TRANSACTIONS OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF ORIENTALISTS IN JAPAN
No. XXII 1977

THE TOHŌ GAKKAI
(The Institute of Eastern Culture)
The Understanding of "Dhātu" in the Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśa

William Grosnick

I

The Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśa is a little known but highly influential sutra of the tathāgatagarbha lineage. Its contribution to the tathāgatagarbha theories of the Śrīmālādevīsīṃhahasta-sūtra and the Ratnagotravibhāga has been well documented, but of perhaps even more significance to the history of Buddhist thought are its introduction of the terms ekadhatu, dharmadhatu, and sattvadhatu 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 buddhadhatu, 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 buddhadhatu found in such works as the Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra.

Another reason is that the prefix “eka-” in the term ekadhatu 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 ekadhatu (the one dhātu), is meant the ultimate basis of that single vehicle of salvation.

II

One interpretation that has been suggested 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 avanikadharmas, 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 (dharma) dhātu of, or contained in, sentient beings.

1) Taishō XVI, no. 668.
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 sattvadhatu), “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.”

If this is indeed what the sutra means by sattva- and dharma-dhatu, then one might conclude that these compounds of dhatu 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.

III

But there are several inconsistencies in the Anunatvapurūṣatvanirdesa that suggest that by the suffix-dhatu it meant something more than a simple collection of dharmas. For besides being said to be “possessed of all dharmas,” the sattvadhatu is also said to be the “root of all dharmas” and the “support of all dharmas.” So when the sutra speaks of the inseparability of the sattvadhatu 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 dharmas suggest that dhatu might mean “primary cause” (hetu, 勘), an understanding found in the Mahāyāna-saṃgraha and elsewhere which seems to derive from the early use of the term dhatu 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 dhatu 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 Anunatvapurūṣatvanirdesa uses the suffix-dhatu, 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 dhatu similar to that found in the Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra, where dhatu is understood as equivalent to such concepts as dharmatā and tathatā. It would also be consistent with the Anunatvapurūṣatvanirdesa’s identification of the tathāgatagarbha with supreme truth (paramārtha-satya), 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 (vaisāraudhya).

Given that the Anunatvapurūṣatvanirdesa is short and not very explicit, and given that the understanding of tathatā and paramārtha-satya frequently became the subject of dispute between Buddhist

6) Taishō 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 tathātā over śīnyātā as a reference to supreme truth, and the definition of the Buddha-nature found in the Fo-hsing-lun (佛性論) as “tathātā revealed through the two emptinesses of self and dharmas,” 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 Anunatviipurāṇatvanirdesa (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 sāṁśāra), 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 nirvāṇa 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 ekadhatu 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.” Indeed, the term dhātu may have been chosen precisely because it had this sense both of something “inner” and of something “outer,” so that by the term ekadhatu could be expressed that which transcends such duality. (Though it is only in passing, the Anunatvapārṇatvanirdesa specifically mentions the two views of “inner” and “outer” as views of those who do not truly understand the one dhātu).

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 tatpurṣa (the dhātu or buddhas), and thus be read as “the cause of buddha (hood),” that term does not occur in the Anunatvapārṇatvanirdesa, 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 ekadhatu 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 (samvṛti-satya). A passage from the Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra makes clear how such a relationship is possible:

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

7) Taishō XXXII, p. 787b.
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 *Anānatasāpurṇatvanirdeśa*,
the one *dharma-dhatu*—the realm of subject-object non-duality—forms
the basis for, and has as its necessary manifestation, the innumer-
able *buddha-dharmas*.

10) Taishō VIII, p. 401a.