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 Mahāyānistic interpretation, borrowing the scene of his Great Death at Kṣināra 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.

2: tr. by the same and rearranged by Huei yen (慧嚴), in 36 vols. Taisho Ed. No. 375.
T 1: tr. by Wañ phab shun, etc. from Chinese source, in 2 cases. Peking Ed. No. 787.

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 ‘prādhyāṣaya’ and ‘prcchāvāsa’ being a part of Chap. VIII of C 3. A manuscript found at Koyasan Monastery, Japan, of which edi-
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ition is in the Taisho Tripitaka, 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 Hörnle 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, atman, 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 yan 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 saddhārma” (C 1 421c).

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

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

yośis su mya ñan las śdās pa chen po hi mdo chen po, dam pa hi chos (sad-dharmah), gsun rab thams cad kyi śniḥ por gyur pa (sarva-pravacanasārabhū-tah), rgyud phyi ma lta bu (uttaratantra iva) rtags par dkaḥ bahi chos kyi śbyuṅ gnas (duṣprativedhadharmākaraḥ), gcig tu de bshin gsègs bahi śniḥ po ston paḥi mdo (ekadhā tathāgatagarbhanirdesāsātratam). (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 saṅs rgyas kyi khams yod do. (L. 138a2) It may be reduced into Sanskrit in the following way: asti buddhadhātuḥ sarvasattveṣu. This statement is spoken of as from the Tathāgatagarbhasūtra (TGS), but the formula in the latter is that sarva-sattvās 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 Śrīmālasūtra (SMS), 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 gsègs paḥi śniḥ 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 mthon hgyur//
Here 'brtag dkaḥ khamś (duśprativedha-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 sarvasattvesu, 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, dhrava, śāsvata and susukha (?), preaches that asti tathāgatagarbhah sarvasattvesu. (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 sarvasattvesu 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’ (miḥi chos las bla mar gyur pa=naradharma-atisāra?) (or does not be crimed to parajika 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
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of nine divisions (navāṅga-śasana), i.e. in the Āgama of the Hinayāna, 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 (saṅs rgyas su hgyur baḥi sa bon de bshin gsēgs paḥi sniū po) and that they will attain the state of the Buddha after extirpating defilements, and that not only themselves but all other kalyāṇamitrās, too, have the buddhadhatu and can obtain the buddhabhumi,—they should be my real disciples and are worth to be called bodhisattvas.

4) If some one say that what is meant by the extinction of sufferings (duḥkhaṇirodha) is the extinction of everything by the practice of śānyatā and so the tathāgatagarbha too should be non-existant, 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, tathāgatagarbhapraśveśa) is indeed what is called the duḥkhaṇirodha satya 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. (vipāryāsa) 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 (samvärti), 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 vipāryāsas.)

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 tathāgata-
dhatu.

IV

Chapter XIII of C 3 starts with the question whether the atman exists or not. The reply was that what is called atman is nothing but the tathāgatagarbha and there exists the buddhadhatu 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 atman 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 atman theory after preaching niratman 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 atman, the tathagatadhātu. Examples of a jewel at the forehead of a lester who does not know it, of the medicine of one taste grown in the Himalaya which changes its taste according to the conditions. Although the buddhadhatu 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 sarana 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 buddhadhatu within him. (T 2 (L) 154b4–157a6; C 1, 409a–410b; C 3, 884a–885b)
3) The method of understanding the TG (tathāgatagarbhapravesa), advayata of atman and niratman, vidyā and avidyā, etc., being the madhyamā pratipad. The teaching of duḥkha, anitya, anatman, and śānya, 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 Himalaya called 'snun can' (肥腻). (T 2 (L) 157a6-161b6; C 1, 410b-411c; C 3, 885b-887a.)

4) The tathāgatagarbha or buddhadhatu is difficult to be seen even for those bodhisattvas who obtained the tenth stage (daśabhoumi). 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 buddhadhatu is the real atman.——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 atman. This is no doubt relating to the definition of the dharmakāya as being nitya, atman, sukha and subha, which is one of the essential doctrines of this sutra as observed in the parable of water sport quoted in the RGV. Because of this ātmanavāda' which is apparently against the anatma-vāda of Buddhism, the MPS called itself as the sandhāvacana.

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 Saddharmapuṇḍarīka. 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 attasarana told in the Mahāparinibbāna-suttanta. The existence of buddhadhatu 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 dañ ḡdra ba’ (L. 152b1) (bcud=rasa, amṛta)
2. ‘bdud rtsi rtag pa khams kyi ḡbyiṅs’ (eternal and amṛta-like essence) (L. 154a2), ‘bdud rtsi mchog gi khams de ni ṇaḥi khams yin’ (L. 154a3) (This highest amṛta-like dhātu is my essence.)
3. TG is ‘yañ dag paḥi khams’ (L. 158b1), with which one should extinguish all the elements (sarvadhātu=samskritadharmas) and establish himself in what is eternal. It is the innate nature (prakṛtīdharmatā) (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 boos ma ma yin paḥi khams (ādy-akṛtrimadhātu), various defilements have been originated as if temporary guests (glo bur, agantu), 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 (sandhāvacana) of the Tathāgata, and the purpose of its propagation. (T 2 (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-kiyo", 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 gops’. 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-pratyekabuddha-śrāvaka-bodhisattva-dhātunirnānakaraṇa(-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 prakṛtiśuddhātā of the dhātu. While another example of the mine of gold shows the vaimalaviśuddhātā 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 pa′i 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) Inspite 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) Inspite 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.

* One of sources of this concept in Buddhism is sought for in the *Sammittyā-śāstra* (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.]

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