The Tathāgatotpattisaṃbhava-nirdeśa of the Avataṃsaka and the Ratnagotravibhāga

— with special reference to the term ‘tathāgata-gotra-saṃbhava’

(如來性起)—

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The point now I am going to express here is the discovery of the use of a compound noun ‘tathāgata-gotra-saṃbhava’ in the Ratnagotravibhāga (Uttaratantra), which seems to be the Sanskrit original for ‘如來性起’, one of the important terms in the philosophy of the Hua-yen (華嚴) Sect of Chinese Buddhism, but is actually not found in the Avataṃsaka, the basic scripture for that sect.

The passage where this term is found is in the prose explanation on v. 27 of Chap. I (Skt. p. 26, 8-9). The commentator of the Ratna., i. e. the author of the supplementary verses as well as the prose commentary on the basic verses, refers there to the 3 meanings of the term tathāgatagarbha made out of v. 27, of which the third one is named ‘tathāgata-gotra-saṃbhava-artha’, while the other two are named ‘tathāgata-dharmakāya-parispharaṇa-artha’ and ‘tathāgata-tathātā-avyatibheda-artha’, respectively. V. 27, the basic stanza on which this explanation is given runs as follows:

“Buddha-jānāntargamāt sattva-rāṣes
Tan-nairmalyasyādvayatvāt prakṛtyā|

* For the textual structure of the Ratna, see my article: Textual Structure of the Ratnagotravibhāga (Uttaratantra) and the Supposed Form of its Original Text (究竟乗対性論の構造と原型) (Japanese), Shūkyō-Kenkyū (Journal of Religious Studies), No. 155 (March 1958, Tokyo).
Bauddhe gotre tat-phalasyopacārād
Uktāḥ sarve dehino buddha-garbhaḥ

(The multitudes of living beings are included in the Buddha's Wisdom,
Their immaculateness is non-dual by nature,
Its result manifests itself on the Germ of the Buddha;
Therefore it is said: all the living beings are possessed of the Matrix
of the Buddha.)

The 3 meanings mentioned above correspond one by one to the first
3 lines in the verse which form the 3 reasons for the statement: “sarva-
sattvas tathāgatagarbhaḥ”. At the same time, the commentator regards these
3 points as the threefold own nature of the Essence of the Tathāgata
(tathāgata-dhātus trividhāḥ svabhāvah). In other words, ‘dharmakāya’,
tathātā’ and ‘gotra’ are said to show the 3 aspects of ‘tathāgata-dhātu’.
This is explained once as ‘powerfulness’ (prabhāva), ‘identity’ (ananyā-
thābhāva) and ‘being moist’ (snigdhabhāva) with similes of jewel, sky and
water, respectively. (p. 27, 1-11) A further detailed explanation is given
in the commentary on the 9 illustrations on how the Essence is polluted
by the covers of defilements based upon the Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra, where
the 9 modes of ‘dhātu’ corresponding to the 9 kinds of defilements are
summarised into the said threefold own nature in the following way:

1. dharmadhātu, 2 & 3. tan-niśyanda — I. dharmakāya (vv. 145-7)
4. tathātā (svanṛavat) — II. tathātā (v. 148)
5. prakṛtistha-gotra, 6. samudānta-gotra, 7. svabhāva-, 8. sambhoga-, &
9. nirmanā-kāya — III. gotra (vv. 149-152).

Now special attention is to be paid to the third group. In the prose
commentary which follows vv. 149-152 (p. 72, 7-14), this ‘gotra’ is explained
to be ‘trividha-buddhakāya-utpatti-gotra’ since the Tathāgatahood is mani-
fested (prabhāvita) in the form of the triple Body of the Buddha, for whose
acquisition the cause (hetu) is the Essence (dhātu) of the Tathāgata. Here
we know that ‘gotra’, being synonymous for ‘dhātu’ (and ‘garbha’, too),
is used in the sense of ‘hetu’ from which the triple buddhakāya is ori-
ginated. This is exactly what is meant by the third line of v. 27, and is

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also identical with what is signified by ‘ratna-gotra’ in the title (gotram ratnatrayasya, v. 24; that from which the ratna-traya is originated, sargako yataḥ, v. 23; ratna-traya= buddha-ratna, par excellence, dharmakāya, the basis of the triple kāya, p. 7, etc.) An important authority for this statement is sought for in a scriptural passage, which runs as follows:

“tatra ca sattve sattve tathāgata-dhātur utpanno garbhagataḥ sanvidyate, na ca te sattvā buddhyante.”

