The *Tathāgatagarbha* Theory in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*

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I

The *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* (MPS) is a Mahāyāna scripture, in which is taught the 'real' meaning of the Buddha's *mahāparinirvāṇa* on the basis of the Mahāyānist interpretation, borrowing the scene of his Great Death at Ksināra as depicted in a scripture of the same title in the Āgama of the Primitive Buddhism (e. g. *Dīghanikāya* No. 15). The Sanskrit original of this *sūtra* seems to have been lost and we have at present the following translations in Chinese and Tibetan Tripiṭakas.

C 1: tr. by Dharmakṣema, in 40 vols. Taisho Ed. No. 374.

2: tr. by the same and rearranged by Huei yen (慧嚴), in 36 vols. Taisho Ed. No. 375.

3: tr. by Fa hien, in 6 vols. Taisho Ed. No. 376.

4: (Additional part) tr. by Jñānabhadra, in 2 vols. Taisho Ed. No. 377.

T 1: tr. by Wañ phab shun, etc. from Chinese source, in 2 cases. Peking Ed. No. 787.

2: tr. by Jinamitra, etc., in 13 *bampos*. Peking Ed. No. 788.

Of them, *T 1* is a translation of *C 1* and *C 4* combined in one. *T 2* is a direct translation of the Indian source, and, though being increased in volume, it is equivalent to *C 3* in its contents. This *C 3* occupies only the first one fourth of *C 1* in its contents, but it seems to show the original form of this *sūtra*. The originality of the remaining part of *C 1* as from India is rather doubtful.

There are 3 fragmental portions known to us in Sanskrit:

Fr. 1: a passage on '*parādhyāśaya*' and '*prcchāvaśa*' being a part of Chap. VIII of *C 3*. A manuscript found at Koyasan Monastery, Japan, of which edi-

tion is in the Taisho Tripiṭaka, Vol. 12, p. 604. (*T* 2 (L)* 73a4-74a6; *C* 1, 385c-386a; *C* 3, 868b-c.)

Fr. 2: a passage on the propagation of this *sūtra* being a scripture of the *tathāgatagarbha* theory. A manuscript found in Central Asia by Höرنle and mentioned in his "*Manuscript remains*" p. 93. It is identified with the MPS and re-edited in comparison with *C* 1 and *C* 3 by Kaikyoku Watanabe in his collected works "*Kogetsu Zenshū*", p. 574-7. (*T* 2 (L) 201a7-202b2; *C* 1, 422b-c, *C* 3, 895a.)

Fr. 3: a passage on the true notion of *nitya*, *ātman*, *sukha* and *śubha* on the Tathāgata, with a parable of water sport, quoted in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* (RGV), p. 74-75 (Johnston's Ed.) (*T* 2 (L) 45b3-46a6; *C* 1, 377c-378a; *C* 3, 862b.)

As all of these fragments are found in the part equivalent to *C* 3 and *T* 2, that part is at least sure of its Indian origin. It is secured by the fact that the index of the contents of the *sūtra* spoken in the form of questions of Bodhisattva Kāśyapa (*T* 2 (L) 52a1-53a3, *C* 1 379c-380a; *C* 3, 863c) refers only to this part and never beyond it. For this reason, I will refer in this article exclusively to the same part.

According to the MPS, '*mahāparinirvāṇa*' means the eternity of the *tathāgata* being *dharmakāya*, and the death of the Preceptor is merely its conventional appearance for the sake of living beings, all of whom he regards 'as if his only son'. This doctrine of the eternity of the Tathāgata is interwoven with the theory of the *tathāgatagarbha* (TG) as *sine qua non* and due to this theory, the MPS declares itself the ultimate scripture (*rgyud phyi maḥi yañ phyi ma=uttarottara-tantra?*) being the secret word (*sandhāvacana*) of the Tathāgata. The purpose of the *sūtra* is to establish the Buddhist Community by means of this highest doctrine at the crisis of decline that will occur in the recent future. "There remain only about 80 years before the destruction of the *saddharma*" (*C* 1 421c).

