison and with practices that are false. So, these cannot be called true actions.” [do. pp. 601C-602A, vol. 83, T.S.D.]

This evil nature is so intrinsic of human being that ascetic practice even of the utmost austerity could not possibly purify him of these evils. Thus he could not accept the saying of Shan-tao without the transformation of its meaning into what he himself thought suitable; no wisdom, virtue, or effort could there be outside, for falsehood sat within.

The identical reflection upon the nature of evils is often seen in the writings what his successors had heard (the authorship of which was formerly attributed to Nyo-shin, but it is now generally believed that it was written by Yui-en); the sattvas or the sentient beings “burdened with grave sins and fiery passions” (chap. 1), the prthag-jana or common mortals “who are, in reality, ordinary men possessed of evil passions” (chap. 4, 10, epilogue), “the poorly gifted and illiterate people (chap. 12)”, “who might do anything, when the due karmic conditions are ripe (chap. 13)”, “who are capable of any practice whatsoever, and to whom hell would definitely be dwelling anyway (chap. 2)”, the evil ones “who are unable to set ourselves free from ‘jāti-maraṇa’ or ‘samsāra’ by any practice (chap. 4)”, and others. And he made these bottom beings become afloat splendidly, saying as follows;

“......the evil persons who trust the Absolute Power are especially the one who have the right and real cause for birth in the Pure Land.” [cf. “Tanni-shō” chap. 3, pp. 728C-729A, vol. 83, T.S.D.]

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He put forward the Shan-tao’s construction on the mind of deep faith, and says;

“So, how gracious is the Original Vow of Amitābha who resolved to save me (this is correspond to the second phase of this mind by Shan-tao), because of being possessed of many karmic sins (correspond to the first).” [do. epilogue, p. 734C, vol. 83, T. S. D.]

Herein established is a theory of the redeemability of man of evil nature. According to this theory, human being is by nature evil, and because he is evil, he is entitled to be saved by the great benevolence of Amitābha. He is not expected to be saved through any other doctrine.

“Sattva” I think, would never be slumped to the boundless severance, though expected to be done. The more acutely feels he severance, the more certainly would be realized the Salvation of Amitābha, desiring the transcendental union with the Absolute. In Shin-ran, the view of “sattva” is the result of serious evaluation of mans potentiality. What actions are really equal to the immeasurable depth of perfection of an All-Enlightened One? Compared his own self and deeds with the high perfection, he came to a total deadlock. From this juncture of total dejection at his impotentiality to good, he found out a new view of “sattva” above mentioned.

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There could be many angles of vision in dealing with the human existence. I’ve, therefore, taken into consideration this problem from a point of sattva in “jāti-maraṇa” in Buddhistic philosophy. This concept may be one of the most fundamental proposition through the history of its thought. In the oldest Gāthās, “prāṇa” which originally meant breathing or life is used to convey a meaning of living being, but in the following period, “sattva” is written very often in the scriptures together with “bhuta”, “jantu”. According to the construction on the Chinese translated term “zhòng-shēng”, the definition on the “sattva” shown in several sūtras can be classified into four large groups. I’ve investigated the theme of “sattva” from the viewpoint of the third (sattva in jāti-maraṇa) which, as an organic existence, looked essential
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on account of including both positive and negative moment at the same time. Seeing within the limits of The Pure Land thought, Shan-tao, in his commentary on Kuan-wu-liang-shou-ching, often uses the term “prthag-jana” instead of “sattva”. Whenever the latters are written, he always gives them peculiar shades of difference in expression. According to the Eighteenth Vow in Sukhavatt-vyāha, Amitābha will save the whole of mankind out of his great benevolence, excepting only those who committed five great sins and those who condemned the Right Law. Shan-tao interpreted this phrase as meaning that even great sinners, under the condition that they be converted, could be reborn into the Ideal Land. Introduced into Japan, these exceptions came to be completely ignored especially by Shin-ran. The human-being, he says, is by nature evil, and so deeply immersed in sins that he could never be saved but for the miraculous power of the Absolute. Out of such an inclination of thinking was formulated the theory of the redeemability of man of evil nature. Thus the concept of “prthag-jana” is greatly transformed by his serious self-reflection into an “evil ones”.

Treating of “the sattva”, I’ve drawn some conclusions by making a summary of a few sūtras, but should refrain from giving any definite opinion on it. The problem of human being, I think, is too complicated to make a sweeping statement.

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