(And now, in every living being, there exists the Essence of the Tathāgata arisen, in the form of embryo. But these living beings do not know about it.)

Unfortunately we have not come yet to know the name of this scripture, but it seems no doubt to be a sūtra belonging to the same group as the Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra. Here the term ‘dhātu’ is used instead of ‘gotra’ in the Ratna, but the significance is exactly the same as the latter in its contents: sattve utpanno, but garbha-gataḥ. It means that ‘gotra’ or ‘dhātu’ is on one hand identical with ‘dharmakāya’, the essence of the Buddha, and on the other hand, however, is ‘garbha-gata’, i.e. in the unmanifested state in contrast with dharmakāya’s being the manifested state in the form of ‘trividha-buddhakāya’.

Then what does the term ‘sambhava’ mean? From the explanations given above, those terms like ‘sarga’, ‘utpatti’, ‘upacāra’, or ‘prabhāvita’, ‘utpanna’ are to be noticed of their synonymous sense of ‘manifestation (origination)’ for ‘sambhava’ or of ‘manifested’ for ‘sambhūta’. There are, however, two ways of usage of this ‘manifestation’: 1) sattva is a manifestation of dhātu or gotra being ‘essence’, i.e. dharmakāya, because of his being penetrated by the latter; 2) buddhakāya is the manifestation of gotra within sattva being ‘cause’ for it. The second point is just what is meant by ‘gotra-sambhava’ as the third aspect of tathāgata-garbha, and hence this compound is to be resolved into ‘gotrāt sambhavah’ (origination from cause) in its literal sense. At the same time, because of the essential identity between both cause and result (this is shown by the second aspect, tathā: tathāgatagarbha=samalā tathā, while dharmakāya=nirmalā tathā), it
The Tathagatotpattisambhava-nirdeśa of the Avataṃśaka (J. Takasaki) means ‘gotrasya sambhavah’, i.e. manifestation of gotra itself. Furthermore, gotra being dharmakāya is all-pervading, and hence this manifestation takes place in gotra itself, i.e. ‘gotre sambhavah’.

This interpretation seems, however, not accepted by both Tibetan and Chinese translations of the Ratna. They translate ‘sambhava’ into ‘existence’ (T. yod-pa, C. 有). This is not completely wrong because the text itself refers often to ‘gotra-astitva’ (e.g. vv. I, 160, V, 8), but the simple sense of ‘astitva’ is, in my opinion, not enough here to show the connotation of ‘sambhava’.

V. 27 is, according to the commentator, said to be taken from the Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra of its whole account. The very sūtra which consists merely of 9 illustrations on the tathāgata-garbha expresses its fundamental idea in the first illustration, a Buddha sitting in the interior of every lotus flower, saying:

“With Buddha’s eyes, I observe that all the living beings, though they are among the defilements of hatred, anger and ignorance, have the Buddha’s Wisdom, Buddha’s Eye, Buddha’s Body sitting firmly in the form of meditation. — Thus, in spite of their being covered with defilements, transmigrating from one path (gati) to another, they are possessed of the Matrix of the Tathāgata, endowed with virtues, always pure, and hence are not different from me. — Having thus observed, the Buddha preached the doctrine in order to remove the defilements and manifest the Buddha-nature (within the living beings). (extracted tr. from C., Taisho 16. 457 c)

It may be easy to pick up the 3 points taught in the Ratna. from this

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* There is another passage where the term gotra-sambhava is used: “na khalu kaścit prakṛti-visuddha-gotra-sambhavād atyantaviśuddhi-dharma bhavitum arhati. (p. 37, 3-4)” Here both interpretations seem possible: existence of gotra = manifestation of gotra (in every body). (manifestation in the sense of I).

** For the last phrase: ‘to manifest the Buddha-nature (顯現佛性), T. instead reads: de-bsgrubs-paṭi de-bshin-gšegs-pa rnams ni yaṅ-dag-pa-nid-du gnas-so (having completed this, the Tathāgatas establish themselves perfectly.) (Peking Ed., Kj. Mdo Shu p. 263a, 1)
passage. One may, at the same time, easily notice, at one glance of this passage, the similarity of the idea with that taught in the Tathāgatotpatti-saṃbhava-nirdeśa of the Avataṃsaka with a simile of an atom which encloses the whole universe.