* Reference to page number in *T* 2 is here basically according to the *Lhasa* Edition (*Mdo Āṇa pa*, No. 122)

The *sūtra* is characterized at the colophon of *T* 2 in the following way :

yoñs su mya ñan las ḥdas pa chen poḥi mdo chen po, dam paḥi chos (saddharmaḥ), gsuñ rab thams cad kyi sñiñ por gyur pa (sarvapravacanasārabhūtaḥ), rgyud phyi ma lta bu (uttaratantra iva) rtogs par dkaḥ baḥi chos kyi ḥbyuñ gnas (duṣprativedhadharmākaraḥ), gcig tu de bshin gśegs paḥi sñiñ po ston paḥi mdo (ekadhā tathāgatagarbhanirdeśasūtram). (L. 222b2-3)

II

Then how is this ‘*tathāgatagarbhanirdeśa*’ expressed in the MPS ?

The fundamental statement of the TG theory in this *sūtra* is found in the following sentence : *sems can thams cad la sañs rgyas kyi khams yod do.* (L. 138a2) It may be reduced into Sanskrit in the following way : *astī buddhadhātuḥ sarvasattveṣu.* This statement is spoken of as from the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra* (TGS), but the formula in the latter is that *sarvasattvās tathāgatagarbhāḥ* as observed in the RGV (p. 25). The same connotation is expressed often using the term TG instead of *buddhadhātu* (e. g. L. 119a2-3), and we come to know that the modification took place in the MPS by introducing the concept of *dhātu* in order to explain the TG. The term *buddhadhātu* (or *tathāgatadhātu*), which is not appeared in the TGS, the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśa* (AAN) and the *Śrīmālāsūtra* (ŚMS), the three basic scriptures on the TG theory, seems to be used for the first time in the MPS. Thus the TG theory in the MPS will be defined as the theory of ‘*dhātu-astitva*’. Now we proceed into detail.

According to *C* 1, the fourth chapter is named ‘如来性’ which is equivalent to ‘*tathāgatadhātu*’, though translated into “*de bshin gśegs paḥi sñiñ poḥi leḥu*” in *T* 1. This chapter covers about two third of the first 10 volumes in which is included the passage referred to the TGS. The same part is divided into chapters VII to XVII in *C* 3, and the title *Tathāgatadhātu* is exclusively given to Chap. XIII. Chapter divisions of *C* 3 is based upon the *sūtra* index referred to above, and Chap. XIII corresponds to the following question :

thub pa, byaṅ chub sems rnams kyis|| ji ltar brtag dkaḥ khams mthoñ ḥgyur||

(L. 52a6)

Here '*brtag dkaḥ khamś*' (*duṣpravedha-dhātu*) signifies the TG which is said to be accessible only to the Buddha. Actually, too, we come to know, the characteristics of TG are mainly discussed in this chapter. At the same time the naming and division of *C 1* is also reasonable since the references to TG are scattered within the part equivalent to Chap. 4 of *C 1*. We will first of all examine the description of TG in those parts before Chap. XIII of *C 3*.

III

Including the statement: *asti buddhadhātuḥ sarvasattveṣu*, the main and typical examples referring to the TG theory are as follows:

1) To cut out the way (*lam chad pa*) means that by practising the notion of *nirātman*, one perceives the *nirātman* without cutting the stream. Then, by practising the notion of *ātman*, one perceives the *ātman* without cutting the stream, and thus after practising in two ways, one perceives the existence of the *buddhadhātu*. This is the *mokṣa*. What is *mokṣa* that is the Tathāgata. (*T 2* (L) 106b5-7, (P) 177. 3. 7; *C 1*, 395b; *C 3*, 875a, Chap VIII on the four ways of preaching.)

2) The Bhagavat, who is regarded as *nitya*, *dhruva*, *śāśvata* and *susukha* (?), preaches that *asti tathāgatagarbhaḥ sarvasattveṣu*. (*T* (L) 119a2-3, (P) 180. 5. 1; *C 1*) 399a; *C 3*, 877c, Chap. IX)

3) A *bhikṣu* maintained that (the Bhagavat) taught in the *Tathāgatagarbha mahāsūtra* that *asti buddhadhātuḥ sarvasattveṣu* and being possessed of this *dhātu*, the *sattvas*, after clearing out defilements, become enlightened, only the *icchantikas* being exceptional, and thus he, too, is possessed of the *buddhadhātu*. Such a statement by a *bhikṣu* does not make the fault of 'going beyond the human moral' (*mihi chos las bla mar gyur pa*=*naradharma-atisāra*?) (or does not be crimed to *parājika* due to false speaking), in case he is keeping himself within the Buddha's precept and discipline.

