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The Understanding of “*Dhātu*” in the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśa*

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I

The *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśa*¹⁾ (不增不減經) is a little known but highly influential sutra of the *tathāgatagarbha* lineage. Its contribution to the *tathāgatagarbha* theories of the *Śrīmālādevīsīṃhanāda-sūtra* and the *Ratnagotravibhāga* has been well documented,²⁾ but of perhaps even more significance to the history of Buddhist thought are its introduction of the terms *ekadhātu*, *dharmadhātu*, and *sattvadhātu* to describe the sphere realized by the Buddha's wisdom, and its explanation of these compounds of *dhātu* in terms of the *tathāgatagarbha*.

One reason for this significance is that the suffix-*dhātu* also occurs in the term *buddhadhātu*, one of the most important of the Sanskrit terms translated as *fo-hsing* (佛性), the “Buddha-nature,” the concept which was of such immense importance in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism. The *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśa* may well have provided the link between the use solely of the term *tathāgatagarbha* and the additional use of the term *buddhadhātu* found in such works as the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*.

1) *Taishō* XVI, no. 668.

2) See Takasaki Jikidō's books, *Nyoraizōshisō-no-keisei* and *A Study of the Ratnagotravibhāga*, and his article, “*Fuzōfugengyō-no-nyoraizōsetsu*,” *Komazawadaigakubukkyōgakubu-kenkyūkiyō*, XXIII (1965), pp. 88-107.

Another reason is that the prefix “*eka-*” in the term *ekadhātu* suggests its close relationship to *ekayāna*, the teaching of the one Buddha vehicle that is the ultimate soteriological truth of Mahāyāna Buddhism. And it may be that by the *ekadhātu* (the one *dhātu*), is meant the ultimate basis of that single vehicle of salvation.

II

One interpretation that has been suggested³⁾ for the term *dhātu* as used in the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśa* is that it has a meaning something like “category” or “principle of classification.” Following this interpretation, the compound *dharmadhātu* would refer to the category of *dharmas*, or more specifically, to a collection of those *dharmas* which fall into the sphere of the Buddha's wisdom. These would be the *buddhadharmas*, sometimes listed as the 18 *avenikadharmas*, but more often spoken of in Mahāyāna texts as the innumerable virtues of the Tathāgata.

This understanding is based on two general uses of the term *dharmadhātu* found in Buddhist literature. The first is as the “sphere of the Dharma,” the realm realized by enlightened ones that is to be contrasted with the *trilokadhātu*, the triple world. The second is the Abhidharmic use of the term to refer to one of the eighteen *dhātus*—specifically to the collection of *dharmas* which are the object of mind (*manas*). It is conceivable that the term came to be understood in both of these senses simultaneously, as “the collection of those *dharmas* which fall into the sphere of the Buddha's wisdom.”

Accordingly, the compound *sattvadhātu* would, at least in several of its occurrences in the sutra, be being used as a *tatpuruṣa* compound, as the (*dharmas*) *dhātu* of, or contained in, sentient beings.

3) See Takasaki, *Nyoraizōshisō-no-keisei* p. 66ff. for a similar interpretation.

In this way the innumerable virtues of the Tathāgata would be seen as abiding potentially within all sentient beings.

There is considerable textual support for this interpretation, for among other things, the sutra says that by the *dharmakāya* (which is said to be synonymous with *sattvadhātu*), “is meant the wisdom that is not separated, removed, cut-off, or distinct from the inconceivable *buddhadharmas* and Tathāgata virtues, the number of which is greater than the sands of the Ganges River.”⁴⁾

If this is indeed what the sutra means by *sattva-* and *dharmadhātu*, then one might conclude that these compounds of *dhātu* are meant in an ethical, rather than ontological sense, and are intended to convey two messages: first that it is the *buddhadharmas*—the practices and attainments of the Buddha—that one should cultivate, and not the practices and attainments of *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*; and second, that such practices and attainments are well within the power of *sattvas* as harbourers of the virtues of the Tathāgata. The *dharmadhātu* is the same set of practices and attainments whether one is speaking of ignorant sentient beings or of fully enlightened Buddhas, and for this reason the sutra refers to it as the one *dhātu*, the *eka-dharmadhātu*.

III

But there are several inconsistencies in the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśa* that suggest that by the suffix-*dhātu* is meant something more than a simple collection of *dharma*s. For besides being said to be “possessed of all *dharma*s,” the *sattvadhātu* is also said to be the “root of all *dharma*s” and the “support of all *dharma*s.”⁵⁾ So when the sutra speaks of the inseparability of the *sattvadhātu* and the *buddhadharmas*, one is tempted to ask whether this insepara-

4) P. 467b.

5) P. 467c.

bility might not mean constant conjunction rather than identity.

The expressions “root” or “support” of all *dharma*s suggest that *dhātu* might mean “primary cause” (*hetu*, 因), an understanding found in the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha*⁶⁾ and elsewhere which seems to derive from the early use of the term *dhātu* as meaning “element” (an example being the element of gold found in gold ore that is the primary cause of pure, refined gold). But just as the understanding of the element of gold as “cause” does not preclude it from also being understood as “result” (*phala*, 果)—for the gold of the ore is present in finished gold—so here the *dhātu* that is the “root” or “support” of the *buddhadharmas* need not necessarily be understood as a cause that ceases at the emergence of the result.