This simile, being the 10th illustration of the mental activity (manas-karman) of the Tathāgata which, in its turn, forms the 4th mode (lakṣaṇa) of the 10-fold manifestation of the Tathāgata (tathāgata-utpatti-saṃbhava) (如來性起十相), has an important significance in that sūtra. The mental activity, otherwise called cittotpatti according to the Tibetan version (thugs-skye-ba), is understood to be essentially the activity of 'tathāgata-jñāna', which is brilliant like the sun, all-pervading like space, and is so essential that without which there is no bodhi, nor buddha. Being thus, this tathāgata-jñāna is duly termed ‘tathāgata-gotra’ or ‘-dhatu’, the Essence of the Tathāgata. Because of its all-pervadingness, every sattva is understood to be penetrated by this jñāna or be within this jñāna (buddhajñānāntargama). The Avataṃsaka refers to this point and says:

"Just as the whole universe is enclosed within an atom and became useless, similarly the tathāgata-jñāna is uselessly enclosed within each sattva. Due to the affections to the misconceptions, sattvas remain without knowing what is inside. Now I (=the Buddha) will break the covering of bondage, and let them know the tathāgata-jñāna within them."

(extracted tr. from the quotation in the Ratna., p. 22, 10-24, 8)

There is, however, no use of the term 'tathāgatagarbha' in the Avataṃsaka. It is probably the Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra which for the first time named this buddhajñāna within the living beings ‘tathāgata-garbha’, succeeded the idea of the Tathāgatotpattisaṃbhava-nirdeśa. The unknown sūtra of which a passage is quoted above seems also a successor of the same sūtra. And lastly the Ratna. systematised this tathāgatagarbha-theory

* The Ratna. quotes the whole illustration as an authority for the identification of tathāgatagarbha with tathāgata because of its endowment of virtues same as those of the Buddha. As for the original in the Avataṃsaka, see Taisho 9, 623 c–624 a.
in its whole account concentrating its basic point to this idea of the all-parvadingness of buddhajñāna. V. 27 is just the verse to express this fundamental idea come down from the Avatamsaka.

Now we have to find out the relation between two terms, ‘tathāgata-utpatti-sambhava’ and ‘tathāgata-gotra-sambhava’. The former is needless to say the fundamental idea in the said sūtra of the same title, of which one phase is expressed by the all-parvadingness of tathāgata-ñāna. In that sūtra, ‘tathāgata’ always means the dharmaśāya, and its ‘sambhava’ (or ‘utpatti’) signifies the manifestation of all kinds of the Buddha’s activity as the natural outflow of the dharmaśāya caused by the Buddha’s great compassion towards sattvas. This is however a kind of Mahayanistic modification of the idea taught since the early days of Buddhism in which the acquisition of the enlightenment by Śākyamuni is meant by the term ‘tathāgata-utpatti’. In other words, tathāgata-utpatti is understood originally to mean the acquisition of the wisdom by a unique personality. (cf. Pali, AN, I, 13 Ekapuggala-vaggo) From the Mahayanistic standpoint, the possibility of enlightenment to all the sattvas are emphasised and to prove this possibility the Avatamsaka made the doctrine of the dharmaśāya’s manifestation to all the living beings. Thus the buddha-ñāna in each sattva is called a form of tathāgata-sambhava. This second kind of ‘tathāgata-sambhava’ is easily replacable by the term ‘gotra-sambhava’ or ‘dhātuv uppannah’ although it was actually not done by the Avatamsaka. The role of the Ratna. was just to resolve this knot kept unrevealed. It called this buddha-ñāna in each sattva directly ‘gotra’ and characterised it as the cause for the actual manifestation of the Buddha (buddha-ñāna= tathāgata-utpatti, or -sambhava). In other words, tathāgata is the result of gotra-sambhava, i.e. the acquisition of bodhi by any one of sattvas. This may be called the third interpretation of the term ‘tathāgata-utpatti-sambhava’ but with special sense of ‘gotra-sambhava’. It is certain that this interpretation was introduced into China along with the Avatamsaka-sūtra when the Chinese Hua-Yen Sect established its ‘性起’-theory.

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