This doctrine of TG-*astitva* is not preached in the teaching in the form

of nine divisions (*navāṅga-śāsanā*), i. e. in the Āgama of the Hīnayāna, nor is taught in the Mahāyāna which is also based upon the doctrine of the *nirātman*. Though being so, still such a statement does not make the fault of going beyond the human moral, since this teaching has not been preached only because it is not in the scope of the *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*. Rather those who think that there exists the *tathāgatagarbha*, being the seed of enlightenment (*sañs rgyas su hgyur baḥi sa bon de bshin gśegs paḥi sn̄in po*) and that they will attain the state of the Buddha after extirpating defilements, and that not only themselves but all other *kalyāṇamitras*, too, have the *buddhadhātu* and can obtain the *buddhabhāmi*,—they should be my real disciples and are worth to be called *bodhisattvas*. (summary) (T 2 (L) 138a2-142a5, (P) 185. 5. 6-187. 1. 3; C 1 404c-405c; C 3, 881b-882a, Chap. X, on the distinction between the true doctrine and false ones.)

4) If some one say that what is meant by the extinction of sufferings (*duḥkhanirodha*) is the extinction of everything by the practice of *śūnyatā* and so the *tathāgatagarbha* too should be non-existent, this is absolutely unreasonable. Quite contrary, by the practice in the existence (*astitva*) of the *tathāgatagarbha*, *sattvas* though being possessed of defilements, can get rid of those defilements. To realize this fact (that is, to enter the TG, *tathāgatagarbhapraveśa*) is indeed what is called the *duḥkhanirodhasatyā* in the Buddha's teaching. (summary) (T 2 (L) 145b3-146a4, (P) 187. 5. 5-188. 1. 3; C 1, 406c; C 3, 883a, Chap. XI on the four *satyas*)

5) To maintain the existence of *ātman* on the *nirātman* is a misconception. (*viparyāsa*) To maintain the non-existence of *ātman* on what is the *ātman* is also a misconception. Here, to practise the *nirātman* concept maintaining that in the Buddha's teaching, as same as in the worldly things (*saṃvṛti*), there is absolutely no *ātman* and hence there should not be even the name of *tathāgatagarbha*, this is the third misconception. (T 2 (L) 147a5-7, (P) 188. 2. 6-8; C 1, 407c; C 3, 883b, Chap. XII on the four *viparyāsas*.)

Thus we come to know that in these passages, what is the first concern of the *sūtra*-composer was in establishing the *astitva* of TG as a synthesis of *ātma*-and *nirātma*-doctrine. Also notable is that inspite of these frequent

references, nothing is explained about what is TG and how it is the *dhātu*. And this task is expected in the next chapter, the chapter on the *tathāgatadhātu*.

IV

Chapter XIII of *C 3* starts with the question whether the *ātman* exists or not. The reply was that what is called *ātman* is nothing but the *tathāgatagarbha* and there exists the *buddhadhātu* in all the living beings but they cannot see it because it is hidden by various defilements. This point is called 'the difficulty of understanding of the *dhātu*', and it was explained with various analogies beginning with a treasure under the ground of a poor woman's house. The whole passage will be divided in the following way :

1) The *tathāgatagarbha* is the *ātman* from the highest and supermundane point of view.

1. parable of a treasure. (*T 2* (L) 147b4-148b5; *C 1*, 407b; *C 3*, 883b)

2. significance of this *ātman* theory after preaching *nirātman* theory. example of a mother who applied poison to her breast. (*T 2* (L) 149b2-5; *C 1*, 407c; *C 3*, 883c)

3. the reason why the differences exist among *sattvas* inspite of the existence of the *ātman*, the *tathāgatadhātu*. Examples of a jewel at the forehead of a lester who does not know it, of the medicine of one taste grown in the Himālaya which changes its taste according to the conditions. Although the *buddhadhātu* is unchangeable and indestructible, variety occurs due to the power of *karman*. (*T 2* (L) 149b5-154b4; *C 1*, 407c-408c, *C 3*, 883c-884a)

2) The *dhātu* being the essence of the Tathāgata is the ultimate refuge. The Three Jewels are the *śaraṇa* since they are of the nature of my *dhātu*, i. e. the essence of the Tathāgata. Therefore one should take refuge only to the Tathāgata. Further, he himself should be the refuge since he has the *buddhadhātu* within him. (*T 2* (L) 154b4-157a6; *C 1*, 409a-410b; *C 3*, 884a-885b)