Consequently when the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśa* uses the suffix-*dhātu*, it may be intended to refer to something like the ultimate nature of reality, the insight into which is the primary cause of the Buddha-virtues, but an insight which does not cease at the attainment of Buddhahood. This would suggest a usage of the term *dhātu* similar to that found in the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*, where *dhātu* is understood as equivalent to such concepts as *dharmatā* and *tathatā*. It would also be consistent with the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśa*'s identification of the *tathāgatagarbha* with supreme truth (*paramāthasatya*), for by supreme truth seems to be meant the insight into the ultimate nature of reality. And it would seem that it would be to stretch the meaning of supreme truth to identify it with a myriad of different virtues that could be discriminated from one another, as, for example, a strength (*bala*) could be distinguished from a fearlessness (*vaiśāradhya*).

Given that the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśa* is short and not very explicit, and given that the understanding of *tathatā* and *paramārthasatya* frequently became the subject of dispute between Buddhist

6) *Taiṣhō* XXXI, p. 133b, 156c.

schools, any statement of how the author of the sutra conceived of ultimate nature of reality is highly speculative, to be sure. But a number of considerations, including among other things the consistent preference found in the *tathāgatagarbha* lineage of sutras for the term *tathatā* over *śūnyatā* as a reference to supreme truth, and the definition of the Buddha-nature found in the *Fo-hsing-lun* (佛性論) as “*tathatā* revealed through the two emptinesses of self and dharmas,”⁷⁾ all tend to suggest that it would be more in keeping with the general tenor of *tathāgatagarbha* literature to in this context interpret supreme truth as expressing subject-object nonduality, the view that perceiving subject and perceived object are mutually interrelated and that neither has separate, independent existence. Perhaps the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśa* (which is uttered in response to Śāriputra’s question as to whether or not there is ever any increase or decrease in the throng of sentient beings as they transmigrate in *saṃsāra*), contains a redefinition of what is actually meant by sentient beings, and perhaps the sutra should be interpreted as saying that it is incorrect to conceive of *sattvas* as individual, isolated beings who disappear one by one into extinction or have a layer of *nirvāna* laid on top of them, when in actuality their lives are impossible to distinguish from the world around them, and their salvation consists of the realization of this non-dual relationship. Perhaps the *ekadhātu* refers to the one realm that is simultaneously subjectivity (the “self”) and the objective world (*dharmas*), a realm which is only falsely conceived to be two because of the dualistic tendencies inherent in conceptual thought.

Such an interpretation would involve two additional understandings of *dhātu* found in Buddhist literature: 1) “subjective nature” and 2) “sphere” or “world.”⁸⁾ Indeed, the term *dhātu* may have been

7) *Taishō* XXXII, p. 787b.

8) Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary*, p. 283-4.

chosen precisely because it had this sense both of something “inner” and of something “outer,” so that by the term *ekadhātu* could be expressed that which transcends such duality. (Though it is only in passing, the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśa* specifically mentions the two views of “inner” and “outer” as views of those who do not truly understand the one *dhātu*).⁹⁾

For that matter, perhaps the meanings of “realm” and “subjective nature” are just as important to the understanding of *dhātu* in this context as are the meanings “cause” or “element.” For though the term *buddhadhātu* can be glossed as a *tatpuruṣa* (the *dhātu* or buddhas), and thus be read as “the cause of buddha (hood),” that term does not occur in the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśa*, and the term *sattvadhātu* cannot be interpreted as “the cause of *sattvas*.” *Sattvadhātu* would perhaps better be read as a *karmadhāraya* compound, with *sattvas* being equated with the one *dhātu*, the one realm which embraces both subjective and objective worlds.

IV

Be that as it may, it is important to note that the understanding of the *ekadhātu* as the non-dual nature of reality need not be seen as contradicting the understanding of it as a collection of the myriad *buddhadharmas*. For if insight into the emptiness of subject-object duality is seen as markless supreme truth, then the innumerable Buddha-virtues can be understood as the manifestation of this insight regarded from the perspective of conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*). A passage from the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā-prajñāpāramita-sūtra* makes clear how such a relationship is possible:

O Subhūti, . . . the giver is empty, giving is empty, and the recipient is empty . . . You should not think that giving

9) P. 466c.

is different from the giver or that these are different from the recipient or the receiving. When you do not think there are any differences between these, then giving will attain the fruit, the taste of which is of sweet ambrosia.¹⁰⁾

The passage makes clear that the perfection of giving—a Buddha-virtue *par excellence*—is the result of insight into one's indivisible relationship with the world. When one realizes that as the giver one is ultimately no different from the recipient, then all egocentric obstacles to giving fall away and the perfection of giving is made possible. Put in the language of the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśa*, the one *dharmadhātu*—the realm of subject-object non-duality—forms the basis for, and has as its necessary manifestation, the innumerable *buddhadharmas*.

10) *Taiśhō* VIII, p. 401a.