3) The method of understanding the TG (*tathāgatagarbhapraveśa*), *advaya* of *ātman* and *nirātman*, *vidyā* and *avidyā*, etc., being the *madhyamā pratipad*. The teaching of *duḥkha*, *anitya*, *anātman*, and *śūnya*, and the TG theory. Parable of *sarpis*, the best of which is produced out of milk of cow who ate a kind of grass grown in the Himālaya called ‘*snum can*’ (肥膩). (*T* 2 (L) 157a6-161b6; *C* 1, 410b-411c; *C* 3, 885b-887a.)

4) The *tathāgatagarbha* or *buddhadhātu* is difficult to be seen even for those *bodhisattvas* who obtained the tenth stage (*daśabhūmi*). The *tathāgatagarbha* is the sphere accessible only to the Tathāgatas. 10 examples beginning with a *taimirika*. (*T* 2 (L) 161b6-164b5; *C* 1, 411c-412b; *C* 3, 887a-b.)

5) The *buddhadhātu* is the real *ātman*.—Example of a real sword in possession of a prince. (conclusion) (*T* 2 (L) 164b5-166a6; *C* 1, 412b-413a; *C* 3, 887b-c.)

Notable points in this chapter are,

1) a positive expression of the TG in terms of *ātman*. This is no doubt relating to the definition of the *dharmakāya* as being *nitya*, *ātman*, *sukha* and *śubha*, which is one of the essential doctrines of this *sūtra* as observed in the parable of water sport quoted in the RGV. Because of this ‘*ātma-vāda*’ which is apparently against the *anātma-vāda* of Buddhism, the MPS called itself as the *sandhāvācana*.

2) Emphasis on the worship of the *dhātu* as the only *śaraṇa*. It is, on the one hand, an expression of the *ekayāna* doctrine similar to that of the ŚMS and shows its deep contact with the *Saddharmapuṇḍarika*. At the same time, however, it seems to be relating to the relic (*dhātu*) worship which is supposed to be one of origins of the Mahāyāna movement. (“I should worship the relic of the Buddha and the *caitya* without neglecting *dharmakāya*”, (L) 155b3-4). We may be allowed to presume that in accordance with the change of conception of the Buddha from the *rūpakāya* to the *dharmakāya*, the *dhātu* to be worshipped has also been changed from the relic to the abstract essence of the Buddha, which is nothing but the essence of the things (*dharmadhātu*) and at the same time is identical with the essence within the *sattvas*, i. e. the *buddhadhātu*.

Another point which is reminded of in this relation is the teaching of ‘*attadīpa*’ or *attasaraṇa* told in the *Mahāparinibbāna-suttanta*. The existence of *buddhadhātu* seems to show the ground of this teaching.

3) There are various explanations of the nature of the TG such as :

1. Tg is ‘*bcud kyi khams dan ḥdra ba*’ (L. 152b1) (*bcud*=*rasa*, *amṛta*)
2. ‘*bdud rtsi rtag pa khams kyi dbyiṅs*’ (eternal and *amṛta*-like essence) (L. 154a2), ‘*bdud rtsi mchog gi khams de ni ṅaḥi khams yin*’ (L. 154a3) (This highest *amṛta*-like *dhātu* is my essence.)

3. TG is ‘*yan dag paḥi khams*’ (L. 158b1), with which one should extinguish all the elements (*sarvadhātu*=*saṃskṛtadharmas*) and establish himself in what is eternal. It is the innate nature (*prakṛtidharmatā*) (L. 158b3)

4. ‘*bde baḥi sa bon*’ (L. 158b3), existing within a body.

5. ‘*chos kyi skuḥi sa bon*’ (L. 158b5), existing within a body.

6. Although TG is the essence which is unartificial from the beginning (*thogs nas bcos ma ma yin paḥi khams* (*ady-akṛtrimadhātu*), various defilements have been originated as if temporary guests (*glo bur*, *āgantū*), and those who wish to be enlightened should extinguish these defilements. (L. 161a4-6)

V

Another important chapter with respect to the TG theory is Chap. XVII entitled the questions of the Bodhisattva.

This chapter will be divided into the following three parts on account of the TG theory.

1) On the *icchantikas* who are regarded as of no cause of the enlightenment. (T 2 (L) 183b4-195b3; C 1, 417b-420c; C 3, 891b-894a.)

2) Characteristics of this MPS which preaches the TG theory as the secret word (*sandhāvacaṇa*) of the Tathāgata, and the purpose of its propagation. (T2 (L) 195b3-202a6; C 1, 420c-422b; C 3, 894a-895a)

3) Indiscrimination of the *dhātu* in essence and its differentiation in appearance. (T 2 (L) 202a6-206b4; C 1, 422c-423c; C 3, 895a-896a)

Of them, 1) the problem of the *icchantika* is another important subject not only of this sūtra but of the TG theory in general. At present, however, as we have no space to discuss on this problem, I will just recommend an article of Prof. Kosho Mizutani, in which all passages referring to the *icchantika* in the MPS are extracted from *T* 2, in comparison with *C* 1, and *C* 3, and commented in detail. (“*The Bukkyo Daigaku Kenkyū-kiyō*”, vol. 40, pp. 63-105)

In section 2), this sūtra is compared to the pure *sarpis* in comparison with other teachings which are like watered milk ‘sold by *goptis*’. Definition of TG as ‘of manly character’ is also notable.

3) The third point is more remarkable. Here, on the request of Bodhisattva Kāśyapa, the Buddha explains the ‘*tathāgata-pratyekabuddhā-śrāvaka-bodhisattva-dhātunirnānākaraṇa(-tva)*’ (*Skt Fr.* 2) with an analogy of cow milk. Namely cow milk is of the same quality inspite of the difference of the colour of cows. This seems to show the *prakṛtivyūddhata* of the *dhātu*. While another example of the mine of gold shows the *vaimalyavyūddhata* in the sense that gold comes out of its mine after receiving purification. At the same time the sūtra never forget to refer to the difference between the Buddha, the Bodhisattvas and the ordinary beings, and is explained by an analogy of making process of *sarpis* out of milk with five stages. Namely the difference is considered to be merely the difference of stages or situations, and the essential identity throughout the whole process is implicitly maintained.

VI

Thus examining, we may conclude the the characteristics of the TG theory in this sūtra in the following way.

1) The biggest contribution of the MPS to the history of the TG theory is the establishment of the concept of *buddhadhātu* as explaining the nature of *tathāgatagarbha*. This *dhātu* concept as showing the essence or nature common to *sattvas* and the Tathāgata seems to be introduced by the AAN, but the MPS, succeeding the AAN, utilized it in its full scope, in which are

involved various other meanings of the term *dhātu* developed in Buddhism, such as relic of the Buddha, the 18 component elements, the 4 gross elements, sphere of the *dharma*, the essence of dharmas (e. g. the *tathāgata-kāya* is not (consisting) of elements of collected materials (*bsags paḥi khams*), but of the essence of the dharma (*chos kyi khams*) (L. 110a1-2). It suggests that '*dharmakāya*' is '*dharmadhātu-kāya*'), the word root, etc.

2) The most unique expression of this sūtra with respect to the TG is the *ātman*, which is regarded as a sort of taboo in Buddhism*. Connotation of this term in the text is completely identical with '*dhātu*'.

3) In spite of the use of such an abstract concept, the MPS is far from systematization of the theory, in comparison with the AAN and the ŚMS. Especially the relationship between *tathāgatagarbha* and *dharmakāya*, problem of the pure mind and the defilements, etc. are not discussed explicitly as in the ŚMS. In this respect, I hesitate a bit to suppose the date of the MPS as commg after the ŚMS.

4) In spite of frequent references to the *icchantika*, the term *agotra* is not used. In general, the *gotra* concept is lacking in the MPS. This point is common to the AAN, and the ŚMS.

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* One of sources of this concept in Buddhism is sought for in the *Sammitiyaśāstra* (Taisho. No. 1649) by K. Venkata Ramanam in *Visvabharati Annals*, No. 5 (Santiniketan, 1953), pp. 219-220 (n. 28). He mentions 3 passages of the MPS (*Taisho* 12, 525b; 502c-3a; 556a) as the evidence, all of which are found in a part we regarded as later addition. [Suggestion is due to J. Rahder in his review article on my work, *A Study on the Ratnagotravibhāga*, Rome, 1966. in JIBS, vol. XV, No. 1.]